

Widespread disaffection in Queensland election

Our correspondents
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During campaigns in the Brisbane suburbs of Inala and West End last weekend, Socialist Equality Party supporters found prevailing alienation, disgust and discontent among working class people, not just toward the snap January 31 election in the Australian state of Queensland but the political establishment as a whole.

After years of broken election promises and worsening social conditions there is intense hostility to the federal and state Liberal-National Party governments, and also the Labor Party, which was in office in Queensland for two decades, and federally for six years, before being overwhelmingly defeated in elections during 2012 and 2013 respectively.

Last Friday's release of the state Labor Party's "fiscal strategy" underlined the essential unity between the two major parties on slashing public services and jobs, while boosting the powers of the police to suppress unrest. Both parties are also basing their election campaigns on the false claim that exports of liquefied natural gas (LNG) will reverse Queensland's economic slump, even though LNG prices are plunging in line with world oil prices.

In the southwestern suburb of Inala, where the official unemployment rate has risen to almost 24 percent, **Peter**, a public servant, opposed Premier Campbell Newman's staging of a sudden early election. He was "very concerned" about the government's elimination of more than 14,000 public sector jobs and cuts to frontline services.

Originally from India, Peter agreed that Newman was anxious to get the election out of the way because of the worsening unravelling of the mining boom, on which the state's revenues have depended for several decades. "You cannot rely on selling our backyard to India and China," he commented. "Crude oil prices are collapsing because the Saudis are trying to drive

everyone else out of business and LNG is not a sustainable energy."

Peter also opposed the diversion of government spending into military purposes and for the US-led war in Iraq and Syria. "The US president is like an arms salesman," he commented.

Jodi, a mother of seven, was outraged by the moves by Prime Minister Tony Abbott's federal government to force patients to pay upfront fees to see doctors. "I'm a single mum with seven children and I'm a chronic asthmatic, so I have to have regular medical visits. I think it's just disgusting. People need to get Abbott out."

When it was pointed out that Labor had also supported the imposition of fees, as far back as the Hawke federal government in 1991, Jodi commented: "People need to reassess what's going on." She said the wallets of the rich were "just getting fatter."

Jodi had seen Labor Party ads condemning the Newman government for cutting jobs, but recalled the previous state Labor government of Premier Anna Bligh selling off assets and destroying jobs. "I'm going to read this," she said, referring to a leaflet of a *World Socialist Web Site* article on the state election.

Chris, a Samoan-born boilermaker, said Newman had "promised a lot of things" but achieved nothing. "So what are we going to do? He lied to us. We thought he would look after us, but he is lying to us. This is not nice." When it was suggested that Labor had likewise sold off \$15 billion in state assets and axed thousands of public sector jobs after promising not to do so, Chris shrugged his shoulders and said: "We'll have to wait and see."

Jane, a retail worker with an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background, said she disliked the political system. "It doesn't matter who you vote in,"

she explained. “I’ve always voted Labor, and trusted Labor, like my grandmother did, but it’s still the same, I reckon.” When people protested, governments treated them like mosquitoes. “They just brush us off,” she said.

Jane was angry about ongoing cuts to public education. “Governments keep taking money from our schools. Even when the [federal] Labor government was in, they promised laptops for our schools, but there was nothing. And we still have to pay fees at schools, per term. You could say it’s not state schools anymore, it’s just like private schools. It’s so expensive, especially for a single mum with three kids.”

In West End, an inner Brisbane suburb, **Eric** described the political system as a “two-headed snake.” He explained: “Either way, you get eaten. Labor and all the other parties are all the same; they are all linked to the same rules. I’m over it! I want a whole new system that works for people, and doesn’t put so much money into the hands of the 1 percent.”

Asked what issues concerned him, Eric, a young worker, nominated inequality. “That’s the big one for me,” said. “People everywhere need to be equal.” He was also opposed to the expansion of US military bases in the Asia-Pacific region. “Anytime you have a war, all the people that fund the wars get the money and everyone has to pay it back,” he said. “The banks win, and people keep dying.”

Asked about the buildup of the police force, and the huge police mobilisation for last November’s G20 summit in Brisbane, Eric complained of constant harassment. “I get assaulted and badgered by the police all the time,” he said. Commenting on the four fatal police shootings in Queensland since September, he said: “It’s getting like America, it’s ridiculous.”

Majak, a young African-born worker, had similar concerns. “I’ve been blocked out of the system, as a person with no say in what the government decides in Australia, or around the world,” he said. “Lately, I don’t even want to be involved anymore because there’s no point in voting; nothing changes. Both parties cost people jobs. Even with the Greens, I don’t see any difference. I’ve dropped out of politics altogether.

“Most of the things that change are not for the better, especially like police-wise, it’s crazy. I can’t even walk on the street. If I get racially abused, the police

tell me I cannot respond to protect myself. In Brisbane, the police have been given so much power, that you can’t protect yourself. People are really scared by the police now.

“People have been killed by the police in Queensland and no one has been held to account. It’s just like that case in America, in Ferguson. There was no charge against the police officer for shooting someone who was unarmed. I got into trouble with the police once and I was surrounded by a dozen cops. It’s not just individual police; it’s a bigger issue than that.”

Majak was shocked by the show of force during the G20 summit. The police barricades forced him to walk an extra half hour to get to work in the downtown Southbank precinct. He added that the current mobilisation of troops on the streets in France, ostensibly to deal with terrorism, was “insane.” With the deployment of soldiers, “it’s just going to go to the next level of brutality.”



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