

One Nation victory in Western Australia underscores working-class discontent

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A state by-election in Western Australia on Saturday produced a tectonic swing away from the governing Labor Party in a previously “safe” Labor electorate. It delivered the first ever victory for the far-right, anti-immigrant One Nation party of Senator Pauline Hanson in the state’s lower house of parliament.

It is also the first time that One Nation has won a seat in any Australian parliament at the direct expense of the Labor Party, which had held Secret Harbour or its earlier incarnations in the outer southern suburbs of Perth, the state capital, since 1989.

With nearly all votes counted, One Nation had picked up 39.1 percent of the primary vote (up 30.6 percentage points since the March 2025 state election), Labor 24.4 percent (down 22.1 points), the Liberals 17.3 percent (down 7.1 points) and the Greens 7.5 percent (down 1.3 points). The rest of the votes were scattered among various other parties and independents.

After the distribution of second preferences in its favour, notably from the Liberal Party, One Nation won by 57 percent to 43 percent against Labor.

Despite being a state by-election, the outcome cannot be explained as a local aberration. It has wider implications.

The results provide another indication of the unrest in working-class areas across the country over falling real wages, the soaring cost of living and cuts to essential social programs, like public health, education and disability services, being imposed by the state and federal Labor governments and their trade union enforcers.

The outcome also shows the danger that Labor’s own right-wing agenda, which includes matching One Nation’s anti-immigrant poison, boosting corporate profits and pouring hundreds of billions of dollars into war preparations, is opening the door for the far-right to cynically exploit the resulting disaffection.

Secret Harbour is home to many young, working families and children, typically paying off large and rising home mortgage debts. Its residents feature blue-collar workers, including fly-in-fly-out workers in the state’s northern mining sector.

According to a real estate investor website, the median listing price for houses is \$776,500 and this has risen astronomically by 46.5 percent over the past two years.

The by-election followed the resignation of state Corrective

Services Minister Paul Papalia, a Navy and Special Air Services (SAS) veteran, after almost two decades in parliament. Papalia had been sitting on what appeared to be a commanding 11.5 percent margin. Less than 18 months ago, he had held the seat with a two-party preferred vote of 61.5 percent.

The underlying disintegration of Labor’s support is even greater. In the state election of 2021, when the state Labor government postured as defending the population from the COVID pandemic, Papalia held the Secret Harbour’s predecessor seat of Warnbro with a 77 percent primary vote.

Georgia Tree, the failed Labor candidate, was a typical Labor-corporate apparatchik. She was a former staffer for federal Resources Minister Madeline King before becoming a government relations adviser for Woodside Energy Group, the largest oil and gas producer listed on the Australian Securities Exchange.

Woodside, which recently scrapped plans to supposedly commit \$5 billion to cleaner energy projects by 2030, gave a \$12,100 donation to Labor during the by-election campaign—a measure of Labor’s commitment to the mining conglomerates.

Labor’s campaign was not assisted by a visit to Perth by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese—his 45th since taking office in 2022—to attend fundraising events, including a \$10,000-a-head dinner. Nor was it helped by appearances in Secret Harbour by state Premier Roger Cook and other ministers to announce funding for an overdue train station.

Meanwhile, the housing crisis was highlighted on Memorial Drive in the neighbouring Rockingham electorate, where hundreds of homeless people sleep in tents and caravans. By contrast, the Albanese and Cook governments are spending billions of dollars on nearby AUKUS military facilities at the Stirling naval base and the Henderson industrial precinct.

Together with housing being built for thousands of US military personnel, these facilities are integral to the plan to host US and UK submarines and their crews from next year as part of the Albanese government’s preparations for war against China.

One Nation’s successful candidate, Luke Herdegen, owns several gyms. He benefited from a well-funded campaign that featured extensive traditional and social media advertising. One Nation’s biggest financial backer is Australia’s wealthiest

person, Gina Rinehart, whose Hancock Prospecting Group has major gas and mining interests in Western Australia. The total of her donations to the by-election campaign remains unknown.

As with One Nation's previous gains in the South Australian state election in March, polling indicates that the overwhelming majority of those who voted for One Nation are not anti-immigrant racists. Rather, their support is based on the cost-of-living crisis and hostility to both the old ruling parties, Labor and the Coalition.

After the results, Hanson reiterated One Nation's campaign theme of posturing as an anti-establishment party. "One Nation has taken a seat where the Liberals have never been able to challenge Labor," she said. "We're taking on the political establishment."

Hanson's party's electoral gains over the past year had been at the expense of the traditional big business formation, the Liberal-National Coalition, whose middle-class base has collapsed. So this result underscores both the loss of working-class support for Labor and the breakdown of the two party-system that has existed in Australia since World War II.

Hanson declared that the Victorian state election in November could place a One Nation-Coalition government in office after more than a decade of Labor rule there.

This prospect is intensifying a political crisis. In a speech to the Queensland Labor Party state conference on Sunday, Albanese anxiously declared: "Across the world, hard right populists are on the march. Peddling politics that is dangerous, divisive, and downright dishonest."

But he offered nothing but more false claims to be tackling the cost-of-living crisis, while insisting: "One Nation are not on the side of working people." Yet the record shows that real wages and working-class living standards have declined sharply since Albanese's government took office in 2022.

This is not an aberration either. Since the early 1980s, Labor and its associated trade union apparatuses have functioned as the primary instrument of an unending assault on the wages, conditions and jobs of the working class, in the interests of the banks and the corporation.

It was also Labor that in the 1990s introduced the mandatory incarceration of refugees, effectively scrapping the right to asylum, and reopened prison camps on remote Pacific islands under the Rudd-Gillard governments of 2007 to 2013, and again under Albanese.

Albanese's government has scapegoated immigrants, and particularly international students, for the cost-of-living and housing crisis, while the unions have for decades blamed "foreign workers" for losses of "Australian" jobs and conditions, seeking to split workers globally.

One Nation's promotion to prominence is similar to developments in the US and Europe, such as the rise of Trump, the anti-immigrant Reform party in Britain and the fascistic AfD in Germany. The disintegration of support for the old ruling parties after decades of serving the interests of big

business has seen sections of the ruling classes promote far-right forces to shift the political establishment even further to the right.

At the same time, there is nervousness in ruling circles at the prospect of political instability and not least the capacity of Labor and the unions to suppress the growing unrest in the working class, which has been seen in recent strikes by teachers, health workers and others.

Monday's editorial in the *Australian Financial Review* said Albanese was right to warn in his speech on Sunday "that a One Nation government would likely mean Trump-style governing chaos."

The corporate outlet implored governments to "show that politicians are listening and responding in meaningful ways to help repair institutional trust" when "belief in the political system is at such a low ebb." How that was possible, the editorial did not say, given the newspaper's record of demanding ever-increasing attacks on workers' conditions.

Likewise, an editorial in the Murdoch media's *Australian* warned: "A chaotic, divided Coalition-One Nation government in Victoria or Canberra would be catastrophic in an era of major economic, strategic and social challenges."

This underlines the continued ruling class backing for the Albanese government, for now at least, to keep enforcing the required program of war and austerity.

If workers see One Nation as an alternative, they are being conned. One Nation's anti-immigrant scapegoating, like that of Labor and the union bureaucracy, serves to divide the working class and to divert opposition from the source of the social crisis: the dominance of the billionaires and the capitalist profit system itself.

The only alternative is the fight for a socialist program aimed at placing society's resources under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class, guaranteeing genuine democracy, peace and decent conditions of work and life for all. That is the perspective advanced by the Socialist Equality Party.



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