

# The socialist alternative in the 2004 Australian election

## Support the Socialist Equality Party campaign

**Socialist Equality Party**  
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The Socialist Equality Party (Australia) calls upon all our supporters, and readers of the *World Socialist Web Site*, to join our campaign for the October 9, 2004 federal election. The SEP is standing candidates to provide an independent political voice for the working class, and a socialist perspective and program to fight against war, social reaction and the onslaught on democratic rights.

The SEP is fielding a team of five candidates led by national secretary and *World Socialist Web Site* International Editorial Board member Nick Beams, who has been a leading figure in the Australian and international socialist movement for more than three decades. Beams will stand with Terry Cook for the Senate in New South Wales. In the House of Representatives the SEP's candidates will be Mike Head in the western Sydney seat of Werriwa, and James Cogan in the south-eastern seat of Kingsford-Smith. Peter Byrne will be the SEP candidate in Batman, in Melbourne's northern suburbs.

As in Spain, South Korea, Canada and the US presidential elections in November, the central question in the 2004 Australian election is the war on Iraq and its implications. Using the tragedy of the September 11 terrorist attacks as the pretext, the US is deploying its military might to secure global domination in the name of a "war on terrorism." While the entire political establishment is trying to bury the issue, the criminal invasion and occupation of Iraq signals the opening of a new period of unrestrained colonialism and great power rivalry. The US, abetted by Britain and Australia, has subjugated an independent country and its people in order to secure control of its huge oil reserves and strengthen American strategic dominance in the Middle East and Central Asia.

Tens of millions of people have demonstrated their opposition to the war in unprecedented global protests. Their anger and revulsion have only grown as Washington and its allies try and stamp out the resistance of the Iraqi people to the occupation and looting of their country. But both the Liberal and Labor parties, in tandem with the media, are determined to ensure that this opposition will be kept out of the election campaign.

No one should be under the illusion that the Labor Party offers any alternative to the Howard government. Like the Liberal-National coalition, Labor wholeheartedly backed the Bush administration's "war on terrorism", supported the UN weapons sanctions regime and endorsed all of the lies used to justify the invasion of Iraq. The party's only objection to the US-led war was that it should have been conducted under a UN flag.

In a bid to tap into the mass constituency opposed to the war, Labor leader Mark Latham made a heavily qualified pledge, after the shock election defeat of the right-wing Spanish government in March, to withdraw Australian troops from Iraq by Christmas. But he expressed no opposition to the continued occupation of the country by 140,000 US troops, or the criminal methods—including torture—being used to intimidate

and terrorise the Iraqi people. From the outset, Labor has fully accommodated itself to Washington's neo-colonial agenda.

Latham's argument for pulling the troops out, like that of the Greens, is based on purely tactical considerations. Its essential purpose is to prosecute the "war on terrorism" closer to home—i.e., to advance Australia's own substantial neo-colonial designs within the Asia-Pacific region. Both the Greens and Labor have totally fallen in behind the Howard government's military adventures in the region, including its interventions into East Timor and the Solomons. Contrary to Howard's rhetoric, these were no more "humanitarian" in their aims than the US conquest of Iraq.

The Labor leader's response to Washington's extraordinary intervention into Australia's domestic political debate should lay to rest any lingering hope that the party might challenge Bush's policies. After US President Bush, Vice-President Cheney, Secretary of State Powell, Deputy Secretary of State Armitage and US Ambassador Schieffer publicly declared that an Australian withdrawal from the "coalition of the willing" would be "disastrous," "unimaginable" and a threat to the US-Australian alliance, Latham fell into line. The moribund political career of former Labor leader Kim Beazley, one of Washington's most vocal advocates, was rapidly revived and the right-wing militarist—nicknamed "Bomber Beazley"—was installed as shadow Defence Minister. At the same time Latham went out of his way to commit Labor to the continued occupation of Iraq and affirm support in advance for any future preemptive wars by the US.

Throughout the pliant Australian media, Latham's grovelling has been characterised as a "masterstroke." The reason? As far as the media barons are concerned, it has effectively removed the Iraq war from the election agenda.

In domestic, as well as foreign policy, there is bipartisan agreement between the major parties. The Labor Party has wholly backed Canberra's unprecedented assault on democratic rights, while Latham's social agenda is even more regressive than Howard's. His appeals to "individual responsibility" constitute the basis for abandoning any government role in assisting the poorest and most vulnerable sections of society. Both leaders are equally committed to implementing the demands of the financial markets and to maintaining budget surpluses at the expense of essential social services.

With Labor in power in every state of Australia, the party's policies are already on public display. State Labor governments have been directly responsible for privatising public enterprises, slashing tens of thousands of public sector jobs, gutting schools and hospitals, and running down essential services, including transport, power and water. Each state has been engaged in a destructive competition with its rivals to attract investment by cutting social spending to fund financial incentives for

business. Far from challenging Howard, Labor premiers have collaborated intimately with the federal government in implementing its economic restructuring agenda.

The lack of any alternative within the confines of official politics underscores the significance of the Socialist Equality Party's campaign. In opposition to the entire official establishment, which seeks to stifle discussion and reduce the election campaign to the exchange of empty "sound bites", we want to encourage the widest possible debate on all the vital issues confronting ordinary people. Our campaign is, above all, about ideas, not votes. Unlike the major parties, we do not conceal our aims and objectives. We base ourselves on a socialist strategy, urge a fundamental political break from the two-party system and argue for the complete refashioning of society to meet the social needs of the majority, rather than the profits of a privileged few.

At the heart of our program is the unification of working people around the world on the basis of a common socialist strategy. Internationalism is not simply a utopian ideal, but an urgent practical necessity. Many people already sense the futility of trying to combat the rise of militarism, or the predatory activities of global corporations, on the basis of national tactics. Last year's unprecedented protests against the Iraq war revealed not only this elemental striving for international unity, but also the worthlessness of relying on other governments, such as America's rivals in Europe, or institutions like the UN. A global counteroffensive of the working class requires new organisations and, above all, a thoroughly worked out political perspective that stops at nothing short of abolishing the root causes of social inequality and war—the capitalist profit system itself.

We regard the fight for internationalism as our most important task. The SEP's Australian election campaign, along with those of its sister parties in Asia, North America and Europe, is seeking to lay the programmatic basis for the building of a worldwide movement against imperialism—one that completely rejects nationalism, chauvinism and all forms of identity politics, whether religious, ethnic, racial or sexual in character—and that fights for the revolutionary transformation of society. The essential precondition for such a struggle is the political independence of the working class from the entire framework of bourgeois parliamentary politics. We emphatically reject the notion that Labor or the Greens represent "a lesser evil" to the Howard government. Their election would not, in any way, advance the interests of working people in Australia or any other part of the world. That is why we will make no "preference deals" with them.

