

Australia: an exchange on Sydney's Claymore housing estate

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Below we publish correspondence on a World Socialist Web Site article entitled, "A visit to Sydney's Claymore housing estate: Mark Latham's 'vision' for Australian working people". The interviews referred to were obtained during the election campaign for the federal seat of Werriwa, where Mike Head is standing for the Socialist Equality Party against Labor leader Mark Latham.

Editor,

I am outraged and appalled by what has been reported in this article, and only wish that more Claymore residents had Internet access so they could understand the way in which their daily life struggles are being manipulated for political gain.

Having lived in the Campbelltown local government area for over 23 years, and having seen the way in which Claymore residents and community groups have worked so hard to improve their lifestyle, I am ashamed that a website such as yours would publish such drivel. In many local papers this year there have been articles describing how proud the local residents are of their achievements in improving their lifestyle. I think that you owe the residents of Claymore an apology for the way in which you have portrayed their achievements, and used the views of a few people to represent those of many others. I grew up two suburbs away from Claymore, I had friends who indeed lived in the suburb, and absolutely it is in stark contrast to the relative luxury in which I lived.

In so far as you suggest that "Melissa Reynolds, a single mother, used to work at Grace Brothers, a department store in Sydney, but the five-hour travelling time every day became "too much". I would equally like to suggest that there are plenty of people in outer regional areas who travel to work everyday. For your reference, Busways operates a nine-minute bus ride from Claymore to Campbelltown Station as frequently as every fifteen minutes during peak morning periods, with an approximate five-minute wait for a 50-minute train ride to city. I believe this constitutes a one-way trip of approximate 1 hour and 15 minutes, a total of only 2 hours and 30 minutes each day. Even allowing for the inevitable late train, five hours seems to be a total, blatant lie. Furthermore, residents of all of the housing estates in the Campbelltown district suffer with the same issues, but they all still go to work, for them it is not an option to give up work because the travel is too much, I would like to ask you why Melissa thinks it is fair that she be able to stop working while single parents in other suburbs must continue with this daily grind?

One suggestion that I might pass on to Triple C catering would be to look into tendering to run school canteens. A great many government and non-government schools tender the running of their school canteens, and I am sure the unemployed mothers would relish the opportunity to work in an environment that offers them the flexibility to still care for their school aged children. Rather than rubbish the initiatives that have been put in place to help improve conditions for these people, how about you use your network to assist these people to establish a more viable business model.

You have played directly into the hands of those who believe welfare is abused by people in areas of Claymore. It is extremely common to hear

people draw conclusions such as perhaps the reason that I lived in relative luxury was the fact that both my parents worked full time jobs, while the parents of my friends in that suburb did not. The politics of this issue is dangerous and divisive, and I suggest that in attempting to shame Mark Latham, you have brought more shame on yourself and the people of Claymore, who so desperately need to be [seen] as people who are good and worthwhile. For many years the people of Claymore and more broadly Campbelltown, have fought the stigma that is attached to living in these areas, and you spectacularly managed to reignite some of that stigma.

The issue that has caused me most concern is the reliability of the WSWs as a provider of insightful and reliable information. I often read reports on your site relating to areas that I have never been, and rely upon your reporting to be truthful and correct. Having seen the way this report has been manipulated is totally abhorrent to me, and now leads me to wonder whether any of your reports can be trusted.

Sincerely,

SB

Dear SB,

Thank you for your letter in response to the *World Socialist Web Site* article "A visit to Sydney's Claymore housing estate: Mark Latham's 'vision' for Australian working people". Your correspondence provides us with a further opportunity to outline the anti-working class character of Mark Latham's so-called "ladder of opportunity".

Although you accuse the WSWs of "manipulating" the "daily life struggles" of Claymore residents to suit a political agenda, it is Mark Latham who is misrepresenting the situation for political purposes. The major reason the WSWs visited Claymore, as opposed to other working class areas of Sydney where conditions are similar, is that Latham has cited the suburb in numbers of books, speeches, interviews and articles as an inspiration and practical example of his politics. Latham has also demagogically utilised the fact that he grew up in public housing in the Green Valley region of Sydney to claim that he represents the interests of what he calls the "outsiders".

In fact, Latham's policies, which are based on further implementing the free market program demanded by global capital, are diametrically opposed to the interests of the working class and unemployed. Latham's promotion of "mutual responsibility" and "individual responsibility" is aimed at cutting welfare and forcing the poorest in society to accept any low-paid work, no matter how sub-standard the conditions.

It is true that people in poorer suburbs such as Claymore, and throughout the Campbelltown area as a whole, are stigmatised by the media and other social layers. One resident to whom we spoke told us that employers often refused to provide him with job interviews when they discovered he lived in Claymore. Such victimisation will not, however, be erased by trying to deny the social problems in the area.

Despite your claims that our article is incorrect, you cite only one specific example. According to you, our claim that Melissa Reynolds, a

single mother, used to spend five hours a day travelling from Claymore to her job in the city is a “blatant lie”. On your calculation, a return trip from Claymore to the city would take just two-and-a-half hours.

In the best of all possible worlds, that may be the case. But, as you acknowledge yourself, the trains are usually late—if not cancelled altogether. As anyone you regularly travels on Sydney’s train system knows all too well, most people are obliged to catch trains that are scheduled to arrive in the city much earlier than their starting time, to ensure they get to work on time. And even on your own very conservative estimate, two and a half hours is a lot of time to spend travelling to the city every day. It is yet another demonstration of the difficulties faced by Claymore residents in getting and maintaining jobs in the city, particularly given that most of the jobs we are referring to are casual or part-time.

