Voters speak to the WSWS on election day

Our reporters
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Last Saturday—election day 2010 in Australia—Socialist Equality Party (SEP) candidates, members and supporters campaigned at polling booths around the country, distributing how-to-vote tickets, and speaking to voters about the party's policies. At the end of a campaign focussed on party leaders, with little discussion of issues affecting ordinary workers, many voters wanted to explain their views and welcomed the opportunity to be interviewed for the *World Socialist Web Site*.

In Australia, voting is compulsory, and long queues of people waited for over an hour at many booths to vote. The overwhelming sentiments were disgust with the major parties, Labor and Liberal, confusion over the alternatives and alienation from official politics. There was widespread hostility and anger—across the political spectrum—over the June political coup within the Labor Party that ousted Kevin Rudd and installed Julia Gillard as prime minister.

In 2007, Rudd was swept to power on the basis of widespread opposition to the Liberal-National Coalition government of Prime Minister John Howard. Despite misgivings about the Labor Party and its record at the state and federal levels, many workers voted for Rudd, often grudgingly, on the basis that he represented a "lesser evil". In 2010, "lesser evilism" has largely disappeared. As one SEP campaigner in Sydney explained: "In general, the enthusiasm that characterised the 'Kevin 07' election was entirely absent."

Aaron, an IT worker who voted in the inner-western Sydney seat of Grayndler, was scathing: "It's been a joke election. Neither of the major parties are doing anything remotely interesting. They've completely smokescreened all the policies that are of real concern. I'm actually hoping that this is the kick in the pants both those parties require … My favourite statistic was the fact that 20 percent of Australians don't want to vote for either Labor or Liberal. I found that very heartening. That should actually make them change, to reflect what the public want, rather than big business."

Susan, a public servant who voted in Grayndler, said: "I'm traditionally a Labor voter in the lower house and Greens in the upper house. Initially I was very pleased to see Julia Gillard installed but very disappointed since then. I've got your [SEP] brochure here and I'm sorry I didn't get this material before. I appreciate it's difficult for the minor parties to get their material out and we're so flooded with advertising, big ticket stuff. So the bottom line is I chose to vote Green in both houses. It's the first time I've done that. I'm hopeful that we'll send a bit of a message and they'll get a bit of a fright today."

Lam, who came to Australia as a refugee from Vietnam in 1979, voted in the western Sydney electorate of Blaxland. Although he voted Liberal in 2007, Lam opposed Rudd's removal. "I don't know why they did this, but it wasn't right to me. I couldn't understand why they brought him back into the election campaign when Gillard said they needed his help. He was elected by the majority and then all of sudden we're told he's no good and they get rid of him. How can this be done without an election? I don't understand it."

Despite the disquiet and opposition to the anti-democratic manner of Rudd's ousting, most people could not explain why it occurred. Many were suspicious about the behind-the-scenes machinations of the handful of party apparatchiks who organised the coup. Some voters recycled the explanations offered at the time: that Rudd was autocratic and had been an electoral liability. Others pointed to the role of the big mining corporations, which mounted a multi-million dollar advertising campaign against the Labor government.

Joe Murphy, a retired teacher who voted in Swan, said: "I was very disappointed because I thought Rudd was a good man. It was obviously a political move". He thought the mining companies had something to do with it, especially in Western Australia. "Big business, the multinationals—they call the tune in too many cases".

"I voted Green, because I'm left of centre in my thinking. I always said that both wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were wrong, the wrong way to go—a lack of understanding of the culture or the milieu in the Middle East and of course they are about oil and resources. They've made a mess of it and it is still a mess".

Ran, a public servant who voted in the electorate of Reid in western Sydney, said: "[It is] a trust issue—how can you trust someone [Gillard] that chucked out the person that was next to them? She was behind him [Rudd], she was supporting him, [then] suddenly he is not needed anymore. It's not about people for them, it's about themselves."