To all those who recognise the need for such an alternative, we say: contact the Socialist Equality Party, participate in our campaign and fight for the SEP's policies by distributing our election material in your area.

## **US militarism and the Iraq war**

The US war on Iraq marks an historical turning point. Not since the 1920s and 1930s has the world witnessed such a naked bid to seize an entire country and its natural resources. The Bush administration's doctrine of "preemptive war" and its ruthless use of overwhelming military force bear a striking resemblance to the propaganda and methods of the Nazi regime, which sought to overcome the historic weaknesses of German imperialism by embarking on a strategy of world conquest.

Bush and the media have attempted to portray the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq as a response to the terror attacks of September 11, 2001. But proposals for the seizure of Iraq—and the broader agenda for American domination of the oil-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia—had been on the drawing board for a decade. Ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the extreme right-wing faction now

in charge in the White House had been demanding that Washington use its military superiority to establish the global hegemony of the US before its rivals could catch up. The Bush administration cynically exploited the tragic events of September 11 to put these long-held plans into action.

The invasion of Iraq was based on lies. No weapons of mass destruction have been found, nor any link demonstrated between Al Qaeda and the secular Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein. US troops were not welcomed into Iraq with flowers and cheering crowds. What has been set up in Baghdad is not "democracy" but a hand-picked puppet regime that is completely dependent on the US military and police state methods to suppress a growing revolt by the Iraqi people against the occupation of their country.

Washington's gangsterism is not simply the product of the individual Bush or the right-wing cabal in the White House. Rather, it stems from the irresolvable economic and social contradictions of American capitalism. In the final analysis, the violent eruption of US imperialism is an attempt to overcome the fundamental contradiction between a globally-integrated world economy and the division of the world into nation states by establishing the dominance of one country—the United States—over all others.

Bush's ultimatum to the world—"either you are with us or against us"—sums up his administration's unilateral pursuit of American interests with reckless indifference to the consequences. It has compelled all governments to reassess their strategies and alliances. While Washington tramples on the vital strategic and economic interests of its European and Asian rivals, the seeds are being sown for another catastrophic inter-imperialist conflict.

If Bush is defeated in November, there will be no fundamental change in the trajectory of US foreign policy. A Democratic Party administration led by John Kerry will not withdraw US troops from Iraq. Kerry voted for the Iraq war and has repeatedly declared an American defeat in that country to be "unthinkable". Whatever his criticisms of Bush, Kerry's differences are of a tactical character. His installation as Democratic Party nominee was the result of a highly professional campaign of destabilisation waged against the previous Democratic frontrunner, Howard Dean, who was regarded by the ruling elite as too closely associated with growing antiwar sentiment.

Whether a US election will even take place is uncertain. The corollary to US militarism abroad has been unparalleled attacks on democratic rights within the United States itself. The "war on terrorism" has been used to enact what can only be described as police state measures, including the use of torture and arbitrary detention. These developments are rooted in the extreme tensions produced by the deepening social divide between rich and poor in the US, which can no longer be contained within the framework of bourgeois democracy.

The Socialist Equality Party condemns the US occupation of Iraq and the Howard government's role in the entire criminal enterprise. We demand the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Australian, US and all foreign troops. We call for the release of all prisoners taken in the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, including those now incarcerated at Guantanamo Bay, on Diego Garcia, and at other US prisons and detention camps around the world.

We call for all those responsible for the unprovoked aggression against Afghanistan and Iraq, including Bush, Blair and Howard, to be placed on trial for war crimes. We call for the allied powers to pay reparations to the people of Iraq for the damage and suffering inflicted by the war, as well as for proper compensation to the families of the killed and wounded coalition soldiers. We demand the dismantling of the military machines of the major powers, the elimination of their nuclear stockpiles and other weapons of mass destruction, and the closure of all US and other foreign military bases around the world. The vast global military apparatus and its technological prowess must be converted into socially-useful production.

## Australia and the Pacific

A key factor in the Howard government's support for the Bush administration's "war on terrorism" has been the sharpening inter-imperialist rivalries within the Asia Pacific region. Ever since the mid-nineteenth century—even before the founding of the Australian nation-state in 1901—the Australian ruling class has tried to overcome its organic weakness by extending military, strategic and diplomatic assistance to the dominant world power in order to secure patronage for its ambitions in the Pacific.

Prior to World War II, Australia looked to Britain and the British Empire. Australia's colonial settlers dispatched troops to assist in putting down Maori uprisings in New Zealand in the 1860s; to aid the British expeditionary force in the Sudan in 1885; to fight alongside British troops in the Boer War in South Africa between 1899 and 1902 and to help crush the Boxer Rebellion in China in 1900. The quid pro quo was British backing for the colonisation of the Pacific, including the annexation of Papua in 1884, and, after World War I, the transfer of German New Guinea to Australian control.

In the midst of World War II, following the fall of Singapore to Japan in 1942, when Britain failed to mount any significant defence, the Australian ruling class made a shift to the US. It now looked to the US alliance for protection and the defence of its geo-political interests. In return, Canberra dispatched Australian troops to fight with the American military in Korea in the 1950s and Vietnam in the 1960s. But in the past two decades, the ruling class has been caught on the horns of a dilemma: while remaining reliant on Washington insofar as military and strategic matters are concerned, its trade and economic interests have been increasingly tied to Asia.

Canberra's delicate balancing act has become more and more precarious with the intensification of major power tensions following the end of the Cold War. On the one hand, the Australian ruling elite is well aware that it needs US backing to ward off challenges to its regional position from even relatively minor nations. On the other, there are deep concerns that Australian and US interests may not always coincide. Nowhere is this more sharply posed than on the vexed question of China. During the past decade, China has been transformed into the "workshop of the world," on the back of a huge influx of foreign capital. The Australian economy has been one of the main beneficiaries, profiting from China's growing demand for raw materials. The extreme right in the US, however, regards China as a dangerous potential rival. Any escalation of tensions between the US and China—over Taiwan, North Korea or any other issue—would place Canberra in the invidious position of having to choose between the two.

Since taking office in 1996, Howard has insisted upon the primacy of Australia's alliance with the US in all foreign policy matters. Following the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis—provoked, in no small measure by US banks and corporations—Howard exploited the resultant political instability in Indonesia to aggressively intervene into the region. As the crisis in East Timor intensified, Howard campaigned for US backing to dispatch the largest troop deployment since Vietnam, in order to guarantee Australia's control over the Timor Sea oil and gas reserves, against its major rivals—particularly Portugal. The government fraudulently justified its military intervention as a "humanitarian" response to the suffering of the East Timorese people—just as the US and NATO had justified their bombing of Yugoslavia as a service to the Kosovar people just months earlier.

