

Australia: NSW voters reject Labor Party's phoney pitch

Mike Head
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Further counting of votes from the March 23 election in New South Wales (NSW), Australia's most populous state, has highlighted the failure of the Labor Party and the Greens to win votes in the working class, despite intense popular hostility to the Liberal-National Coalition at both state and federal levels.

Statewide results for the state's upper house, the Legislative Council, show that the Coalition polled just 33 percent, a 9-point plunge since the last state election in 2015. As a result, while clinging to office with a possible two-seat majority in the lower house, Premier Gladys Berejiklian's government will have no majority in the upper house.

The opposition Labor Party, however, was unable to capitalise on the seething discontent. Its vote dropped 3 points to 27 percent. That is barely above the record low Labor vote of around 25 percent in 2011, when the last state Labor government suffered a landslide defeat after 16 years in office. The Greens, who were openly seeking to join or support a Labor government, polled only 8.5 percent—down 1 percentage point.

Labor failed to pick up seats throughout working class areas, once considered its stronghold. In fact, its vote declined in some Sydney electorates, including a 10-point fall in its state leader Michael Daley's seat of Maroubra.

The result immediately reverberated nationally. The federal Labor Party is campaigning for the imminent federal election on a very similar basis to its NSW branch. It is demagogically accusing the Coalition of being a "bankers' government" and making fraudulent promises to reduce social inequality and pour billions of dollars into chronically-underfunded public schools and hospitals. Yet many voters now treat these empty pledges with contempt.

Federal Labor leader Bill Shorten strongly backed

Daley throughout the NSW election campaign, describing him as "my friend," "the barnstorming opposition leader" and "the next premier of NSW."

At Labor's official state campaign launch, just a week before the election, Shorten was Daley's warm-up speaker, hailing him as a "great bloke." Shorten declared: "If you want a government that will help the people instead of helping themselves then vote for Michael Daley and vote for Labor."

When Daley spoke, he sounded exactly like Shorten, whose constant claim is that Labor will "look after" workers, not the "big end of town." Daley repeated Labor's phoney pitch to "put schools and hospitals before Sydney stadiums." He accused the Coalition of favouring the rich by deciding to demolish and rebuild two Sydney sports stadiums.

The day after the election loss, Daley declared he would remain the state Labor leader, with the backing of Shorten and the party's headquarters. Shorten cynically intervened to force his resignation, however, making him a scapegoat for Labor's debacle. Daley first said he would stand aside, but recontest a leadership ballot. A day later, he announced he would quit altogether.

Shorten knifed Daley by branding as "inappropriate" blatant anti-Asian remarks that Daley had made months earlier, in which he accused "Asians" of taking "our kids'" jobs. This lost Labor votes, especially in Sydney's substantial Chinese and Vietnamese communities.

This is sheer hypocrisy. Labor and its affiliated trade unions have a long record—going back to their "White Australia" founding program—of whipping up anti-foreigner sentiment by blaming immigrants for job losses and social crises.

It is no accident that Mark Latham, Labor's federal

leader from 2003 to 2005, won an upper house NSW seat as a figurehead for the anti-immigrant Pauline Hanson's One Nation. His trajectory underscores the fact that "White Australian" nationalism always has been at the core of Labor's program.

Moreover, while Daley's explicit anti-Asian comments certainly contributed to Labor's loss, the underlying causes of the hostility among workers to Labor lie deeper, in its pro-business and anti-working class record.

Opposition has grown ever since the 1980s, when the Hawke and Keating federal Labor governments, backed to the hilt by the trade unions, spearheaded the imposition of the global corporate agenda of deregulation, privatisation and destruction of full-time jobs and working conditions.

Both Daley and Shorten are right-wing union-backed powerbrokers with parallel records of enforcing Labor's attacks. Until 2011, Daley was a roads, police and finance minister in the last Labor state government, which boosted the police force to deal with social unrest, sold off the state's electricity retail assets and axed jobs. When the Coalition took office, it continued the privatisation of public services and utilities begun by Labor.

Until 2013, Shorten was a key minister in the last federal Labor government, which imposed the burden of the 2008 global financial crisis on the working class, privatised disability services and cut welfare payments for single mothers. Labor and the unions have also been agitating against "foreign workers" taking "Aussie jobs."

While making empty promises to voters, Shorten is quietly reassuring big business that its agenda will be implemented. In a recent interview with the *Australian*, Shorten declared he had strong pro-business policies. He said: "I talk to hundreds of businesses. I can't open the door without business people wanting to come to talk to me... We've got some very good initiatives for business."

Labor's disaster in NSW is part of a wider crisis of the whole parliamentary setup. While the Liberal Party lost only one lower house seat in Sydney, its rural-based National Party coalition partners suffered swings of up to 20 percent, losing three seats to the right-wing populist Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party, which exploited years of devastation of jobs and services in

many rural areas.

If replicated at the federal election, such National Party losses alone would cause the defeat of the minority Coalition government headed by Prime Minister Scott Morrison. More fundamentally, the collapse of National Party support in its former heartlands presents an existential threat to the Coalition, the other mainstay—with Labor—of capitalist rule in Australia since World War II.

After the NSW shock, former National Party leader Barnaby Joyce, who was removed by supporters of then-Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull in February 2018, demanded that the federal government "wake up." Joyce and his backers are part of a wider push by the "hard right" wing of the Coalition to refashion the Coalition into a Trump-style far-right movement to attempt to divert the mounting social unrest in reactionary nationalist and xenophobic directions.

After a decade of political turmoil in which there have been seven changes of prime minister—four through inner-party coups—the coming federal election is also looming as one of crisis for the two major parties and the political establishment as a whole.



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