Pat, a high school student in the western Sydney seat of Fowler, said: "It was a bit wrong the way Gillard was put in. Rudd did bring the economy out of recession, but it's hard for people to see that, and he did start building the halls in schools. But a few schemes turned out to be failures… Labor shouldn't have backstabbed him. The mining companies had a hand in it. They're powerful—BHP Billiton and Rio Tinto. They have billions of dollars and they used that to their advantage and to publicise their interests."

Some people voted Greens as a protest against the major parties. Others, particularly young people, voted for the Greens because they regarded their policies as a progressive alternative to Labor and Liberal on the environment and social issues, including health and education. Only a few had examined the party's policies in detail.

In Parramatta, **Brooke**, a casual primary school teacher, voted for the Greens because they had "the best education policy" and the "best climate change policy". She said: "I would usually vote for Labor but this time I found the MySchool website isn't exactly an accurate way of assessing the schools." Labor's MySchool website is based on standardised testing to rank schools. "It puts a huge [amount] of pressure on the teachers, on those in disadvantaged schools, and on those who do take positions in the

more challenging schools [and] should be given more support."

Luke, an unemployed teacher in the northern Melbourne seat of Calwell, expressed a general hostility to all parties. "[Liberal leader Tony] Abbott and Gillard come out of the same mould. All the Greens do is oppose everything. Much of what they do is unrealistic. [Greens' leader] Bob Brown doesn't add up. Gillard's a lot shiftier than she makes out to be. The guy she replaced was just as shifty. They shaft each other. They are isolated and insulated."

James, a nurse who voted Green in the seat of Grayndler, said: "It's very hard to distinguish between Liberal and Labor anymore. It's a toss of a coin. I've voted Labor most of my life but not this time. I voted for Labor last time on the promise of an Emissions Trading Scheme [to cut carbon emissions]. They went nowhere with that."

SEP campaigners found many people wanted to talk about issues that had been buried by the major parties and the media—Australia's involvement in the Afghanistan war, the continuing global economic crisis and the deterioration of living standards.

Don, a retired insurance representative who voted in Parramatta, said he was an ex-member of the Liberal Party, but it had "lost its way." Speaking on the global economy, he said: "I honestly don't believe the world is out of the woods economically. I think the whole financial system could collapse, and I've been talking about that for some time with people. We are on the edge and I really think things are much worse than the public knows.

"Well, this might surprise you. I'm obviously not a socialist—I don't think socialism works. But I also believe, given the circumstances the world is in now, that the capitalist system is bankrupt, and we have to find a new model." Don suggested that heavily regulated capitalism would be required in the future.

Gayle, a disability pensioner who voted grudgingly for Labor in the western Melbourne electorate of Gellibrand, denounced the war in Afghanistan. "I'm against war, I don't think the poor innocent people should die. I just don't believe in war. I don't like pollution either—in fact, I don't like the way the world is going at all. This is a money-hungry system. I hate going to shop at the big [supermarkets] Coles and Woolworths."

Michael Badolato, a young forklift driver who voted in Fowler, commented: "I wouldn't be surprised that, whether Labor gets in, or the Liberals, we'll see more troops sent to Afghanistan. It's just to follow America's suit. That war is just for money. If there wasn't money involved, they wouldn't be there. They've discovered minerals in Afghanistan, so there goes Afghanistan! Who's going to grab it all? The rich people. And the oil and gas in Central Asia. And then they'll get out. Everyone's fighting for money, and then they'll have another massive war. America is losing its grip all over. What's next? Who knows? It's all about business."

Zoran, a full-time carer who voted in the eastern Sydney electorate of Kingsford Smith, said the living conditions in his public housing estate were unbelievable. "The people who live on the pension don't have enough to eat. They don't have enough to pay for electricity. They put mentally ill people in this housing alongside well people. They should be in hospital! And what about the homeless people? There should be no homeless people in this society. This society is rich enough. But who is talking about that in this election?"

Both the Labor and Liberal parties whipped up xenophobia against immigrants, particularly against refugees fleeing countries like Afghanistan and Sri Lanka by boat, in an effort to deflect attention from their own political responsibility for the lack of social services and infrastructure.

