

A socially-progressive alternative to the onslaught on jobs and democratic rights in Australia

Socialist Equality Party New South Wales Election Statement

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The Socialist Equality Party is standing two candidates in the NSW state election on March 27--Richard Phillips in Bankstown and Terry Cook in Newcastle--to advance the only socially-progressive alternative to the bipartisan onslaught on jobs, living conditions and democratic rights.

This election reveals a great deal about the current state of the political system and its inability to meet the needs of millions of people. By any measure, the campaign is shaping up as the most right-wing in decades, with both the Labor government and the Liberal-National Party coalition abandoning any commitment to social reform.

Premier Bob Carr set the tone in his first election speech by declaring he had made a mistake in issuing promises before taking office four years ago. This time, there would be "no shopping list, no auction wish list, no last-minute gimmicks or stunts, no big promises and no last-minute bribes". In fact, the only major promise that Labor made to win the 1995 election--to halve public hospital waiting lists--was soon broken.

But Carr's remarks have a deeper significance. In the post-war period, Labor and conservative politicians alike issued long lists of election promises, claiming to represent the interests of ordinary people. Today, no such attempt is being made. None of the immense social problems facing the working class--economic insecurity, falling living standards and the run down of public services--will even be addressed.

In this, there is no difference between any of the parliamentary parties. Their unity is an expression of the deep economic, social and political crisis of the global capitalist system, amid the meltdown of the Asian economies, the disaster of the "market" model in Russia and the continuing turmoil gripping financial markets. Throughout Asia and Russia and around the world, the private profit system has plunged millions of people into dire poverty.

Since 1995, health, education, housing and community services have been gutted in New South Wales, while, according to the Auditor-General, the government will outlay at least \$2.3 billion on the Sydney Olympics. Surrounded by corruption scandals, the Olympics have become a symbol of how every aspect of life, including sport, is now dominated by the profit requirements of the financial elite.

New South Wales is a concentrated expression of social and economic processes that are leading to the unprecedented enrichment of a tiny minority at the expense of the broad masses of people. Corporate downsizing, public service cuts and outsourcing are destroying thousands of full-time jobs, both blue- and white-collar, resulting in permanent mass unemployment and the prevalence of low-paid casual, part-time and temporary work.

Unemployment and inequality: Sydney now consists of wealthy enclaves--referred to as "global Sydney"--surrounded by mounting deprivation-in "industrial Sydney". Over the past decade, the average

income in the working class suburbs of Sydney fell by nearly 10 percent in real terms, while those living in the wealthiest suburbs received an average increase of almost 20 percent. Someone living in Fairfield, in Sydney's west, for example, is 13 times more likely to be unemployed than a resident of Kuring-gai on the north shore.

Rural areas, and provincial centres like Cobar, Broken Hill and the Hunter Valley, have been hit by the closure of banks, government services such as post offices, CES offices and Telstra, and other businesses, including abattoirs, clothing factories, timber mills and mines. An estimated 19,500 state government jobs have been lost in regional NSW in a decade. The human cost has been devastating. The suicide rate among young men in the country is twice as high as in the metropolitan areas. A similar pattern exists nationally. Of the poorest 40 areas in Australia, 36 are rural or provincial.

Altogether, the bottom half of society now owns just 5.8 percent of the wealth, whereas the top half owns 94.2 percent. Nearly one-third of the population, including two million children, live below or near the poverty line. Among teenagers, including young workers, the poverty rate has risen to 60 percent.

Public health: In 1995, Carr and his deputy Andrew Refshauge promised to resign if they did not halve the public hospital waiting list of 44,470 within 12 months. In the first year they cynically manipulated the figures, shunting patients off the records. Since then, waiting lists have soared again, hitting a record of 51,000 in April 1998, before being artificially reduced to around 42,000 for the election campaign. Under the guise of shifting hospital beds to areas of need, beds and funds have been continuously cut in working class and rural areas, placing lives at risk. Many critically-ill patients--27 percent of emergency cases and 32 percent of urgent cases--are not treated within medically-required time limits.

Schools: Large classes, schools relying on fees and fund-raising for essential resources, a growing gap between rich and poor schools, and harassed teachers--this is the reality after four years of Labor government. NSW has the worst teacher-student ratio in the country and spends less per student than any other state, except Victoria, which has about the same ratio as NSW after six years of relentless cuts and closures by the Kennett Liberal government.

Public housing: Private rents in Sydney and NSW, already the highest in the country, are continually rising. Yet public housing funds have been slashed. More than 92,000 families are on government waiting lists--up 5,000 since 1995. This is almost half the national total of 217,000. Over 40 percent have been waiting more than three years.

Welfare services: A chronic lack of decent facilities exists for the homeless, mentally-ill, sick, disabled and aged. Suicides among young people in NSW have soared by 27 percent over the past year, yet spending

on community mental health services is just \$22 per head per year. Despite rising nursing home fees and the decrepit state of these institutions, elderly and disabled people who want to live at home receive an annual average of just \$291 per person aged over 70 for services such as home nursing, meal delivery, home maintenance, community transport and podiatry.

Environmental health and safety: Intensive damage by floods in Wollongong and outback towns, the Thredbo landslide tragedy, rural land degradation and the contamination of Sydney's water supply are all testimony to the subordination of rational planning to the dictates of private profit.

Electricity: Both the major parties agree on privatising the state's electricity system, but Carr and Treasurer Michael Egan were forced by popular opposition in 1997 to temporarily abandon their plans. The Liberals are attempting to prevail by offering an unprecedented electoral bribe of \$1,000 to every electricity customer if they win the election.

Over the past decade, both state and federal governments have handed over increasing portions of the social infrastructure--from the Commonwealth Bank to electricity, gas and water supplies--to corporate interests, with disastrous consequences, including power blackouts in Queensland and a gas supply breakdown in Victoria.

The real issue is not just the sale of public assets. Privatised or not, basic services are being gutted, job security is being eliminated and public health, safety and the environment are being endangered to satisfy the requirements of the financial markets.

Incapable of resolving the mounting social crisis in any way, the entire focus of official politics has shifted to "law and order". Carr's government has outstripped every other state in strengthening the hand of the police. They now have the power to detain anyone for questioning; stop and search people and vehicles; set up general roadblocks; move on people likely to cause "fear"; and impose curfews on youth.

Labor has increased spending on the police by 30 percent to \$1.3 billion annually and boosted operational police numbers by 3,000 to near 15,000. Working class youth have been specifically targeted, with Carr demanding a crackdown on "youth gangs". The number of juvenile arrests doubled last year. Under both Labor and Liberal, the number of inmates in the state's jails has risen by 75 percent over the past decade. Last year the prisons became so overcrowded that the government reopened the previously condemned Parramatta jail.

In the run-up to the elections, the Labor leaders have proposed major inroads into basic democratic rights, including naming juvenile offenders and abolishing the 200-year-old right of those charged by the police to remain silent until their cases are heard. Opposition leader Kerry Chikarovski and the Liberals have countered by pledging increased police numbers, more draconian prison terms and the scrapping of unanimous verdicts in murder cases.

The first purpose of this "law and order" auction is to distract attention from the underlying causes of the social crisis. Poverty, unemployment, family breakdown, youth suicide, drug abuse--these are symptoms of a failed and decaying system. Bereft of any solutions, the capitalist politicians blame the victims, above all the youth.

Secondly, facing mounting hostility and resentment, and having alienated their previous electoral support base, the old parties are seeking to develop a new constituency for deepening the social assault required by the financial markets. By whipping up fears of crime and violence they are attempting to condition public opinion to accept more repressive and punitive responses. Their orientation is to the most reactionary and confused layers, competing for support in the same milieu as One Nation, which demands a return to the death penalty, and the Reverend Fred Nile's Christian Democrat Party, which agitates for a "war" on crime.

Thirdly, because the entire thrust of government policy is in conflict with the concerns and aspirations of the vast majority of people, it cannot

be imposed without threats and intimidation, and ever more authoritarian measures.

Demands by the banks and major companies for lower business taxes, the slashing of social spending and the removal of all impediments to profit, including welfare benefits, minimum wage levels and health and safety standards, are becoming increasingly strident.

The Howard federal government has already foreshadowed outright cuts to wages, working conditions and unemployment benefits. Under the proposals recently unveiled by Workplace Relations Minister Peter Reith, all the unemployed will be forced to work for the dole after six months and employers will be able to hire new workers on lower wages and worse conditions.

Reith and others refer to the "US model". There the official unemployment rate has been driven down to below 5 percent--through wage cuts and the scrapping of welfare benefits. Since 1977, the real wages of American workers have fallen by some 13 percent, transferring about \$700 billion a year into the pockets of the wealthy. Over the same period, the number of prison inmates has tripled to about 1.8 million, a number that is expected to reach two million this year. The US has the highest incarceration rate in the world, and 3,300 inmates sit on death row awaiting execution. This is the real face of the "US model"--the use of the state apparatus to police poverty and mounting social problems.

The collapse of support for the official political establishment has seen a virtual explosion of new parties. In 1991, eleven parties contested the NSW elections; by 1995, the number had grown to 27. This year, 92 parties have so far applied for registration. Their names, such as "A Fair Go For Families", "Jobs for Everyone - Futures for All", "Make Billionaires Pay More Tax!", "No Privatisation Peoples Party", "Stop The Banks Ripping Us Off", "Tenants Have Rights Party", "Young Australians Caring For Our Future" and "Sack Them All", point to the multitude of issues and concerns giving rise to mounting anger.

