An analysis of the federal election result:

# Australian Labor Party records lowest primary vote since 1934

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The May 21 federal election marked a significant turning point in Australian politics. Decades of disillusionment and anger toward the official political set-up was expressed in an unprecedented collapse of support for the ruling parties.

Together, Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition won just 68.27 percent of the primary vote. Labor has formed government despite receiving the first preference of just 32.58 percent, or less than a third of the primary votes, the party's worst result since the Great Depression.

Under Australia's anti-democratic preferential system, voters must allocate preferences to all candidates for their House of Representatives ballot to be counted. Primary votes are those that receive a first preference. Votes for other candidates are eventually allotted, nearly always to major parties, particularly Labor or the Coalition, based on preferences, to bolster the political establishment.

The Liberal vote plummeted by 4.28 percent, with the party registering its worst result in 80 years. This was bound up with mass hostility to former Prime Minister Scott Morrison, who was identified above all with callous disregard for bushfire and flood victims, and the catastrophic "let it rip" COVID policies.

But Labor was not the beneficiary, with its own first preference vote declining by 0.76 percent, on top of a fall of 1.39 percent in the 2019 election. There is a growing recognition that there is no difference between Labor and the Liberal-Nationals on any of the substantive issues, from war, to the "herd immunity" coronavirus program and social austerity.

In affluent areas, the massive decline in the Coalition's vote produced gains for the Greens, who picked up three new seats in the House of Representatives, and "Teal Independents," who won six seats. These "independents," with substantial financial backing and themselves closely connected to the corporate elite, promote the lie that climate change can be reversed through "green" investment, the real purpose of which is to develop new profit opportunities for big business.

All nine of the seats gained by the Greens and Teals were in the wealthiest third of electorates, reflecting their orientation to, and support from, the upper-middle class and sections of the ruling elite. While the program of the Greens and the Teals is utterly bogus, this support also reflects, in a distorted and limited form, broad-based opposition to the continued destruction of the environment in the interest of private profit.

Despite a massive advertising budget, reportedly as high as $100 million, the far-right populist United Australia Party made only small gains as voters deserted the major parties. Nationally, the party, which opposed COVID-19 vaccines and public health measures, and promoted dangerous fake treatments for the virus, gained just 0.69 percentage points in the House of Representatives and 1.10 points in the Senate, less than some minor single-issue parties.

Australia's other major far-right party, Pauline Hanson's One Nation, gained 1.88 percentage points in the House of Representatives, primarily by standing in all electorates, and lost 1.11 points in the Senate.

This illustrates that the mass desertion by voters of Labor and the Liberal-Nationals is not the product of a shift to the right by the working class, but a loathing for the entire political establishment. Virtually all minor parties made small gains, essentially in proportion to the number of electorates in which they stood candidates.

**Labor's declining working-class vote**

One of the most significant features of the election was that it confirmed that Labor can in no way claim a mass base of support in the working class. Throughout Australia's history, Labor has been the pre-eminent political force tying workers to the capitalist system. However, decades of pro-business policies have made it clear to an increasing number of workers that the party does not represent their interests, but those of the corporate elite, and can no longer even be considered a "lesser evil."

Labor's vote declined in 85 of the 151 electoral divisions across the country. The fall was largest in working-class and impoverished regional areas. On average, the first preference vote for Labor declined by 1.7 percentage points in the 76 most disadvantaged electorates, while it dropped by just 0.07 percent in the most advantaged 75 seats.

Labor won only a single new seat in the most disadvantaged half of the country's 151 electoral divisions, the marginal New South Wales (NSW) seat of Robertson, while five of the party's ten seats gained were in the 23 wealthiest electorates.

In the predominantly working-class Sydney areas to the south and west of Parramatta, the city's geographical centre, Labor's vote fell in ten out of twelve electoral divisions. In Parramatta, 11.4 percent of 15-24 year olds and 5.9 percent of workers overall are unemployed, even on the misleadingly low official statistics.

Labor's largest decline across the country was in the southwest Sydney electorate of Fowler, the tenth-most disadvantaged division in the country. Labor had held the seat since it was created in 1984, but this year it went to independent candidate Dai Le after Labor's vote fell by 18.48 percent.

The immediate cause was a tone-deaf attempt to parachute the deeply unpopular former NSW Premier Kristina Keneally into a safe seat, but the result also points to a growing hostility to the political establishment, in a region where workers confront an acute social crisis.

