

Australia: SEP holds public meeting in Werriwa in lead up to federal election

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The Socialist Equality Party held a successful public meeting on Sunday, ahead of the federal election on October 9. The Sydney meeting was addressed by the SEP's four candidates in New South Wales, Nick Beams and Terry Cook for the Senate, James Cogan for the eastern suburbs seat of Kingsford Smith, and Mike Head for Werriwa. Held in the outer-west, working class suburb of Ingleburn—part of the Werriwa electorate—the event was attended by SEP supporters, readers of the *World Socialist Web Site*, and workers and students who had earlier met with the party's campaign teams.

The SEP is the only political party to hold a public meeting in Werriwa, or any working class area of Sydney, in the course of the current election campaign. In other words, it is the only party encouraging the broadest possible discussion on all of the critical issues facing ordinary people.

James Cogan addressed the audience first, and explained that the SEP maintained that the central question in the election was the criminal invasion and occupation of Iraq. The war, he said, was not the result of mistaken intelligence. The campaign surrounding Iraq's "weapons of mass destruction" was nothing more than a pretext, manufactured to justify long held US ambitions to control Iraq's oil resources and establish its dominance of the Middle East.

"The Iraq war has produced atrocities unseen since Vietnam," Cogan declared. "The estimates of Iraqi military deaths during the invasion begin at 10,000, with as many as 10,000 civilian deaths as well. One estimate is that at many as 37,000 civilians were killed by the actions of the occupation between March 20, 2003 and the end of October 2003. The US-installed Iraqi Health Ministry estimates 3,487 Iraqis were killed between April and September this year, and another 13,720 injured. The ministry estimated that two-thirds of these casualties were inflicted by the US occupation forces."

The SEP candidate said that the party demanded the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all Australian, US and other foreign troops. This position contrasted with that of the Greens and Democrats, who argue that the occupation must continue, under a UN banner, until "stability" was imposed. These parties, Cogan told the audience, "accept and are propagating another lie of the Bush administration to justify the war—that it was, in some way, aimed at 'liberating' the Iraqi people from oppression. The invasion was not to bring liberation, but to replace the oppression of Hussein's regime with the direct oppression of the US military."

Cogan also highlighted a significant article in the *Bulletin* magazine on September 21, "Howard's secret strike force". The piece quoted Aldo Borgu, former defence analyst for three coalition governments, who said that the US may soon request an additional 1,200 Australian troops for operations in Iraq. The *Bulletin* noted that such a request would be extremely difficult for either a Labor or coalition government to refuse. In this event, Cogan warned, the Greens and Democrats could provide the deployment with a humanitarian gloss, just as they did when the Howard government moved into East Timor in 1999.

Mike Head explained why the SEP was fielding a candidate in Werriwa, the electorate of Labor leader Mark Latham. The party's decision demonstrated its complete rejection of the position held by the Greens and the Socialist Alliance—a grouping of middle class radical protest groups—that Labor represented a "lesser evil" in the election. "In complete opposition to these parties, we have placed at the centre of our campaign the need for the political independence of the working class," Head said. "A review of the experiences that the working class has had with the Labor Party over the past century demonstrates that the most crucial issue in this election is to break from any remaining illusions in Labor and the entire parliamentary establishment, and lay the basis for building a new mass socialist party."

The SEP candidate noted that when he stood against Bob Hawke in the 1981 federal election in the Melbourne electorate of Wills, he warned workers that the promotion of the former Australian Council of Trade Unions leader represented a new right-wing lurch for the Labor Party. Between 1983 and 1996, the Hawke and Keating Labor governments imposed a program of deregulation and economic restructuring that had devastating consequences for the working class.

Now, Head continued, "we are standing against Latham because he signifies a new, even more right-wing turn by Labor." The opposition leader's social program was even more vicious than that of the Howard government. "His so-called 'ladder of opportunity' regime amounts to turning back the clock completely to the nineteenth century notions of 'individual responsibility'", Head said. "Latham told the Labor Party conference this January that, according to his mother, the world is made up of 'hard workers' and 'slackers'. That is, those who don't work—or who do not accept low-paid jobs under any terms and conditions—are slackers who do not deserve welfare. Latham's perspective is to herd the jobless, sole parents, the disabled and retired workers off pensions and benefits and into cheap labour."

