

Australian election: Workers and young people speak on mounting social crisis

Our reporters
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Last Saturday, WSWs reporters spoke to voters in the Australian federal election about the social problems confronting the working class. Many voiced anger over the gutting of healthcare, education and welfare and rising unemployment.

While the corporate press and the major parties sought to cover-up the mounting social divide during the elections, it was underscored by the release of the Rich List in the midst of the campaign. It revealed that the combined wealth of the richest 200 individuals reached a record \$197.3 billion. At the same time, more than 2.5 million people live in poverty.

Labor, seeking to assuage widespread anger over inequality, adopted a populist posture during the campaign. It cynically declared that the election was a referendum on Medicare, warning that the Liberal-Nationals planned to privatise the state-subsidised health system. In reality, successive Labor and Liberal-National coalition governments have gutted funding for health care, including Medicare.

Labor's real agenda was underlined by the billions of dollars in spending cuts it outlined during the campaign, including to health, education and welfare. Many people who spoke to the WSWs agreed that whichever parties formed government the assault on the social rights of the working class would intensify.

In the Blaxland electorate in Sydney's south-west, **Joseph**, a carpenter, said that he "voted for the Greens for no specific reason" and added, Labor and the Liberals were both "corrupt" and "nothing will change after the elections."

Joseph pointed to the mounting healthcare crisis. "I'm concerned about Medicare because my grandmother is old and she needs it. If we didn't have Medicare it would be coming out of our family's pocket. My grandmother is only on a pension and the family is struggling. My mother had to quit work to look after her because she is very

sick."

He noted the difficulties facing small contractors. "Me and my dad work very hard just to get by. I work on contract and the companies pay rubbish. They say there is a shortage of tradies [tradesmen] but there isn't a lot of work around.

"When I started my apprenticeship the apprentice benefits lasted for two years. The government got rid of it. What's to stop Liberal and Labour doing the same about anything? Just because they say they're going to do something doesn't mean they will."

David, a graphic designer from Bankstown, said he was concerned about health services and the government attacks on pensions.

"The government says it doesn't have any revenue but they spent huge amounts on the military and keep privatising industries and services. They used to own the Commonwealth Bank, which gave them revenue, but that was sold off.

"There are no social services today and yet the politicians get big fat pensions for life and can go into business. If I had a small business they'd take the pension away from me straight away. The gap between the rich and poor is getting wider and wider."

Ayman, a small businessman from Sydney's south-west, voiced his concerns about the rising cost of living. "These days the most challenging thing is to buy a house. They're very expensive. It's a dream hardly anyone can afford. Capitalism has made the prices high so property managers can make money," he commented.

"Job security is also getting worse and worse. I don't think billions of dollars should be spent on defence spending. It should be spent on education, hospitals and other things that people need."

In Brisbane, **Alysha**, an ambulance paramedic who had come off a night shift, was concerned about the future of Medicare. "That matters to me, so I voted towards that,"

she said.

Alysha agreed that consecutive governments had whittled away Medicare and the public health system. “They’ve both got plans to privatise it, and one party is promising to save it, just to get the votes. I picked up those vibes too. You can only hope they do the right thing by their election promises, but they usually don’t.

“Insufficient funding is putting pressure on medical staff. Unfortunately, it’s not about meeting the demand, it’s about how much money we can get from the government. There’s not enough supply to meet the demand. They need to give more.”

Sarah, who has major heart problems and leukemia, spoke to the WSWS in the working-class suburb of Auburn, in Sydney’s west.

“I got very sick in 2014,” she explained. “I had a massive heart attack and the system let me down. The ambulance services didn’t come to my home when my husband rang them. They told him to take me to the nearest hospital, so my husband and my daughter, who was 9, got me to the hospital. I collapsed in the emergency department. They didn’t attend to me when they should have so my heart was very badly damaged.

“This is what has happened to this country. I remember when my father was sick we would call the ambulance and they would be at the front door before you put the phone down. Now they have cut back on these services. Everything is getting harder. It’s a rich bastards’ world and not everyone can be rich.”

Eric, a 43-year-old unemployed worker from Ashfield in Sydney’s inner-west said:

“I’ve been looking for work for a couple of years but it’s been really difficult because of my medical conditions,” he said. “In 2008 I had a work accident and injured my neck, spine, lower back and right shoulder. I had two surgeries and I’m having another one this year. I was covered under WorkCover, but in 2013 the state Liberals changed the law and 50,000 people in NSW were kicked off WorkCover.”

“They cut the assistance for medicine and rehabilitation. I’ve been waiting for two years for the surgery I’m having. This is a social crime. There are people who not only lost their houses and their family, they lost their lives. Every year people commit suicide because of that law change.”

Eric said that he has gone through periods of homelessness because of unemployment. “I’ve got a university degree in programing and I’m doing another degree at a design college and I still can’t find a job,” he

said.

Emilee, a 20-year-old university student from the central coast in New South Wales, said she was “concerned” about health care after hearing that the Liberals could privatise Medicare.

“Private providers are making plenty of money and are already very wealthy. Even now it is hard for people on low incomes, to get access to decent health care such as scans and x-ray services,” she said.

“People have the right to decent health care. The rich get the best of everything but ordinary people are supposed to fend for themselves. We need a government that acts for ordinary people, not just the wealthy.”

Emilee also spoke about the difficulties facing young people looking for work on the Central Coast, where youth unemployment is over 16 percent. “I wasn’t accepted for many jobs I applied for because they said I was too old,” she said. “They were looking for younger people who they could pay less. Other times I was told I did not have the necessary experience.”

Taylor, a young worker and student from the Wills electorate in Melbourne’s north, also spoke about increasing social hardship facing young people.

“I’m working three jobs now but it’s really hard to pay bills. I’m working at two restaurants and a supermarket, as well as studying nursing. It’s really hard to juggle all of this, especially in this area because I have to move constantly. I can’t afford to stay in one place all the time. I’ve moved four times in the last few years. At times I have been just living with friends.

“Now they’re cutting Medicare. I suffer from certain sicknesses, I find it hard to go and buy medication all the time, especially when the price of everything has gone up. I require surgery, and I have to buy medication for pain. I spend roughly \$40 to \$60 a week on all my medication.”

Taylor said she had voted for the Greens, because “I don’t really like either of the major parties. Labor carried out university cuts—that’s why I had to wait to study until now. They upped the cost of the course I was going to study to ten grand and I couldn’t afford that, so I waited till now.”



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