

Australian Labor Party thrown out of office

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The Australian Labor Party lost office in Saturday's national election, registering its lowest primary vote since 1903, at just 33.8 percent. The result underscores the disgust and hostility felt by broad layers of the working class and young people towards the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments, which spent the past six years implementing the agenda of big business and finance capital.

In 2007, when the former Howard government was routed, 5.4 million people voted for Labor, with the party winning 43.4 percent of the primary vote. In this election, only around 3.6 million did so—a loss of nearly one in four of Labor's previous supporters. In 2007, Rudd capitalised on bitter anger over the Liberal-National Coalition's support for US-led wars in the Middle East, its brutal treatment of refugees and of Aborigines, its inaction on climate change, and its attacks on workers' wages and working conditions. In every area, the Labor government lurched even further to the right during its two terms in office.

The Greens registered the first decline in their national vote since the party's founding in the 1990s, receiving just 8.4 percent of the primary vote, down from 11.7 percent in the last federal election in 2010. The result was an expression of the widespread hostility towards the Greens' role as parliamentary props for the minority Labor government during the past three years—an experience that has severely undermined their efforts to posture as the “progressive” alternative to the major parties. Notably in Tasmania, a Labor-Greens coalition state government has slashed public education funding and sacked thousands of public sector workers, the Greens' vote was less than half the 16.9 percent the party won in 2010.

Liberal Party leader Tony Abbott is now prime minister elect. While votes are still being tallied and several seats remain in doubt, the Liberal-National coalition is forecast to win 89 of the 150 House of Representatives (lower house) seats, with Labor expected to be left with 57, down from its 88 seats in 2007, and 72 in 2010. Despite Labor's

record low vote, however, the coalition only made marginal gains, reflecting broad opposition to both major parties. The Liberal and National parties received 45.4 percent of the primary vote, only 1.7 percent higher than their result at the last election in 2010.

A record 20.8 percent of primary votes, more than one in five, went to parties and candidates other than Labor and Liberal-National. This figure provides only one indication of the extent of the disaffection and disgust felt by millions of ordinary people towards the entire parliamentary setup.

Despite compulsory enrolment and voting laws in Australia, millions of people risked being fined by abstaining from the election. According to the Australian Electoral Commission, nearly 1.4 million eligible voters failed to enrol. Initial turnout figures suggest the number of eligible voters staying away from the polls was higher than in previous elections. Moreover, of the 11.2 million votes so far counted, nearly 6 percent were informal, or invalid, with many of these due to people submitting blank or “none of the above” ballot papers, in a protest against all the candidates.

While the election underscored the continued political crisis wracking the Australian ruling elite, it also pointed to the crisis of perspective within the working class.

The main beneficiaries of Labor's collapse were a series of right-wing nationalist parties that ran populist campaigns seeking to harness opposition to the major parties and channel it in reactionary directions. Billionaire coal mining magnate Clive Palmer established the Palmer United Party (PUP) earlier this year and spent enormous sums of money standing candidates in every electorate and buying numerous expensive television and newspaper advertisements. These declared that Australia needed a “revolution” and promised lower income taxes, higher aged pensions, and massively increased funding on health and education. The PUP won 5.5 percent of the national vote and double that in Palmer's home state of Queensland. The extreme right-wing billionaire appears, at this stage of counting, to have won a seat in the lower

house, while at least two of his PUP members will enter the Senate, where they and other right-wing minor party figures are expected to hold the balance of power.

Once in parliament, these layers will collaborate with the Abbott government as it implements a ruthless agenda of austerity, aimed at drastically lowering the living standards of the working class.

During the campaign, Abbott said as little as possible about his policy intentions. While he and his advisers crafted the Liberals' "small target" campaign, mindful of the deep opposition among ordinary people to European-style budget cuts, Abbott's government is preparing to implement a savage pro-business agenda. Today, less than 48 hours after the election, the Murdoch and financial press is calling on Abbott to drop his pre-election pretences. On the *Business Spectator* website, Stephen Koukoulas wrote a comment entitled, "No time for Abbott to hover with the knife", declaring, "If Tony Abbott wants to kick off his prime ministership on a strong note, he and Treasurer Joe Hockey should have an economic statement or mini-budget, if you like, sometime before year-end... a quick implementation of some cuts in government spending in the right areas will work to shore up Australia's triple-A fiscal position and give some fiscal freedom, if needed, some time down the track."

The election outcome underscores the fraud of parliamentary democracy. Had Rudd won re-election, he would now be lending full diplomatic and military support to Washington as it prepares its predatory war of aggression of Syria, while at the same time accelerating his pro-business "competitiveness" program in collaboration with the trade unions. Now Tony Abbott and the Liberal-National coalition are preparing precisely the same agenda.

There is no possibility of the working class advancing its interests in any way within the existing political framework. Enormous social and political shocks lie immediately ahead. As the crisis of global capitalism deepens and Australia rapidly heads into recession, the ruling class is preparing new authoritarian forms of rule to implement its deeply unpopular agenda of war and militarism abroad and cuts to jobs, wages, and living standards at home. The task confronting the working class is to intervene into the crisis on a politically conscious basis in defence of its own independent class interests through the fight for a workers' government that will implement socialist policies.

Herein lies the significance of the Socialist Equality Party's 2013 election campaign, which alone advanced

the need for workers and young people to come off the political sidelines and fight for the socialist and internationalist perspective required to build a new revolutionary party of the working class. The SEP's Senate candidates in the five mainland states received a small but significant vote. With the ballot still being tallied, the *World Socialist Web Site* will report in coming days on the SEP's vote and the extent and importance of its campaign.

The party's national secretary and lead Senate candidate in New South Wales, Nick Beams, declared today: "The overriding lesson for the working class to emerge from this election is that its independent interests can find no outlet within the existing parliamentary system. The hostility to the Labor Party within the working class has so far found expression in the return of the Liberals and the emergence of a series of right-wing populist parties, most notably the PUP of billionaire Clive Palmer. Workers and young people must find a way out of this blind alley and strike out on a new road. This is the significance of the campaign waged by the SEP against the US-led drive to war, the assault on democratic rights, and the program of austerity that will now be implemented by the Abbott government. Socialist internationalism, aimed at unifying Australian workers with their counterparts throughout the Asia-Pacific region and around the world, against the capitalist profit system itself, is the only viable program on which the working class can now fight."



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