Following the "success" of this neo-colonial exercise, Howard

triumphantly enunciated a new "doctrine" whereby Australia would act as "deputy sheriff" to the US in the Asia Pacific region. Although forced to issue a public retraction in the wake of angry denunciations across Asia, Howard remains committed to the "doctrine" as the basis of his government's foreign policy.

Immediately after the Iraq invasion, Canberra stepped up its activities in the Pacific. Declaring the Solomon Islands a potential haven for criminals and terrorists, the Howard government organised its second military intervention into the region. Significantly, Australia and New Zealand rejected an offer of "assistance" from rival France, as they bullied their small Pacific neighbours into joining a regional "coalition of the willing", dispatching 2,000 police, troops and officials to take over the running of the tiny island state. As with East Timor, the motive had nothing to do with concern for the islands' impoverished population. Over the past year, Australian funds have poured into jails, police and the courts, not schools and hospitals. The major beneficiaries have been Australian corporations such as GRM International, which took over the running of the prison system. It is owned by Kerry Packer, Australia's richest individual.

East Timor and the Solomons are part of broader plans. Canberra now has its sights set on Papua New Guinea and other Pacific Island states, such as Nauru—using the threat of aid cutbacks to blackmail regional governments into subordinating themselves to Australia's economic, administrative and military domination.

There is not, however, unanimous backing for Howard's foreign policy within Australian ruling circles. Significant layers have become deeply concerned at the implications of Washington's reckless unilateralism for Australian corporate interests, especially in the Asia Pacific region. Leading figures within the Liberal Party itself, such as former party president John Valder and former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser, have openly opposed Howard, insisting on a more independent approach to foreign policy. As the quagmire in Iraq becomes ever more disastrous, these tensions, which cross party lines and extend throughout the entire state apparatus—the military, the public service and the judiciary—are intensifying.

But none of the factions opposed to Howard is concerned with the defence of the oppressed masses of the region. The Australian working class must shoulder that responsibility. That is why the Socialist Equality Party unequivocally opposes Canberra's neo-colonial interventions and demands the immediate withdrawal of all Australian and foreign troops and police from East Timor, the Solomon Islands and elsewhere in the region.

We propose, instead, a socialist foreign policy, based on international working class solidarity. The resources and technology of the advanced industrialised countries should be employed, not to oppress and exploit the people of the "Third World" but to raise living standards for all working people to a decent level and create, for the first time in world history, conditions of genuine social equality.

## A looming economic crisis

The divisions within Australian ruling circles are also being fuelled by the increasingly precarious position of the Australian economy. For the past eight years, the Howard government has touted its credentials as an "economy manager", boasting that the country was able to weather the Asian financial crisis and endlessly repeating the same mantra—"all the fundamentals are sound". But as the more perceptive economic commentators have noted, the rosy economic statistics and apparent buoyancy of the Australian economy rest on a house of cards.

After two decades of economic restructuring, Australia has become

evermore closely integrated into the world economy. Trade as a percentage of GDP has nearly doubled since the early 1980s, from around 27 percent to 44 percent. Over the same period, foreign direct investment in Australia as a proportion of GDP shot up from 17 percent to 30 percent. Investment has also flowed out of Australia, overwhelmingly to the US, to take advantage of the booming share and property markets.

The dismantling of national economic regulation in Australia was a by-product of deep-going processes within world economy. The economic and political upheavals of the 1970s and declining profit rates saw corporations in the major capitalist centres beginning to shift production offshore, looking to benefit from cheaper sources of raw materials and labour. Far from strengthening Australian capitalism, the global integration of production has left it highly vulnerable to the instabilities of world economy. For all the changes of the last two decades, Australia remains heavily dependent on the export of raw materials, especially to North East Asia. Any downturn in China, or more significantly in the US—the major destination of Asian exports—would rapidly rebound on the Australian economy.

The exposed character of the Australian economy is further underscored by the mountain of debt on which it rests. Over the past two decades, gross foreign debt has soared from a mere \$19 billion or 13 percent of GDP to \$517 billion or 74 percent. Gross foreign liabilities (gross debt plus foreign-owned assets) now total more than a trillion dollars. The only way these massive debts can be serviced is by continually ratcheting up the rate of exploitation of the working class.

Australia's growth rates are not the product of the ingenuity of Howard and his ministers. Rather, as in the US and Britain, low interest rates have fuelled a real estate and consumer spending bubble that has maintained the superficial appearance of economic prosperity. During the past five years, banks and other finance institutions have lent a net \$82 billion to businesses and \$345 billion to households. From 1998 to 2003, household debt as a proportion of GDP rose by a massive 39 percent—double the rate in Britain and the US, the two other components of the so-called “Anglo-Saxon debt miracle”.

But alarm bells are already ringing. The London-based *Economist* magazine warned in May: “Having narrowed in the last 1990s, Australia's current account deficit has swollen again to 6 percent of GDP, even bigger than America's. As consumer spending has outpaced incomes, household saving has plunged. Australia now has a negative saving rate. Households have been on an extraordinary borrowing binge, with debt rising more than twice as fast as in the United States over the past decade ... The clock is striking midnight on Australia's boom: a downturn may not be far off.”

Likewise, the *Melbourne Age* noted apprehensively in June: “We are borrowing overseas not to invest so much as to drive up housing prices and consumer spending... One day, debts have to be repaid. It is ludicrous, and reckless, to borrow money assuming you will never have to pay it back. It is equally ludicrous, and reckless, to think that Australia can go on living on borrowed money, year after year. At some point the flow will stop, and our living standards will drop to what we can afford.”

Economic commentators blithely speak of “we” and “our living standards” as if everyone is equally responsible for the deepening crisis and will equally shoulder the pain. In reality, ordinary people have no say over the economic processes and policies that determine the quality and course of their lives. But the burden of any downturn will inevitably be placed onto their backs. The hardest hit will be the weakest and most vulnerable members of society, who have already borne the brunt of two decades of savage economic restructuring.

## Howard and the “race card”

Concern in corporate boardrooms over Australia's uncertain economic future has exacerbated a growing sense of frustration within the ruling elite that its “market reform agenda” has stalled. Howard is regarded as something of a failure in relation to implementing the measures required to keep the country “internationally competitive”. The financial press regularly cites the need to gut welfare benefits, fully privatise Telstra, deregulate the media, hire and fire workers at will and extend “user pays” in health and education.

