

Australian Labor's defeat in Queensland election underscores historic political crisis

Mike Head**27 October 2024**

Saturday's election in the northern Australian state of Queensland saw huge swings against the trade union-backed Labor government in working-class areas, pointing to the ongoing decades-long implosion of Labor's base across the country, now accelerated by its pro-business program of war and austerity.

Despite these shifts—which neared 20 percentage points in some suburban electorates in the state capital, Brisbane, and in some regional centres—the right-wing Liberal National Party (LNP) secured only about 42 percent of the vote.

With vote counting still taking place and some seats in doubt, it appears that the LNP will command just a few more than the requisite 47 seats in the 93-seat legislative assembly to establish a majority government.

Labor is likely to be reduced to around 30 seats. Its statewide vote plunged to 32.8 percent, down 6.8 points from the October 2020 state election, which it largely won by claiming to have protected the population from the COVID-19 pandemic by shutting the state's borders.

The trade union apparatuses reportedly poured at least \$2.5 million of their members' funds into electorate campaigns to try to save the state Labor government, but to no avail.

The result calls into question the survival of the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, which barely scraped into office in May 2022 with a near-record low vote of 32.5 percent.

More fundamentally, the Queensland outcome indicates the deepening instability of the whole political establishment, now confronted by rising working-class hostility over the spiralling cost-of-living and social and housing crisis.

This disaffection is compounded by the overshadowing issue that the media and political elite tried to bury throughout the election campaign—the bipartisan Labor-LNP support for the intensifying Israeli genocide in Gaza and the plunge into wider US-backed wars in the Middle East and against Russia and China, threatening a nuclear third world war.

As Socialist Equality Party members and supporters can confirm from our campaigns in working-class areas, there is deepening disgust with the Albanese government over its support for the US-backed Israeli genocide and its wider commitment to US militarism, particularly the AUKUS military pact to prepare for a calamitous war with China (see: "Workers speak out on war, genocide and the social crisis at Queensland polling booth").

The result in Queensland, Australia's third-most populous state,

has an added significance because it marks only the third time since 1989 that the LNP has taken office. For this entire period, except for rapidly despised single-term LNP governments from 1995 to 1998 and 2012 to 2015, the corporate elite has relied on union-backed Labor governments to maintain its rule.

The outcome did not represent any mass shift to the right, despite the LNP mounting a vicious law-and-order campaign against a supposed youth crime wave, which Labor sought to match. The LNP mostly picked up votes negatively on the back of discontent with the deteriorating social conditions, including rising homelessness, poverty and hospital failures delivered by the state Labor government since 2015 and the federal Labor government since 2022.

Between them, the two longtime ruling parties obtained less than 75 percent of the vote, with the rest spread across the Greens and an array of independents and right-wing formations, including Katter's Australian Party, which is likely to retain three rural seats.

There was no rise in support for far-right parties, such as Katter's, whose vote was stuck at 2.6 percent, and Senator Pauline Hanson's One Nation, whose vote barely rose by 0.7 percent to 7.8 percent, leaving her formation without a seat in parliament.

Despite the shift against Labor, the Greens' vote stagnated on 9.4 percent, reflecting the party's limited, largely inner-city, upper middle-class constituency. After boasting that they could pick up six or even ten inner-urban seats in Brisbane, mostly by exploiting the anger over soaring rents, the Greens look set to lose one of the two seats they had held in affluent areas.

By far the biggest shifts against Labor occurred in working-class areas, both in Brisbane's outer suburbs and in coastal regional centres such as Rockhampton, Mackay, Townsville and Cairns, where Labor lost some working-class seats it had held for decades, with negative swings of up to 17 percent.

In Brisbane's working-class suburbs, the swing against Labor was as high as 19.4 percent in Inala, taking its vote down to 48 percent in the seat formerly occupied by ex-Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk and her father before her for more than 30 years. While the LNP profited from that disaffection, its vote only rose by 11.6 points to 28.2 percent. The rest of the anti-Labor swing went to the Greens, an independent and others.

Similar diffuse patterns, propelled by anti-Labor swings of 12 to 13 percent, occurred in working-class electorates like Algester, Woodridge and Logan in Brisbane's south, Bundamba in the west

and Capalaba in the southeast, often reducing Labor's vote to below 50 percent. Labor will still hold numbers of those seats, but only on the back of second preferences from the Greens and other candidates.

