

Australia: campaign in Batman differentiates SEP from all other parties

Our reporters
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The Socialist Equality Party election campaign in the seat of Batman, in Melbourne's northern suburbs, has centred on the Iraq war and its implications for the international working class, as well as the growing social crisis in the area. SEP candidate Peter Byrne and election teams have visited shopping centres and workplaces and canvassed residential areas selling hundreds of copies of the SEP election statement.

The SEP is standing in Batman against Labor and in opposition to all the minor parties that are calling for the election of a Labor government as a "lesser evil" to the Liberal-National coalition of Prime Minister John Howard. There are nine parties contesting the seat, including the Greens, the Democrats and Socialist Alliance.

The Batman electorate, covering 53 square kilometres and with over 85,000 eligible voters, is home to enormous social contradictions. In Northcote and Fairfield to the south, young professionals have moved in to renovate former working class homes. Further away from the city, Preston and Reservoir begin the working class suburbs that stretch across Melbourne's north.

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) figures show that Batman has a large immigrant population, with 34 percent born overseas, and 43 percent speaking a language other than English. Of those residents born overseas, 25 percent or 10,000 people, are counted as speaking English "not well" or "not at all".

Within the electorate virtually all factories of any significant size have been closed down. The median household wage is just \$600-\$699 a week and severe poverty—among pensioners, refugees, Aboriginal families, unemployed people and students—hovers not far beneath the surface.

Byrne addressed a meeting at the East Preston Senior Citizens Club, where retirees told him of their difficulties surviving on the old-age pension. The only major hospital in the area, Preston and Northcote Community Hospital, was closed down with Liberal and Labor collusion in 1996.

Over the past six weeks Byrne and SEP teams have

engaged in extensive discussions in the electorate. Few people have expressed any enthusiasm for Labor or Liberal and election promises made during the campaign have largely fallen on deaf ears.

While the major parties and the mass media have suppressed any serious discussion on the invasion and occupation of Iraq, the SEP has raised its implications with hundreds of workers and youth. Many have agreed with the assessment made in the SEP election statement:

"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."

The campaign has found broad support for the SEP's demand for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all Australian, US and foreign troops from Iraq, and agreement with the call for all those responsible for the illegal war of aggression, including Bush, Blair and Howard, to be placed on trial for war crimes.

Said, an unemployed worker from the Middle East, who together with his family campaigned with the SEP, expressed common views about the war and the elections: "Labor and Liberal are the same party. Because they are the strongest two parties they fight each other. I heard about the Greens. They are interested in supporting nature.

"I heard that the Greens support the United Nations but the UN is controlled by the US. The US puts pressure on the UN to do what the US wants. For example, Allawi [the Iraqi interim prime minister]. Who put him there? He and the US say they are bringing peace, but there is no food, no peace, and 100 innocent people die there every day. I don't say Hussein was good, but life was better before.

"Now the US wants to do what Hussein did, but the people in Iraq hate them. They originally thought that the US was

going to help them, but it turns out they just want petrol.

“The US is fighting for control of the Middle East. They know it has more than half of the world’s oil. They wanted support from Australia and Spain to justify the war. They want to cover their greed. I think after Iraq, they are planning to control Europe. When Hussein was in Iraq, oil prices were something like \$20 per barrel. Now it is more than double that. Who gets the benefit from this?”

Batman is considered a safe Labor seat with the incumbent, Labor frontbencher Martin Ferguson, holding it since 1996 with a 25 per cent margin over the Liberals. As is the case across the country, however, the majority of people in the electorate are disaffected with the political system and deeply alienated from the two major parties.

Ferguson has not called a single election meeting, nor has he participated in any open debates on Labor party policy. This hostility to democratic debate is not just a matter of disdain and indifference towards the electorate. Labor cannot bear any scrutiny on either the Iraq war or its stance towards the most impoverished sections of society.

According to the ABS, at least 20 percent of families with children in Batman have an income less than \$35,000 per year. This is the layer of society that would suffer under Latham’s tax and family benefit policy. Those with more than one child will be many hundreds of dollars worse off if Labor is elected than they are under the Howard government.

Alongside the opposition to the Iraq war and concerns over inequality, there is enormous anger in Batman over the Howard government’s persecution of refugees, and the Labor Party’s bipartisan support for mandatory detention.

One SEP campaign team met numerous refugees outside a bulk-billing medical clinic in the north of the electorate. Amongst the newest arrivals in the area are workers and students from Iraq. One temporary protection visa (TPV) refugee expressed frustration over his lack of any democratic rights in Australia, including not having the right to vote. A woman from the Middle East was angry about visa restrictions that limit her ability to work and complained that the huge number of visa categories for entry to Australia was being used to discriminate against refugees. A Somali worker explained his struggle to ensure the safety of his young family in the aftermath of the US invasion of Somalia.

One of the other main discussion points with Byrne and SEP campaigners is the imminent closure of the Kodak manufacturing plant in the Melbourne suburb of Coburg, which borders Batman. Over 600 factory workers will lose their jobs by November, with another 300 jobs in administration likely to go by next March. This week, Byrne issued a statement on the WSWS, “Kodak to shut Australian

plant and destroy hundreds of jobs”, drawing out how the shutdown poses in the starkest way the necessity for socialism.

Workers at a car components plant neighbouring the electorate responded warmly to SEP campaigners. One employee who had worked there 18 years said he was disturbed by the Kodak shutdown and recalled the closure of car manufacturer Nissan in 1993. Byrne pointed out the role played by the unions in organising “orderly closures” and explained that Kodak demonstrated that no amount of sacrifice by workers could guarantee jobs.

With huge disaffection towards the mainstream parties, the Greens have attempted to fill the vacuum and in Batman are likely to receive a strong vote from young people. This support, however, is not deep. Many people are aware of the contradictions between the Greens’ professed concerns over the environment, war and the brutal treatment of refugees, and its promotion of the Labor Party as a “lesser evil” and its support for the United Nations.

Luke, a student who met the SEP outside a Reservoir supermarket, said: “At first the Greens were more outspoken about the war but when the UN sanctioned it they went quiet. I am attracted to their environmental policies, such as enacting the Kyoto accord. I’m not happy with their preferences going to Labor. They want to get in power so they are helping Labor.”

Justine, a young worker from the Coles retail chain who attended the SEP election launch last month, said that she had hoped the Greens would offer some resistance to the militarism of the Howard government. She said: “I read the *Herald Sun* article that made fun of the Greens’ policies. Then they gave two paragraphs to John Howard who called them the lunatic fringe. I was attracted to their policies that seemed freethinking and offering some alternative to the two major parties. I can’t stand the way the media won’t let smaller parties have a say.

“When I met the SEP I was told that Iraq was the main election issue. When I attended the SEP meeting I was surprised at the gulf between the SEP and the Greens. But when I saw it from the perspective that the whole system is wrong and has to be changed at its roots, I can understand the differences. The Greens see that things are wrong but they don’t want to change the whole system.”



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