

Australian voters speak out—Part 1

“Everything is far from rosy”

Our reporters
24 August 2010

A wide range of voters spoke to World Socialist Web Site reporters in the course of election day in Australia—August 21. Overwhelmingly, there was a sense of alienation from the two major parties—Labor and Liberal—with significant numbers voting for the Greens, either as a protest vote or in the belief that the party would implement its promises on the environment and extending services such as health and education.

Many voters opposed the June 23-24 political coup within the Labor Party that ousted Kevin Rudd and installed Julia Gillard as prime minister. While unclear as to the reasons, people commonly expressed concerns that it was done anti-democratically behind their backs. Some directly blamed the big mining corporations which had mounted a campaign against the Rudd government’s plan for a mining super profits tax.

In speaking to the WSWS, voters took the opportunity to express their concerns on a range of issues—from Australian involvement in the Afghan war to the growing hardships they faced—which were ignored by the media and major parties. Below is the first of three articles presenting their views:

Kim, who is married with two children, voted in the northern Melbourne suburb of Calwell. Her husband works at the nearby Tullamarine airport.

“I’ve been heavily Labor all the time. My dad’s in the union and works at the open cut [coal mine] in the Latrobe Valley. My husband works for Qantas. I wasn’t happy with the coup. I liked Kevin. I didn’t think he was doing too bad. I’m not 100 percent sure of Gillard. She’s hugely union backed. I’m not a fan of Bill Shorten [a key Labor powerbroker who was instrumental in the coup]. I voted Greens this time. I want to see more happen with the environment. Labor annoyed me changing their minds. They back flipped on the mining tax. I’m for it. They [the mining corporations] make lots of money. The airport is putting off more people.”

Tom, a rigger/dogman in the construction industry, voted in the southwestern Sydney electorate of Fowler. Asked about the official campaign of the Labor and Liberal parties, he said: “It would be nice if they were honest. We are getting fed stories of what we want to hear, not what’s going to happen. That’s my opinion of the elections. Both parties are obviously covering up something. It would be nice to know what they are covering up.”

Tom was disturbed by the backroom coup that ousted Kevin Rudd as prime minister, saying: “It’s a joke the way that happened. Obviously, Rudd wasn’t doing as he was told—by whom I don’t know. Very possibly, the mining companies were involved. Who else? Because the mining companies have 40 percent [of their profits] to lose! And the money markets, or the rich and famous, in other words!”

Asked about the Labor government’s claims to have prevented a recession, Tom said: “Everything is far from rosy. Conditions on the job are going backwards. I’m a qualified dogman and the companies want me to do labouring work, which is not on the cards. I’m a skilled guy. There’s more and more casual labour, because the bosses can use casuals to control their workforce. Because the permanent guys won’t go out of their way to bend with the bosses, whereas the casuals do. That’s why they get rid of the permanents and bring in the casuals.”

Tom said he voted Labor, but reluctantly. “I was very worried about voting because I don’t believe either party. Unfortunately, I did vote for Julia Gillard, because you can’t have WorkChoices back in, which is what [Liberal leader] Tony Abbott wants.”

The WorkChoices industrial legislation was enacted by the previous Liberal government of Prime Minister John Howard. Rudd promised to abolish the law but enacted Fair Work Australia legislation that bans virtually all industrial action. Gillard was the industrial relations minister under Rudd.

Asked about Labor’s laws, Tom said: “I know that Fair Work Australia is the law. It says you can’t go on strike but if we have to go on strike, I believe it will still happen on a building site.

“We have had strikes over Ark Tribe, the South Australian building worker who’s in court because he wouldn’t do what the ABCC [Australian Building and Construction Commission] wanted him to do. The fact that he’s still on trial under a Labor government, though, means they are covering up something. And Labor has kept the ABCC and the same laws. But Ark Tribe will get help from the people.”

Referring to Gillard’s comments on West Gate Bridge

construction workers in Melbourne, whom she described as thugs when they walked out on strike, Tom said caustically: “It is an easy way out to call people thugs.”

