

Labor Party routed in Western Australian election

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Saturday's election in Western Australia saw the Labor Party suffer another state electoral defeat. Entrenched hostility among ordinary people toward the federal Labor government was a significant factor in the vote. Prime Minister Julia Gillard is now under greater pressure as Labor Party figures warn of a pending "massacre" in the national election due in September.

The incumbent West Australian Liberal Party won 47 percent of the primary vote, a swing of 8.8 percent. Premier Colin Barnett no longer depends on the support of the rural-based National Party, which had backed the minority Liberal government formed after the 2008 election delivered a hung parliament. The Liberals are forecast to secure 32 of the parliament's 59 seats, with the National Party on 7 seats. Labor will hold no more than 20, down from 28. Labor's primary vote of 33.6 percent was down 2.2 percent from the previous election, with the Liberals gaining more ground at the expense of independents and "others" (down 3.6 percent) and the Greens, which lost a third of their vote, cutting their share to 7.9 percent, down 4 points.

Over the past two years, Labor has suffered repeated electoral disasters, losing office in the three most populous states—New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland—and the Northern Territory. Such is the hostility to the federal government that the Labor leader in Western Australia, Mark McGowan, asked Gillard to stay away from the state during the election campaign.

Former state Labor government minister Alannah MacTiernan has demanded that Gillard now resign. MacTiernan said many Labor Party supporters had told her during the campaign that they would vote Labor in the state election, but not in the upcoming federal poll. "It's pretty simple and it's pretty brutal, and they are saying they don't like Julia Gillard and they don't

believe her," she told the ABC. "If we do not take note of this, there is going to be an absolute massacre in the federal election."

The federal parliament resumes sittings this week, amid continued media speculation over a new leadership challenge from former prime minister Kevin Rudd or another caucus rival.

The political crisis confronting the Labor Party is not, as MacTiernan and various media pundits have presented it, merely a matter of Gillard's personal standing. The prime minister has been widely despised ever since she came to office through the anti-democratic Labor Party coup against Rudd in mid-2010, which was organised by a cabal of factional and trade union apparatchiks.

More fundamentally, the Labor Party at every level of Australian politics has lost any connection with its former social base in the working class. Over the past three decades it has transformed itself into the most ruthless instrument of finance capital and the ultra-wealthy. The Gillard government is the product of this evolution, on foreign policy lining up with Washington's war drive against China, while at home working with the trade unions to advance a sweeping pro-business economic restructuring agenda and austerity spending cuts aimed at lowering workers' living standards.

Labor governments at the state level have likewise cut taxes on business, undermined public infrastructure, promoted "user pays" and privatised health and education services. In Western Australia, Labor lost office in 2008 due to widespread anger over substandard and deteriorating public services and infrastructure, and growing financial pressures caused by the rising cost of living, particularly for housing, fuel and groceries.

Five years on, this anger has only grown. Western Australia is socially polarised as never before. The centre of the Australian mining investment boom, the state economy registered economic growth of 14 percent during 2012. A handful of mining magnate billionaires has accumulated enormous personal fortunes, and a layer of the upper-middle class has benefited from the rising stock market and rapidly inflating property prices. For ordinary working people, however, the “boom” has meant massive increases in the costs of housing, utilities, and other basic necessities. (See “Social crisis to intensify after Western Australian election”)

State Labor leader Mark McGowan made no serious appeal on these issues in the course of the election campaign. In fact, Labor’s central message was directed to big business, appealing for its support on the basis that Labor would rein in government spending. While McGowan tried to distance himself from Gillard, he committed himself to implement the austerity program being spearheaded by the federal Labor government. McGowan attempted to capitalise on credit ratings agencies’ warnings that the state’s “AAA” ranking would be downgraded unless the public debt, forecast to reach nearly \$25 billion by 2016, was sharply reduced.

Just before the vote, McGowan publicly warned that the Liberal Party was preparing to privatise state-owned water and electricity assets, pushing household bills even higher. The federal Labor government is the most strident proponent of utility infrastructure privatisation, and McGowan’s efforts to win support on the issue fell flat.

Now that the election is out of the way, Premier Barnett’s government will quickly accelerate the anti-working class austerity cuts in order to address the corporate elite’s debt demands. The economic slowdown in China is widely expected to see another plunge in iron ore export prices later this year, which will immediately exacerbate the West Australian government’s budget position, which depends heavily on mining royalties.

The West Australian election is also the latest in a series of recent state and territory polls registering declining support for the Greens. Their alliance with the minority Labor government in Canberra, which they have propped up since 2010, has exposed their

posturing as a “progressive” alternative to the two major parties.

Business and the media are stepping up a coordinated campaign demanding that the federal budget in May deliver massive new spending cuts. Finance Minister Penny Wong, head of the Gillard government’s “razor gang”, declared that the latest state election loss showed the need to “hold to budget discipline.” In other words, the Labor government has used the West Australian election result to affirm its commitment to delivering on this corporate agenda.



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