But the Liberal-National coalition has confronted the same fundamental problem as its counterparts around the world: how to get voters to support a program that is diametrically opposed to their interests and aspirations. No one believes the worn out nostrums about short-term sacrifice leading to long-term gain. The last Australian politician to openly campaign for a comprehensive package of free market reforms was Liberal leader John Hewson, who lost what was widely regarded as an unloseable election in 1993 by advocating a goods and services tax (GST).

Over the last two decades, Liberal and Labor politicians alike have resorted to every populist trick to try and conceal their underlying agenda. But there are definite limits to this process. The majority of the population now despises both major parties and feels deeply alienated from the entire official establishment. Most people know that the election will resolve nothing and that parliament acts in the interests of a powerful, but tiny, corporate elite. If it were not for compulsory voting, abstention rates in Australian elections would be similar to or higher than those in the US and elsewhere.

While millions oppose Howard and want his government thrown out of office, there is no enthusiasm for Labor, or its new leader, Mark Latham. Thirteen years of Labor government, between 1983 and 1996, demonstrated conclusively that the Labor Party will stop at nothing to prove its reliability to both local and international capital. Unlike the US and Britain, where the free market offensive was led by Reagan and Thatcher, in Australia it was Labor that dismantled the old framework of national economic regulation and, under the Accord with the trade unions, broke up and destroyed working and living conditions won in decades of struggle by the working class.

Howard—an unabashed partisan of the “free market” agenda of the banks and major corporations—won the 1996 election by posturing as a champion of the “battlers” who had suffered under Labor. Once in office, his government immediately followed Labor by inflicting savage cutbacks to public education, health and housing. And every measure his government has implemented since—from the incarceration of refugees to the imposition of university fees and the GST, to the privatisation of Telstra—was either begun or foreshadowed under Labor.

The more unpopular his government has become, the more Howard has tried to whip up fears and insecurities over immigration and national security to divert attention from his own policies. In the run-up to the 2001 election, staring defeat in the face, Howard mobilised the military to prevent “boat people” from reaching Australia. Throughout the campaign he lied about refugees throwing their children overboard, and created the conditions for the drowning deaths of 353 desperate people, including 150 children, when their boat—the so-called SIEV X—sank in international waters between Australia and Indonesia. At the same time, he used the September 11 terror attacks to further fuel fear and hysteria—with complete bipartisan support from Labor.

Since the 2001 election, Howard has continued to rely upon these tactics. Over the past months, the government has orchestrated a series of highly publicised “anti-terror” arrests, directed exclusively at the country's Muslim community. These include the detention of 21-year-old Sydney medical student, Izhar ul-Haque, for allegedly receiving training from an organisation that was not even listed as terrorist at the time. There is no doubt that the politics of prejudice and fear will be an essential component of Howard's re-election campaign.

## The elevation of Latham

The Labor Party has never recovered from the legacy of the Hawke and Keating years. Membership has plummeted and the party enjoys no active allegiance from any significant section of the working class. The trade unions, which played a key role in Australian political life from the end of the nineteenth century, have been reduced to virtual irrelevance.

Beazley, who became Labor leader after the party's monumental defeat in 1996, attempted to distance himself somewhat from Keating's pro-market policies and to make the appearance of returning the party its "Labor roots". But Labor's old program of national social reform had been completely undermined by globalised production. Beazley's policies, like his much-vaunted "rollback" of the GST—were nothing but empty rhetoric. In the 2001 election, he deliberately tried to eliminate any significant difference with Howard, and completely backed the government's policy of "border protection" and its attacks on refugees.

Beazley's successor, Simon Crean, pursued similar tactics. When his popularity plunged to record lows, and remained there despite various efforts to resuscitate it, nervousness grew within ruling circles that Labor had become a spent political force, threatening the stability of the two-party system itself. Without Labor, the ruling class could no longer play one party off against the other to ensure the implementation of its agenda. And without Labor to corral and contain the working class, discontent and dissatisfaction could take new and more dangerous forms. Key sections of the media establishment orchestrated a destabilisation campaign against Crean, and, in December 2003, Latham was installed as the new Labor leader. The aim was to resuscitate support for the Labor Party, as well as prod Howard into a renewed offensive for economic restructuring.

Apart from being a new face, Latham's main credential for the job, as far as corporate Australia is concerned, is his regressive social agenda. Unlike Beazley and Crean, Latham has openly embraced Keating's economic rationalism. Ever since the party's defeat in 1996, he has been groomed by the media moguls to sell the next wave of "economic reform". In column after column in the Murdoch and Fairfax press, Latham has expounded on the need for "individual responsibility", the "self-provision" of education, health, housing and employment services, and rewards for "achievement" in the form of tax cuts for the wealthy.

Latham's free market individualism was summed up in his victory speech. "I believe," he declared, "in an upwardly mobile society where people can climb the rungs of opportunity... I believe in hard work. I believe in reward for effort." In the guise of egalitarianism, Latham's message was that society had no responsibility to provide for basic social needs: individuals have to look after themselves, regardless of their circumstances or capacities. His perspective constitutes nothing but a return to the law of the capitalist jungle: rewarding the rich while blaming and vilifying the rest of society, including its weakest sections, for failing to climb the "ladder of opportunity". Every Laborite, including the so-called "lefts", embraced Latham's right-wing agenda without a murmur of opposition. Witnessing his extraordinary promotion throughout the media, they began to hope of winning office.

In his response to the government's May budget, Latham joined with Howard in passing massive tax handouts for the highest income earners. Then, in a blatant bid to reassure big business that he would be "fiscally responsible", he abandoned Labor's previous objections to a 20 percent price hike in the cost of subsidised medicines under the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme. The hardest hit will be the poor, especially the elderly, the disabled and the chronically sick, who can ill afford to spend up to \$875 more each year on vital medicines.

As the election has drawn closer, Labor has tried to lift its electoral prospects by recruiting rock star and former Nuclear Disarmament Party leader, Peter Garrett. From being an avowed opponent of US military and spy bases in Australia and the detention of refugees, Garrett, like many others in the "left," has become a loyal Latham supporter. He now defends the US bases and the continuation of mandatory detention for refugees—initiated by Labor in the early 1990s. That the party has expended so much effort advancing him as its "star" candidate merely highlights, once again, the collapse of its base of working class support.

## The crisis of Australian society

Contrary to the official myth of an "egalitarian" Australia, staggering disparities exist in the distribution of wealth and income. The policies of successive governments—Liberals and Labor—are responsible for widening, not narrowing, the enormous gulf between rich and poor. According to one study, nearly half of the total increase in disposable income generated between 1995-96 and 2000-01 went to the top 20 percent of the population, while the bottom fifth received just 4 percent.

In 2000, the richest 1 percent of the population held 13 percent of the wealth, while the poorest 50 percent held just 7 percent. This year, the combined wealth of the richest 200 individuals reached \$71.5 billion, up 13 percent from 2003. Social inequality will only deepen, with one study projecting that in the next three decades, the share of wealth held by the poorest 50 percent of Australians will decline by a further one-third.

