

# Victorian election underscores crisis of Australia's two-party system

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The Victorian state election on November 28 is emerging as a focal point of the deepening national crisis of the two-party system and the accelerating shift to the right by both Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition.

The election campaign is already marked by mass anger over the soaring cost of living, the degradation of social services and enormous social inequality. These sentiments are finding electoral expression in widespread hostility to Labor and the Liberals.

An average of five Victorian state opinion polls conducted in September and October puts Labor on just 24.4 percent of the primary vote, the Liberals and Nationals combined on 29.2 percent and the far-right populist One Nation on 22.8 percent. Together, the traditional governing parties are attracting only 53.6 percent, almost 18 percentage points below their combined vote at the 2022 state election.

The election is taking shape not as a conventional transfer of power from one traditional party of government to the other, but as a highly fragmented and fraught contest, provoking nervousness within the ruling elite.

The political crisis is unfolding amid mounting pressure for sweeping spending cuts. Victoria's net debt is projected to reach \$175.6 billion by June 2027 and almost \$200 billion by 2030, with annual interest payments rising to \$11.8 billion. Business organisations and financial commentators are demanding accelerated austerity, while both major parties are pledging "spending restraint." Whatever parliamentary combination emerges from the election, it will seek to impose a stepped-up offensive against public services, jobs and living standards.

The electoral breakdown in Victoria is a new stage of a protracted national process. At last year's federal election, the Coalition was reduced to a rump, with the Liberals, the traditional party of urban conservatism, retaining just nine of 88 metropolitan seats.

At the time, the WSWs explained that Labor retained a majority government not as an expression of positive support, but because of the Coalition's collapse, reflecting the disintegration of a broad middle-class base for traditional conservative politics.

Beginning late last year, One Nation surged in the polls, exploiting hostility to the major parties and attracting former Coalition voters. In the South Australian election, Labor retained a substantial parliamentary majority, while One Nation received 23 percent of the primary vote, substantially outpolling the Liberals at 19 percent.

The Victorian election is underscoring the reality, somewhat obscured by those results, that this is not simply a crisis of the Coalition, but of the entire two-party system, and increasingly of Labor itself.

Labor's crisis is particularly significant in Victoria, where it has governed for 33 of the past 44 years, including the past 13 consecutively. Its primary vote has fallen from 37 percent in 2022 to around 24 percent in recent polling, amid mounting hostility to its record of austerity, deteriorating public services and attacks on living standards.

The social crisis is acute. Mortgage Stress Victoria reported that requests for assistance doubled between January and August, while Foodbank Victoria is feeding about 76,000 people daily. Anglicare found that just 0.8 percent of advertised Victorian rentals were affordable and suitable for households dependent on income support. Meanwhile, Labor is proceeding with the demolition and redevelopment of Melbourne's 44 public-housing towers, affecting more than 10,000 residents.

Public hospitals and schools are likewise under severe pressure. More than 13,000 patients spent over 24 hours in Victorian emergency departments during the past year, while Labor withheld \$2.4 billion in previously promised public-school funding.

Labor is pledging further austerity. The replacement of Jacinta Allan by Ben Carroll as premier in July was followed by renewed commitments to cuts. Labor has claimed more than \$4 billion in budget savings, including the elimination of 1,000 public-sector jobs last year. At its campaign launch, Carroll declared that land-tax concessions benefiting affluent property owners would be paid for through "commonsense decisions to reduce spending."

Labor's record in Victoria and its pro-business pitch are in line with the role of the federal Albanese government, which is spearheading the program of militarism and austerity.

Federal Labor's May budget contained \$63.8 billion in savings and reprioritisations, including approximately \$38 billion in cuts associated with the National Disability Insurance Scheme, as part of a program aimed at removing hundreds of thousands of disabled people from support. While implementing this offensive against some of the most vulnerable sections of the population, Labor has increased military spending to record levels to complete Australia's transformation into a launching pad for a US-led war against China.

The hostility to Labor expressed in the Victorian polling is inseparable from deepening opposition to the Albanese

government.