Almost 66 percent of renters and 70 percent of mortgagees in Fowler are in housing stress, according to social housing organisation "Everybody's

Home." Across southwest Sydney, the official unemployment rate is 7.6 percent, the highest of any urban area in the country and almost double the national figure of 3.9 percent, while youth unemployment is at 12.2 percent.

On top of a fall of 6.28 points for Labor in Fowler in the 2019 election, this year's defeat resulted in a more than 25 percent drop over the two elections.

Southwest Sydney suffered disproportionately from high levels of the COVID-19 infection, illness and death that has been allowed to run rampant as a result of the homicidal policies of all Australian governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike.

At the same time, the region was targeted with punitive and aggressively enforced partial lockdowns. This included the deployment of the military and police to demonise and harass ordinary people, while a host of pro-business exemptions meant that the measures did little to curtail the spread of the virus.

Mass infections have accelerated in these working-class areas, since even the inadequate lockdowns were ended last December. Anecdotal reports indicate that the virus continues to spread like wildfire in factories and warehouses, along with schools.

Labor's vote also fell in the neighbouring electorates of Werriwa (7.9 percent in 2022, 4.38 percent in 2019) and Blaxland (2.8 percent in 2022, 5.53 percent in 2019), the most disadvantaged electorate in NSW. In Werriwa, 66.4 percent of renters and 70.7 percent of borrowers are in housing stress, as are 64.1 percent of renters in Blaxland.

While Labor's vote increased by 1.9 percent in McMahon, to the north of Fowler, this fell far short of offsetting a 7.36 percent decline in 2019. Similarly in Greenway, which includes several working-class suburbs but is overall one of the wealthier electorates in the state, the 1.89 percentage point increase in Labor's vote this year was less than the 3.11 drop at the last federal election.

Labor won two new seats in Sydney. One was Bennelong, a wealthy electorate dominated by the Liberal Party since it was created in 1949 and previously held by former Liberal Prime Minister John Howard. The other was Reid, which was a Labor stronghold from 1922 but went to the Liberals from 2013.

The turn away from Labor in areas of high socio-economic disadvantage is not a new phenomenon. When Labor lost the "unloseable" 2019 federal election, its vote fell by 2.78 percent in the poorest half of electorates and by only 0.33 percent in the wealthiest half.

In Victoria, Labor's primary vote this year fell in 18 of the 20 most socially disadvantaged electorates. While the party made substantial gains in the 2019 election, this year's decline more than outweighed them. Since 2016, Labor's vote has fallen in 26 out of 39 seats, including 16 of the 20 poorest.

There are clear links with the deindustrialisation that has taken place in the region, especially the shutdown of the car manufacturing industry. Beginning in 1984, with the "Button car plan," the Labor Hawke-Keating government and the trade unions spearheaded the pro-business overhaul of the sector, leading to its complete closure by 2017. This resulted in the destruction of thousands of jobs, leaving a legacy of long-term unemployment.

In Calwell, a working-class electorate that includes the former automotive manufacturing hub of Broadmeadows, Labor suffered a swing of 9.57 percent, following a fall of 4.8 points in 2019. In the 2016 election, held months before Ford shut down its Broadmeadows plant, Labor received 56.81 percent of the primary vote. This year, the party received just 44.86 percent. The official unemployment rate in the region is 6.8 percent, the highest in Victoria, and youth unemployment is at 13.7 percent.

In the neighbouring electorate of Scullin, where 65.4 percent of mortgagees are in financial stress, the highest level of any seat in Melbourne, Labor's vote declined by 14.17 percentage points.

Labor's vote also fell in Gellibrand (6.3 points), where 14 percent of youth and 5.2 percent of all workers are unemployed, and Corio (5.47 points). These electorates contain the former automotive manufacturing hubs of Altona and Geelong.

The two new seats Labor won in Victoria were both in Melbourne's inner east and among the state's ten wealthiest electorates. In Chisholm, a marginal seat, Labor's vote increased by 3.77 points, while in Higgins, Labor gained 2.39 percent this year, on top of an 8.85-point increase in 2019, to win the seat for the first time since it was created in 1949.

