

Australian voters speak out—Part 2

“It’s like the election got hijacked”

Our reporters
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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 carried out 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 second of three articles presenting their views:

Hannah, a disability worker who voted in the Perth electorate of Swan in Western Australia, said: “Initially I thought Rudd’s removal was about popularity, and because I believed in Labor, I thought I understood such things have to be done to keep the Liberals out. I thought Labor should get in at all costs. But if it was a push by the mining companies, then it’s pretty deep and dark, and people need to know the underlying issues and not have to guess why it happened.

“I saw the way public servants have been treated in South Africa recently. My husband has been through Thatcherism and both of us think more workers need to rise up and organise themselves. There needs to be more indignation and a collective effort, especially for the ordinary people.

“Some people vote for Labor because they still think it’s a vote for the working class, but people should look at other smaller parties and not be so wary. If this attitude is to change, there needs to be more education. I do despair sometimes about politics because people say it’s all too hard, and they hear ‘Stop the Boats’ [refugees] and perhaps support Liberal.”

David, a musician who voted in the inner-western Sydney seat of Grayndler, commented: “There’s virtually no talk about the issues. Boat people have been made into far too big an issue relative to the

amount of people actual coming. It makes me ashamed. To me, it’s like the election got hijacked.

“I also have a big problem with the removal of Rudd. I know that technically we don’t elect the leader, we elect the party. But I have a big problem in a democracy where a leader can be deposed by any other method than by being voted out by the people. I’m not okay with that at all. And I’m certainly not okay with a bunch of factional bosses deciding.

“First they wanted to get rid of Rudd and then they had to try and bring him back to resuscitate the [Labor] campaign. I lived in America for 20 years, between 1981 and 2000, and the country I came back to was so different. You couldn’t tell the difference between Labor and Liberal. The reason I voted Labor last time is that I have a two-year-old son and I didn’t want him to be born in John Howard’s Australia. Then Rudd commissioned a lot of studies, but actually didn’t do too much.”

Linh, who works at Melbourne’s Crown Casino, voted in the northern suburban seat of Calwell. He said: “I don’t know what the point of this election is. There’s always going to be one party or the other, nothing else. I think the Labor Party’s alright. I voted for them. I voted for the SEP in the Senate [upper house] because they stand for equality. I think society has to be fairer and that’s what equality is. That’s what we have to strive for.

“I think the war in Iraq and Afghanistan was because they all wanted to follow what America wants, and they are there for the petrol. It never matters what we say. They always go ahead with these wars for their own interests.

“Workers barely get enough to live now. I wonder if the government will do anything about the price increases in housing. I think it will go like America, where the bubble burst. People are going to end up homeless. I don’t know how kids are ever going to be able to afford housing, when we can barely pay for the huge prices now. The prices kept getting higher. Some houses around here will cost close to half a million to a million dollars. It’s ridiculous. People’s wages haven’t gone up, and a lot of people don’t have enough work to live affordably.”

A legal secretary, originally from Chile, voted for the Liberal Party in the western Sydney seat of Parramatta. She explained: “I have had discontent with the Labor Party since they came into government.

Basically, to me, it is of concern to me whether Julia Gillard is going to be our next prime minister.

“I don’t want to vote for someone who is going to take action on issues in three or four years. We had a government that made promises, [and] nothing happened in the last two years. There was no action. There was a lot of spending, and basically if you run your household that way, you will have nothing, and that is what is going to happen.”

Asked about the ousting of Rudd, she commented: “I come from a South American background. It is what military governments in South America actually did back in the 70s—what happened in Uruguay, what happened in Argentina, and it happened in my own country, in Chile.” She said the same thing had happened here, in a “democratic country, but without having to have the military government in place... I think people should have been given the option, to decide what should happen [to Rudd].”

Petar, a storeman, voted for the SEP in the seat of Gellibrand in the western suburbs of Melbourne. His sister Veronica is a disability pensioner who suffers from mental illness.

“I am a member of the NUW [National Union of Workers]. I was a union delegate but I quit. I wanted to improve and retain conditions, not downgrade conditions. This year the awards were changed by the Labor government under modernisation. Casuals used to get a 33.3 percent loading. Now they get 25 percent.

“I don’t like the way Gillard says she is from the ‘left’. You shouldn’t claim to represent what you’re not. She doesn’t represent workers.

“I don’t like the industrial relations laws. Unions’ hands are tied. There are too many restrictions on them. For example, you need to give 24 hours’ notice of a union meeting, if a company wants to be technical. But the manager can call his lawyers any time he likes.

“I don’t like the ABCC [Australian Building and Construction Commission]. It is not transparent and open like court systems. It is like a secret society. Basically it is more of an institution set up to attack the construction industry workers.

“Governments have changed laws over the years. They made pattern bargaining illegal and now there are individualised workplace agreements—enterprise bargaining agreements. People can do the same job and get completely different rates of pay.

“How it ends up is that big companies like Toll open up another shed somewhere else, make a green-fields agreement and basically people get bargain basement wages and conditions. Then that shed is in competition with higher-paid enterprises. Locally, I’ve seen Coles Myer close sheds down because they weren’t happy with wages getting high. But I’ve seen charts and statistics that show the proportion of wealth that workers get of GDP compared to business has significantly dropped from the 1980s.

“In Victoria, under the Workcover legislation, too many people who have been injured on the job, and not able to work at full capacity,

have had their benefits stopped after 30 months. They are thrown on the scrapheap, abandoned.

“For people at the top, it doesn’t matter how much money they make. They’re trying to maximise profit and they have no regard for the people they hurt.”

Cheryl, a young Aboriginal health worker, who voted in Calwell, commented: “I’ve never voted Liberal but I don’t trust either of them. I think the way Labor went about removing Kevin Rudd was awful. The way the party did that, the whole process. The mining companies earn billions, so why not pay some extra taxes? When the mining companies pay Aboriginal communities the money to get their land, only a few—a select few—in the community get any money.

“In the Northern Territory, it’s Third World status. It’s appalling. I can’t believe in Australia we could have people living in those conditions. There are not statistics on the life expectancy of Aboriginals there, but I’m sure it’s a lot lower than ours. The politicians turn a blind eye to it. It’s frustrating and disheartening. Why don’t they get the same benefits as everyone else?”

In 2007, under the pretext of protecting Aboriginal children, the Howard Liberal government ordered a police-military “intervention” into Northern Territory Aboriginal communities and imposed welfare quarantining. Welfare recipients have half their income “quarantined” for spending on items such as food and clothes at designated stores using a “basics card”. The Rudd Labor government retained and extended this regressive “income management” policy across Australia.

Cheryl, who had first-hand experience, said: “I didn’t agree with the intervention. I’ve seen families come from the Northern Territory to Melbourne for medical attention. They have community services but it isn’t as advanced as here. Their access to health is far more limited. Rheumatic heart disease is common—due to diet I think.

“Families with sickness come down with the [basics] cards that replace their welfare payments and they need surgery, which can’t be provided up there. The basics cards they have aren’t transferable, so families cannot get the money they need for their daily needs. Whoever gets in, they won’t make anything better for us or the Northern Territory Aboriginal people.”

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[23 August 2010]

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[24 August 2010]

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