An SEP campaigner in the northern Melbourne electorate of Calwell explained: "Several people raised their concerns about refugees coming here and taking local jobs working for $7.00 per hour undercutting wages here. Every person you speak to in Craigieburn is furious about the lack of infrastructure and facilities in these areas. Many of the residents have lived there for more than 30 years and nothing has been done. When you explain the problems are the same everywhere, whether in Craigieburn, Detroit or Colombo, there is always a positive response and an understanding that these are global class issues."

Satish Ishri, who voted in Calwell, expressed concerns about refugees taking jobs, but also empathised with the plight of refugees: "I am an immigrant myself. I came to this country in 1992 because of the military coup in Fiji. I did that for the safety of my children. I could see that they would not have much future there because of the persecution of Fijian Indians. So those people who are coming from Sri Lanka have similar reasons."

Other voters were opposed to the vilification of "boat people" by the two major parties. **Eddy**, an electrician who voted in Grayndler, said: "The election campaign was a race to the bottom. The two parties are virtually indistinguishable from each other. [On] this ridiculous asylum seeker issue, Labor's too gutless to stand up and lead. I'm sure that most people would support them if they made a positive stand. They shouldn't vilify these refugees the way they are, it's ridiculous. A few thousand coming by boat and yet Abbott tells us the world's going to end."

Mehmet, a student who voted in Calwell, said: "There was no difference between Labor and Liberal. Gillard outlined her position on asylum seekers and it's not fair this sending them offshore, in closing the door. There's xenophobia and they try and say that they care about Australian jobs and unemployment… I want someone in who is more honest in the Senate. I'm thinking of a transition to a more humane society."

During discussions, people commonly commented to SEP campaigners that they wished they had heard more about the party. Others explained why they had voted for the SEP.

Sokhanna, a young nurse of Cambodian descent in Fowler, had already voted but explained: "I saw 'equality' on your placard—that is what I want, what I believe in. When I turned 18 I thought: why am I voting like everyone else? People don't get educated by the other parties. So people vote blindly and then these are the consequences—health care and education problems that are getting worse. You are here explaining what is happening to us. The other parties don't."

Alex, who voted in Blaxland, said he voted for the SEP because of the growing social inequality in Australia. He said his parents had left Russia in order to escape the social devastation caused by the collapse of the former Soviet Union. Moscow, he continued, now had 45 billionaires. "My parents thought that Australia would be a land of fairness and more liberal. But in fact, it is the same." Pointing to a nearby shopping mall, he said: "These companies are just as monopolistic as the Russian oligarchs. They exclude competition. Enormous wealth and political power are being concentrated in the hands of a tiny minority. These are the real masters of

the Labor and Liberal parties."

At the Gladstone Park polling booth in Calwell, SEP campaigners handed out several hundred copies of a statement by candidate Peter Byrne entitled "SEP candidate demands immediate end to Tullamarine health hazard". Residents in the area are concerned about the health risks they face as a result of chemical leakage and fumes from the nearby Hazardous Waste Landfill.

The statement provoked considerable discussion, with people lining up on occasions to get a copy. Significantly, many people said they knew of cancer cases among their neighbours. A couple explained that they both had a form of cancer. By lunchtime, the SEP team had sold 11 copies of "Cancer and industrial pollution"—the findings of the workers inquiry initiated by the SEP into cases of leukaemia and cancer in the suburbs of Wollongong near the BHP steel mill.

School student **Brianna**, who helped the SEP on polling booths in the seat of Newcastle north of Sydney, said she had done so after reading the party's statement and attending a public meeting. "I think the election was brought on quickly after getting rid of Rudd so that none of the issues could be considered," she said. Brianna raised her concerns about government inaction on climate change "because big companies do not want their activities restricted" and her opposition to the war in Afghanistan.

Brianna said she was attracted by the socialist program outlined in the SEP's election statement and was keen to know more about the party. "I think society should function to address social need but with the capitalist system there is a massive divide between the rich and the poor, between the working people and those who control the system and own everything.

"There are such great problems across the world but these are never going to be addressed while the system is focussed on creating profit and wealth for a small amount of people. I want to see a system that will redistribute wealth so social equality can be established. This is far more important than profit."

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