Hostility to the ruling parties deepens political crisis in the Australian election

Mike Head, Socialist Equality Party candidate for the Senate in Queensland
5 May 2022

More than halfway through the six-week official campaign for the May 21 federal election in Australia, media polls indicate that support for the two ruling parties, the Liberal-National Coalition and the Labor Party, is dropping from already record low levels.

These polls offer only a pale and distorted view of the mounting discontent in the working class, which is fuelling strikes by teachers, health care, aged care, university and public sector workers.

Despite all the false and empty promises being made by both Labor and the Coalition, workers are experiencing a disastrous surge of the COVID-19 pandemic plus sky-rocketing cost of living increases, falling real wages and rising interest rates, particularly for house mortgages.

In line with other surveys, Tuesday's *Guardian* Essential poll reported that voting support for both Labor and the Coalition has declined since the start of the election campaign. This increases the possibility of a "hung" parliament and a fragile minority government propped up by the Greens and various independents.

The implosion of support for the two main parties, on which capitalist rule has relied since the formation of the Australian federation in 1901, is producing alarm within ruling circles about the danger of "chaos" and "instability."

There are fears that any incoming government will be unable to contain the rebellion developing in the working class, and also suppress opposition to Australian involvement in the escalating war plans against China, which threaten to trigger a catastrophic nuclear conflict.

Greg Sheridan, the foreign editor of the Murdoch-owned *Australian*, declared on Tuesday: "A minority government relying on single-issue populists and extremists is a recipe for instability and incoherence." Such a "destructive, harmful and dangerous vote" would be "a direct threat to our national security."

Despite both the Coalition and Labor spraying several billions of dollars in cynical vote-buying election promises, the Essential poll showed the Coalition's primary vote languishing at 36 percent—down from 37 percent a fortnight ago. Labor's was at 35 percent, a drop from 36 percent at the start of April.

Significantly, the disaffection is not moving in the direction of far-right parties. Mining billionaire Clive Palmer's United Australia Party remained on 4 percent, even after spending tens of millions of dollars on saturation media and billboard advertising. Pauline Hanson's anti-immigrant and anti-welfare One Nation was still on 3 percent.

Nor are the Greens benefitting. They hope to form another de facto coalition to prop up a Labor government, as they did from 2010 to 2013, but were still stuck on 10 percent. This is not least because of their association with that Labor government, which slashed welfare and education funding, signed up to the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" to confront China, and incarcerated refugees on remote Pacific islands.

In affluent inner-city electorates, some of the Greens' vote is haemorrhaging to corporate-funded "teal" independents. Like the Greens, they claim that climate change can be reversed by the same capitalist profit system that is causing the planet to burn. The independents and "other parties" polled 5 percent, with 6 percent of respondents "undecided."

The poll suggests that broader disaffection has intensified during the election campaign. It reported that the number of people who felt that "Australia is heading in the right direction" dropped from 46 percent to 41 percent compared to a fortnight earlier. They were outnumbered by the 43 percent who said the country was on the "wrong track," up from 37 percent.

Asked to nominate the important election issues, 79 percent listed cost of living, ahead of improving public services (69 percent), job security (60 percent) and climate change (54 percent).

None of the capitalist parties has any solutions to these burning issues because they all insist that corporate profit and private wealth accumulation must take priority over the lives and livelihoods of the vast majority of the population—the working class.

© World Socialist Web Site

The Essential poll was taken after the latest official inflation figures had brought the underlying social crisis to the surface, disrupting the efforts of the political establishment and the corporate media to bury the reality throughout the election campaign.

Prices for non-discretionary purchases, such as food and fuel, jumped by 6.6 percent over the past year, nearly three times the average wage rise of 2.3 percent, on top of a decade of stagnating or falling real wages.

About 10 percent of poll respondents reported having difficulty already in paying bills, while 34 percent said they were "struggling a bit." Only 18 percent described themselves as comfortable.

These results indicate that many voters, most likely young and working class, are looking for a progressive alternative to the parties of big business and are open to considering a socialist alternative. That is being offered only by the socialist program advanced by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP).

This underscores the united operation by the Coalition and Labor to push through anti-democratic electoral laws last August to deregister political parties, such as the SEP, that have no members of parliament. The legislation gave us just three months, amid the deadly pandemic, to hand over to the electoral authorities the names and details of 1,500 members, suddenly tripling the previous requirement of 500.

The laws were blatantly designed to stifle dissent and prevent workers and young people from expressing their backing for socialist candidates. To combat the laws, the SEP conducted a powerful campaign last month to obtain, in just over a week, more than 750 signatures to nominate our candidates for the Senate in three states—New South Wales (NSW), Victoria and Queensland.

However, because of these laws, our six candidates appear on Senate ballot papers as groups of two without our party name.

The hostility to the ruling parties has grown since the last federal election in 2019. During these three years, trillions of dollars have been poured into the financial markets and corporate support packages, while the profit-driven governments have let loose COVID-19, leading to mass infections.

Over the same period, terrible bushfires and floods have highlighted the failure of capitalist governments to address climate change. Now the escalating US-NATO drive to exploit the Ukraine war to crush Russia has slashed supplies of food, fertilisers and fuel worldwide.

The disaffection with the old parties goes deeper, however. It is the outcome of decades of successive governments, both Coalition and Labor, enforcing cuts to real wages and surging social inequality. This corporate-government offensive was set off by the Hawke and Keating Labor governments of 1983–1996, which inflicted pro-market restructuring on workers in close partnership with the trade unions.

There is growing concern within the ruling establishment that the next government will be unable to deliver the austerity measures needed to force the working class to pay for the more than $1 trillion in government debt incurred by corporate handouts and rapidly expanding military spending.

An editorial in the *Australian* on May 3 denounced the "feel-good promises" being made in the election campaign. It demanded a focus on "the significant challenges facing the nation," such as inflation, "sluggish productivity," "potential wage breakouts," "funding substantial defence upgrades," "the looming effects of higher interest rates" and "government debt."

There is no doubt that these anxieties about a fragile government in Australia are shared in Washington, which regards Australia as an absolutely essential base for its coming war against China to reassert US hegemony over the Pacific and globally.

The demands of the corporate media for a "strong" government that can impose this agenda are a warning to the working class. If the decayed and fracturing political order cannot deliver on the commitment to austerity and war, there will be moves to even more anti-democratic and authoritarian forms of rule.

The SEP is standing in the elections to advance a socialist program of action for workers to fight for their class interests against the relentless assault on their basic social and democratic rights.

A workers' government, resting on rank-and-file committees and other organisations created by the working class in its struggles, has to be established to reorganise society along socialist lines as part of the fight for socialism internationally.

Contact the SEP:
Phone: (02) 8218 3222
Email: sep@sep.org.au
Facebook: SocialistEqualityPartyAustralia
Twitter: @SEP_Australia
Instagram: socialistequalityparty_au
TikTok: @SEP_Australia

Authorised by Cheryl Crisp for the Socialist Equality Party, Suite 906, 185 Elizabeth Street, Sydney, NSW, 2000.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site