Almost certainly, the Labor defeat would have been worse except for last-minute voters' fears that the LNP, led by David Crisafulli, refused to rule out facilitating a Katter's Australian Party resolution to overturn abortion rights.

Ominously for the Albanese government, which has tried similar ploys, Labor Premier Steven Miles' frantic efforts to claim to be addressing the cost-of-living crisis failed to stem the discontent.

Miles' government temporarily cut public transport fares to 50 cents, offered one-off annual \$1,000 power bill rebates, and promised free primary school lunches and \$200 sports vouchers. It even proposed a state-owned power retailer with fixed prices, and government-owned petrol stations to supposedly drive down fuel prices.

Crisafulli, now the incoming premier, matched the cheaper fares policy and promised not to slash health and other essential social services. This was much to the chagrin of the corporate elite, which is demanding aggressive cutting of social spending.

By adopting the "small target" tactic of hiding most of their cost-cutting agenda, Crisafulli and his shadow cabinet were anxious to avert the hostility toward the LNP generated by the last short-lived state LNP government, led by Campbell Newman from 2012 to 2015. It suffered a humiliating electoral defeat after slashing social services, including by laying off 11,000 health workers, and privatising \$11 billion worth of public infrastructure.

The enmity toward the LNP had allowed Labor, which had been routed and reduced to a rump in 2012 for its own pro-business privatisations and destruction of thousands of public sector jobs, to return to office under Palaszczuk in 2015.

Labor only continued its anti-working class program, which included public sector pay freezes, and chronic under-funding of hospitals and schools.

Last December, the increasingly discredited Palaszczuk was ousted as premier via a backroom coup, and replaced by Miles in a fraught attempt to stem a forecast electoral rout. Miles was installed at the behest of Labor's union bureaucrat powerbrokers. Chief among them was United Workers Union (UWU) boss Gary Bullock, who sits on Labor's national executive and epitomises the union bureaucracy's control over the party at state and federal levels.

Even after Labor's disaster, Miles will survive as state Labor leader because of this backing. A week before the election, Bullock publicly insisted that Miles would retain the leadership, regardless of the looming electoral defeat. "I think he is the best option," Bullock told the *Australian Financial Review* on October 21.

Albanese and other federal Labor ministers are trying to deny the implications of the result for their own prospects. This flies in the face of the evidence that their imposition of deep cuts to working-class living standards and total commitment to US war plans is opening the door for a similar outcome in the federal election due before May.

Albanese and his Labor "strategists" reportedly calculated that

the ousting of the Labor government in Queensland would permit voters to vent their unrest and thus improve the chances of federal Labor clinging to office, even if in a minority government.

The Queensland defeat is clearly part of a national process, following the landslide defeat of the Labor government in the Northern Territory in August, and losses in the Australian Capital Territory election a week ago.

These are not simply state issues. After more than two years of the federal Labor government, working people face devastating cost-of-living pressures driven by soaring rents, home mortgage payments and prices for food, energy and other essentials, and a public health disaster produced by surging doctors' bills under the Medicare scheme, and life-threatening hospital emergency and elective surgery waiting times.

There is also widespread anger over the Albanese government's dictatorial takeover of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union, which is an attack on the democratic rights and conditions of building workers.

Major class battles lie ahead. In an October 25 editorial, the Murdoch media's *Australian* lashed Crisafulli for "foolishly promising to implement Labor's big-spending budget" and declared that he would have to "stand firm" against threats of strikes by public sector workers.

This, and a similar editorial in the *Australian Financial Review* (AFR) today, must be a warning of sharp cuts and conflicts to come. In this, the LNP government will cooperate with the Albanese administration, while billions of dollars are poured into military spending.

Crisafulli told the AFR yesterday that he had already had a "really good" and "very, very cordial" 20-minute phone call with Albanese. That underscores the essential bipartisan unity between Labor and the LNP, which is the state arm of the national Liberal-National Coalition.

This underlying partnership highlights the necessity to build the Socialist Equality Party to provide the genuine, revolutionary socialist answer to capitalism and the wars and destitution it produces.



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