

Australia: NSW state election reveals mass hostility and alienation

Oscar Grenfell
25 March 2019

Saturday's election in New South Wales (NSW), Australia's most populous state, has further underscored the mass alienation, hostility and anger of broad layers of working people to the political establishment and all the major parties—Labor, the Liberal-National Coalition and the Greens.

With three seats still to be declared for the Legislative Assembly, the lower house of state parliament, it appears likely that the Coalition will form the next government. It will have, however, a majority of just one or two seats, while in the Legislative Council, the upper house of parliament, it will be a minority.

Absurdly the Coalition and the media are presenting the outcome as a product of the “masterful tactics” of NSW Liberal leader Gladys Berejiklian. She is being hailed as the first female politician to lead an election win in NSW, while members of the crisis-ridden federal Coalition government have declared they will seek to “learn the lessons” of this “success” for the federal election slated for May.

The Coalition “win” came amid a decline in the primary vote of the Liberals and major losses for the National Party. If Berejiklian scrapes back into office, it will be because voters do not regard the Labor Party, despite all the efforts of the unions and pseudo-left organisations, as any alternative to the Coalition, not even “a lesser evil.”

The defining feature of the election was the decline in the vote of all the major parties. With around 74 percent of lower house ballots counted, the Liberal Party vote is down by almost 2.5 percent, compared with the 2015 election. The swing against the Nationals was around 1.1 percent, while Labor and the Greens each lost roughly 1 percent.

Successive Coalition and Labor governments at the state and federal level, in some cases directly supported

by the Greens, imposed the austerity agenda demanded by big business and created a massive social crisis.

Popular anger has been fueled by the deepening social gulf between rich and poor, rising unemployment and the crisis of infrastructure. Real wages are plummeting, up to half of the workforce is employed in precarious casual or part-time labour and youth joblessness is endemic in Sydney's working-class suburbs and in regional areas.

The speculative property bubble, which has propped up the NSW economy, is rapidly unravelling, leading to the destruction of tens of thousands of construction jobs. Hundreds of thousands of households confront mortgage debt, meaning they are struggling to meet their housing repayments.

Unable to address the social concerns of working people, the major parties focused their campaigns on attack ads and mudslinging on the one hand, and bogus election promises on the other.

Many voters sought to register their hostility by casting a protest ballot. The lower house votes for five minor parties—right-wing populist parties, such as the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party, One Nation and Sustainable Australia, along with Animal Justice and Keep Sydney Open—were up a combined 8.6 percent compared with 2015. With counting yet to be finalised, the overall vote for minor parties and independents has increased from just over 10 percent in 2015 to nearly 14 percent in 2019.

There were significant swings in key seats against the major parties.

The Nationals—traditionally the party of rural and regional areas—lost heavily. It lost the seat of Barwon, which it had held for 69 years, to the Shooters and Fishers Party, with a fall of 17.8 percent in its vote. The Nationals also lost Murray to the SFF, on the back of a

20 percent swing. The SFF retained the seat of Orange, with the Nationals' vote falling more than 40 percent.

Regional and rural voters were angered by the Berejiklian government's lack of action to alleviate the state's devastating drought and water mismanagement that has led to massive fish kills in the Murray-Darling Basin. For decades, successive state governments have presided over the gutting of essential services and jobs in rural and regional areas.

Despite the widespread hostility to the Coalition at the state and federal level, Labor appears to have gained no seats and its primary vote declined, including in working-class electorates such as East Hills in western Sydney.

In areas such as Hurstville, in the seat of Kogarah, which have a significant Chinese community, Labor's vote fell by up to 10 percent, in part prompted by a leaked video showing Labor leader Michael Daley denouncing Chinese people for supposedly stealing jobs from "Australian" workers.

Labor and the unions, like the Coalition, have stirred up anti-immigrant and anti-refugee xenophobia for decades, aimed in particular at Muslims and Chinese. All of these parties are responsible for cultivating the extreme right-wing nationalism that led to this month's fascist attack on mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, that killed 50 people.

Labor governments, at the state and federal level, have spearheaded the assault on the working class. It was the federal Hawke and Keating Labor governments, which, in collaboration with the unions, began the deregulation of the economy in the 1980s, leading to the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs.

Since then, Labor and the unions have played the key role in an unending attack on jobs, wages and conditions. They have done everything to suppress any rebellion by workers against the corporate offensive.

The claims of the Greens to represent an alternative to Labor and the Liberals are also increasingly discredited. The party retained three lower-house seats, in Ballina in northern NSW, and the inner-city Sydney electorates of Newtown and Balmain, but their vote remained in single figures in most working-class and regional areas. The Greens are a party of the affluent upper-middle class and have supported or joined governments at the state and federal levels that have attacked basic

democratic and social rights of working people.

The election will deepen the profound political crisis and instability of the past decade, which has resulted in seven prime ministers over the past eleven years, and the toppling of multiple state governments.

Already, federal MP and former National Party leader Barnaby Joyce has demanded that the Coalition "wake up" and "stop ignoring the bush." Joyce's populist pitch will intensify the civil war within the Coalition, which is already in turmoil following the ousting of former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull last August and the installation of the far right-wing Scott Morrison in his place.

Facing a federal election, Labor leader Bill Shorten will draw no solace from the party's failure to make any gains in NSW despite the hostility to the Berejiklian government. At the state level, Daley has declared that he will remain as NSW leader, but he is likely to face a challenge sooner rather than later.

The election result poses critical political issues for workers. Anger and hostility towards the official political establishment, while entirely justified, are not enough. The independents and right-wing populists that attracted a protest vote have all collaborated with state and federal Labor and Coalition governments in implementing their anti-working class policies.

What is required is the development of an independent political movement of the working class based on a socialist and internationalist perspective to fight social inequality, war and the attacks on democratic rights, and their source, the capitalist profit system.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact