

Australian state elections point to deep discontent

Mike Head
18 March 2014

Elections held last Saturday in the Australian states of Tasmania and South Australia highlighted both the continuing disintegration of electoral support for the Labor Party and the emergence of sharp popular opposition to the federal Liberal-National government.

Following Labor's landslide defeat in last September's national election, its primary vote in the two states fell to 27 percent in Tasmania—an historic low in the island state—and 37 percent in South Australia, underscoring Labor's reduction to a minority party.

Sixteen years of implementing the agenda of the corporate elite in Tasmania, and 12 years in South Australia, by enforcing mass layoffs and deep cuts to public sector jobs and services, have produced widespread disaffection in Labor's former working-class base.

As with all parliamentary elections, the voting provided just a pale and distorted reflection of the underlying political alienation. The acute concerns felt by millions of ordinary working people over growing unemployment, declining living conditions, the mass surveillance of phone and Internet communications and the danger of war find no expression whatsoever within the political establishment.

While the Liberals benefitted from Labor's demise in Tasmania, winning a clear majority in parliament, the antipathy to the federal government's intensification of the austerity offensive demanded by big business prevented them from securing a similar result in South Australia. There the final outcome may not be known for another week, because of knife-edge results in some seats. A "hung" parliament is likely—with neither Labor nor the Liberals able to form government without the support of one or two independents.

In Tasmania, the results were devastating for both

Labor and the Greens, who were in a coalition government for the past four years. Labor's vote plunged almost 10 percentage points from the 2010 state election to 27 percent. The Greens fared even worse, losing a third of their vote, which dropped from 21.7 percent to 13.5 percent.

As a consequence, the Liberals picked up at least 14 of the 25 seats in the state parliament's lower house, entitling them to form a government in their own right. The Greens lost three of their five seats, and Labor may be reduced to six seats.

Labor's rule since 1998, supported by the Greens, has left the working class suffering the highest levels of unemployment in the country—officially 7.4 percent, and up to 20 percent among young workers—and the deepest public spending cuts per capita, involving hundreds of job losses, school closures and public health cutbacks.

Both the Labor leader Lara Giddings and the Greens leader Nick McKimm nevertheless defended their records in office, making clear their parties' intent to keep doing everything they can to satisfy business. "I am proud of Labor, I am proud of our campaign, I am proud of our candidates," Giddings said during her concession speech on Saturday night. "We delivered stability for four years and not only that, we reformed."

McKimm, who as education minister led a drive to shut down schools, provoking public outrage, was even more explicit. On the basis of his record, he pleaded for ruling class support for the Greens to take ministerial posts elsewhere. While it had been a "tough night" for the Greens, his party had achieved much as ministers in the power-sharing government, he boasted. He and fellow Greens MP Cassy O'Connor would "not be the last" Greens ministers in Australia.

An attempt by mining magnate Clive Palmer to

capitalise on the political discontent by financing an advertising blitz for his free market Palmer United Party (PUP) failed dismally. The PUP polled about 5 percent and won no seats, a far cry from its pre-election claims to have 20–25 percent support.

In South Australia, Labor could still cling to office, despite obtaining just 37 percent of the vote, and only 47 percent after the distribution of preferences from other candidates. It may hold onto 23 seats in the 47-seat House of Assembly, and strike a deal with one of two rural-based independents. Counting of more than 300,000 postal and pre-poll votes, however, could see the Liberals form a similar minority government.

In the northern suburbs of the capital Adelaide, unemployment is already as high as 20 percent, even before the impact of the looming closure of the GM Holden car assembly plant by 2017. Labor's vote crashed by as much as 6.8 percentage points in Napier and 3.5 points in Little Para, the two electorates that cover Elizabeth, the location of the GM plant.

Throughout the election campaign, Labor Premier Jay Weatherill sought to blame Prime Minister Tony Abbott for GM's shutdown, because his government reduced the auto industry subsidies offered by the previous federal Labor government. In reality, Labor and the trade unions are enforcing the closure of the entire car industry, insisting that workers must accept it as a *fait accompli*, just as the Labor and union leaders have done with every mass retrenchment in Australia for decades.

Labor's public sector cuts have also involved axing more than 11,000 jobs since the global crash of 2008 in an unsuccessful bid to appease the financial markets and retain the state's AAA credit rating.

In several key "marginal" electorates, however, fear of the Abbott government's brutal plans produced small swings against the Liberals, and reduced Labor's overall loss of votes to about 0.8 percentage points. In the lead-up to the Abbott government's first budget, in May, it is already obvious that it will go beyond its Labor predecessor in slashing social spending, imposing thousands of public sector job cuts and enforcing wholesale corporate job-shedding and restructuring, like that by GM, Ford, Toyota and Qantas.

On election night, Weatherill was as unapologetic as his Tasmanian counterpart. Labor could still retain

government, he claimed, because the state's voters "understood that they had a government that was prepared to stand up and put a positive program in front of them for their future."

The real content of this "positive program"—whether Labor or Liberal end up in office—will be to escalate the attack on the jobs, conditions and basic rights of the working class. Editorials in the *Australian* and the *Australian Financial Review* over the past two days insisted that two state governments, and Abbott's, must now push on with what the *Australian* called "tough, unpopular decisions" in order to "cut taxes, business regulation and the size and reach of the public sector."

This points to the political crisis confronting working people. The ruthless offensive demanded by the financial and corporate elite is proceeding, despite intense public hostility. The anger and disgust must be translated into a conscious struggle for a socialist program, based on the fundamental interests of the working class, rather than the dictates of the wealthy corporate elite.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact