

# State by-election result deepens Australian Labor Party crisis

**Oscar Grenfell****25 May 2021**

A by-election last Saturday for a lower house parliamentary seat in the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW) has again demonstrated the widespread popular hostility to the official parties, and particularly the collapse in Labor's support among key sections of the working class.

The poll for the state parliamentary seat of Upper Hunter, which covers a substantial regional area several hours north of Sydney, was sparked by the resignation of National Party incumbent Michael Johnsen last March, after it was publicly revealed that he was the subject of a police investigation over an alleged rape in 2019.

Johnsen's departure deepened a crisis of the Liberal-National Coalition government of Premier Gladys Berejiklian, which has seen two other MPs resign or move to the crossbench this year. Had it lost Saturday's ballot, the government would have been reduced to a minority.

Despite the circumstances of the election and the indications of disarray in the government, National Party candidate David Layzell retained the seat, with a first preference vote of just 31 percent, down 2.8 percent on the party's result in the 2019 state election.

While the Nationals vote fell, the decline in first-preference ballots for Labor Party candidate Jeff Drayton was even sharper. Labor received just 21 percent of primary votes, down 7.3 percent in three years.

This was part of a broader turn against the official parliamentary parties. The first-preference votes of the Greens and the Liberal-Democrats both fell. The Shooters, Fishers Farmers party received 12 percent of the vote, down more than 10 percent compared with the last election. The party postures as a populist alternative to the Nationals in regional and rural areas, but has repeatedly collaborated with Coalition governments.

Five independent candidates all gained votes. In their campaigns, the independents condemned the major parties as being out of touch with ordinary people and raised

issues relating to the crisis of regional health and education. Kirsty O'Connell, who was endorsed by former Coalition Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull picked up almost 9 percent of the first-preference vote.

Dale McNamara, who stood for Pauline Hanson's xenophobic One Nation party, received 12.3 percent of all ballots, amounting to more than 5,600 votes. McNamara, a former coal miner, largely campaigned on the issue of mining jobs, calling for the establishment of new coal fired power stations and an expansion of protectionist trade policies.

Right-wing populist formations such as One Nation, which are intensely hostile to the working class, are only able to win a broader hearing as a result of the bankruptcy of the official parties and the absence of a progressive outlet for mounting social discontent within the official political framework.

While indicating the broader fragility of the entire political set-up, the vote has especially intensified a deepening crisis of Labor.

Supporters of NSW Labor leader Jodi McKay have tried to deny that broader conclusions could be drawn from the party's showing in the Upper Hunter. They have noted that the seat has been held by conservative representatives for more than a hundred years, and also pointed to the results in several general elections in other states, where incumbents have received large votes by falsely claiming responsibility for Australia's relatively low COVID-19 infections and deaths.

It is clear, however, that McKay's leadership is under threat. Two MPs have already resigned, with leaks to the media indicating that more are to follow. Chris Minns, who stood down from his position as shadow treasurer this morning, has been tipped as a potential challenger to McKay.

The crisis of McKay's leadership underscores the fraudulent character of the various justifications for the

fact that Labor actually lost ground in an election sparked by a highly-publicised sexual misconduct allegation against the Coalition incumbent.

In reality, the result underscores the protracted erosion of Labor's support within the working class, after decades in which Labor governments at the state and federal level have presided over the gutting of healthcare and social spending, and a continuous offensive against workers' jobs, wages and conditions.

While the Upper Hunter is a mixed electorate, including areas of relatively well-off layers of the middle-class, it encompasses working class towns such as Singleton and Muswellbrook that have been hard hit by the destruction of jobs, especially in the mining sector. The broader Hunter region has frequently registered the highest unemployment rates in NSW. Its official joblessness figure hit 9 percent last year, and still stood at 7.1 percent in March.

Figures from individual polling places indicate that the decline in Labor's vote was substantially greater in the most working class areas than elsewhere in the electorate. At the main booth in Singleton, for instance, Labor's share of first-preference votes plummeted from almost 40 percent in 2019, to less than 25 percent.

The outcome was a rebuke, not only of Labor, but also its affiliated trade union apparatus. The party's candidate Jeff Drayton was billed as a coal miner from Muswellbrook, but is in fact a full-time official of the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining Energy Union (CFMMEU).

The unions are increasingly viewed by workers as a corrupt instrument of company management. For decades, the CFMMEU has presided over job cuts in the mining sector, as well as unsafe conditions such as those that led to the Grosvenor Mine disaster in central Queensland last year.

Prominent Labor figures have pointed with disquiet to the parallels between the party's result in the by-election and its debacle in the 2019 federal election. In that year, Labor's primary vote across the country fell to just 33.3 percent, the lowest level in 85 years. The decline in the party's vote was sharpest in working class areas of the major cities and in regional areas hit by mounting unemployment, where falls in the vote registered well over 10 percent. Labor retained the federal seat of Hunter, but its vote fell by almost 15 percent.

Underlying the 2019 loss was the fact that millions of working people simply did not believe Labor's claims that it would improve social services and defend jobs,

when the party has for decades spearheaded the corporate offensive against the conditions of the working class.

After the 2019 defeat, Labor used the debacle to shift even further to the right. Its leading figures declared that the result was a consequence of popular fears that its tepid rhetoric about "taking on the big end of town" and ensuring a "fair go for all" amounted to class warfare. Current federal Labor leader Anthony Albanese was installed. He pledged to refrain from any rhetoric over inequality and instead talked of "efficiency" and "productivity," code words for pro-business austerity, and to appeal to "successful people," i.e., the wealthy elite.

Over the past year, Labor has marched in lockstep with the federal Coalition government, functioning as a "constructive opposition." Labor has backed the government handouts at the state and federal level of more than \$400 billion to the corporations and the rich throughout the pandemic. When in office at the state level, Labor has implemented policies based on subordinating health and safety to the profit interests of big business.

The Upper Hunter result will intensify a deepening crisis of federal Labor amid ongoing speculation over Albanese's leadership. As in 2019, it will also be used as the pretext for a greater shift to the right.

The federal Labor MP for Hunter Joel Fitzgibbon responded to the outcome by declaring that while he will stand as a Labor candidate at the next election, he would not commit to remaining in the party indefinitely, unless it "wakes up to itself."

As he has before, Fitzgibbon noted the inability of Labor to win substantial support from coal miners and other sections of workers. His appeal, however, is for Labor to commit to massive subsidies to the mining companies, on top of those already provided, and for an end to token commitments to action on climate change.

Far from being solely the result of issues relating to the coal sector, the collapse in Labor's support is both widespread and irreversible. It expresses a developing break between the working class and Labor, which decades ago dispensed with a program of limited social reforms and has been transformed into the most ruthless representative of the corporate and financial elite.



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