

Australian workers voting in state election express hostility to Labor, political establishment

Our reporters
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World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke with workers and young people after they voted in the Victorian state election last Saturday.

The result underscored the deepening crisis of the two-party system in Australia, with further declines in the vote for both the governing Labor Party and opposition Liberal-National Coalition.

Hostility to Labor over the cost-of-living crisis, falling real wages, the broken health system and lack of services was palpable in two working-class areas of Melbourne, the state capital, the northern suburb of Broadmeadows and the outer southeastern suburb of Cranbourne West.

Broadmeadows

Broadmeadows, with a large immigrant and refugee population, has been ravaged by deindustrialisation, including the closure of the car industry in 2016. The liquidation of numerous factories has been overseen by successive Labor state and federal governments and enforced by the trade union bureaucracies. Official figures from September 2021 indicated an unemployment rate of 20.4 percent. The real figure is even higher, if underemployment and those quitting the workforce entirely were to be counted.

Mehmet, who came to Australia from Turkey in 1987, told the WSW: “I worked for the Ford motor company for nearly 30 years until it closed down and production shifted overseas. The company found it could make more profit in Thailand or China and moved there because of lower labour costs. I now work as a carer for a family member.”

The maximum available carer payment is at the poverty level rate of \$513.25 a week. Asked if he had been affected by cost-of-living increases, Mehmet replied: “Yes, of course. It’s always rising, when I go shopping, next week or the week after, the prices are changing, going up—we can’t keep up. Life is getting harder. It’s very hard to live, to make ends meet, and the Labor government is doing nothing about it.

“In other elections here I have voted for Labor, but no more, I won’t vote for Labor. They see this district as a safe area for Labor, so they don’t do anything. They put money, they put other things, in other suburbs but we’re always left out of government investments.”

Mehmet said he had voted for Victorian Socialists. Asked why, he said: “I believe they think of the community and better ways to help people.”

A WSW reporter explained that the Socialist Equality Party had issued a statement outlining its opposition to the pseudo-left Victorian Socialists, including because of its support for US imperialism’s funding and arming of Islamist opposition forces in the Syrian civil war, and of the right-wing regime in Ukraine. Mehmet replied: “I didn’t know that—that’s no good!”

Mehmet spoke about his opposition to war and imperialism. “I believe that America is using other countries to unbalance these areas so they can move in there and get their wealth, those countries’ wealth. We are not interested in war, the working class has no interest in war, no way. On Ukraine, the main thing is the attack on Russia. If the US and Europe didn’t invite Ukraine into NATO there would be no problem.”

Asked if he was concerned about the danger of a global nuclear war, Mehmet said: “Yes, of course, there is the danger of nuclear war, that danger is always there. You never know what these people in power might do. They might get different ideas from different people and then they might push the button one day.”

Sahar spoke about the cost-of-living crisis and war. “I was a teacher before, now I’m going to have to go back to work and try and become a teacher’s aide. My husband and I paid for a deposit for a house for our daughter. We took out a loan. It was then 1.89 percent. It’s gone up, and now it’s more than 6 percent. Why? We used to pay \$1,800 and it’s gone up to \$2,400 a week, and it is still rising. In the future, I don’t know what will happen.

“We used to live in Syria and war has destroyed everything. In the north, the US and Turkey have stolen petrol, oil everything. They got everything, now people need basics and people can’t even eat. It is terrible.”

In Broadmeadows, as in other northern and western working-class suburbs, there was a large decline in the vote for Labor, of 21 percentage points compared with the last election, taking its vote below 50 percent.

One of those voting Labor was **Khaled**. He explained that he came with his family from Iraq 15 years ago, and felt grateful to Australia and the state government for the opportunities he has had. He spoke about the cost-of-living crisis: “I feel now, that in the last two years there has been a big change. When we came here first, life was quite easy but now it is very, very hard. I have five kids, now it is very hard to get money.

“I have my own small transport business, I have my own house, but the price of everything is up, maybe 200 percent, you know what I mean? When I read the news on the internet I see that this is all around the world, but in Australia we need to change this situation. I own two trucks. In the last 15 months, diesel has gone from 95 cents a litre to \$2.40, so I’m not making any money. It’s very hard. Sometimes I think I should sell my trucks.”

Khaled spoke about the Iraq war. “I left because of the war. It’s a really bad situation and still is now, to be honest. Saddam was a very big dictator, but who made this dictator? America made him. America give him the chemical weapons, that’s what we think. The reality is that America gave him everything to fight against Iran [in the 1980s], and after that they decided to take him out. Iraq is a very rich country but you see now that 40 percent of the people are under the poverty line. There is

corruption everywhere. It's all because oil companies control the country."

The Greens' vote was concentrated in gentrified inner-city areas. In Broadmeadows they received fewer votes than Victorian Socialists.

Susan, one Greens voter, said: "I'm not happy with either of the two parties, so I voted Greens. They're not perfect, but I wanted to do something about climate change. I used to go to rallies about climate change, but I've got 'compassion fatigue'—the government just seems to change the rules to suit the corporations, like when they brought in Adani [coal] mines."

Susan explained that she was unemployed and struggling with the impact of inflation. "I lost my job two years ago because of COVID, and since then I injured myself and it's been very hard to find work. I've had to wait for three years [on hospital waiting lists] to get my knee fixed up. The health system can't cope.

"I'm most affected by the cost of living as I'm unemployed. I've had to make cuts to so many things. Six months ago, suddenly I found my Centrelink [income payment] wasn't enough to live off. I've tried to get cheaper insurance, lower my bills. I don't go out, I don't drink any alcohol at all. Everything is just down to basics. I can't even buy new clothes."

Cranbourne West

Cranbourne West is 43 kilometres southeast of central Melbourne. Its comparatively less expensive housing has seen the population increase by 500 percent since 2000. Basic infrastructure lags far behind, with substandard public transport, schools and healthcare facilities. Mortgage stress due to rising interest rates is endemic.

The inchoate hostility to the political establishment was sometimes expressed in votes for right-wing populist and fascistic parties.

Shaun, a butcher by trade but now working as a driller for soil testing, said he had voted in the upper house for the Shooters Party and in the lower house for the Freedom Party, an outfit formed by an anti-vax, anti-lockdown protest leader.

Shaun emphasised his hostility toward the privatisation of public assets: "If [Premier Daniel] Andrews brings back the SEC [State Electricity Commission] into public ownership, I'm a big fan of that. My old man worked at the SEC originally. I'd rather the government controls power rather than privatisation. My brother worked for the local council in Euroa but they've subcontracted everything out.

"The Liberals just seem to want to sell everything and get rid of it. I'd love to see them bring back technical schools. If kids are not academic, put them in a tech school. That way they get woodwork, motor mechanics, engineering, farming, plastics, graphics."

Bec works in early childhood education and has two primary school-aged children. Describing herself as a "swing voter," who had previously mostly voted Labor, she said she voted for the Freedom Party because she opposed the Labor government's lifting of all COVID-19 public health measures.

"I was a massive supporter of vaccinations and the lockdowns at the start, but then they opened up when we have as many cases as we had. Why did you [the Labor government] make us suffer for two years as you did, then just open up for election year? All that says to me is 'I want to be re-elected. I'll make the people happy by not locking them down.' But it's ridiculous."

Bec explained that she had been in and out of hospital for the past three years. "The way the public system is, it's crumbling. There was one Saturday night where there was only one nurse for an entire ward of 20

people. She was run off her feet. That's why they're all getting burnt out. They've been pushed way too far."

Bec also spoke about public transport: "We're in Cranbourne East and the train line was supposed to be extended from Cranbourne but it hasn't been. There's no effective public transport, because the buses are very irregular."

Sumeet works in the disability sector and **Aman** is a nurse in the private health system. They have two children aged 7 and 17.

Aman said: "The main issues in our area are the roads that are getting more congested. They've started some works but it will take years to fix. Every time they promise they will help the health system but after the election they just do 1 percent of what is promised and come up with the same agenda. Grocery prices have gone up by 30 percent, mortgages are going up and petrol prices. Our mortgage has gone up \$250 per month."

Sumeet said: "Some of the sectors are really underpaid, particularly in health. Both of us are working full time and it's not enough for survival. Most of the families are struggling."

On the question of war, Aman said: "War is no good. In Ukraine and Russia the government officials are safe. The people are struggling. The kids are losing their parents, they can't get out. The US wants to stay in power as the world power. If there is a war with China it will be a nightmare. Normal people are not in favour of war. As I said, nothing will happen to the big industries and the politicians. They will be safe, their families will be safe and their money will be safe. I hope for peace in the world."

Amit voted for Labor but discussed issues of social inequality and socialism. "Every country has to minimise the gap between the rich and the poor," he said. "Globalisation means that the whole world should be a global village. I don't see any boundaries. My vision is that the whole world is going to be a big global village.

"Karl Marx advocated the democratic right to vote, but the rich have the power and they run the parties. The big companies are getting bigger and bigger. These days you can't compete. Like Bunnings, how can you compete with them? Coles is buying milk from farmers and farmers can't sell to anyone else. In other terms, it's slavery. They decide what you're going to get. I support socialism the way Karl Marx and Lenin said."



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