

Australia: SEP holds election campaign public meetings

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The Socialist Equality Party (Australia) held two public meetings in Melbourne and Sydney this week, the first in the electorates where the SEP is fielding candidates in the October 9 federal election. Both meetings focused on the historical and political significance of the Iraq war, and explained the necessity for the working class to adopt a socialist and internationalist perspective to fight for its independent class interests.

Both meetings were addressed by Nick Beams, national secretary of the SEP and candidate for the Senate in New South Wales. James Cogan, SEP candidate for the seat of Kingsford Smith also spoke in Sydney, while Peter Byrne, the party's candidate for Batman, addressed the Melbourne meeting.

Nick Beams began his report by noting that whereas in the 1990s "globalisation" formed the main focus of debate in the social sciences, this decade has seen discussion centre on "empire" and imperialism. The two phenomena, the speaker explained, were, in fact, fundamentally and causally intertwined. The contradiction between the universal and global character of capital and the nation-state system had seen the explosion of US militarism, and the intensification of inter-imperialist rivalries.

The only force capable of resolving these contradictions in a progressive manner, the speaker continued, was the international working class. The fight for a socialist alternative could not be separated from the struggle for the political independence of the working class, which required a break from all the establishment parties, including the Greens and the various radical groups, which based themselves on protest politics.

The speaker highlighted the significance of Greens' leader Bob Brown's recent comments boasting of his party's record in Tasmania, where the party helped the Labor government impose a series of budget cuts between 1989 and 1992, in the face of mass opposition. Beams warned that the next recession in Australia was likely to have a major impact, given the debt fuelled nature of the recent period of economic growth. "Such conditions would bring political instability, possibly requiring the formation of an accord with the Greens and a coalition government to impose the harsh measures demanded by the banks and money markets."

The opportunist groupings that made up the Socialist Alliance appealed for support on the basis that a strong "left vote" would force a future Labor government to institute a program of social reforms. Beams explained that the Labor Party's evolution was not the result of a lack of pressure from workers. The critical question was the absence of a political perspective to orient and organise the struggles of ordinary people against the reactionary program of any new Labor government.

In Sydney, James Cogan emphasised that the central political question facing the working class in the election was the Iraq war, notwithstanding the attempt by all of the established parties and the media to make it a non-issue. The speaker rejected Labor leader Mark Latham's characterisation of the war as a "mistake", insisting that it represented a historic war crime. Cogan explained that the SEP demanded the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all foreign troops, and the payment of massive reparations to the Iraqi people.

He also assessed the evolution and role of the high-profile Labor Party candidate in Kingsford Smith, Peter Garrett. Garrett was formerly the lead singer with rock group Midnight Oil, and used to be a prominent campaigner against nuclear armaments and US military bases in Australia.

Workers and young people, Cogan said, should draw some definite lessons from Garrett's evolution. "He is a classic case that you cannot judge people or parties by the radical-sounding phrases they make, but only by a concrete examination of their program and history," he explained.

In the 1980s, Garrett and the Nuclear Disarmament Party, for which he ran as a Senate candidate, worked to channel the mass hostility and anger among young people towards the official establishment into the dead-end of protest and parliamentary politics. Now, Cogan continued, "Garrett has been recruited by the ALP in a somewhat pathetic attempt to use the lingering memories of his one-time radical sloganeering to shore up its vote among Australian workers and youth who are looking for an alternative to the major parties".

The SEP's candidate also described how the social conditions in Kingsford Smith were indicative of what faced the working class throughout Australia. While campaigning in the area, SEP teams had met with a Kelloggs contract worker, who had no security of work from one week to the next and who was forced

to travel throughout Sydney for available employment. A former Ansett worker, retrenched three years ago, had been unable to find another job, and had still not been paid his entitlements.

SEP campaigners had also spoken with public housing tenants living in substandard conditions. The Kingsford Smith electorate includes the suburb of Matraville, where, earlier this year, an Aboriginal woman and her three young children were killed in a fire after faulty door locks trapped them inside the house.

Cogan reported that many students at the University of New South Wales, which is located in the electorate, were forced to work more than 30 hours a week to fund their full-time courses. The conditions in the area, the speaker concluded, underscored the necessity of developing an independent political movement of the working class against the profit system.

SEP candidate Peter Byrne described some of the consequences of the social crisis within the Melbourne electorate of Batman, which has an official unemployment rate of 8.7 percent. The speaker discussed the announced closure of a Kodak manufacturing plant in Coburg, which will result in the sacking of 600 workers. The company claimed that the rapid rise of digital photography had made the plant unviable.

Byrne explained that the cause of the job losses was not technological change, but rather the social system in which this change occurred. "Workers under capitalism face never ending uncertainty and anxiety over their employment, with every technological advance that is made," he said. "What should be a progressive development for society becomes, under the capitalist system, a devastating blow to the lives of hundreds of workers and their families as they are thrown into unemployment."

The SEP candidate assessed the response of the unions to the sackings. The bureaucracy first complained that it had not been consulted, and then promised to fight "to enhance the severance package for our members". The SEP fought for an international socialist strategy, Byrne said, in opposition to every futile nationalist conception, including that of trade unionism.

Following the two reports, audience members at both meetings asked a number of questions, covering important areas from the likelihood and significance of a US or Israeli attack on Iran, to the shifts in both Latham and John Kerry's criticisms of the Iraq war, Peter Garrett's nomination for Kingsford Smith, and the campaign of Ralph Nader in the US.

A number of questions focused on the role of the Greens, who are expected to significantly increase the size of their vote this election, largely due to their perceived antiwar position. Nick Beams responded by emphasising that the Greens were an establishment party, committed to maintaining the social and political system that gave rise to imperialist war. The recent slander campaign against the Greens by the government and the Murdoch press was motivated, not by the ruling elite's fear of the Greens' program, he explained, but rather by its fear of the

potentially explosive consequences of the breakdown of the two-party system.

At the conclusion of both meetings audience members donated generously to the SEP's Election Fund, and several people responded to an appeal to support the campaign by helping distribute the party's material.

World Socialist Web Site reporters interviewed a number of people after the meetings. Hossein Iran, an immigrant worker employed casually as a painter, said: "The people in the Middle East feel they are held in contempt by the imperialists, who are stealing their resources. They want to do something to stand up and fight and get revenge by any means.

"I heard in the meeting that the Greens do not have an alternative policy for humanity and society. They limit their aims within the system. They are not antiwar. The significance of the SEP campaign is that workers have an alternative. They don't have to choose between bad and worse. Official political discussion is closed to any other ideas. It is a jailing of the mind. The SEP meeting shows a better choice."

Lee Kuss, a production worker in a confectionery factory, said: "My opinion is that Latham and Howard are both as bad as each other. Since there isn't any choice between them, it makes you feel as though you are not listened to, as though your vote isn't worth anything.

"For the past seven years, since I came to Melbourne, I have had different jobs, mainly as a labourer or as a fork lift driver. I have had this job now for four months and I am a casual. I started out getting five days a week, but now it has suddenly dropped off to only two or three days a week. I haven't worked since last Thursday. Luckily when the job started, I saved a few thousand dollars, but now I have to partly live off the money I have saved. It's no good—like that it will soon run out.

"Coming to the meeting, I can begin to see the connections between the war in Iraq and social inequality here. The Iraq war shouldn't have happened. Now that I have been to the meeting, I will have a read of the SEP program and I will help in the SEP election campaign."



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