

Australia: Socialist Alliance lauds Greens wins in NSW election

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In its publication *Green Left Weekly*, Socialist Alliance (SA), an Australian pseudo-left organisation, has declared the winning of three or possibly four lower house seats by the Greens in the March 28 New South Wales (NSW) state election as an “important political gain for the left.” Its assessment underscores the thoroughly pro-capitalist character of SA and its use of socialist-sounding rhetoric to try to confine political opposition to the dominant Labor and Liberal parties to a nationalist and parliamentary perspective.

Socialist Alliance stood a slate of 16 candidates for the upper house of the NSW parliament, and candidates in two lower house seats, Summer Hill in Sydney’s inner west and the regional city electorate of Newcastle. SA’s campaign promoted the Greens as the alternative to Liberal and Labor. Despite not being obliged to allocate preferences, SA urged anyone who voted for it to preference the Greens second, and then Labor, so their vote would “not be wasted.”

SA’s election platform did not refer to any issues outside NSW. It was essentially a more radical-sounding version of the limited reformist window-dressing advanced by the Greens to garner support from Labor and Liberal. To gain respectability in the eyes of the establishment media, the Greens had their policies vetted by auditors to ensure they were “affordable.”

It appears that some of SA’s constituency simply voted for the Greens. SA’s lower house candidates received a similar proportion of the vote as 2011, around 1.5 percent. The 7,300 votes for its upper house slate—0.17 percent—was a decline of several thousand compared with the last election and less than half its 15,142 votes in 2007.

Susan Price, SA’s co-convenor and candidate in Summer Hill, lauded the Greens vote. She told *Green Left Weekly* that the “Greens’ win... strengthens an

important progressive break from the stranglehold of politics as usual.” She declared: “This is a clear rejection of the major parties’ arrogance, corruption and neo-liberalism in these electorates—which have a bigger proportion of politically engaged voters. It has sent a powerful warning to the ALP [Australian Labor Party], as well as the Liberals.”

In fact, the election demonstrated the widespread disaffection that exists toward the political establishment as a whole, including the Greens. While the Greens won concentrated votes in a small number of seats, the party’s state-wide vote did not increase. It remained at 10.3 percent. In most working-class electorates, it was between 3 and 7 percent.

The election took place under conditions of immense hostility toward the austerity agenda that Prime Minister Tony Abbott’s Liberal-National Coalition government has sought to impose nationally. Large sections of the population face a worsening social crisis as the economy slumps toward recession, with deep concern over rising unemployment, housing costs and the dysfunctional public health, education and transport systems.

The NSW Liberal-National government of Premier Mike Baird contested the election vowing to sell off what remains of state-owned electricity assets, supposedly to fund billions of dollars in infrastructure spending. The opposition Labor Party, which privatised most of the electricity network while in power from 1995 to 2011, cynically postured as an opponent of the asset sale, backed by multi-million dollar advertising financed by the trade unions. Virtually no other issue received any degree of prominence in a campaign that was characterised by general indifference on the part of large numbers of people.

The Labor-union campaign concluded with desperate

racist-tinged agitation over the alleged “security threat” posed by potential Chinese investors in the electricity industry. Despite the anti-Abbott factor, Labor only won back 14 of the seats it lost in a landslide defeat in 2011. Its vote increased from 25.5 percent to just 34.2 percent—its second lowest result since 1907. The enduring disgust with Labor in NSW, due to its 16 years of big business policies and endemic corruption, enabled Baird’s coalition to hold onto office with a reduced majority—unlike first-term Coalition governments in Victoria and Queensland, which were thrown out in state elections in November and January respectively.

Socialist Alliance’s specific role was to ascribe to the Greens vote an anti-capitalist and even socialist character that it does not have. The “politically engaged voters” that Price lauded in two electorates won by the Greens—Newtown and Balmain in Sydney’s inner suburbs—have a distinct socio-economic character. They are better-off and even affluent sections of the upper middle class, many with definite interests in the upper echelons of the public service, the burgeoning “green” business sector and the various state-funded institutions that promote identity politics agendas such as feminism and multiculturalism.

The Greens consciously appeal to the concerns among this layer over the cutbacks to the public service by successive Labor and Liberal governments, environmental issues, opposition to the xenophobic treatment of refugees and general disgust with the state of official politics. In Newtown and Balmain, a focus of the Greens was opposition to a poorly-planned toll road that would bring additional vehicle traffic into the inner Sydney suburbs. In north coast tourist and retirement towns such as Byron Bay and Lismore, in the electorates of Ballina and Lismore, the Greens made a specific appeal to local opposition to coal-seam gas projects.

The political perspective of the Greens consists of winning enough parliamentary seats to make it a credible partner in a capitalist government. In the state of Tasmania, the Greens twice formed a coalition with Labor and helped inflict drastic cutbacks to public spending. At the federal level, the Greens maintained a de-facto coalition relationship with the minority Labor government from 2010 to 2013, keeping it in power as it enlisted in the militarist US “pivot to Asia” and

imposed the largest percentage cut to government spending in three decades.

The NSW election outcome is another symptom of a crisis of parliamentary rule. There is an unprecedented disconnect between the mass of the population and the Labor and Liberal-National parties that have traditionally dominated official politics. Growing numbers of people are also beginning to grasp that the source of the problems they face is not the particular politicians who hold power, but the profit system itself. A profound economic or social shock could see rapid shifts and political realignments toward a revolutionary socialist perspective, above all in the working class and among students and youth.

Socialist Alliance opposes such a development. Its outlook is embodied in its gushing support for the Syriza government in Greece. Amid the staggering social and political crisis that has engulfed Greece since 2008, Syriza has promoted the illusion that austerity can be prevented through parliamentary means and helped block any challenge by the working class to capitalism and its institutions. Since winning office in January, Syriza has utterly betrayed those who voted for it and committed to continuing the anti-working class dictates of the European Union, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

In recent weeks, Socialist Alliance welcomed suggestions by Greens Senator Lee Rhiannon that the Greens could serve as the basis for “a Syriza-equivalent electoral option” in Australia. As in Greece, the sole aim of such a formation would be to prevent the emergence of an independent political movement of the working class to fight for a workers’ government and a socialist program.



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