

Australia: Queensland by-election highlights discontent over austerity

Mike Head
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A large anti-government swing in a by-election in the Australian state of Queensland last weekend provided another indication of the hostility of broad layers of working people toward the corporate program of austerity and decimation of social services being implemented by governments, state and federal.

The election in the Brisbane electorate of Stafford, whose residents include public servants, medical workers, public housing tenants and younger city workers, produced a swing of more than 18 percentage points against the Liberal National Party (LNP) state government and to the opposition Labor Party.

Labor's candidate picked up 51 percent of the vote, with the LNP on 33 percent and the Greens on 12 percent. It was the LNP's second disastrous by-election result, after suffering a 17 percentage-point swing in the northern Brisbane electorate of Redcliffe in February.

If these outcomes were reproduced at the next state election, due in March, Premier Campbell Newman's government would fall, and Newman would lose his own seat—just three years after the landslide defeat of the previous state Labor government.

At present, however, this widespread intense, but inchoate, opposition is being confined to parliamentary arena and finds no means for waging a struggle against the corporate agenda of austerity. The return of another Labor government, which would be just as ruthless as the LNP in slashing spending in order to satisfy the financial markets, is no alternative.

The Stafford vote clearly expressed opposition to the state government. It has already destroyed more than 14,000 public sector jobs since 2012, deepened the previous Labor government's cuts to public hospitals and announced plans for another \$33.6 billion in public asset sales, which will mean thousands more job losses,

especially in the electricity industry and ports.

Over the past month, the antagonism toward the Newman government has intensified as it subjected the population to a propaganda campaign, called Strong Choices, insisting that the privatisation program is essential to meet the demands of the financial markets to eliminate the state's budget deficit.

However, the defeat also reflects the continuing outrage toward the federal Liberal-National Coalition government's budget, handed down in May, which unveiled a blueprint for dismantling welfare entitlements and cutting billions from education and health.

Last month, in its state budget, the Newman government initially attempted to pass on to retirees the federal government's budget cuts to their concessions for utility bills, public transport fares and other essential services. Within two days, Newman was forced to reverse that decision. Amid the public outcry against the federal budget, his government was confronted by the prospect of pensioners marching through the streets in protest.

Newman then sought, unsuccessfully, to distance himself from Prime Minister Tony Abbott's federal government, accusing it of making cuts to pensioner concessions and to funding for health and other basic services that were "clearly not an acceptable outcome for Queenslanders."

Acutely aware of the national implications of the Stafford vote, an editorial in yesterday's *Australian* declared that the state government must not change course. The "most important challenge" for Newman and his team, the Murdoch newspaper insisted, "is to hold their nerve and persevere with the economic reforms needed to restore Queensland's budgetary position."

The editorial emphasised: “Paul Kelly’s incisive recent commentary about Australians being in denial about the challenges facing the nation is highly relevant in this case.” This was a reference to an article by the newspaper’s editor-at-large several weeks ago, in which he railed against the popular opposition to the federal budget, and the Abbott government’s failure to push all its measures through the Senate.

Giving voice to the alarm and frustration in ruling circles, Kelly declared that Australia’s political system was in “malfunction.” He condemned what he claimed was a culture of complaint, the decline of “self-reliance,” and inflated expectations that governments should provide social services.

On Monday, Newman professed to apologise for “getting some things wrong.” He announced several cosmetic changes, but insisted that his government must pursue the “Strong Choices program”—the privatisations—because “we believe that this is the only way in which to repair the state’s finances.”

State Labor leader Anastacia Palaszczuk, whose party now holds just 9 seats in state parliament, compared to the LNP’s 73, claimed that the Stafford vote was simply a product of Newman’s personal arrogance and his government’s record of “constantly picking fights with its citizens.”

In reality, Labor, while posturing as an opponent of the asset sales, is equally committed as the LNP to cutting social spending. In her budget reply speech last month, Palaszczuk said Labor would match the government’s debt reduction program.

Labor’s pro-business program led to an overwhelming defeat in 2012, after 14 years in office under premiers Peter Beattie and Anna Bligh. A key factor was Bligh’s 2009 announcement of a \$15 billion selloff of public enterprises, at the direct cost of 10,000 jobs.

Bligh’s decision, which repudiated her own election promises, was a blatant bid to try to appease the financial markets, which stripped the state of its AAA credit rating after the 2008 global financial meltdown.

Bligh’s government did so with the full support of the federal Labor governments of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard. Even as Bligh quit parliament, she continued to defend her sell-offs and Gillard praised her political bravery in pursuing Labor’s economic “reforms.”

None of this was possible without the trade unions,

which systematically blocked any struggle by their members, including electricity, railway and health workers, against the job cuts and other measures.

These same unions are now trying to contain the opposition to the federal and state governments and divert workers into seeking the return of Labor administrations that would only intensify the assault. “Stafford shows that Queenslanders reject the LNP’s choices,” Queensland Council of Unions president John Battams said on Monday.

Potentially fatal illusions are being sown. The program being pursued by the Newman and Abbott governments is not the result of “choices.” Internationally, governments are waging an onslaught on the jobs, living standards, social services and basic rights of the working class in order to satisfy the dictates of the financial and corporate elite amid the continuing crisis of global capitalism.

Queensland, previously depicted as a “boom” state—largely because of its coal exports to China and other Asian markets—is part of this universal drive to austerity by capitalist governments whatever their political complexions.



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