

Labor Party retains office in Western Australia despite heavy swing

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In another indication of an underlying political crisis nationally, the Labor Party government in Western Australia (WA) won Saturday's state election by a considerable margin, but largely due to worse-than-predicted results for the opposition Liberal and National parties, especially in former Liberal heartland seats in affluent suburbs of Perth, the state capital.

Backed by significant mining industry and other business figures, Labor will retain office for a third consecutive term in WA. That is despite substantial negative swings against it, particularly in Perth's outer suburban electorates where working-class households are most affected by the cost of living, housing affordability crisis and deteriorating social conditions.

Labor's statewide vote fell to 42 percent, down a huge 18 percentage points from the 2021 state election, in which Labor won a landslide victory by claiming to protect the state's population from the COVID pandemic by closing the state borders.

Yet the Liberals' vote only rose to 29 percent, up 8 points, and the rural-based Nationals, the Liberals' usual coalition partners, gained just 5 percent, up by 1 point. They both proved incapable of exploiting the political discontent.

Federal Liberal shadow minister Andrew Hastie labelled the result a disaster. "We didn't get the swings where we would have expected," he told the media.

Overall, with counting still continuing, Labor is expected to hold 45 seats in the 59-member lower house of parliament, down from the 50 it secured in 2021, when the Liberals were reduced to a rump of two seats after opposing the COVID border closures.

Much of the disaffection with Labor went instead to independents and other parties, including the Greens and the anti-immigrant One Nation, which each picked up about 4 percent of the vote. In total, about 25 percent of the vote went to candidates outside of the post-World War II parties of rule—Labor, Liberal and Nationals. That was near the previous record of 28.3 percent in 2001.

Significantly, Labor retained most of the wealthier inner-Perth seats. It suffered its largest swings in outer suburbs, where soaring house prices and mortgage repayments have made Perth the least affordable capital city in Australia, outstripping Sydney and Melbourne.

In Rockingham, in Perth's outer south-west suburbs, Labor had a 25 percent swing against it, yet still held the seat. In Perth's outer north, Labor retained the seats of Joondalup and Wanneroo,

despite swings of 19.6 percent and 15.6 percent respectively.

Likewise, in Forrestfield, an eastern suburbs seat, Labor's vote fell by 23 percent, but it still kept the seat. Labor could lose Fremantle, a traditional Labor seat in Perth's port, to an independent.

Reflecting the pro-business and pro-mining character of Labor's program, Premier Roger Cook publicly attributed the win to "sensible, stable government focused on strong financial management."

Within a year of winning the 2021 election, the WA Labor government joined every other capitalist government in letting the COVID pandemic rip for the sake of corporate profit, with disastrous consequences.

By May 2023, after Labor ended most safety measures in March 2022, the number of officially recorded infections in WA had soared above 1.3 million, in a population of about 2.8 million, and confirmed deaths had risen above 1,000. That was when Cook's predecessor as premier, Mark McGowan, abruptly quit, claiming that he was simply "exhausted."

Saturday's results are a further pointer to the likelihood of the imminent federal election producing a "hung" parliament and an unstable minority government, with either Labor or the Liberal-National Coalition depending on the votes of the Greens or various independents.

The federal Labor government scraped into office in May 2022 with less than a third of the popular vote, demonstrating the further disintegration of Labor's previous working-class electoral base. It only obtained a slim parliamentary majority by winning four seats in WA off the back of the electoral collapse of the Liberals.

On Saturday's results, the Liberals could regain two federal seats in WA at the federal election but still fall short of being able to form a majority government.

By all reports, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese had originally intended to call the federal election this weekend for April 12. He had planned to be in Perth on Saturday to identify himself with the expected Labor state victory.

Those hopes were dashed by the continuing disaster caused by Cyclone Alfred's high winds and flooding rains this week in Australia's third largest population centre, Brisbane, and the surrounding regions of Queensland and northern New South Wales.