As many as 4.1 million people—nearly a quarter of the population—live below the poverty line. They include 3.6 million people—21 percent of households—living on less than \$400 a week. Real wages have been driven so low that more than one million people are now counted among the "working poor"—living in poverty in households where one or more adult is employed. To pay their bills, both adults in working families must now seek work, placing them and their children under ever-increasing pressure.

The official unemployment rate of around 6 percent has been lowered in recent years, primarily by forcing jobless workers into substandard and insecure jobs. Over half of all new jobs created during the past 16 years have been casual jobs, with no set hours, security of employment, or holiday and sick leave. By 2002, casual workers constituted 27.3 percent of the workforce. When the "hidden unemployed" are counted the real jobless rate is estimated to be more than 12 percent.

\* **Housing crisis:** House prices have more than doubled in the past decade, making it increasingly difficult for working people to own their own home. Rising costs have also exacerbated "housing stress", where more than 30 percent of income is spent on housing. For low-income earners, public housing is scarce. Federal government spending on public housing declined by almost 20 percent from 1993-94 to 2002-03. In New South Wales alone, more than 90,000 people are on the public housing waiting list. Nationally, it is estimated that at least 100,000 people are homeless.

\* **Health care:** The government's "MedicarePlus" plan, while advertised as a means of strengthening Medicare, is, in fact, designed to further undermine the public health system. Medicare is now being promoted as a "safety net", i.e., a substandard system for those unable to afford private insurance. Since 1996, the number of general practitioners who provide free ("bulk billed") consultations has fallen from 80.6 percent to less than 70 percent. Health economists predict that this rate will soon fall to 40 percent. Despite chronic underfunding in the public health system, the government provides an annual subsidy of \$3.7 billion to private health insurance companies.

In an age where the technology exists to prevent disease and suffering,

free and prompt access to high quality health care is both a basic right and social necessity. Yet the systematic rundown of public hospitals means that tens of thousands of people are forced to wait for weeks, months and even years, or denied basic services altogether. They include cancer patients being refused critical treatments such as radiotherapy due to a lack of machines and properly trained staff.

**\*Education:** Public education is being transformed into a second-class service for low-income families. Under Howard, funds have been siphoned from public schools through mechanisms such as the Enrolment Benchmark Adjustment and the Socio Economic Status model to provide huge subsidies for private schools, including the most exclusive. Despite the financial burden, many families feel compelled to withdraw their children from the rundown, understaffed public education system. As intended, private schooling is now increasingly the norm, with only 52 percent of students attending a public high school, down from well over 70 percent just a few years ago.

As part of the market-driven model of education, standardised testing regimes have been imposed to compel schools to compete for shrinking funds, based on student test results. Instead of being aimed at developing the intellectual, physical, artistic and creative potential of all students, education is becoming increasingly regimented and narrow, with test results for reading, writing and arithmetic the measure of “success”.

The right to tertiary education is under similar attack. The 2003 Higher Education Reform Act allows universities to increase full-fee paying places to 35 percent of the total, and hike the fees for all other students by 25 percent. Fees for TAFE colleges have likewise been increased, in some cases by up to 300 percent.

**\*Aborigines:** The appalling living conditions of Australia’s indigenous population represent a damning indictment of the entire ruling elite. Aboriginal life expectancy is currently just 56 for males, and 63 for females—lower than in Burma, Papua New Guinea and Cambodia. On every measure, Aborigines are the most oppressed stratum of Australian society. Despite making up just 2.4 percent of the total population, indigenous people constitute 20 percent of the current prison population—up from 15 percent in 1993.

**\* Youth:** The rise of low-paid, insecure employment has particularly impacted on young people. In June 2004, the official unemployment rate for 15-24 year-olds was 11.8 percent, more than double the figure for the workforce as a whole. For 15-19 year-olds the rate was 22.3 percent and, in some working class areas, rose to over 30 percent. The collapse in employment prospects for young people is closely connected to a precipitous rise in mental health and other social problems, such as drug abuse and alcoholism. Suicide is now the second most common cause of death for young men, with the rate doubling between 1970 and 1995.

**\* Prisons:** The social tensions being produced by mounting social inequality are being met with increased repression. Over the past decade, every election campaign has seen the major parties attempting to outdo each other on draconian “law and order” programs. In 1993 there were 16,000 prisoners in Australia. By 2003, the figure had dramatically risen to 23,500. At the same time, the underlying social causes of crime are being totally ignored. A 2003 study found, for example, that three in four prisoners in New South Wales suffered from a psychiatric disorder.

**\* Infrastructure:** Much of Australia’s social infrastructure—power supplies, roads, rail networks and public transportation, water and sewerage facilities—is in an advanced stage of decay. Residents of major cities, such as Sydney, face permanent water shortages and unsafe and unreliable public transport systems. Rural towns and regions are being devastated by land degradation while the cities are choked by pollution.

**\* Environment:** In every sphere, the Howard government has subordinated the requirements of ordinary working people for a clean, safe environment to the dictates of profit. Along with the US, Australia has refused to agree to the modest requirements of the Kyoto Treaty to limit

the production of greenhouse gases and the dangers of global warming. Like Washington, Canberra has also loosened the regulation of toxic industrial by-products such as the known carcinogen, dioxin, which has been left off the EPA’s monitoring list.

## Democratic rights under assault

The prosecution of war abroad has been paralleled by a growing militarisation of the state at home. The Howard government has utilised the September 11, 2001 attacks to steadily erect the framework for a police state. Long-standing and fundamental democratic rights, such as freedom from arbitrary detention, the presumption of innocence, the right to remain silent and the burden of proof on the prosecution, have been overturned. “Terrorism”—defined so widely that it covers traditional forms of political action and protest, including strikes, pickets and street demonstrations—has become a crime punishable by life imprisonment. By executive fiat, the government can swiftly ban political parties that allegedly support terrorism and jail their supporters—measures that go far beyond the Menzies government’s bid to outlaw the Communist Party in 1950, a plan that was defeated in a referendum.

ASIO, the political police force, has gained previously unthinkable powers, including secret detention for at least a week without charge or trial. Targeted individuals can be monitored night and day, have their homes and computers searched, and be hauled in for interrogation without any right to notify their families or the media. Those detained need not be suspected of any terrorist activity or sympathy. All that the government and its agencies have to assert is that they may possess information relating to terrorism—even if no terrorist act has occurred or even been planned. Detainees can be forced to answer questions on pain of five years’ imprisonment and, if charged, police can interrogate them for a further 24 hours before facing court. The presumption in favour of bail has been scrapped; it will be granted only in “exceptional circumstances”.

Other laws modelled on “consorting” provisions give police the power to arrest and charge people for even knowing an alleged terrorist sympathiser. Anyone who visits, speaks to, or attends a meeting with a person deemed to be a “terrorist” can be jailed for up to 25 years. In the name of protecting “national security,” closed courts can censor evidence in terrorist-related cases, prevent questioning of government witnesses, require defence lawyers to obtain official security clearances and even exclude defendants and their lawyers from parts of trials.

The Labor Party has backed every one of these anti-democratic measures, against strong public opposition. This highlights a basic fact: that there is no longer any significant constituency, within the official political establishment, for the defence of the most fundamental democratic rights. If elected, a Labor government would be no less ruthless than the Liberals. The ALP has even criticised the government for not going far enough, advocating the establishment of a Bush administration-style Department of Homeland Security to bring ASIO and all other security agencies under a single command. State Labor administrations have readily handed Howard the constitutional powers needed for the terror laws and adopted their own legislation to create unprecedented police powers.

The assault on democratic rights—in Australia and internationally—is ultimately rooted in the staggering levels of inequality that increasingly dominate social life. These are rapidly producing political and social tensions that cannot be contained within the framework of the old forms of rule.

The treatment of David Hicks and Mamdouh Habib is a warning of the type of measures that are now regarded as acceptable by the ruling elite.

The Howard government has willingly allowed the Bush administration to incarcerate the two Australian citizens at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba for nearly three years as alleged “enemy combatants” in flagrant violation of the Geneva Conventions on wartime detention. It is the only government in the world to issue no demand for its citizens’ repatriation, despite the fact that there is growing evidence that both men were subjected to the same methods of torture that were used by the American military at Baghdad’s notorious Abu Ghraib prison.

The government’s efforts to divert political discontent in reactionary directions has seen asylum seekers vilified and stripped of every basic legal and democratic right. Refugees have been fired upon by naval warships, transported to remote Pacific Islands, incarcerated indefinitely without trial, subjected to inhuman conditions in detention camps and blocked from seeking legal assistance and redress.

To muzzle any genuine political alternative, the Labor and Liberal parties, supported by the Democrats and Greens, have united to push through anti-democratic restrictions aimed at impeding the registration of new political parties and imposing extensive supervision of existing ones. Any political party without representation in parliament must, if it wants to be registered and have its name recorded on the ballot paper, submit the names and addresses of 500 of its members to the state authorities. In light of the long history of political surveillance, harassment and provocation of political opponents—particularly socialists and communists—by the state, this amounts to a flagrant attack on the democratic rights of minor political parties and their members and election candidates, as well as on those who wish to vote for them.

Herein lies the significance of the jailing of Pauline Hanson. Notwithstanding her reactionary politics, it was aimed at setting a precedent for the criminalisation of any political organisation that threatens to destabilise, in any way, the existing two-party political set-up.

The government’s assault on democratic rights has taken myriad forms, including attempts to suppress freedom of artistic expression. By raising the banner of “community morality”, Howard has attempted to shore up a base among extreme right-wing Christian fundamentalists. In 1999 the government passed legislation giving the Australian Broadcasting Authority the power to fine or close down Internet service providers hosting material deemed to be offensive. It has also stacked the Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC) with conservative appointees and backed their banning of sexually explicit films such as *Baise-moi*, *Salo* and *Ken Park*. These efforts at artistic censorship have been paralleled in the field of science, where Howard has tried to severely restrict vital stem cell research.

The defence of democratic rights is inseparably bound up with the struggle for socialism. The SEP indefatigably defends every past democratic gain, including voting and electoral rights, and civil liberties. We insist that every law against strikes and pickets must be repealed and all discrimination based on nationality, ethnic background, religion, gender or sexual preference outlawed. Refugees held in detention centres must be released immediately. We call for an end to all forms of immigration control and restriction. Workers must have the right to live and work wherever they wish, with full citizenship rights and full access to social benefits. Women must have the unrestricted right to abortion on demand.

But the very concept of democratic rights must be extended beyond formal equality before the law, which masks ever-greater social and economic inequality. Access to courts and the right to vote every three years mean little when a financial plutocracy prevails over every aspect of daily life, dictating who will work, and under what conditions, as well as who will have access to basic social facilities, such as education, health care, child care and aged care. With the myth of equal rights before the law, the legal system legitimises and enforces this domination, ultimately with the force of the police, the security agencies and the military.

Genuine democracy requires real control by ordinary people over economic decision-making and the circumstances of their daily lives. Decisions affecting production, salaries, safety and working conditions must be subject to the democratic voice of the workforce. This means opening the books of all corporations for inspection by workers and democratic control by all employees over corporate leadership. Ultimately, true democracy can be achieved only through the political mobilisation of an informed and articulate working population in the struggle for socialism.

## A socialist program

Modern society encompasses complex social needs that cannot be met by an economic system based on the private monopolisation of the means of production and the unrestrained accumulation of corporate and personal wealth. The dog-eat-dog pursuit of private profit produces gigantic waste, spectacular business collapses, serious infrastructure breakdowns and destructive recessions. It is incompatible with the humane, environmentally sensitive and intelligent social planning necessary to ensure the very physical survival of human civilisation.

The Socialist Equality Party advances a program for the reorganisation of society in the interests of the majority. We advocate the creation of a new economic system, based on public ownership and democratic control. Only when need, not private profit, becomes the organising principle for production and all aspects of social life, will the extraordinary human and technical resources that are now available be utilised to provide a better living standard and safe environment for all.

\* **Public ownership:** We advocate the transformation of all large privately-owned industrial, mining and agricultural corporations, together with the banking and financial institutions, into publicly owned enterprises, with full compensation for small shareholders, and, for large shareholders, the public negotiation of the terms of compensation. Likewise, the SEP proposes the nationalisation of the airlines, telecommunications and privatised utilities, and public ownership and control over all critical natural resources.

This does not mean the abolition of small or medium-sized businesses and family farms, which have themselves become the victims of giant corporations and banks. Establishing a planned economy will give such enterprises ready access to credit and more stable economic conditions, so long as they provide decent wages and working conditions.

\* **Jobs:** To guarantee full employment, with well-paid and secure jobs for all, a massive program of public works must be established to improve living standards throughout the country. To create jobs and allow workers to more fully participate in political and cultural life, the working week must be reduced to 30 hours, with no loss of pay. All workers should receive at least five weeks’ annual leave.

