

Australia: Brisbane voters speak to the WSWS

Our correspondents
26 March 2012

Workers and young people voting in the southern Brisbane suburb of Kingston during last Saturday's Queensland election spoke bitterly to the WSWS about the reality of mass unemployment, insecure jobs, poverty-line wages and broken promises in the so-called mining boom state after two decades of nearly continuous Labor rule.

Their comments gave an insight into the landslide defeat of Premier Anna Bligh's government. Kingston and the surrounding areas have for decades been regarded as Australian Labor Party (ALP) strongholds. In the previous state election of 2009, the ALP's vote still exceeded 70 percent at the Kingston polling booth. On Saturday, it fell to 46.7 percent across the Woodridge electorate, one of only four seats in which Labor MPs survived.

Brisbane's southern suburbs, from Woodridge and nearby Logan stretching west to Inala, have among the highest official unemployment rates in Australia. Since the global financial crisis erupted in 2008, the figure has remained at Great Depression-style levels of around 20 percent—almost four times the national average.

Travis White, 26, a fully qualified baker, said he was working 14 hours a day, six days a week, earning only \$9.50 an hour, in order to save the money he needed to pay for a wedding and put down a deposit on a house. He received no overtime rates, and every third week, he worked seven days straight.

"It's a crazy world," White commented. "No one should be working this hard." He added: "The working class is keeping Australia afloat, but Labor has meant that we get none of the benefit." For people in the Logan region, "nothing's changed for so long, even though they keep promising it." Instead, life was "getting worse and worse."

The young worker explained that he had cast an

informal vote, because he now refused to vote for the ALP but had no confidence in any other party. "My theory is: what is the point if someone I vote for is not going to do what they promise? Business interests decide everything basically."

Justin Michalik, a Woolworths storeman and former soldier, said that more than half the workforce at his warehouse had been casualised, and the company was refusing to pay shift and forklift allowances. After tax, Michalik took home only about \$33,000 a year.

"Big business is making all the money, and not passing it down to workers," Michalik commented. He added that the trade unions had "allowed all this to happen... the unions are a waste of time—all they do is feather their own nests."

Michalik denounced the Bligh government. "We should be living well, with all the mining resources, but only the miners are doing well. There is no flow-on effect. Instead, we now have high prices, the state is broke and everyone's struggling."

Tepz, an Australia Post night-shift mail sorter, originally from Samoa, said she had always voted Labor, but would never do so again. Although she had a full-time job, there had been many cuts in the postal service. "Our jobs are not secure at all. We could be asked to leave at any time."

By privatising railway and other public assets after the last state election, Premier Anna Bligh had "lied" and "gone against what she promised," Tepz said, reflecting an almost universal condemnation of the ALP's privatisation program. "So what is there? Voting for what? They don't listen to us."

"Labor does nothing for you," she said. "What about all those people who have no jobs, or whose partners are losing their jobs? They can't even apply for [unemployment] benefits because someone in the house

is still working. They've got no money to support themselves. The people without jobs and single parents should get more money so they can help their kids."

Tepz typified the sentiments of workers who had migrated to Queensland from the South Pacific, Asia and Africa, looking for a better future but finding their hopes now being shattered.

Joyce Pepe, a single mother, originally from Papua New Guinea, said she voted Labor, as she had done for many years. She had just lost her job in the airline industry. "I am 40, and yet I have to go back and study, and I hope there is a job when I get out."

Alongside the disaffection with Labor, there was considerable foreboding about the prospect of a Liberal National Party (LNP) government led by former Brisbane Lord Mayor Campbell Newman, who had campaigned as a "can do" man who would fix the ALP's "waste and inefficiency."

Michalek, the Woolworths storeman, said he had "no confidence in the LNP. I don't know what they stand for. As for the 'can do man,' you're kidding me, what can he do?" Michalek commented that under successive governments, Labor and conservative, society had become increasingly divided into "poor and rich" and there was "no middle class anymore."

Albert Matthias, a retired public sector worker, and carpenter by trade, had been retrenched under the previous National Party government of Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen, in power from 1968 to 1987. "I voted Labor, because Newman would be a dictator," he said.

Matthias wanted more money spent on public schools. He said the ALP's privatisation policy had been "wrong," but "all the governments are doing it." Matthias added: "I don't agree with the way that governments follow the money markets, but they all do it."

Similarly, **Matt**, a self-employed painting contractor, said he had voted ALP, as he had done all his life, because he was vehemently opposed to Newman. "A full passion, don't like that man! He's even more pro-business. Labor was still a little bit more mindful of the little people." Matt commented that Labor had become "too much like the Liberals... they all want to make the rich richer and keep us in our place."

Matt illustrated the problems of small contractors, many of whom have been severely affected by soaring petrol prices. To get painting jobs, he had to travel long

distances, either into Brisbane city, or Ipswich or the Gold Coast (each almost an hour away), because there was "no money and no work around here."

Matt had been disgusted by the negative, mud-slinging character of the election campaign. "At least they used to lie to us, now they don't even do that anymore! They just tell us how bad the other person is—what the other side won't do."

Most people had followed the media reports of the austerity measures and protests in Greece and elsewhere in Europe, but saw little connection to the situation in Australia, or the policies implemented by the Bligh and Gillard governments.

White, the baker, was something of an exception. "If it can happen in Europe, it can happen anywhere," he said. "It may be a bit different and take a bit longer but it will happen eventually. The global financial crisis should have been over, but it's not. American and Europe are still in the mire and because they're so big, it affects us."

No one voiced support for the main so-called alternative parties standing in the election—the Greens and Bob Katter's Australian Party. Tepz, however, said she had voted for Family First, a right-wing, socially conservative Christian party. She had done so in the hope that it would be "true to its name" and "help the families, because they need help, especially those with little kids." Tepz conceded that she knew little about Family First's policies, but had primarily wanted to record a vote against Labor, without supporting the LNP.

Tepz's comments highlighted the political impasse confronting the working class. There is deep alienation from the ALP's enforcement of the dictates of the corporate elite, and at the same time real fear of what lies in store under the LNP. What is needed, however, is a conscious turn toward a socialist alternative.

The authors also recommend:

A historic rout of Labor in Queensland election
[27 March 2012]



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