Thembi is from South Africa and has lived in Australia for four years. While unable to vote in this election, she expressed her views: “I thought the elections were a bit mediocre—it just seems like a race to the bottom. I think Rudd’s removal was brutal but I think that it was probably a necessary sacrifice for the Labor Party. I agree with a lot more of the policies of Labor than Liberal, such as the [proposed] broadband network. That’s probably the major one, but as to whether they actually implement that successfully is another story I guess.

“I don’t think the war in Afghanistan makes sense. I think if America had invaded anyone they should have invaded Saudi Arabia because that is where the majority of the terrorists came from in 9/11.” She expressed concern when told that Abbott indicated that he would send more Australian troops to Afghanistan and that Labor and the Greens had been silent on the issue. “I didn’t know that. That makes me wonder then if they want to go in that direction as well,” she said.

Angie, a teacher’s assistant and single mother, voted in the Perth seat of Swan in Western Australia. She is studying to become a teacher and was concerned about the deterioration of public education and child care.

“Being a part of the department of education, I think it’s really unfair the way the teachers and teachers’ assistants have to reapply for their jobs every year. It’s hard for them to get permanency. I’d love to become a teacher, but to get permanency it means I have to go out to a country town. I don’t want to go somewhere that would take my son away from his stability. I don’t know if I’ve got a job for next year because I have to reapply, and it’s very stressful.

“There’s also no incentive for single mums to go back to work. The childcare rebate is fantastic, without that I wouldn’t be able to work at all. But the fact that I lose 40 cents in the dollar after I earn \$75 a fortnight means I don’t benefit from going to work.

“The cost of studying is huge, I mean you come out with huge HECS debts and you’ve got to pay it straight to the government once you start earning a decent wage”.

“The teachers and nurses have to do their study and also their practical. As a teacher you have to do numerous 10-week practicals and 5-week practicals—this is all working full-time without pay. Families are put under so much pressure for students to go to work and study and they don’t get paid. Teachers and nurses are two critical professions in our lives but they don’t get paid for their learning or for trying to live while studying”.

Nisrine, a shop assistant for Coles supermarkets, voted in the western Sydney electorate of Blaxland. She said that she decided

to vote for the Socialist Equality Party after being phoned by her husband from the polling booth, who told her about the SEP and that it was calling for the withdrawal from all foreign troops from Iraq, Afghanistan and East Timor.

“I agree with your policies on this question, especially the war in Afghanistan. I didn’t know what to do or who to vote for until now. The Americans shouldn’t be there and neither should Australia and I can’t stand how it goes on and on. It’s not about Osama bin Laden, just like the invasion of Iraq had nothing to do weapons of mass destruction. It’s about oil and everybody knows it.

“Two more soldiers were killed today but Abbott and Gillard don’t talk about Afghanistan. Probably it’s because they’re going to send more troops as soon as they’re elected,” she said.

Nisrine previously voted Labor but “had no reason to support them anymore. Why should I? They have done nothing to help us or our families and life is getting harder and harder. They treat us like rubbish. How are we supposed to keep our heads above water with the wages we are getting?”

Nisrine had been working at Coles for 15 years but conditions were becoming impossible as the company and other retailers were attempting to push out long-term older employees and replace them with young casuals.

“Coles tried to sack me after I’d been on maternity leave with my first child. I’ve been working for this company for 15 years but they tried to replace me with someone who’d just started there. I took them to court over it and won a discrimination case. The union supported me on this but now they don’t do anything.

“Coles has cut the number of the people on the [cash] registers and we’re flat out all the time—sometimes it’s only two or three people and the lines are huge. If you make a mistake because of the pressure and productivity, management comes down on you. I’ve contacted the union about this and other stuff and they don’t do anything. How are we supposed to deal with this? The union is rubbish. We pay dues to them but they do nothing.”

Click here for full coverage of the SEP 2010 election campaign



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact