

Australian voters speak out

Workers and young people warn about the mounting social crisis

Our reporters
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On election day last Saturday, voters in the lower-house electorates of Oxley, Parramatta and Calwell—in Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria respectively—voiced their concerns about unemployment, low wages, homelessness and the persecution of refugees. These working-class electorates have been hard hit by job cuts, plant closures, falling real wages and decades of Labor and Liberal-National governments slashing spending on essential social services such as health and education.

Brianna, an expectant mother in the Hunter electorate, raised concerns about the Australian National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). “It is a great system for the minority who are able to access it but the majority can’t,” she said.

“I’ve helped people access that system but for the majority they don’t have the mental ability, the carers or the support to jump through all the official hurdles and so most people end up below the poverty line. Finding out if your eligible takes months and nine times out of ten they lose your paperwork.”

The system is designed like Centrelink welfare, she added, and “made hard to access... It’s designed to keep the budget down.”

Commenting on rising poverty in working-class families, Brianna said: “The cost of living is going up and we have less money in our pockets. We are trying to fight for our wages but they’re trying to take away our penalty rates. It’s almost at a point where people can’t afford a house because they are busy trying to feed themselves.”

Australia’s health care system, she said, “is designed to cater for and assist Tier 1 families. Anyone below that is just expected to suffer in silence.”

A young plant mechanic in one of the Hunter Valley open cut mines was disgusted with the both major parties, Labor and the Liberals. “I went for independent parties,” he said, “it doesn’t matter which side you choose they only wanted to line their own pockets.”

Commenting on the unhealthy conditions at his mine, he said, “If I take a glass of water into the workshop and leave it there for five minutes specks of mine dust are floating around in it. It makes you think about what you’re breathing in 12 hours a day.”

Mining areas in the electorate, around Singleton and nearby Muswellbrook, have the worst air pollution in New South Wales.

In the Queensland seat of Oxley, **Zameel**, an aged-care worker, said he was “not impressed” by the election campaign. “I’m paid

\$22.36 an hour—that’s as bad as the childcare industry. That’s what you get with for-profit industries. Healthcare should be provided by the government and paid for by the government.

“Even when you do get a promise to increase childcare workers’ wages, it’s subsidised by the government. I don’t see why governments should have to pay wages for the private sector. It’s going to go to companies that earn millions and millions of dollars.”

Zameel voted for the Labor Party, but admitted that the Hawke and Keating Labor governments “laid the basis” for all the attacks on workers living standards. “They deregulated the whole market,” he said.

“I thought it was outrageous that Labor leader Bill Shorten said he would call a summit with business, just like Hawke. We would end up with another Accord. I know all about that! And I can’t ignore the fact that Hawke sent troops to Iraq. But I genuinely see Labor as the lesser evil, although you might be right, especially when it comes to war. Labor would be invading more Middle Eastern countries.”

In Parramatta, **Alexander**, who is on a Disability Support Pension and studying, received the SEP’s election manifesto in his letter box. He said its program “shows a lot of potential because it’s for the workers, for socialism.”

“The major parties are interested in keeping society wealthy and not contributing equally throughout society. Social inequality is a big problem in Australia... ‘A fair go for Australia,’ [Labor’s slogan] is not for everybody. It’s only for certain people.

“The workers need to stand up against right-wing politics. But the structure of capitalism is they don’t let any other parties function and they’re try to turn to fascistic forces... I’m really not sure how workers take the next step but they have to be organised, notify the people and put their policies forward and conduct campaigns.”

Savina, a 19-year-old warehouse worker in Parramatta, said young people have to become more politically involved. “I think that our vote counts but we’re not taught about it enough. We’re supposed to know who we’re voting for, but we’re going in and being told who to vote for and we’re just basing that off what adults are doing.

“We’re not really being shown the broader picture of what can be changed but I think people are waking up. We want a more

democratic approach to politics; we should be heard; and we need to learn the lessons of history.”

Alison, told SEP campaigners in Parramatta she was concerned about the inhumane treatment of refugees. “Many people say it’s a climate change election but there are a lot of other things as well, including the treatment of refugees. The current government is not doing enough and it is time for a change.”

Asked if she thought Labor was an alternative, she said: “It’s like choosing the lesser evil isn’t it? Although I’d prefer to have faith in our government, it’s really two of a kind at the moment and they’re both as bad as each other.”

When it was pointed out that the Gillard Labor government reopened Manus Island and Nauru detention centres, she agreed. “Yes, it was horrible. I’m part of a group of individuals who actively campaign against things like this, for humanitarian rights. It’s disgusting that we seem to put other people as lesser than us just because they happen to be born somewhere else,” Alison said.

“These are people who are fleeing wars that are dirty and horrible and have no other purpose than economic reasons like oil etc. War is often used as a ruse to create fear in people and even now you can see different parties presenting minority groups within Australia as the great enemy.

“What then? Do we go into a military-style country where we are watched or having to watch our backs? It is really scary. It’s really difficult to trust Australian politics right now and the younger generations are very disenfranchised or very cynical about all parties.”

Aaron, 39 and originally from Somalia, said: “The two big parties lie so much and they don’t address the real questions—the social and economic issues. Wages and salary stay the same and mortgages are really going up.

“I’ve seen so many homeless people over the last three years living in cars. I saw a man in my own apartment living in the garage. He told me he was living in his car because he can’t afford electricity, rent. The same thing is happening globally.

While the north-western Melbourne working-class electorate of Calwell is regarded as a “safe” Labor Party seat many workers voiced their hostility. Many Labor voters had few illusions that the party represented any genuine alternative to the Liberal-National coalition.

Calwell was previously the centre of the car manufacturing and car components industry in Australia before its liquidation under Labor and Liberal-National coalition governments with the active assistance of the unions. In Broadmeadows, the current unemployment rate is 25 percent, one of the highest in the country.

Rahma, a nursing student at La Trobe University, explained: “I voted against Morrison because he has made racist comments about Muslims. Everyone should have the right to come to Australia—the government should not choose and pick who should come. Everyone should have the right to come here whether Christian, Muslim or refugee, all we want is a better life.

“I came from Somalia and there are eight in my family, all of whom, apart my brother, are here. We have tried to get a visa for him, but we were told Somalia is not in the list. We contacted someone and we said we could pay \$50,000 to get a visa but they keep saying Somalia is not included. This is not fair.”

Sibel said: “The only reason I voted for Labor is that my father is in a refugee detention centre at the moment, after spending his whole life in Australia. Whenever I go there to visit him, I can see that there are a lot of people in detention centres, for practically no good reason.

“My father told me that Labor has promised to let them out, the 501s [visas] and everything. So, my idea was to support them, to be honest. I put down you guys as my second preference. As for the ones after that, I wasn’t too sure.”

Mary, an aged care worker, spoke about the constant changes in Australian prime ministers. “They change the prime minister all the time. You can’t trust them. Who we voted in isn’t going to stay there and it goes right back to Rudd. Let them do their term. Wait for the people to have their say,” she said.

Like hundreds of other voters, Mary denounced the persecution of Julian Assange. “I think Assange should be able to say what he feels. What he was saying was the truth. He shouldn’t be punished for that. They’re using him to say, if someone dares to do what he did, this how they’re going to be treated. Assange revealed the truth and people have the right to know. It’s wrong what they’re doing to him.”

Raid, a casual Chemist Warehouse worker originally from Iraq, said: “The most important thing for me is jobs, security and the economy. We need real action on jobs. Government needs to address what the people want, instead of talk, talk, we need action.

“Too many people are casual workers—they should be made permanent—because there is no security. After six months working, we should be made fulltime, so you know where you stand, without that it’s impossible to buy a house. When you’re casual the company can tell you they don’t want you anytime and you’re forced to go on the dole. I have been twelve months casual.”

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