

Australia: Staggering Labor losses in Queensland elections underscore wider political breakdown

Mike Head
17 March 2024

Australia's governing Labor Party suffered extraordinary vote collapses in two Queensland state by-elections in working-class electorates last Saturday. The results are a further indication of a developing political crisis, not just in Queensland but throughout the country.

In the Brisbane western suburb of Inala, which has among the lowest income levels and highest unemployment rates in Queensland, Labor lost almost half its primary vote. It fell by around 30 percentage points to less than 35 percent.

Nearby, further to the west, in Ipswich West, which covers outer-suburban working-class neighbourhoods and some semi-rural areas, Labor's primary vote crashed by about 15 percentage points, also to around 35 percent.

Labor is likely to barely retain Inala, which it has never lost before, because the openly right-wing opposition Liberal National Party (LNP) obtained only 29 percent of the vote. The combined vote for the two parties that have ruled in Australia since World War II fell to 64 percent, with the rest going to various independents.

Of added significance is that Inala had long been held by Queensland Labor Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk. She quit in December at the behest of the trade union bureaucrats who control the Labor Party.

Palaszczuk's removal had clear national implications. She became the third Labor state premier to suddenly quit this year, following the departures of Mark McGowan in Western Australia and Daniel Andrews in Victoria. The resignations were all a response to the rising animosity and opposition to the policies of Labor governments that hold power federally and in all states and territories except Tasmania.

Palaszczuk had literally inherited the seat of Inala, due to Labor factional deals, from her father Henry, who was a cabinet minister in the earlier long-running state Labor government of Peter Beattie. Between them, the Palaszczuks had occupied the seat for more than three decades, since its creation in 1992.

The only previous time that Labor's hold over the seat was threatened was in 2012, when Annastacia Palaszczuk's vote plunged by 17 points to 42 percent amid the defeat of Premier Anna Bligh's state Labor government. That government was thrown out of office in an electoral landslide after axeing thousands of public sector jobs and privatising rail and other basic services. Saturday's vote crash in Inala exceeded that of 2012.

In Ipswich West, Labor will lose the seat for only the fourth time since 1960, but the LNP will only just scrape in, with a minority vote of 39 percent, thanks to second preference votes from Legalise Cannabis and the far-right One Nation.

Labor's vote also plummeted in municipal council elections across Queensland on the same day, with losses of up to 23 points in predominantly working-class suburbs, such as Wynnum-Manly in Brisbane. In the Brisbane City Council mayoral election, Labor's vote fell to 26.5 percent. Most of its 5.5-point loss went to the Greens, who obtained around 19.5 percent, mainly in affluent inner-city districts, reflecting their political orientation.

The corporate media coverage has noticeably played down the national dimension of Labor's electoral disasters, claiming that Saturday's results relate only to state issues. According to the media, the result represents a dire warning for the state Labor government of recently-installed Premier Steven Miles, which faces a statewide election on October 26.

The acute problems confronting working-class households, however, are national and international, not state issues. After nearly two years of the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, working people face a devastating cost-of-living crisis driven by soaring rents, home mortgage payments and prices for food, energy and other essentials, and a public health disaster produced by soaring doctors' bills under the Medicare scheme, and life-threatening hospital emergency and elective surgery waiting

times.

As Socialist Equality Party members can attest from our campaigns in Inala and other working-class areas, there is also deepening disgust with the Albanese government over its support for the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza and its wider commitment to US militarism, particularly the AUKUS military pact to prepare for a calamitous war with China.

That hostility was clearly a factor in the overwhelming defeat of last October's Voice referendum, which the Albanese government had heavily promoted to try to put a progressive gloss on its program of war and austerity.

Under conditions of the greatest decline in working-class living standards for at least 50 years, voters in these areas did not believe the Labor government's claims that entrenching an elite indigenous advisory body in the country's 1901 Constitution would alleviate the appalling social conditions of most indigenous people, who are among the most oppressed layers of the working class.

The efforts of Premier Miles and his union bureaucrat sponsors, led by United Workers Union powerbroker Gary Bullock, to put a fresh face on the nine-year-old state Labor government have come to nought.

Since taking office in 2015, this government has presided over worsening staff shortages and resources in the state's public hospitals and schools, and a growing social housing and homelessness crisis. During the first stage of the COVID-19 pandemic, it imposed a two-year wage freeze on public sector workers, enforced by the union leaders.

Palaszczuk's government won re-election in 2020 by claiming to protect people by shutting the state's borders in response to the pandemic. It then promptly joined all the country's other governments, both Labor and Liberal-National, in scrapping every health safety measure, letting COVID rip at the cost of an estimated 1,000 lives in Queensland.

In his inaugural speech as premier last December, Miles outlined the intensified right-wing, pro-business and repressive character of the government's agenda to be implemented in close partnership with the UWU and other union bureaucrats. He announced a consultative body, the Queensland Leaders' Forum, "to bring together business, industry, community and unions in the one room to work together."

Miles declared the government would increase police resources because "youth crime in Queensland is unacceptably high." The Queensland government already jails more children, many of them indigenous, than any other Australian state or territory. Last year, responding to a media witch hunt over "youth crime" amid the deepening social crisis, the Palaszczuk government twice rushed through

parliament laws to lock up more children in adult cells, suspending the state's Human Rights Act to do so.

On Sunday, Miles said the by-election results were "bad" and worse than expected. He said they showed voters wanted his government to work harder on cost-of-living pressures and "crime in the community."

This foreshadows a further lurch into a "law and order" offensive against youth in the working-class areas where economic, employment and social conditions are deteriorating. As for "cost-of-living pressures," the by-election results point to the failure of the Albanese government's recent rejigging of the "Stage 3" income tax cuts to reverse Labor's fortunes.

The tax cuts amount to a pittance for most workers—about \$2 a day for those on \$40,000 a year. Most of the tax benefits still go to the wealthier layers taking home more than \$200,000 a year.

On top of the March 2 federal by-election in the outer-Melbourne electorate of Dunkley, Saturday's results underscore the ongoing disintegration of support, not just for Labor and its union factional bosses but for both the two main parties of rule and the political establishment as a whole.

Albanese's government took office in 2022 after Labor won a national primary vote of less than 33 percent. That was Labor's lowest vote in nearly a century, despite the implosion of support for the widely-hated Liberal-National government that had ruled since 2013.

For nearly two years, backed by the trade union leaders, Labor has only intensified the attacks of the previous Morrison Coalition government on every front, including by letting loose the COVID pandemic, ratcheting up the US military alliance and imposing falling living standards on working people.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact