

Australian workers and youth speak on social crisis, hostility toward political establishment ahead of Dunkley by-election

Our reporters
29 February 2024

A federal by-election being held tomorrow in the outer southeast Melbourne electorate of Dunkley has highlighted the unprecedented crisis of the Australian parliamentary system.

The *World Socialist Web Site* previously noted that the poll has “become a test of the survival of the Albanese Labor government as well as that of the equally unpopular opposition Liberal Party,” while: “There is enormous disaffection and hostility which sections of the media have nervously registered.” (See “Australian by-election campaign underscores crisis of political establishment.”)

A WSWs reporting team this week spoke with residents from the suburbs of Seaford and Carrum Downs, working-class centres within the Dunkley electorate.

These areas provide an insight into the social crisis afflicting working class communities across Australia. As the WSWs previously reported, more than 80 percent of mortgage holders and 75 percent of renters in Carrum Downs experience “negative cash flow,” defined as their total weekly expenses exceeding their total weekly earnings.

Another report issued in January by the SuburbTrends research group found that average rental costs increased in the state of Victoria by 12 percent over the previous year. SuburbTrends’ “Rental Pain Index,” measuring rental hikes against wages, found that two of the worst affected suburbs in Victoria were within the Dunkley electorate (Seaford and Frankston North).

Only a small minority of workers who spoke with the WSWs were aware of or engaged with the by-election campaign. Many rejected any suggestion that the by-election or elections in general had any relevance to their lives.

Michael was buying dinner for his family of nine,

including a newborn. He previously worked as a furniture removalist until a spinal injury ten years ago. He now works from home, booking removalist jobs, while paying \$550 per week in rent.

He explained: “This is why we’re eating rissoles and vegies.” On clothing expenses, he added: “K-Mart saved us big time.”

On federal politics, Michael raised: “I don’t like [federal Liberal Party opposition leader Peter] Dutton. I’ve found him arrogant.” He rejected the bipartisan assault on the democratic rights of asylum seekers: “Why do they [state authorities] do that instead of helping people? We are a multi-cultural country now, so why can’t we help people? We’ll have more success helping people than pushing them away. They [refugees] have risked their own kids’ lives, their own lives.”

The collapse of the working-class membership and base of the Labor Party and trade unions because of their pro-business program—a decades-long process—has left a political vacuum within which politically inchoate positions find expression in outer working-class suburbs.

Keeley, an aged care services worker, said she had cast a pre-poll ballot for the Liberal Party for the first time, while not realising that the by-election was for a federal rather than a state seat. Labor has held office in Victoria since 2014, and for all but 11 of the past 41 years.

Keeley explained: “The state of the health system is pretty ordinary. I’m moving away from a Labor position. Over the years I’ve voted for various parties.” Keeley has five children, aged from mid-teens to early 30s. “They’re not going to be able to buy a house without us,” she said. “That’s pretty sad, they’re stuck at home with us.”

Keeley organises the transport needs for elderly people who receive home care packages that are designed to care for people in their homes rather than in residential aged

care. She said: “The federal government is ripping money out of aged care. They gave us \$11 million in the last budget, but they pulled \$22 million out in other areas.

“In my work we use volunteers to bridge the gap. And at the moment, local councils are pulling out of aged care services. They are reforming the aged care packages mid-year, but people won’t get enough for what they need. Older people will be far worse off. Dementia is increasing. People will be dying in their homes.”

Jesse, who works in logistics, only moved to the electorate a few months ago. He said: “The cost of the Voice referendum was a problem, for what it achieved. And how much was spent during COVID times? There’s an indirect paying back by everyday people. The supermarkets and banks are being criticised.”

Asked how he was planning to vote, he said: “I haven’t thought about it to be honest. I would take a socialist stance in that everyday people need to be more considered. I think things are becoming more like America where there is a greater wealth divide.”

John, a landscape gardener, said: “I’m definitely not voting for Labor or Liberal ever again. I’ll vote for anyone but them. They lie. You can’t trust anyone.”

Asked about the Gaza genocide, he replied: “It’s not right what’s going on in Gaza but also Ukraine. It’s not just the wars, they’re not good but it’s the cost of living. As you probably know, when there’s wars people make money. I know the background to Palestine and Gaza. One of my mates is from Iran. He knows exactly what’s going on. A lot of us don’t know. I never watch TV. That’s the worst place to learn anything.”

We raised the need for an independent movement of the working class against capitalism. John replied: “Something’s got to be done. If it wasn’t for the working class, truck drivers and tradesmen, who’s going to build the houses? I’ve lived in Australia all my life. It’s not getting any better... We’re going backwards. The price of fuel, cost of living, rents through the roof. I’m never going to be able to afford to buy a house.”

Ben, a musician, said: “The Liberals say if we win we’ll give you this and that, and the Labor Party says the same... I’m going to put Labor and Liberal last.

“The state [Labor] government promised new beds for the Frankston hospital. We never got one of them. Go into the hospital. The chairs are all ripped. I had to wait eight hours in the emergency department the other day. There was a guy with a massive cut on his leg from coral when he was swimming in the sea and they put super glue and tape on it. We’re becoming like a third world country. I

know of people who are removing stitches themselves.”

Phoebe, a member of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) who lives in Frankston, explained: “The increased cost of living is definitely having an impact in Dunkley. I think there has been a lot of price gouging, with everyday items rising because the supermarkets lift prices even though they aren’t spending more to get the items that they have on their shelves. With inflation increasing, workers have a huge burden that includes even basic necessities of life.

“Among a lot of young people, the major parties are viewed as one and the same. Dunkley had been a Liberal seat since 1996. It’s only recently gone to Labor. But a lot of people don’t really care because they just get the same treatment, no matter who is in power.”

Phoebe said war and militarism has been excluded from discussion in the by-election campaign. “The government and the media don’t mention Gaza because they know there is discontent amongst the population and opposition to genocide,” she said.

“There is not going to be support for the major parties if the Gaza situation is promoted. Labor is openly supporting the US and Israel. The genocide is disgusting. It is open support for murder against thousands of people. The Australian government sends arms while a high number of children are being killed.

“The media is complicit in silencing opposition. I heard that doctors and medical staff are being reported to authorities for opposing genocide. That’s the same for teachers, journalists and anyone who speaks the truth. It is outright censorship. At the same time Julian Assange is up for extradition to the United States. He faces espionage charges for publishing war crimes largely committed by the US. It is a massive attack on democratic rights and freedom of speech.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact