

Victorian workers discuss key issues in state election

“These conditions cannot continue unanswered”

Our reporters

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Voters spoke with World Socialist Web Site reporters on a range of issues outside polling booths in the Broadmeadows electorate on Saturday. Socialist Equality Party candidate Peter Byrne contested the seat in the Victorian state election.

A key manufacturing centre, Broadmeadows has been devastated by job cuts in the past five years and now has the state’s highest official unemployment rate—15.9 percent or almost three times the state average—and over 50 percent youth unemployment. While the electorate was considered a “safe Labor seat,” it recorded a 10.7 percent swing against the state Labor government of Premier John Brumby on Saturday.

Voters angrily denounced the government over rising unemployment, inadequate housing, poor health and education facilities and the ongoing Australian involvement in the US-led occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan. This is the first of two articles detailing voters’ concerns.

Roger, a retired worker, said job losses were making life impossible for working class families. “I used to work in bathroomware manufacture for Fowlers,” he said, “and there were 100 workers that the company made redundant.

“My first wife and all her friends worked at Yakka [clothing factory] before it closed down. I had three mates at South Pacific and my son and his ex-wife worked at Ericssons. All these jobs have been wiped out. I come from Yorkshire, where they have closed down the mines. If you’ve seen the movie *Brassed Off* you know what it is like. Australia has gone down a lot since I came here in the 1960s.

“The money they pay bank executives now—\$11 million a year—is outrageous. How do we fight against it? And look at the cost of living adjustments—it’s never level with the real cost of living. If you get a few dollars then the prices go up immediately, or the bosses sack you because they won’t pay. These conditions cannot continue unanswered.”

Joseph, an accountant and previously a Labor voter, voted Liberal in protest against the Brumby government.

“I think Labor will win,” he said, “but I want them to wake up

and think about the northern suburbs and the issues of jobs and lack of infrastructure. The Northern Hospital needs much better staffing and we need a 24-hour clinic here.

“Mark my words, next year there are worse times to come, and irrespective of whether Labor or Liberals are in power, workers are going to have to pay much more. I see the tax office becoming really aggressive in getting back refunds and auditing people. The billionaires pay nothing, of course, even though they might charge one or two of them as a show.

“I have relatives in Greece—basically they are immigrants to Greece from Lebanon, and they are seen as second class citizens. They have UN refugee status but they are the first to lose their jobs. I spoke to them a few weeks ago and my cousin had lost his job and his wife had had her hours cut. We have to send money to keep them going.

“We are hitching our boat to China with the Australian minerals boom and when it collapses ordinary people will have to suffer. Taxpayers, people on the dole, pensioners will be the ones to pay.”

Baris, a bricklayer, said he voted for the SEP. “I have always had a socialist heart in my lifestyle and would like to see the socialists in the parliament. Labor and Liberal all seem the same to me. Certain groups like the wealthy have more say and not the majority of the people. The government represents business, not us.”

Baris denounced Australian involvement in the US-led invasions of Iraq and

Afghanistan. “It’s all for petrol; it’s all business related,” he said. “I believe America has been behind many wars since World War II—the government, that is. What makes the world turn is the law of the capitalists and the world’s superpowers making profits.

“I think Obama is just a puppet who was put there just to shut up people’s mouths. He should be ashamed about what he’s doing, especially considering what Afro-Americans have been through over the years.”

Amal, 60, said: “I can’t get a job because I’m over 55.

Everybody is crying for money and I can only pay my [utility] bills—they send me two at once—if I don't eat."

Commenting on job losses she said: "I worked at JB Morgan for 10 years as a welder, which made oil and air filters for the car industry. You had to hit the oil filters with your hand to close them, so my fingers were blue and black, and I had to push heavy baskets with 380 oil filters in them. The glue looked like clay and the stink gave me asthma, which I never had before.

"The factory closed in 1998 and we were all thrown onto the scrapheap—200 people lost their jobs. Even though I'd been there 10 years, the company claimed that in the last three months I'd worked as casual so they could steal my entitlements. I then worked at Betta Foods but it closed down as well.

"My daughter-in-law worked at Dunlop [South Pacific] Tyres but it closed and went to South Korea. My son went to Lebanon and the only work he could find was for \$300 a month, \$1 an hour. You can't live on that."

Kimmy voted for Labor but gave her second preference to the SEP. "I'm a nursing student and am worried about the state of health care," she said. "There's not enough nurses, and the ratio between nurses and patients is bad. I'm working as a PCA [patient care assistant] because I am not registered as a nurse. There are two of us for about 13 or 14 residents and it's quite hard.

"The situation with ambulance waiting times is also bad. It's not easy for ambulance drivers because we really don't have that many paramedics out there and it is often hard for the ambulances to get out," she said.

Brad said "important issues, like the war, unemployment or job security" were not discussed in the state election campaign.

"I work in a plastics factory and my conditions are terrible. I have no lunch-break and have to work eight hours on my feet all day and I have an injured finger. The supervisor always yells at me; he often makes me feel like it's my last day there. I was out of work for a few years and can't afford to lose my job. Yesterday I was sent home after an hour because there wasn't any work. This means \$90 less for the week. I average about \$530 a week but it's very hard to live on that," he said.

An Autoliv worker, who wanted to remain anonymous, denounced the major political parties. "Labor and Liberal always put us last," she said.

"Our factory is shutting down and going overseas; our jobs will be gone in the next few months. Nine hundred jobs have been destroyed at Autoliv [an auto-parts manufacturer] over the last couple of years and there's only a handful of us left. The union has done nothing—they're with the company and are just concerned about our union dues.

"I always vote and did it again today—for Labor as usual—but

they don't help us at all. We are always on the bottom," she said.

Zahra, a mother of two children, spoke about the run-down of public hospitals. Health care, she said, was "outrageous."

"I've always voted Labor but this time I voted Liberal," she said, although she had no confidence that social conditions would improve under the Liberals.

"I had a dental problem," she continued. "I went in at about 5.30 to emergency and was in real agony. They said, 'We can't see any more people' even though it was an emergency.... I'll have to go private because there's a 3- to 5-year public waiting list for your teeth. Every time I go to the dentist I have to tell them, 'No don't pull it out' but it's becoming difficult because I can't afford to save my teeth."

Sean, an engineer, challenged Labor campaigners at Broadmeadows North to answer his questions about public health. "When was the last time you visited a hospital and what is Labor going to do about it?" he asked but received no answer.

He later spoke with the WSWs: "My father is 90 and has been a life-long member of the ALP. They've just sent him a special medal and certificate but I don't have any time for Labor because they've done nothing for the people in this area.

"I'm dissatisfied with what's happened to public transport, the ambulances and other basic infrastructure. I used to think that Melbourne had good public transport but it's one of the worst in the world—that's what tourists coming here tell me. Some of them have described it as third world.

"I've got a mate who's a paramedic on the Mornington Peninsula and it's impossible. They have two vehicles to handle the whole peninsula. I've heard Brumby's election ads and what he says about hospitals is false. Things are not improving at all; people here are really suffering. I'm disgusted with all them—Labor, Liberal," he added.

Asked to comment on the ongoing US occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, he said: "I'm an engineer and was sent to Iraq in 2005. I don't agree what what's going on there at all. Another friend of mine was there and he's never recovered from what he saw; he's a mess. I'm definitely antiwar and that's why I voted for your guy."

Click here for the coverage of the SEP Victorian election campaign.

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