The polling for the Coalition is substantially a negative expression of the collapse in Labor's support. Victorian Liberal leader Jess Wilson has vaguely gestured to that hostility, but her campaign centres on convincing big business that the Coalition would be a more reliable pair of hands. Her proposed public-sector hiring freeze is projected to save \$22 billion over a decade. Such a pitch, however, comes up against the complete disarray of the Coalition nationally, which remains in an existential meltdown.

It is within that broader context that One Nation is winning support. It is fraudulently posturing as an alternative to the major parties and a champion of ordinary people. As in the South Australian election, One Nation is campaigning on the cost-of-living crisis and the degradation of services, such as healthcare.

The party, however, has no answers to any of those issues whatsoever. Its real program, articulated by federal leader Pauline Hanson, is for even further cuts to social spending, a pro-business offensive against workers' rights and the reduction of wages. It is for that reason that One Nation is being promoted by elements of the ruling elite, including the country's wealthiest individual, mining magnate Gina Rinehart.

One Nation's ability to make this pitch is the responsibility of the political establishment itself. At the federal level, Labor and the Coalition are engaged in a contest with One Nation over which party is best placed to deport hundreds of thousands of immigrants. Labor is already proceeding with a major crackdown, in line with its historical record as a party that has led the assault on refugees and immigrants.

In addition, One Nation is only able to win support by appealing to the social misery imposed by Labor governments in partnership with the corporatised trade union bureaucracy.

The reality that the election could result in either the return of a Labor government pledged to even deeper austerity, a right-wing Liberal government or even the entrance of One Nation directly into the corridors of power underscores the urgent need for a genuine alternative.

Such an alternative is not provided by the Greens, a capitalist party whose populist posturing against the major parties in this election is cover for its continuous collaboration with Labor and its aspirations to form a coalition with that party of big business.

Nor do the misnamed Victorian Socialists (VS) offer a way forward. An electoral front of the pseudo-left Socialist Alternative organisation, VS is running its largest campaign yet in an attempt to capitalise on growing anti-capitalist sentiment.

The program VS advances, however, has nothing to do with socialism. It is parochial in the extreme, suggesting that the issues confronting working people can be resolved within the state of Victoria, regardless of the massive crisis of Australian and world capitalism.

VS advances a grab bag of reforms that it suggests could be implemented by a Victorian government as a means of winning votes. It is the vehicle through which the grasping layers of the middle class, represented by the pseudo-left, are seeking to find their place within the decaying political establishment. VS promotes Labor and the Greens as a lesser evil, thereby preventing workers and young people from breaking with the parties of war

and big business.

Such a break is exactly what is required. The Socialist Equality Party will intervene in the election, not primarily to win votes, but to take forward the building of a revolutionary and socialist movement of the working class against every other party. In opposition to the exclusive focus on "state issues," the SEP will sound the alarm on the global war which is already underway, the fundamental issue facing workers everywhere and a central source of the drive to austerity and authoritarianism.

The mounting social anger is finding not only distorted electoral expression, but is also giving rise to a growth of the class struggle. This year, Victorian teachers engaged in a mass struggle against the Labor government's attempts to impose real wage cuts and entrench intolerable conditions. Doctors and other health workers have struck, as have other sections of workers.

All of these struggles are coming up against the need for a rebellion against the Labor-aligned union bureaucracy. Victorian teachers twice voted down sell-out agreements pushed by the Australian Education Union, but were eventually worn down through the combined efforts of Labor, the bureaucracy and their defenders in the pseudo-left.

The SEP will use the election to take forward the fight to build new organisations of struggle, independent rank-and-file committees controlled by workers themselves, as the basis for sharing information, developing democratic discussion and preparing a genuine industrial and political fight against the war-related corporate offensive on jobs, wages, conditions and services.

Above all, the SEP will tell the truth. There are no simple solutions to complex, historically rooted problems. The election will resolve nothing for the working class. The issue is not primarily who workers vote for on November 28, but their turn to a socialist and internationalist perspective aimed at ending war, authoritarianism and social inequality through the revolutionary transformation of society in Australia and globally.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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