Moreover, in Ms Reynolds’ case—like that of many other people—her claim was entirely accurate. As a single mother without a car, she had to take her son to his school in Mascot, in Sydney’s south-east, by public transport everyday before work. Since the Department of Housing placed Ms Reynolds in Claymore over six years ago, she has continually requested a transfer closer to her family and friends in the eastern suburbs. But public housing is so under-funded that the transfer waiting time is 12 to 15 years.

It is particularly notable that you make no attempt to refute the substantive issues we raise about the state of social conditions in Claymore. The suburb has no decent parks or sporting facilities for children, no petrol station and the shopping centre is extremely rundown. Because there are virtually no jobs in the area, incomes are low, and only 30 percent of adult residents are employed.

You allege that the WSWs “used the views of a few people to represent those of many others” whereas “in many local papers this year there have been articles describing how proud the local residents are of their achievements in improving their lifestyle”. The local newspapers, the *Macarthur Chronicle* and the *Campbelltown Macarthur Advertiser* are owned by Rupert Murdoch’s News Limited and the other major media empire, Fairfax, respectively. These media groups have demonstrated significant support for Latham’s policies over the past three years, and were instrumental in promoting him to the position of opposition leader.

The comments we quoted in the article were consistent with the views of many others to whom we spoke and they express common concerns throughout working class areas. For example, Richard Butt’s comments about the atrocious condition of Claymore’s houses were echoed by Brian Murnane of Argyle Community Housing who described the housing as “terrible”. In fact, Murnane told us that an Argyle survey found that residents overwhelmingly “hate the houses”. One only has to walk through the suburb’s streets and alleyways to see why.

Our article also cited comments by residents who said that streets like Proctor Way were not the success story that Latham and the media were claiming, and who demanded more government funding in the area, not less.

You provide no evidence to refute our conclusion that Latham’s job creation schemes are unviable and that they constitute no substitute for public spending to create decent services and jobs in the area. We reported accurately that the gardening and maintenance service employs just one full-time worker and that the Laundromat and Coffee Shop rely on volunteer labour and charity to stay afloat.

You suggest that the WSWs should “assist these people to establish a more viable business model” and argue that the Triple C Catering service should bid for tenders to run school canteens. Creating a “viable business model” means competing on price with the large catering firms, thus having to pay lower wages and drive up labour productivity. Just to stay afloat in the capitalist market, such “models” would require Claymore residents to be exploited as volunteers or cheap labour.

When Mike Head, the Socialist Equality Party candidate for Werriwa,

and a campaign team returned to Claymore last week to show the WSWs article, and your objections, to residents, they told us about the latest installment in Latham’s private sector “success” story. The small, rundown local shopping centre was sold to a private developer, who was supposedly going to upgrade and improve it. However, the only real change was that shop rents were increased. As a result, the supermarket closed, and this month a new owner announced it was not viable to reopen it. People without cars now face \$20 taxi bills to haul their groceries from Eagle Vale or Campbelltown.

Residents who spoke to the campaign team confirmed the correctness of our article. Michael, an injured worker who has lived in Claymore for five years, commented: “I haven’t heard anyone who has agreed with Latham’s talk of the Argyle Community Housing as a model way out for people. I don’t know where he is getting his information. What is needed here are decent services, repairs to the houses, safety and security.

“Claymore is not well off, not like it should be. Security is lacking, there’s not a lot for people to do—they just have to sit in their houses day in and day out. They are not able to pick themselves up by their own bootlaces, as Latham claims. This is a landing place, rather than a take-off place. It has been like that for a lot of years. What is Latham going to do with the people who can’t climb the ‘ladder of opportunity’? These are conditions that both parties have created over years.

“I have been told myself not to work, because I have a broken knee, but I still force myself to go to casual jobs in the city, to support my family and because I have debts. So, I do a little work, my knee gets worse and my surgeon says don’t do it, but I have to. Centrelink says I am too injured to do a course as well. So I dose myself up on painkillers and go and work, because there’s not a lot else for us.

“Living on welfare payments, you can’t afford the things you need. Everything, even basic items like food, is so high-priced, and always going up. So what do you do? To travel to the city or Parramatta takes hours a day. To work in the Campbelltown area you have to have a vehicle, you are told, because most of the jobs are away from public transport.”

Richard Butt, who was quoted in the earlier article, stood by everything he had told the WSWs and added: “I went to the local paper to ask them to do a follow-up story on the closure of the supermarket, but no-one wants to move in there. So much for Latham’s model. No one from the private sector is going to spend the money upgrading facilities in an area like this. Government money is needed.”

Finally, in your letter you accuse the WSWs of playing “directly into the hands of those who believe welfare is abused by people in areas of Claymore”. On the contrary, our article shows that the problems faced by people in Claymore, unemployed or employed, are the product of the policies of successive Labor and Liberal governments. Again, it is Mark Latham who has portrayed welfare recipients, including single mothers, as individually responsible for unemployment, crime and the poor education of children. This is bound up with his corporate agenda, outlined in his 1998 book *Civilising Global Capital*: punishing the poor and forcing working people into cheap labour in order to satisfy the requirements of global investors.

Our perspective is the opposite. We are fighting for the reorganisation of economic and social life along genuinely egalitarian and democratic, that is, socialist lines. We say that every working person must be guaranteed a well-paid and secure job, or a social security benefit sufficient to raise a family in comfort. To guarantee full employment, a massive program of public works must be established to provide decent housing, essential health care, education and other community services. Areas like Claymore are a good place to begin: building new homes and establishing decent transport, providing facilities for young people to begin realising their physical, creative and intellectual potential, constructing high quality facilities for the aged, the sick and the disabled, and providing workers

with worthwhile, enjoyable and properly paid jobs.

Sincerely,

Jake Skeers

World Socialist Web Site



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact