

Labor Party narrowly wins Melbourne election

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The Labor Party appears to have barely held on to the Victorian state seat of Melbourne, following Saturday's by-election. Postal and absentee ballots are still being counted and the Greens are yet to concede, but Labor candidate Jennifer Kanis yesterday claimed victory after the counting showed her ahead of Greens' candidate Cathy Oke, on a two-party preferred basis, by 750 votes, or 51.4 percent to 48.6 percent of the total.

Labor powerbrokers greeted the outcome with obvious relief. Despite the efforts of the Labor Party and the Greens to maintain that the by-election was solely about "local issues," the crisis of the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard overshadowed every aspect of the official campaign. In the lead-up to Saturday's poll, sections of the media speculated that a Greens win in Melbourne, a seat held by Labor for more than a century, could trigger another move to oust Gillard. Trade Minister Craig Emerson, a Gillard supporter, this morning declared that if the Melbourne election had been a test of the prime minister's leadership, she "has done very well."

In reality, the by-election outcome has underscored the deeply-felt hostility to the Labor Party and its right-wing policies. Melbourne was previously a "safe" Labor seat; as recently as 1999 the party received 59 percent of the primary vote. Last Saturday, according to the votes tallied so far, Labor received just 33.3 percent of the primary vote. This was behind the Greens' 36.4 percent.

Nevertheless, Labor's candidate has apparently won the election, because Australian elections are not decided on a "first past the post" basis. The winning candidate must instead get more than 50 percent of the vote. Unless someone receives more than half of the primary vote, candidates with the fewest votes have their ballot paper

preferences distributed to the leading candidates. Under the anti-democratic compulsory preferential voting system, to cast a valid ballot, voters must number in order of preference every candidate on the ballot paper. Minor parties and candidates typically issue "how to vote" cards instructing their supporters to direct their preferences to one of the major parties, with sordid backroom deals and promised payoffs often determining the order of these preferences.

In the Melbourne by-election, the Labor Party outmanoeuvred the Greens in stitching up "preference deals" with the other candidates. Labor was desperate to cover all its bases—at the beginning of the campaign, Labor candidate Jennifer Kanis telephoned the Socialist Equality Party to request a meeting to discuss preference arrangements. (The SEP declined the offer, explaining its longstanding principled position of not doing preference deals or directing preferences to the parties of the political establishment.) In the end, Labor secured the preferences of almost all the right-wing candidates, including Family First and other Christian fundamentalists. The Labor candidate was also backed by the Sex Party—a well-funded vehicle of the pornography industry that promotes libertarian policies—which finished third with 6.6 percent of the vote.

That the Labor Party only won Saturday's election with these preferences is further evidence of the deep crisis it confronts across the country. Labor has been reduced to a rump in the state parliaments of Queensland and New South Wales, and is similarly facing electoral oblivion at the next federal election.

The media today gave little credence to the party's boasts about holding onto the Melbourne seat. The *Australian Financial Review* noted in its editorial that the

by-election had “assumed unusual importance given the precariousness of Julia Gillard’s leadership.” The result “showed Labor’s primary vote is still mired in the basement even in its heartland seats.”

The by-election demonstrated widespread alienation not just from the Labor Party but the entire political establishment. This found expression on Saturday in the low voter turnout—estimated at just 70 percent, despite compulsory voting laws under which people who abstain can be fined—and in the higher than usual informal (invalid) vote—8.5 percent of all ballots counted. The Liberal Party’s decision not to field a candidate was likely a factor in both these statistics.

The informal vote was probably partly due to the large number of candidates contesting the election—to cast a valid vote, people had to consecutively number the ballot paper from 1 to 16, without missing or doubling up a number. But a large number of people registered a protest against all the parties and candidates by either staying away from the ballot booth, or turning up to avoid being fined, and then deliberately spoiling their ballot or returning it blank.

The Greens failed to capitalise on the anti-Labor sentiment. Despite reportedly spending more than \$250,000 on their election campaign—a record for the Greens on a state seat—their vote was only marginally higher than their result in the seat at the November 2010 Victorian state election.

The Greens’ parliamentary alliance with the Gillard government has undermined their ability to posture as a progressive alternative to the Labor Party, while their refusal to rule out doing a ruling coalition deal in the Victorian parliament with either the Labor or Liberal parties underscored the absence of any significant policy differences between the Greens and the two major parties. Labor attempted to exploit the Greens’ manoeuvring, distributing leaflets to some parts of the Melbourne electorate in the final days of the campaign that condemned the Greens for leaving open the option of supporting the deeply unpopular state Liberal government.

Only the Socialist Equality Party represented the interests of the working class in the by-election. The SEP issued a series of statements in the course of the

campaign—among others, we defended international students, opposed the vendetta against WikiLeaks’ Julian Assange, advanced socialist solutions to the housing crisis and other social problems in Melbourne, defended the unfettered right of asylum seekers to enter Australia, and exposed the pro-business nature of both the Labor Party and the Greens.

The SEP was also able to intervene in struggles waged by sections of the working class, including car workers, construction workers, teachers and striking Coles-Toll warehouse employees. We held two successful public meetings—the only such events organised by any of the parties contesting the election. Unlike previous election campaigns, the mainstream media did not completely black out the SEP’s campaign, with some, albeit very limited, coverage on ABC Radio and in the *Australian*.

The SEP’s candidate, Patrick O’Connor, received 148 votes, a small but significant tally amid a crowded field of candidates and without the SEP’s name appearing on the ballot due to anti-democratic electoral laws. The focus of the party’s campaign was the fight to make its analysis and revolutionary perspective known to the widest layer of workers and young people, preparing for the immense social struggles, in Australia and internationally, that lie directly ahead. Those who voted for the SEP and who participated in our campaign should seriously study our program and apply to join the party.

The author also recommends:

Melbourne voters speak to WSWS

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See the SEP web site for further information on our election campaign.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact