

Australian elections: Workers and young people speak on mounting social divide

Our reporters
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Over the past week, Socialist Equality Party (SEP) candidates and campaigners for the Australian federal election have spoken with workers and youth about the mounting social crisis facing ordinary working people.

The major parliamentary parties are impervious to the growing difficulties of everyday life facing millions, resulting from the destruction of jobs and conditions and the gutting of funding to health, education and other social necessities by successive governments, Labor and Liberal-National Coalition alike. Nor is the stark social divide, between a tiny handful of the ultra-wealthy and the vast majority of the population, a subject of discussion in the official campaign.

Social inequality, however, was underlined by the release of the Rich 200 List last month, which revealed that the wealth of the richest 200 Australians has reached an unprecedented \$197.3 billion. Their fortunes have more than trebled since 1999. At the same time, an estimated 2.5 million people live in poverty, youth unemployment figures are at depression-era levels in working-class areas and 40 percent of the workforce is in insecure casual and contract work.

Labor and the Coalition have made clear that they will carry through sweeping spending cuts, which will deepen the social divide after the elections. For their part, the Greens have declared they are a party of “fiscal responsibility” and stated their willingness to form a coalition government with Labor.

In the seat of Wills in Melbourne, where the SEP is standing Will Fulgenzi, campaigners spoke to **Max** and **Josh**. Both are students who work part time in a supermarket. They are originally from New Zealand.

Max noted the rising cost of living. “I think it comes down to the GST [goods and services tax],” he said. “Working-class people spend such a large percentage of their income on a massive tax. They spend their money on food and it all adds up. After I pay my rent, I’ve got

hardly anything left.”

Referring to the Liberal-National government’s moves to deregulate university fees, Josh commented: “They are trying to introduce \$100,000-plus university degrees. Fees have already gone through the roof. This is a real struggle for a lot of young people. A lot of us don’t have parents to fund it or the ability to pay later in life. It starts a poverty trap because it takes such a large portion of income.

“I work 24 hours per week and I go to university part time because it is all I can afford. Every week, one third of my income goes to paying for books and fees.”

Max added: “I did an electrical course which cost me \$3,000. The government subsidised another \$13,000. It was a \$15,000 course for three months from a private college and they teach you hardly anything.

“I also completed a TAFE course but it’s impossible to find full-time work. I was trying to get electrical work. I rang several businesses and told them that I would work for free but they said ‘no, sorry mate.’ It’s so hard to get an apprenticeship.”

Max noted a growth in youth homelessness. “You walk through the city and see so many homeless people,” he said. “The government should spend money on facilities like housing for homeless young people.”

Josh pointed to the routine harassment of the homeless by state authorities, commenting: “If the police get them, they go to jail and get a criminal record. Then they can’t get jobs. Ninety percent of homeless youth probably have a mental health problem. The police target homeless young people.”

In Newcastle, John Davis, one of the SEP’s candidates for the Senate in New South Wales, spoke to **Thomas**, a geology student. Thomas noted the difficult plight of many university graduates. “I don’t know where I will end up working within the first few years of graduating,” he said. “My field is quite specialist so there won’t be

many opportunities for me.”

Thomas spoke on the growth of unemployment in the Hunter Valley, including the town of Dungog, where he was raised. According to figures released in March, youth unemployment in the Hunter Valley, excluding Newcastle, stands at over 20 percent, and has doubled in the past two years.

“In Dungog especially, there has been an exodus of young people moving to Newcastle,” Thomas said. “Unemployment out there is high so people move to Newcastle because there are slightly more opportunities. But only slightly. There is nothing really for young people, even in terms of hospitality work. Demand is slumping and the cost of living has hit the employers and employees. There is a real crisis.”

Helen, who works in drug and alcohol rehabilitation, spoke to SEP campaigners at Bankstown, in Sydney’s southwest. The suburb is within the electorate of Blaxland, where the SEP’s candidate is Gabriela Zabala.

According to a report in the *Australian*, Blaxland has the largest number of residents receiving some form of government welfare in the country—a measure of widespread poverty and unemployment. Factories in the area, such as the Chullora railway workshops and the Hawker de Havilland aircraft plant, which once employed thousands, no longer exist.

Helen said the rehabilitation program still had a “steady flow of people suffering from alcoholism, and gambling addictions, but at the moment, ice is the big one. Our rehabilitation is long term, up to 10 months.

“Towards the end we start looking at accommodation, reemployment or education,” she said. “We try transitional housing or help them back onto the department of housing list. But it’s such a long wait for public housing. People are waiting two years for priority housing. They are asking for priority because they’ve got nowhere to go. They don’t have family to turn to. They can’t go back to where they were for different reasons. The services now are either full or they have been cut. The need for domestic violence services is rising but the resources aren’t.”

When asked about the demands from the corporate elite for ever-deeper cuts to social spending, Helen commented: “It’s frightening. It’s like people don’t count.”

Will, a boilermaker, originally from Solomon Islands, spoke with Mike Head, one of the SEP’s candidates for the Senate in Queensland, at Goodna, in Brisbane’s western suburbs. After years of job destruction in basic

industries, Goodna’s official unemployment rate stands at 11.5 percent, almost double the national average.

Will said the cost of living had outstripped wages ever since he arrived in Australia. “I’ve looked back over the past 16 years and prices have risen three-fold compared to what we earn in wages. Things are much harder now than they were then.”

Working conditions had also worsened. “At work, I just find it a lot harder than I used to,” Will said. Despite the high unemployment, he had not lost his job, but his hours had been cut. “Our work has slowed down,” he said. “It’s not stable and we’re not getting the overtime like we used to.”

Will said he was concerned about the growth of social inequality. “I think the gap between the rich and the poor is getting wider,” he said. “For us, things are staying the same or getting worse, but the rich are getting richer. They are squeezing us middle-class and lower-class people down lower, so they can make more money out of us. The government is cutting the tax for the high-income earners above \$80,000 a year, and all of us below that don’t get a cut at all.”

Will had no confidence in the major parties, stating: “In the end, the Labor and Liberal leaders are all there for their own pockets. And they all do the opposite of what they promise once they get into office.

“It’s no better for workers here now that we have [Labor Party Queensland Premier Annastacia] Palaszczuk, not Campbell Newman, in government. It just stays the same, or gets worse, for workers. They have the power to pull the strings but we are the workers and maybe we have the power to change that. We’ll have to try to change that if we can.”

To contact the SEP and get involved, visit our website or Facebook page.

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