

Australian PM promotes nationalism and “law-and-order” in western Sydney

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In a desperate political stunt, Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard is spending this week “visiting” the working class suburbs of western Sydney, staying every night in a local hotel. Like areas around the country that were once historically considered as bastions of Labor support, Sydney’s west is seething with hostility toward the government as a result of deteriorating living standards and a worsening social crisis. Opinion polls suggest that the Labor Party could lose all the parliamentary seats that it holds across the region in the federal election that Gillard has called for September 14, ensuring it will lose office.

Gillard launched her tour to revive Labor’s electoral fortunes with a campaign-style rally at the University of Western Sydney’s (UWS) Parramatta campus last night. Intended as a show of support for Gillard and Labor in western Sydney, the rally was a dismal and demoralised affair. Despite the NSW Labor Party office sending invitations to party members, and lapsed members, throughout the state, urging them to come and bring along friends and relatives, they struggled to fill the venue. Before proceedings began, Party apparatchiks feverishly shifted members of the audience around to hide the empty seats. The carefully-vetted audience was full of Gillard’s loyal cabinet ministers and MPs, their staff and union bureaucrats, as well as party die-hards from across New South Wales.

Blasts of upbeat pop music failed to lift the mood, which was set by state Labor secretary Sam Dastiyari in his introductory speech, when he spoke of “difficult” and “tough” times, with “our backs against the wall.”

While the obligatory standing ovations occurred before and after Gillard’s address, there was a noteworthy lack of response during much of its rather short duration, of around half an hour.

The event made clear that Labor intends to try and

win back support through the reactionary promotion of Australian nationalism, anti-immigrant xenophobia and “law and order” scare-mongering.

Gillard’s speech was peppered with anti-immigrant jibes, which sought to blame overseas workers for the decimation of jobs and conditions that has taken place under the Labor government. “We will stop foreign workers being put at the front of the queue,” the prime minister declared, and “put Aussie workers first.” Gillard claimed that her overriding concern was to create jobs for workers in Sydney’s west. She appealed to building industry employers and contractors on the basis of her government’s recently announced plans to ensure that they can tender for large contracts. “We will back your firms to get more work at home,” she claimed.

Gillard’s anti-immigrant pitch is in line with the efforts of the trade unions to whip up hostility toward overseas workers in Australia on temporary “457” work visas. The union’s racist-tinged campaign is above all an attempt to deflect attention away their collaboration with employers and the Labor government in the enforcing the avalanche of job cuts and closures over the past 18 months, including by Australian corporate giants such as Qantas, Telstra and BlueScope Steel.

Gillard highlighted “law-and-order” as another plank of Labor’s election campaign. She declared that it was the “vital business” of her government to crack down on “gangs” and “organised crime”. She painted a picture of ordinary people in Sydney’s west and other parts of the country living in fear of violent criminals—though the main evidence she cited was the “drive-by shootings” in Sydney that occurred during 2012.

Hysteria over crime is another attempt to divert

discontent over declining living standards, while bolstering the already large resources and powers of the police and intelligence apparatus that will ultimately be directed against the working class. Gillard boasted about her announcement, earlier in the day, of a \$64 million joint police taskforce to target crime syndicates and “gangs”.

Gillard also sought to revive a central axis of Labor’s 2007 election campaign, pledging to “fight anyone” who wanted to return to the WorkChoices industrial legislation of the former Howard Liberal government. In reality, the Labor government, working closely with the unions, retained all the essential anti-strike and other repressive features of WorkChoices in its “Fair Work” laws that have repeatedly been used to suppress industrial action.

The remainder of what Gillard presented as a “five-point plan” consisted of repeating the government’s fraudulent claims to be delivering high-speed Internet access via its National Broadband Network, “world-leading” education, health and disability services, and easing “pressures on family life”.

In fact, the conditions in western Sydney epitomise Labor’s record of presiding over the destruction of jobs, particularly in manufacturing and the public sector, and essential services.

Official unemployment rates across the region, which are understated, are as high as 12.8 percent in Fairfield East (up from 10.5 percent in September 2011)—more than double the national average. Regional youth unemployment is estimated at 18 percent, and is far worse in the most impoverished suburbs such as Mount Druitt and Macquarie Fields.

There are chronically high rates of mortgage and rental stress (when payments exceed 30 percent of income). The Reserve Bank last year calculated that more than 10 percent of households with home loans in Sydney’s west had signs of “potential mortgage vulnerability”. The figure was closer to 20 percent in the central western suburbs of Auburn, Bankstown and Fairfield. Households in the outer electorate of Lindsay, based on Penrith, had average debt-servicing ratios of more than 50 percent, almost twice the national level.

Financial stresses are accentuated by the difficulties of travelling up to three hours a day on increasingly congested roads or unreliable public transport to get to work and back. Inequality has also become ever more

extreme in Sydney since the 2008 financial crash, with average incomes in the more affluent northern and eastern suburbs soaring to about three times those in the west.

The state of services in the region is epitomised by the rally’s venue. Gillard declared that the University of Western Sydney—which she described as a “factory for suburban opportunity”—provided “no greater example of our Labor faith, of the substance of the things Labor hopes for in Sydney’s west.” UWS has just retrenched nearly 30 academics and nearly doubled class sizes in some disciplines as a direct result of Gillard’s “education revolution”, which forces universities to constantly cut costs and tailor their courses for narrow vocational purposes.

No amount of campaigning by Labor can erase its record. Gillard’s “visit” already appears to be backfiring, with one reported survey indicating that 43 percent of voters were now less likely to vote Labor as a result of her tour.



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