Every conceivable aspect of social life has become a cause for seething resentment. But none of these single-issue protest outfits can offer any solution to the fundamental problem: a deep-going crisis of the profit system itself.

The Socialist Equality Party, on the contrary, fights for the complete reorganisation of society on the basis of three fundamental principles:

1. For the international unity of the working class

Australian workers can only defend their independent class interests in a unified struggle, as part of the international working class, against globally organised capital. The SEP implacably opposes all forms of racism, nationalism and chauvinism, which serve to split and divide the working masses. Pauline Hanson's One Nation is part of a political continuum that includes the Democrats, the Greens and the various radical protest groups. All of them defend the nation state, calling for a return to national economic regulation, tariff protection and investment controls, policies that tie workers to the national employers and pit them against their fellow workers worldwide.

The causes of the economic and social crisis lie in the private profit system, not globalisation or the technological revolution associated with it. Globalisation has created the preconditions for a rationally planned and harmonious world economy. Left in private hands, however, the world's resources are used only to enlarge the immense wealth of a few at the expense of humanity as a whole.

The SEP opposes all forms of immigration restriction. Workers and their families, whatever their national or ethnic origin, must have the basic democratic right to live wherever they choose, with full citizenship and voting rights, entitlements to work and guaranteed access to all public services and welfare benefits.

2. For social equality

The SEP bases itself on the socialist principle that everyone must have the resources needed for a productive, secure and enjoyable life. The vast

technological, scientific and medical advances made in recent years can and must be harnessed to lift living standards and meet the needs of all. But this requires a direct challenge to the profit system, which is no longer capable of meeting even the most elementary needs of society.

Genuine social equality is impossible unless society is completely reorganised so that the central levers of the economy--the financial institutions and basic industries--are placed under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class.

3. For a workers government

All the other political parties maintain that the working class can pressure or jolt the powers that be to change course, within the framework of parliament. The SEP insists that parliament is simply a figleaf behind which the financial markets and corporate boardrooms make the real decisions.

A new type of movement must be built to unite all sections of the working class--employed and unemployed; blue collar and white collar; immigrant, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal; youth, housewives and pensioners--in a conscious struggle for a socialist perspective. Such a politically-informed and militant movement will lay the foundations for a genuinely democratic workers government. Only a government of the workers, by the workers and for the workers will take the economic and political measures necessary to eliminate poverty and unemployment.

To this end, the SEP advocates the following policies:

** Secure and well-paid jobs for all*

- End the scourge of mass unemployment
- Reduce the working week to 30 hours with no loss of pay
- Establish a program of public works to create decent jobs and provide urgently needed housing, public health, education, child care and public transport

• Abolish work-for-the-dole and all cheap labour programs

** Raise living standards and eradicate poverty*

- Increase all pensions and benefits to a living wage
- Raise minimum wage levels to \$20 an hour
- Tax all personal incomes over \$150,000 at 100 percent, while those under \$20,000 should be tax-free

** For first class health care, education, housing and child care*

• Billions of dollars must be poured into providing free, first-class public hospitals, schools, universities and child care facilities

- Expand and upgrade public housing
- Limit rents and housing payments to 20 percent of income

** Guarantee a future for the youth*

• Make high quality educational and training programs freely available to all young people

- Prohibit night work and rotating shifts for young workers
- Provide first class sports and recreational facilities in every area

** Proper care for the elderly*

• All elderly people must have access to free transport, health facilities, decent accommodation and recreation

• Abolish nursing home fees and provide generous subsidies to families caring for ageing parents

** Defend democratic rights*

• Abolish youth curfews, street searches and other police state provisions

- Repeal all laws against strikes, pickets and solidarity action
- Outlaw discrimination based on nationality, colour, religion, sex or sexual preference

• End all immigration restrictions

** For rational planning and a safe environment*

• Utilise modern technology to comprehensively monitor public health and combat pollution

• Introduce proper planning measures to protect residents and, where necessary, relocate industry with no loss of jobs

Big business and its political representatives will label these proposals as "unrealistic" and claim "there is no money". Yet it is totally unrealistic to expect the majority of ordinary people to live without these essential requirements. Ample resources exist to provide them, but they must be taken out of private hands. To the destructive political economy of the "free market"-- the amassing of immense wealth in the hands of a few--must be counterposed the social economy of the working class--providing for the needs and aspirations of all.

The Socialist Equality Party, the Australian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement, is the only party that fights uncompromisingly for the interests of the working class. We urge all workers, unemployed, professional people and youth to support our election campaign and, above all, to join and build the SEP.

See the Election Website of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
<http://www.sep.flex.com.au>



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact