

Blaxland: A microcosm of Australia's social crisis

John Davis—SEP candidate for the Senate in NSW
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The electorate of Blaxland, where the Socialist Equality Party is standing Gabriela Zabala as its candidate for the July 2 federal election, provides a picture of the worsening economic and social conditions facing millions of working people in Australia.

Located in Sydney's southwest, it is an area of high unemployment, impoverishment and social disadvantage, presided over for decades by Labor Party representatives at federal, state and local government levels. Nothing of this social reality has received any coverage in the mass media or the election campaigns of the major parties.

Blaxland encompasses most of Bankstown, a major working-class suburb. It extends to the surrounding areas of Chester Hill, Bass Hill, Milperra, Condell Park, Villawood and Georges Hall, and parts of Auburn, South Granville and Lidcombe.

The electorate is a concentrated example of many features to be found throughout Australia's working-class areas: lack of employment and opportunities for young people, astronomical housing prices, inadequate infrastructure and over-stretched social services.

The closure of major factories in the area, such as the Chullora railway workshops and the Hawker de Havilland aircraft plant, as well as closures in telecommunications and other industries, has stripped many workers and young people of jobs, training and apprenticeships.

According to statistics released in March, Bankstown's official unemployment rate is 12.9 percent—more than double the national average. In Fairfield East, the rate is 16 percent, Guildford-South Granville, 15.3 percent, Auburn, 10.8 percent, Chester Hill 10.6 percent, and Lidcombe 6.3 percent.

Youth unemployment (15–24 year-olds) is endemic,

with the most recent statistics recording 30.6 percent in Villawood. In Bankstown, it was 22.6 percent and in nearby Mount Lewis 23.5 percent. The Greater Bankstown City's youth unemployment rate averaged 14.8 percent, higher than the 12.6 percent across Sydney.

Thousands of young people, desperate for work, have been pushed into "cash-in-hand" jobs that fall well below the minimum wage, or forced to work in unpaid internships or traineeships in the hope of securing a job in the future.

At the same time, the median house price in the Bankstown city area has doubled over the past five years as a flow-on effect from the debt-fuelled housing bubble in Sydney, producing super-profits for property developers and banks.

Between 2010 and 2015, the median price rose from \$427,510, to \$814,331 in Bankstown, taking home ownership further out of reach for many young people. Median prices for units rose from \$308,255 to \$514,146. Median rents also soared—from \$370 to \$500 a week for houses, and from \$340 to \$425 per week for units.

Underscoring the financial stress for thousands of people, the minimum wage is only \$672.70 a week—leaving little on which to live after paying rent, while the maximum unemployment payment for a single adult without children is just \$237 a week.

Blaxland has the highest number of welfare recipients in Australia, with 149,018 welfare transactions in December, topping a list of federal electorates. This figure includes 33,000 family tax benefit recipients, 16,000 age pensioners, 7,500 disability pensioners and 8,000 on unemployment benefits.

In 2011, under the previous Labor government, Bankstown became an experimental ground for

“welfare quarantining,” a scheme that directs up to 80 percent of an individual’s welfare payments to a debit card that can be used only in authorised retail outlets. That leaves a single person on unemployment benefits with slightly more than \$50 per week in cash.

Bankstown also illustrates the conditions confronted by some of the most vulnerable members of the working class—those born overseas, or whose parents migrated to Australia. More than half—55 percent—of residents live in households where English is not the main language. Arabic-speaking homes account for 21 percent of all households, but there are many people from other backgrounds, notably from Vietnamese, Chinese, Irish, Greek and Italian descent.

Because of its high proportion of Arabic-speaking and Muslim residents, youth and workers in Bankstown have long been targeted for police harassment and victimisation, which has intensified under the cover of the bogus “war on terror.” Like other working-class youth, those living in Blaxland are regarded as a threat by the authorities because young people have always been in the forefront of the struggle against the deprivations of capitalism, a system that increasingly has no future for them.

The Labor Party is primarily responsible for the social crisis in Blaxland. Since its inception in 1949, the seat of Blaxland has been held by Labor. For the longest period—27 years—the member of parliament was Paul Keating. He replaced Jim Harrison, who had been there for 20 years, and Keating remained Blaxland’s representative until the end of his prime ministership in 1996.

Between 1983 and 1996, the Hawke-Keating governments’ economic “reforms” played a major role in devastating areas like Bankstown. Working hand-in-glove with the trade unions, Labor restructured the economy, at the cost of jobs and basic working conditions, to meet employers’ demands for “international competitiveness.” Through its prices and incomes Accords with Labor, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) systematically suppressed workers’ opposition.

Since 2007, the Labor MP has been Jason Clare. Like Keating before him, he has been touted as a potential future Labor leader. Clare personifies Labor’s nationalist and militarist agenda. Under Prime Minister Julia Gillard, he first served as defence materiel

minister, supervising military equipment purchases. From December 2011 until Labor’s landslide defeat in September 2013, Clare was home affairs minister, in charge of the Australian Federal Police and the “border protection” operations by the navy and the customs force against refugees.

Clare is currently shadow minister for communications, and would almost certainly become a cabinet member if Labor were to form a government after the July 2 election. Labor leader Bill Shorten has already made clear that any such government would be committed to imposing billions of dollars in cuts to essential social spending, including healthcare, education, pensions and family payments. The result would be further social devastation in Blaxland and throughout working-class neighbourhoods across the country.

The lessons of this historical experience need to be drawn. A political break is needed from Labor, which has long enforced the dictates of the corporate elite. The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is standing in Blaxland to advance the only alternative—the complete reorganisation of society along genuinely socialist lines to meet the needs of all, not satisfy the profit requirements of the wealthy few.

The SEP insists that a decent job, free, high-quality education and healthcare, affordable housing, decent retirement incomes and access to art, culture, sport and entertainment are fundamental social rights that should be guaranteed to everyone. Under the profit system, however, this is impossible. The only way to win a decent future is through a political struggle to mobilise the working class to overthrow capitalism internationally.

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

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