\* **Social security:** Poverty and the exploitation of the unemployed as a pool of cheap labour must be ended. Every working person must be guaranteed a well-paid and secure job and an income sufficient to raise a family in comfort. We call for the abolition of all work-for-the-dole schemes and the raising of social security benefits to a living wage. Evictions and foreclosures, as well as the cutting off of electricity, gas, water or telephone services to the unemployed or to welfare recipients, must be outlawed.

\* **Social services:** Billions of dollars must be poured into the upgrading, expansion and staffing of public hospitals, schools, universities and child care facilities so that these services are equipped with the latest technologies and are freely available to all. The sell-off of public housing must be halted, new high quality housing units constructed, and rents and

house payments reduced so that no worker pays more than 20 percent of his or her income for shelter.

\* **The elderly:** All elderly people must be able to live in dignity, with all the necessary financial and social supports, including access to free transport, health facilities, decent accommodation and recreation. Generous subsidies must be provided to families caring for ageing parents, and all nursing home fees abolished.

\* **Young people:** We propose a huge expansion in the number of apprenticeships and the availability of high-quality training and educational programs for all young people. Night work and rotating shifts for young workers must be prohibited. A reduced working week on full pay must be established for workers under 21 to allow them to engage in recreational and cultural activities.

\* **Tax:** As a first step towards ending the gulf between rich and poor and providing the resources for an expansion of jobs and public services, we advocate a progressive tax system to lower taxes on working and middle class families while raising those on the wealthy. The regressive Goods and Services Tax must be abolished, together with the tax loopholes and accounting gimmicks that allow most corporations to pay minuscule taxes on their profits. Direct taxes on wealth, such as estate taxes, should be restored.

\* **Culture:** The Socialist Equality Party regards the flowering of art and culture as an essential aspect of socialism. We demand massive funding for the arts, including galleries, museums, orchestras, theatres and film-making, as well as libraries and public television and radio. For the intellectual and moral development of society, every section of the population must have access to music, dance, drama and art, either free or at a nominal fee. Decisions on subsidies and grants for the arts must be taken out of the hands of the politicians and bureaucrats and placed under the control of committees of artists, musicians and other cultural workers.

A recent survey found that the overwhelming majority of the 45,000 professional artists in Australia live on or below the poverty line—either unemployed or in low-paid part-time work. Artists must be guaranteed a living wage and full access to the equipment and materials needed to develop their creative work. A society that refuses to encourage challenging and critical artistic work is one in serious intellectual and cultural decline.

\* **Scientific research:** A vast expansion of scientific and technological research is required to deepen mankind's understanding of the basic processes of nature and to enhance society's ability to provide a fulfilling, healthy and safe life for all. At present, research is directed at bolstering corporate profit and the coercive power of the state. Research findings are treated as a commodity to be exploited for private gain rather than for social benefit. Like other aspects of productive activity, scientific research should be placed under the genuine democratic control of working people.

\* **Free speech:** Genuine freedom of the press and political expression is vital for true democracy. The mass media, increasingly monopolised by a handful of press barons and giant corporations, currently function as propaganda outlets for the government and big business, routinely churning out lies and misinformation. The SEP advocates the breakup of the media monopolies and their placement under public ownership and control, with democratic access guaranteed for opposing viewpoints.

Only one social force is capable of establishing a rational and harmonious society. That is the working class, whose ranks include all employees—white-collar staff, professionals, artists and intellectuals, as well as industrial and service workers. Far from “disappearing,” as various media and academic pundits claim, the working class on a world scale is expanding exponentially, as hundreds of millions of former peasants in the semi-colonial countries of Asia, Latin America and Africa are put to work in the factories and sweatshops servicing the transnational corporations.

The Socialist Equality Party is fighting to initiate a new mass political

movement for a socialist alternative. That is the essential aim of our intervention into the 2004 elections. We advocate the establishment of a workers' government, which will represent the social and economic interests of working people and vastly expand their democratic control over the decisions that affect their lives. The goal of our campaign is to raise the political consciousness of the working class, and, in that way, assist in transforming it into a class conscious and politically independent force.

### **For the political independence of the working class**

The most essential precondition for the full economic, social and political emancipation of the working class is its independence from all forms of bourgeois politics. This means a conscious break, not only from the Labor Party, but from the traditions of Laborism, as well as from the various “third party” and “radical” formations that, in one form or another, act as apologists for the Labor Party, thus blocking a struggle against the profit system itself.

Since its formation in the 1890s, the Australian Labor Party has been the main political prop for Australian capitalism and the nation state. In every major political crisis, the ruling class has turned to its Labor servants. Labor held power during the two world wars, at the onset of the Depression and initiated the “free market” agenda in the 1980s. Its founding program of “White Australia” racism finds its expression today in Labor's support for the compulsory incarceration of asylum seekers.

From its very beginnings, the Labor Party opposed any revolutionary reckoning with the profit system. The party only adopted its limited “socialist objective” in 1921 in an effort to forestall the growth of the Communist Party, following the Russian revolution. In reality, its leaders have always dismissed socialism as an impossible utopia and fostered the pernicious illusion that the ruling class can be pressured to grant concessions through parliamentary legislation and trade union militancy.

In the 1950s and 1960s, that illusion appeared to be reality. Confronted by a working class determined to end three decades of war and depression, capitalist governments in Australia and internationally enacted a series of welfare reforms. By the 1970s, however, the postwar economic boom had collapsed. In a bid to counter declining profit rates, the major corporations globalised their production to take advantage of the cheapest international sources of labour and raw materials. In their bid to attract investment, governments everywhere scrambled to remove all restrictions on the operations of capital, making deep inroads into the social position of the working class—a program initiated by the Hawke-Keating governments and continued under Howard.

It is a delusion to believe that it is possible to pressure the Labor Party into reversing the continuing onslaught on jobs and living standards, or oppose the slide towards war. The same is true of the trade unions. Staffed by cynical bureaucrats whose primary objective has been to stifle any independent initiative on the part of their members, these organisations no longer even attempt to win concessions for the workers. Instead, they aim to pressure workers to grant concessions to the employers, in order to make them “internationally competitive”. The unions' appeals to economic nationalism and protectionism are the means by which they attempt to subordinate Australian workers to their corporate bosses and divide them from their class brothers and sisters around the world.

Under the Howard government, the unions' role has been as treacherous as it was under Labor. In August 1996, when angry unionists, students and other protesters stormed parliament house in response to the coalition's first budget, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) joined in the official chorus of condemnation and immediately shut down its limited



campaign against the government's savage cutbacks.

Since then the trade unions have blocked any opposition to Howard's policies. Far from defending the rights of immigrants and refugees, union officials have encouraged the persecution of so-called illegal workers and, in some cases, directly initiated police raids to round up and deport them. Like Howard, the unions promote xenophobia to divert attention from their own complicity in destroying jobs and conditions. In the lead up to the Iraq invasion, certain "left" bureaucrats postured as antiwar critics. But as soon as Australian troops had been dispatched to the Middle East, the unions as a whole rejected any industrial action to stop military supplies.

The failure of the Labor Party and trade unions to defend the working class in any way is not simply the product of treacherous individuals. It flows organically from the collapse of all national reformist programs and perspectives.

This also underlies the bankruptcy of protest politics. The political orientation of the Greens and the various "radical" groups, such as the misnamed Socialist Alliance, is fundamentally opposed to the political independence of the working class. In the final analysis, their aim is to pressure the Labor Party and the powers-that-be to the left. Whatever their differences, they seek to channel the growing mood of rebellion, particularly among young people, back into the safe waters of the parliamentary two-party system by maintaining the fiction that a solution can be found to the world's immense problems within the confines of capitalism.

In this election, these organisations are united in advocating "anyone but Howard." In other words, they advocate the return of a Labor government with the help of second preference votes, insisting that, despite the ALP's record, it remains a "lesser evil" to the Liberals. The Socialist Equality Party completely rejects this notion. The program of "lesser evilism" serves definite class interests. Above all, it is aimed at keeping the working class trapped within the present official political framework and preventing it from undertaking its most important task: the construction of its own independent party. Based on this understanding, the SEP will not preference Labor, or any of the so-called "left" alternatives, in the filling out of ballots.

**The Greens** in no way articulate the interests of the working class. Their recent popularity derives from two factors: firstly, the demise of the Democrats as the "third party" after that party supported Howard's GST in the Senate, and secondly—and most significantly—their opposition to the invasion of Iraq. The perception that the Greens are antiwar has brought them a groundswell of support from young people and significant layers of alienated Labor voters. But while the Greens posture as a progressive, and even radical, alternative to the two major parties, their program reflects the interests of smaller, less globally competitive and nationally-based sections of business. Greens Senate leader Bob Brown has publicly promoted Latham as an alternative prime minister and encouraged the false hope that Labor would be more likely than Howard to put environmental concerns before corporate profits.

Like Latham, Brown calls for the withdrawal of Australian troops from Iraq on a completely nationalist basis. "It's in our interests to bring our troops home for the security of our region," he declared last April. The same reasoning lay behind the Greens' support for Howard's neo-colonial military interventions in East Timor and the Solomons.

Whenever the Greens have held office, whether in coalition with Labor in Tasmania during the 1980s, or in Germany today, they have quickly discarded their radical and pacifist rhetoric, along with their election pledges. In Tasmania, they helped enforce the greatest public sector job cuts in the state's history; in Germany they backed the first overseas deployment of German troops since World War II.

The **Socialist Alliance** comprises an uneasy coalition of the various "socialist" outfits that came to prominence during the anti-Vietnam War

protests of the 1960s and early 1970s. While formally espousing socialism, they reject its central premise—the necessity for the political independence of the working class—and inevitably line up behind one or other faction of the bourgeoisie. In this election, the Socialist Alliance is tailing behind both the Greens and the ALP, hailing the Greens' supposed opposition to the Iraq war and claiming that Labor can be pushed to the left.

Like the Greens, the groups making up the Socialist Alliance supported the Australian imperialist intervention in East Timor in 1999, actively campaigning for "troops in" and hailing Howard's dispatch of military forces as a victory. Five years later, East Timor remains one of the world's most impoverished countries, deprived of the lion's share of the Timor Sea oil and gas reserves by its Australian "liberator". While the Socialist Alliance opposes the presence of Australian troops in Iraq, it was the East Timor "troops in" campaign that helped lift the post-Vietnam stigma on Australian participation in overseas military interventions.

Critical lessons must be drawn from these experiences. "Lesser evil" politics are a dangerous trap for working people. The two-party system cannot be reformed or pressured to meet their interests and needs. There is no substitute for the painstaking, patient and principled struggle to construct an independent, mass socialist party. It is this conception that constitutes the axis of the Socialist Equality Party's election campaign.

## **Socialism and the working class**

The Socialist Equality Party bases itself on the great liberating traditions of the international socialist movement. Socialism means equality, human solidarity and freedom from oppression and want. These goals—eminently achievable, given the tremendous advances in science, technology and humanity's productive forces—are embodied in the program of the world Trotskyist party, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), and its internet centre, the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Marxism—scientific socialism—proved its viability in the October 1917 Russian Revolution when it became the program of a popular mass movement that overthrew capitalism and established the Soviet Union as the first workers' state. The revolution led by the Bolshevik party was bound up with, and inspired, a broader international working class struggle against the depredations of capitalism. In Australia, as in other countries, socialists were in the forefront of every major battle—for the eight-hour day, for the right to vote, against conscription.

However, the failure of socialist revolutions elsewhere left the first workers' state isolated in a poor and war-devastated economy, creating the conditions for the emergence, and eventual triumph, of a privileged bureaucracy, headed by Joseph Stalin. The Stalinists abandoned the internationalist program on which the Russian Revolution was based and adopted instead the anti-Marxist perspective of building "socialism in one country". This nationalist outlook provided the ideological basis for a repressive bureaucratic apparatus that destroyed Soviet democracy, suppressed the socialist opposition and sabotaged the revolutionary struggles of workers around the world. These betrayals culminated in 1991, when Stalin's heirs in the Kremlin liquidated the Soviet Union, paving the way for the restoration of capitalism and all its accompanying disasters.

The SEP bases itself on the legacy of the most courageous and far-sighted representatives of the working class, who fought for socialism against the Labor, union and Stalinist bureaucracies. This tradition encompasses the International Left Opposition, established by Leon Trotsky in the Soviet Union in 1923, and the Fourth International, the World Party of Socialist Revolution, founded by Trotsky in 1938 to lay

the basis for the rebirth of the international workers' movement.

In 1972, the Socialist Labour League (SLL), the forerunner of the SEP, was founded to uphold and advance this international perspective as the Australian section of the ICFI. The SLL and SEP have a long and proud record in the Australian working class. For 26 years our newspaper, the *Workers News*, advanced an independent socialist analysis and perspective, intervening in all the major struggles of the working class, championing democratic rights and seeking to theoretically clarify the lessons of the strategic experiences of the international working class throughout the twentieth century. Since 1998 the SEP has collaborated with our sister parties in the ICFI in the maintenance and development of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

We urge all those who want to participate in the development of a genuine alternative to war, social inequality and reaction to actively support our election campaign. Help publicise our candidates and public meetings, discuss our election material with your friends and workmates, contribute financially to our election fund and encourage the widest possible audience for the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Above all, we call on everyone who agrees with our program and perspective to join and build the Socialist Equality Party as the new political party of the working class.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**