

Melbourne voters speak to WSWS

Our reporters
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Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in the Melbourne state by-election spoke to workers and young people at the polling booths on Saturday. Held by the Labor Party for more than a century, Melbourne is an inner-city electorate, with a mixture of older working-class families, newly-arrived immigrants in public housing estates, university students and a growing better-off middle class population.

The 18-month-old state Liberal Party government of Premier Ted Baillieu—whose cuts to public sector jobs and services, and attacks on the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) system, have caused widespread anger—choose not to stand a candidate. That left the Labor Party and the Greens as the only two parliamentary parties vying for the seat, under conditions where the Greens are propping up the minority federal Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard.

Even though the Labor Party narrowly retained the seat, a striking feature of the interviews was hostility to Labor, and especially the Gillard government. Over the past three decades, at both state and federal levels, the Labor Party has served as a ruthless representative of the corporate elite, imposing cuts to public spending and social services, and imposing job losses and casualisation.

Those who voted Labor, typically did so because they saw no other way of opposing the Baillieu state government.

A young worker in the hospitality industry, **David**, explained why he voted for Labor. “I am not happy with Baillieu cutting back TAFE,” he said. “I would like to go back to school but it is really hard. I want to do a business course to increase my skills to get full-time work. The problem I have is that all my jobs are always casual—this casualisation of the workforce is a real problem. It is hard to get a decent income coming in. I would be lucky enough to get 15 hours a week at about \$16 per hour, and that is not a lot.”

Eddy, who had always voted Labor, said: “I am concerned about the job cuts in the public sector. There are far too many jobs going.” At the same time, he was disenchanted with the Gillard government. “Look, I work in the mining sector and those guys are just printing money. They are making vast profits... I definitely believe the mining companies should have been taxed, but I am

really not a fan of what Gillard gave the mining companies after [Prime Minister Kevin] Rudd was sacked.”

Labor also picked up votes from former Liberal voters. **Magdoline** said: “I’m concerned with Baillieu government’s cuts to TAFE and everything else. Before the [November 2010 state] election he made all sorts of promises, but when he got in he broke them. I used to vote for the Liberals but I voted for Labor this time because I think the election will be between Greens and Labor. I prefer Labor because the Greens are extremist.”

Many young people showed their contempt for Labor by accepting only Greens’ how-to-vote cards. They regarded the Greens as being more “progressive.” They tended to be worried about the prospect of a federal Liberal government led by opposition leader Tony Abbott government, but were hostile to the Gillard government. They wanted something done about climate change, were concerned about the plight of refugees, and disgusted by the growing inequality and ever-increasing wealth of the financial elite.

Yet, most Green voters were not fully committed to Green policies, rather seeing them as a pragmatic choice. They often had only a vague idea of the party’s policies. Many were unaware that the Greens had joined a Labor Party coalition government in Tasmania that had axed thousands of public sector jobs.

Tom and Ben, both in their 20s, voted for the Greens. Tom said: “I am not happy with how any of the political parties are going in the federal area. I voted for the Greens even though I don’t agree 100 percent with their policies...I think the Greens stand up for a lot of the policies that Labor should stand up for, or did in the past.”

Tom was “sickened and disgusted” by how the major parties—“even the Greens” were handling the refugee issue. “Refugees are human beings and they should be treated with respect. They should absolutely be allowed to live wherever they choose. It is abhorrent what we are doing with these people; we are using them as political pawns.”

Tom said he was opposed to the right-wing austerity consensus. “Government policies never seem to change from the economic rationalism started under [former prime ministers] Keating and Hawke. Companies and banks are being bailed out everywhere. Look here at the bailout of Ford: it was bailed out by the government, but they sacked 440 people last week. This money

could have been used for education of workers to get other jobs—not just given to the companies.

“It’s the same in the US. What is being created there is the development of an underclass. It is like slave labour—no minimum wage—and if we continue to emulate the US, then we are going to have a lot of problems of our own.”

Simon, a teacher who recently moved into Melbourne from suburban Mount Waverly, typified a middle-class layer who voted for the Greens. “I’m traditionally a Liberal,” he said. “It used to be Liberal versus Labor. I grew up in the country and the Liberals looked after the country areas. As society changes we have to change the way we vote. It’s not just the labour force and the professionals. People are now more complicated, more global in their perspectives.”

An array of independent candidates, mostly right-wing or promoting single issues, as well as several minor parties, contested the by-election, each seeking to appeal to the widespread disaffection with the major parties. They included Berhan Ahmed, a former Eritrean refugee, Stephen Mayne, an ex-Liberal, and the Sex Party. In total, there were 16 candidates.

Voting is compulsory in Australia, and voters in the state of Victoria must also record preferences for each candidate, in this case from 1 to 16. Many people expressed their hostility to Labor through protest votes for independent candidates and smaller parties. Their sentiments were often contradictory.

Oztac said he had voted for the Sex Party because Labor and the Greens “aren’t doing anything.” He continued: “I’ve always been a Labor voter, but I hate Julia Gillard. I hate the way she stabbed Rudd in the back, and her lying, just one lie after another.”

Oztac voted for the Sex Party on the spur of the moment. He said that he had only first heard about the group earlier that day, when he saw one of their leaflets. He said he agreed with their calls for 24-hour public transport and “better career planning” in schools.

Rod a construction worker, said he had put two independent candidates as his first preferences. “I voted for [Stephen] Mayne, and my second preference was for the African independent, Berhan Ahmed, because I like to give people from other countries a chance.”

“The major parties are disappointing,” he said. “I’ve been a Labor man all my life. My father was for Labor; my grandfather was for Labor. In the old days, the party was run by people like us. Now, they’re not at all for workers. Look at what they’re doing to refugees; it’s disgusting. Everyone who comes here should be given a chance to have a decent life.”

“The unions have lost the plot, too,” he added. “To get them to come out to your workplace, it takes someone to get the sack. In the old days they would just come out to say hello. Instead, they

take your dues money, they drive around in nice cars, but they don’t care about your job.”

Rod said he had attended a Carlton residents’ forum at which Patrick O’Connor had spoken, and said he would read the SEP election statement. “I agreed with what he said. He focussed on the social issues—I think that’s important.”

Throughout the campaign, the SEP’s candidate Patrick O’Connor advanced a revolutionary socialist alternative, emphasising that the urgent political task confronting workers and young people was to develop their own independent class response to the accelerating crisis of the global capitalist system.

A thoughtful layer of workers and young people voted for O’Connor, despite the fact that anti-democratic voting laws prevented the SEP’s name being listed on the ballot.

Andrew, an educational researcher, said: “I voted for Patrick O’Connor because I read his stuff in the papers. He is the most articulate representative of the old left, of all the candidates. He has no vested interest; he’s not some small businessman or shareholder. He has a widespread attitude and policies on serious issues.”

Andrew explained: “I am concerned about the current Liberal government, or rather Liberals’ mates’ government. Public transport and willy-nilly development in this area are a problem.”

Jane, who works at a university, commented: “I voted SEP because I think we have to radically re-think the world. We’re told that Marx might be out of fashion but we haven’t solved the profound inequities at either a global or local level. A recent example is that, apparently, mankind produces 6,000 calories of food per day for every person globally, and yet a billion people go hungry every day. Why do we starve a billion? So I voted for a socialist.”

She added: “But in pragmatic terms my second preference for the mainstream parties went to the Greens. I hope the Greens win the seat. It gives the nation a sense that it’s possible to bring about change. I was a traditional Labor voter from the age of 18 until three elections ago. I voted for them for 20 years, until they had nothing left.”



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