

Broadmeadows by-election highlights growing hostility towards Australian Labor Party

Our correspondents
22 February 2011

Saturday's by-election in the Victorian state electorate of Broadmeadows underscores the hostility felt by working people towards the Labor Party, and their alienation from the entire political establishment.

Labor retained the working class seat, in Melbourne's northern suburbs, which it has held for decades—but with a significantly reduced majority. Its candidate, wealthy property developer Frank McGuire, received a primary vote of 53.8 percent—8.5 percentage points lower than Labor's vote in last November's state election. The party's previous Broadmeadows representative, ex-Premier John Brumby, won 62 percent three months ago. In 2006 he received 68 percent, and in 2002, 75 percent. In the past decade Labor's vote in the electorate has declined by more than 20 percent.

Voting in Australia is compulsory, so those who failed to cast a ballot on Saturday are now subject to a fine. Despite this, 23 percent of all enrolled voters decided not to vote. Many in the area did not even know there was an election on, so minimal was the media coverage of the campaign. Moreover, there were no candidate debates or forums, and the Liberal Party did not bother to field a candidate at all.

The low voter turnout also reflected general disgust towards the whole electoral process. Many people were angry that Brumby had forced yet another poll, by quitting parliament as soon as his Labor government was defeated last November. Informal votes—ballots either not filled out properly by mistake, or deliberately left blank or filled with a message of protest—comprised 8 percent of the total. In all, some 31 percent, or nearly a third of the electorate, failed to cast a formal vote.

The new member for Broadmeadows claimed the reason that Labor's vote had dropped again was “a culmination of voters going to the polls for the third time in six months (including the federal election), nine candidates running, the ending of a Labor political era and the resignation of a former premier.”

These self-serving alibis are designed to cover over the real reason: the party's unrelenting social assault on the jobs, living standards and basic rights of workers and youth.

In office from 1999 to 2010, the Victorian Labor government was among the most ruthless pro-business state administrations in Australia. It worked closely with the former federal Howard government, including assisting in the implementation of various anti-democratic laws as part of the bogus “war on terror”. It pioneered “free market” policies in health (casemix, activity-based hospital funding) and education (so-called performance pay for teachers) that have since been promoted nationally by Labor prime minister Julia Gillard.

In Saturday's by-election, so-called independent candidate Celal Sahin won 19.7 percent of the vote, largely from the significant population of Turkish-Australian workers. Sahin advanced no specific policies, promoting himself merely as a “local”, and appealing for an anti-Labor protest vote. One side of his “how to vote” card distributed at the polling booths featured, in large print, “Put the ALP Last”.

The Greens received 6 percent, less than in the 2010 and 2006 state elections. Their inability to capitalise on Labor's declining support reflects their growing difficulty with maintaining an “anti-establishment” posture, given their sordid alliance with the federal Labor minority Gillard government. The Greens' vote in Broadmeadows is also an expression of the party's social base, which is located, not in working class electorates, but in the far more affluent inner city suburbs.

The Socialist Equality Party's candidate Peter Byrne, received 535 votes, or 2 percent of the total. Given that there were nine candidates, and Byrne was not identified on the ballot paper as an SEP member, due to anti-democratic electoral registration, these were significant and conscious votes for a socialist and revolutionary alternative. Byrne is widely known in the area, after standing as the SEP's candidate for last November's state election and the federal election in August.

SEP campaigners spent election day discussing the party's program and analysis with voters at the polling booths. They had several conversations with people who said they had voted for Byrne after having read the party's election statement—“The socialist alternative in the Broadmeadows by-election”. Unemployment, poverty, mental health, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the overthrow of former Egyptian President Mubarak were among the issues they raised.

Broadmeadows has been one of the areas hardest hit by the protracted downturn in the Australian manufacturing sector. Factory closures and mass layoffs have been imposed at Pacific Brands, South Pacific Tyres, Ford, and many car component companies, with the active collaboration of the trade unions. Hours have also been slashed. Workers from the Ford plant in Broadmeadows and elsewhere voiced their concerns over these attacks, and over the role played by the unions in implementing them.

Alvin, a Ford worker, said: “The company looks like it might be shutting in a few years' time. They are cutting working hours. The conditions are very bad now and they're not the same as they used to be. The union is under the management now. If you have something to complain about, you go to the union and forget about it—they won't help you.”

Bandula Hewawasamge, a Ford technician for 16 years, said he voted SEP because “both parties are the same”. “It’s getting worse at work; I’m working three days a week. This is because the car industry is down, due to high petrol prices; people don’t like big cars anymore. The unions don’t help us much—they’re with the bosses. The bosses give them a car, and they don’t work, so they shut up.”

Julia, also a Ford worker, explained: “We lost so many conditions in the last few years.” Asked about the statement of Labor’s Frank McGuire that unemployment in the area was due to the “cost of labour”, she replied: “I think it is totally incorrect to say that wages are too high. Let him [McGuire] come and live our life at the moment ... For four years we haven’t had a wage rise. The way these Labor and Liberal parties are going, we’re not satisfied with any of them.”

The official unemployment rate in Broadmeadows is 15.9 percent, while youth unemployment is over 50 percent. The real jobless rate—counting those who have given up looking for work through the official Centrelink process and those working as little as one hour a week—is even higher.

Christina, a retired worker, recalled some of the many factory closures in the area. “I started work at 14,” she said. “In those days you could finish a job at any factory and get another one whenever you wanted to. I worked at Kodak just before it shut—it broke my heart to see that place close. I also worked at Dunlop for three and a half years—they’re now shut. Also at Hilton Hosiery, now shut.”

Khaled Mohamad, who voted for the SEP, said: “I lost my job at Ford in 1999. After five and a half years they gave me \$16,000, and kicked me out. Now I work as a taxi driver and as a courier. The union works for the company at Ford. Whatever the company says at head office, they do ... We’re losing many jobs. Too many companies are closing down. My cousin has been here for two years and he is still unemployed.”

Jennifer, currently unemployed, said: “I was a stay-at-home mum. As soon as my son turned 16 they kicked me off the [single parent] pension and put me on the dole. I’ve put in heaps of resumes and got nothing. I look on the Internet all the time. I’ve been waiting for a public housing place for ten years ... The only way I can afford to live is that my son, who is now 19, has an apprenticeship at an engineering place in Roxburgh Park, and my daughter, 24, is on the dole and helps out too.”

Broadmeadows has some of the worst concentrations of poverty in Australia—the consequence of successive Labor and Liberal governments driving down pension and unemployment payments far below the poverty line.

Hulya Keles, a single mother of Turkish background who has four children, explained her plight: “I’m in a terrible situation at the moment. I can’t afford things like mince meat and can’t have basic things like proper housing. I receive \$290 a fortnight, everything else I get goes straight to the rent. I haven’t had a holiday for years—you need at least \$3,000 for a holiday.

“I’m going through stress at the moment,” she continued, “but it’s

really hard to get help with problems like stress. I need an operation on my hip but can’t afford private health and so I’ll have to wait for at least two years. I’m here voting but it won’t help the population with anything, that’s the truth.”

Hulya, like many other voters who spoke with the SEP, expressed her solidarity with the workers and young people in Egypt. “The governments in the Middle East have created a terrible situation in places like Egypt. People have been living so poor for so long,” she said. “It’s really good that they took a stand against the dictator and didn’t stop until he left.”

Endemic unemployment and poverty in Broadmeadows has led to increasing mental health problems, suicide, relationship breakdown, alcohol addiction and substance abuse. Belinda, an acute mental health nurse who has worked in psychiatric care for 12 years, discussed this crisis with SEP campaigners.

“There are huge pressures on the staff working in the hospitals to get patients through and out in four hours but mental health nurses and the mental health system are the poor cousins of health,” she said. “We suffer the most from the government—no-one wants to acknowledge this because it’s mental health and they want to pretend it’s not there.

“One in four people have mental health issues but working class families are more prone to adversity in mental health because they don’t have access to private health. The gap between the poor and the rich just keeps getting bigger, the poor get nothing. With unemployment you see an increase in depression and anxiety-based disorders and people using drugs to avoid what is happening in their life.”

The Socialist Equality Party was the only party in the by-election opposing the Labor government’s involvement in the US-led neo-colonial wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. This received an important response among workers and young people.

Meriana, a first-year student at the University of Melbourne, was born in a Syrian refugee camp to Iraqi parents who fled after the first Gulf War. “I think the war in Iraq was about oil, of course, but also more about politics,” she said.

“Saddam Hussein was a dictator but he was not going to launch war against America. The US used 9/11 as an excuse to attack Iraq. Afghanistan seems a bit different with the Taliban. I thought the government was pulling troops out by 2014, but I think Australia will just follow the big players like the US and UK. We never stand alone.”

On the Egyptian revolution, she added: “What’s happening in Egypt is good, in terms of democracy. Everyone is a bit afraid that people might be taken advantage of, that religious groups will come to the fore. The economic and political state in Egypt has created this situation. It’s good that the revolution took place, but let’s hope that people are not taken advantage of. If the military don’t deliver on their promise then the people will turn on them. Mubarak has been backed by the US with \$1.2 billion a year.”

Gustavo, a 73-year-old pensioner, said: “I voted for the SEP because I’m tired of the other political parties. I’ve always voted Labor.” Gustavo had received the SEP statement in his letterbox and brought it with him to the polling booth. Pulling it out of his pocket, he continued, “I hope you maintain what you said. I’m against war. War is awful for everyone,

Afghanistan, Vietnam, Korea ... What's shown in Egypt and Tunisia is that instead of making war, the people can take action. The people need the opportunity to choose representatives and have a good future."



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