With hundreds of thousands of residents affected by power blackouts, damaged homes and floods, Albanese was forced to

effectively postpone the federal election until May, and in the meantime seek to portray himself as overseeing the relief and recovery operations.

Cook, who heads WA Labor's "Left" faction, replaced McGowan as state premier in May 2023. He took the government in an even more pro-business direction, summed up in Labor's primary campaign slogan, "Made in WA." Despite the global economic turmoil, Cook claimed that the state's iron ore, gas and other mineral resources could be used to build future downstream processing and create manufacturing jobs.

Cook established himself as an unabashed advocate for the mining industries owned and controlled by global corporations and Australia's two wealthiest billionaires, Gina Rinehart and Andrew Forrest.

Labor streamlined the state's environmental approval laws, winning praise from Rinehart, and pushed through the approval of Woodside Energy's controversial North West Shelf oil and gas extension. Cook agitated successfully against the Albanese government's promised "Nature Positive" laws, which proposed a federal Environment Protection Agency, even though it would have had only toothless advisory powers regarding mining projects.

Cook also backed away from McGowan's occasional criticisms of the escalating commitment by Australian governments, including Albanese's, to the US war plans against China. These preparations include hosting US nuclear submarines and future AUKUS submarines at the Stirling naval base just south of Perth.

More than a fifth of state government revenue comes from iron ore royalties, with half of the state's exports going to China. That has generated \$15 billion in budget surpluses over the past three years.

Despite the mineral wealth, social conditions have still deteriorated, generating the discontent reflected in Labor's loss of support in working-class areas. The cost of living has soared, as it has nationally, despite state and federal government band-aids such as one-off electricity bill credits.

Since first taking office in 2017 under McGowan, Labor has cut public health, education and housing spending compared to population growth. As a result, waiting times for ambulances to deliver patients into public hospital emergency departments doubled from 2019 to December 2024, a month in which ambulances spent 4,580 hours "ramped" outside hospitals.

Staff shortages and intolerable workloads intensified for doctors and nurses, as they did in government schools and welfare services. More than 20,600 WA residents are on the public housing wait list.

After its 2021 win, Labor imposed pay freezes on more than 150,000 public sector workers, including health staff, carers, firefighters and teachers, followed by nominal wage "rise" offers that were below the official inflation rate.

Just before McGowan quit, his government imposed, with the complicit agreement of the Australian Nursing Federation (ANF), a penalty of \$350,000 on the union, after earlier threatening a fine of nearly \$36 million, which could have hit nurses individually.

The unprecedented fine was over a one-day strike by 4,000 public sector health workers in November 2022 against the

government's 3 percent nominal wage rise offer—a stoppage that the ANF itself had tried to prevent.

The WA Council of Social Service (WACOSS) state election campaign statement provided a picture of the social crisis. It reported that at the end of 2023, 37 percent of WA families said they were not food secure and had skipped meals or changed their shopping to cover costs.

Over the previous 12 months, median advertised rents in Perth had increased by more than 13 percent for houses and by 20.2 percent for units.

WACOSS commented: "Western Australians on lower incomes have been left without financial reserves and are missing out on essentials; regular and nutritious meals are becoming a luxury for a growing number of households, safe and affordable housing has become unattainable for many, children are missing out on the fundamentals needed to thrive and far too many parents have very real concerns for their children's future."

For its assault on workers' jobs, wages and social services, and its fierce protection of mining industry profits, the Labor government benefited from support by the WA-based corporate establishment, including Kerry Stokes, the billionaire owner of the *West Australian* newspaper and the Seven TV network.

An election-eve editorial in the Murdoch media's *Australian* declared that "Mr Cook has earned another term," because "he is proving pragmatic and a safe pair of hands" in championing the resources industry, while "a stronger, more effective state opposition would be in the interests of West Australians."

For all the hailing of Cook, the result reflects the political instability across Australia, which is being intensified by mounting working-class discontent and struggles under conditions of deepening poverty and social inequality, the Gaza genocide, the suppression of dissent and the danger of war.



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