

Australian voters denounce attacks on refugees, living standards

Our reporters
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World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke with workers, students, youth, retirees, welfare recipients and immigrants outside polling booths in New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Queensland and Western Australia during last Saturday's federal election. In this second article of interviews, voters give voice to their hostility to the major parties and the whole parliamentary set-up.

Denunciations of both the Labor government and the Liberal-National opposition were commonplace last Saturday. Voters were angry about the government's attacks on asylum seekers and voiced concerns over job destruction, declining living standards, and cuts to health, education and other basic social services.

While Labor was dumped by voters—producing the party's lowest vote in over 100 years—this did not translate into popular support for the Liberal-National Coalition. There was an overwhelming sense of alienation from all the major parliamentary parties.

The following exchange in Newcastle with **Chelsea**, a pensioner, was typical.

WSWS: What do you think of the two major parties?

Chelsea: They're a disgrace. That's all I have to say; they're a disgrace. There's no difference between them. They'll sell anyone to make a dollar and they don't share our country with needy people.

WSWS: What's your comment on the election campaign?

Chelsea: Pathetic, absolutely pathetic. There's nowhere to go, no one to choose. It's a farce. Why would you want cruel people in charge of your life? None of the parties support the working class. They don't even understand how hard it is to live on a pension."

David, a designer from Toukley on the New South Wales central coast, declared: "I don't think they [Labor or the Liberal-National coalition] represent the working people. They seem to be more about making money for big business than improving life for everyone.

"There is a small section in society where money is concentrated, while in large areas there is not enough. This is crazy. All society should be equal. I have just spent ten years in capitalism, in business, and it's not a world I want to live in any more. I think it is impossible to have social equality under capitalism. We need a new society but it needs some real intelligent thinking and a study of history to reach that goal."

Chris, an artist from Newcastle, said: "It has been annoying, frustrating and really difficult to differentiate between the parties.

It's the worst election I've ever seen and the first time I had no idea who I was going to vote for.

"The last ten years I've cast a vote for who I didn't want to get in, rather than who I wanted, and this year I have asked more questions of myself so I could make an informed decision. In the end, I realised it's a coin toss and hope for the best."

In Footscray, **Joe** declared: "Labor has failed—all the internal divisions and irrelevant squabbling. They have lost the plot. I voted Labor, but in this seat it doesn't really matter. I am not impressed with them—they have no interest in what the community needs."

Gemma, Victoria University law student, had been affected by the tertiary education cuts but was also concerned about the attacks on refugees. "I think the 'stop-the-boats' campaign is very cruel," she said. "Feeding fear about asylum seekers is not the way to go about human rights issues. I'm disappointed there isn't much difference between the parties in regards to asylum seekers. It's such a minor number of people coming, but they have blown the issue up and tried to grab votes."

In western Sydney, Mt Druitt voters raised many concerns about Labor's measures against refugees and the growing attacks on living standards.

Tasneem, a University of Western Sydney student voting for the first time, said: "The politicians like it when the poor and workers are quiet. When people start to talk and rise up, they try to take away our rights. We're supposed to have free speech but [Edward] Snowden showed these freedoms are all talk and no show for the government. We want our freedom, our human rights.

"Two things shouldn't be touched: education and pensions, and as the population grows there should be good jobs. Here in Australia, university students and casual workers have to live with their parents because they can't find full-time work."

Samira, another student, said she voted Labor because her parents always did, but was "confused because of what the Labor government is doing to the refugees. Refugees are being blamed for taking away jobs and services, and are called lazy. That's not true. Many of these people are victims of wars started by the US and other big powers."

Ayak, a Sudanese single mother of four, is one of thousands of women whose single parents benefit was cut by the Labor government. Her fortnightly income was reduced by about \$400. "It is very hard to pay the bills and pay for food for the kids," she said, explaining that high rents made her life very difficult. "I

can't go to work because I have to stay and look after my children," she added.

At nearby Kingswood, **Christine**, a home duties and volunteer worker, said: "This is the first time I've been undecided. I've been a Labor supporter for years, but I was so disgusted with their asylum seeker policy and they're not doing as much for the environment as they should be. They should have stood up to the miners and big businesses."

In Geelong, **Guillermina**, a teacher, came to Australia as a political refugee, following the military coup that overthrew the Allende government in 1973. Australia had become like Chile, she said, because the divisions were very clear between the rich and the poor. "Our whole lives have been around the issues of equality and something that identifies with our values," she said. "I came to vote but could not make up my mind because of the similarities of the parties and particularly the candidates."

Mark, from the northern Adelaide suburb of Craigmare, said: "At the end of the day the main thing any worker wants is job security. I've got a massive mortgage of over \$300,000 and don't want to go to work thinking my job isn't going to be there. I'm a painter by trade and my work now is short-term and all over the place."

Mark said he and his wife both worked and had no children at home, "but we're just keeping our heads above water. How can it change so much in 30 or 40 years? My parents only had one income and five kids, and we were OK.

"The corporate executives are raking it in while we have to tread water to keep living. CEOs make millions of dollars! It's a joke. The Labor Party has forgotten about us. It's all about the shareholders and the companies these days—that they have to make their profits."

In Perth, **Helen**, a Curtin University lecturer, was disappointed with the entire election process: "Some really important issues are being swept under the carpet—like climate change. I think policy is being made to appeal to the polls—like refugees and asylum seeker policy—and going for the lowest common denominator. For me this is low level politics... the number of people entering Australia is relatively small but there's a lot of scare-mongering and calling for 'stop the boats'."

In Brisbane, **Lincoln** was disillusioned with the election. "I want to see a society where people are supported, where is it not just business, business, business," he explained. "People are people, and need to be looked after... I care about the economy, but not at the cost of welfare.

"The main thing for me is health. There is a massive push for private health care and insurance. I have an issue with that, because it's a fear campaign—they tell us that as we get older it will cost you more, so get in now... The more people do that, the more the public health system will go out the window. Then, if you are rich, if you have money, then you can get care, sort yourself out and be fixed up, but if you don't have money then you are screwed."

Young people were especially concerned about unemployment and insecure jobs.

Mateo in Dandenong left school at end of Year 11 in 2011 and still has not been able to find a decent job. "I've only had up and

down, unstable work— part time—where they can sack you any time. I want something stable. I've done labouring work and factory work... And I always end up working for next to nothing.

"Every politician is the same: all promises and they don't explain anything or what the future holds. Why should I put my future in their hands, when they won't tell me anything of what they plan? The election is just to make it look like you have some rights... The workers have to stand up for themselves. At the moment, they're not powerful enough."

Juma, a fork lift driver originally from Pakistan, has spent the past four years trying to get his wife and family into the country. "I have a friend from Afghanistan who has been in Australia for 15 years and can't find any work. He feels too ashamed to speak to his family.

"I just came to vote because I don't want to be fined. All these politicians are the same. Julia Gillard just lies. She said she would never send refugees to Papua New Guinea and then she did."

Michael, 20, a student in Wollongong, said: "This entire region is a complete dead end; there are no jobs. There's absolutely nothing. It's ridiculous. When my grandfather worked here in the 1960s and 1970s there were heaps of jobs in the steelworks, and even when my parents were working there were lots of jobs.

"If I can't get a job, how am I supposed to support myself? I don't want to be on the dole. I'm going to have to move to Sydney or somewhere else to get a job. I have to pay HECS and other fees at university... Education should be for free for everyone, no matter what race or nationality."

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