In South Australia, Labor's vote fell in eight out of ten electorates. The largest decline, of 7.1 percentage points, was in Spence, the most disadvantaged area in the state. The seat includes the north Adelaide suburb of Elizabeth, home to General Motors' Australian plant until it was closed in 2017, putting thousands out of work. The official unemployment rate in the area is 5.9 percent, the highest level in Adelaide.

While Labor's vote increased slightly in Queensland, this paled in comparison to a massive swing away from the party in 2019, meaning that, since 2016, Labor has lost votes in 25 out of the state's 30 electorates.

The only state in which Labor made substantial gains was Western Australia (WA), where its primary vote increased by 7.04 percentage points. Despite the pandemic being virtually unmentioned during the election, even after Labor leader Anthony Albanese was infected with COVID during the campaign, Labor's vote reflected the support for the measures initially enacted in that state to keep it free from the virus.

The state had essentially eliminated the virus throughout most of the pandemic, until the WA Labor government acceded to growing pressure, spearheaded by Morrison and the National Cabinet, to drop its "hard border." Four of the ten seats gained by Labor were in that state, and Labor's vote increased in all but one electorate.

**Labor's record**

The growing turn away from Labor is based on the experiences of workers over the past four decades. In that time, Labor governments, in close collaboration with the trade unions, have been at the forefront of a massive assault on the working class.

This is part of an international process. Beginning in the 1980s, all the social-democratic and trade union organisations dispensed with their previous program of seeking limited reforms for workers, by placing pressure on nationally-based governments and businesses.

The objective basis for this nationalist program, which was always aimed at propping up the capitalist wage labour and profit system, was shattered by the globalisation of production. Labor, together with the unions, became the chief advocates of ensuring that Australian industry became "globally competitive" in the new world market, through a continuous lowering of workers' wages and conditions.

The Labor governments led by Bob Hawke and Paul Keating, from 1983 to 1996, carried out a sweeping economic restructuring, slashing wages and destroying hundreds of thousands of jobs in industries no longer considered sufficiently profitable.

The Labor-union imposition of "enterprise bargaining" ensured workers' struggles were isolated to individual workplaces, and denied workers the right to strike over pay and conditions, except during narrow bargaining windows. Union-enforced enterprise bargaining has resulted in one sell-out agreement after another, across every industry. It is responsible for the massive growth of casual labour, and the decades-long

stagnation of wages.

This agenda was further stepped up by the Labor governments of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard from 2007 to 2013 with the introduction of the "Fair Work Act." The legislation introduced further restrictions on the right of workers to strike, while handing the anti-worker Fair Work Commission expanded powers to shut down industrial action.

Between 1937 and 1983, Labor's first preference vote averaged 45.8 percent. Since the 1983 election of the Hawke Labor government with 49.48 percent of the primary vote, the party has scored an average of 39.1 percent. Since 2000, Labor has recorded an average of just 36.36 percent of first preferences, with the exception of the 2007 when Kevin Rudd won with over 40 percent of the vote.

Events since the election have underscored Labor's character as a pro-war party of the banks and big business.

After taking office, Prime Minister Albanese jettisoned Labor's election slogan of a "better future," instead insisting that workers must accept "sacrifices" through continued wage suppression, amid soaring inflation. Labor has also signalled sweeping cuts to social spending, to force the working class to pay for the deepening crisis of capitalism and the hundreds of millions of dollars handed to big business during the pandemic.

Internationally, Labor is functioning as an attack dog of the US confrontation with China in the Indo-Pacific, a program which threatens nuclear war. Albanese's government has continued the bipartisan persecution of refugees and rejected calls to free Julian Assange, the Australian citizen and journalist being persecuted for exposing US-led war crimes.

The crucial issue for the working class is a new perspective.

As the Socialist Equality Party has explained, amid an upsurge of the class struggle, workers require their own organisations, including rank-and-file committees, independent of the corporatised trade unions. Such committees are the only basis for unifying different sections of workers, breaking the isolation and sell-out operations of the unions and forging a new mass movement of the working class.

Above all, the turn away from Labor must be accompanied by a rejection of its nationalist and pro-capitalist program. The alternative is a socialist and internationalist program, aimed at unifying workers in Australia with their class brothers and sisters around the world, in a common fight against war, austerity and the assault on democratic rights, and their source, the capitalist profit system. The aim must be the establishment of workers' governments and a socialist society, which would be organised to meet the needs of working people, not the profit interests of the corporate elite.

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