Terry Cook, the party's candidate for the Senate in New South Wales, spoke on the question of the political role of the trade unions. An increasingly desperate Howard, he noted, was attempting to scare voters by warning of a return to the "dark days" of militant unionism and class warfare, seen in the 1950s and 60s.

"That Howard even contemplates that these claims will spook masses of people to support him at the ballot box is just one more example of the great divide that exists between the everyday experiences of ordinary people and the thinking of those who inhabit official political circles," Cook declared. "In fact, raising the possibility that today's moribund, decaying and openly class collaborationist union organisations will wage militant class warfare is completely ridiculous—something akin to claiming that life can be breathed back into a long-time dead corpse, or that beating a dead horse will make it gallop."

The intensified integration of the global economy since the mid-1970s had shattered the national reformist platform of the unions, Cook explained. Rather than pressuring employers and governments for social

concessions, the unions disciplined their own members to improve productivity and boost their employers' "global competitiveness". This function had been evident since the 1980s, when the unions played a critical role in diffusing workers' opposition to the right-wing program of Hawke and Keating.

"The Socialist Equality Party is for the revival in the working class of the most militant forms of struggle and the creation of organisations at every level, such as factory committees and committees of struggle, that will unite workers throughout entire industries and communities to wage an uncompromising struggle in defence of jobs, working and social conditions and basic rights," Cook said. "Whatever organisations arise, however, they can only serve the working class as a means of struggle to the degree that they are based on a perspective that challenges the dictates and framework of the capitalist profit system."

Nick Beams, national secretary of the SEP, who heads the party's Senate ticket in NSW, delivered the final report. In his wide ranging speech, he assessed the objective basis for the struggle for socialism. Beams discussed the claim that socialism had failed, and the position of Francis Fukuyama, who argued in his 1989 essay, *The End of History*, that liberal democracy represented the culmination of mankind's historical evolution. Beams insisted that, against those who equated socialism with Stalinism, "socialism has not failed, it has yet to be realised, and upon its fate rests the fate of mankind as a whole".

The internal contradictions of capitalism—principally the clash between the global economy and the nation-state system upon which bourgeois rule rested—were leading to ever more destructive inter-imperialist rivalries. Socialism or barbarism, Beams concluded, was the choice confronting humanity. A progressive resolution of the international crisis required the complete democratisation of all social relations, and the popular control of mankind's economic and social powers. This was the perspective of socialism in the twenty-first century.

Following the candidates' reports, an audience member asked what the consequences would be if foreign troops immediately withdrew from Iraq, and what could be done to help the people of that country. In response, Beams said that the problems facing the Iraqi people would only be resolved with the development of a political movement uniting the Iraqi working class with workers in the US, Australia and around the world. The precondition for this development was a common struggle against imperialism. Only on the basis of a socialist perspective could the international working class help the Iraqi people defeat the US occupation, as well as overcome the deeply reactionary and anti-communist Islamic fundamentalist movements that have emerged over the past several decades.

The meeting concluded with audience members contributing to the SEP's Election Fund. Those present were also encouraged to assist the party's efforts in the final week of the campaign.

WSWS reporters spoke with several people who attended the meeting. Diana, a pensioner living in the western suburb of Minto, said that her area was marked by growing social inequality. "At Minto you have the privatisation of Department of Housing properties, and then you have squalor left behind. You can see the discrepancy between the rich and the poor just by crossing the road. There are millions and millions of dollars in social equity such as rent which is being taken by the Department of Housing, but they're cutting back on the maintenance structure, saying that they don't have enough funding. It's a cover up—they've got the money.

"The Labor Party isn't doing anything, we need an option. We need a better party, to bring to attention what people's lives are like, so that they get their human rights and respect. People must stand up and say 'no'—this is not the way it's done. This way of life is devoid of any humanistic or humanitarian concern. Because we're not looking after each other. It's the survival of the fittest—the rich over the poor."

Diana noted that ordinary people were paying very little attention to the official campaigns. "At the council elections [held earlier this year] in Claymore they had a truck with a loud hailer and it was saying 'today is election day—if you do not vote you will get fined'. It shows how they have to round people up to get them out to vote. 'We'll attack you, we'll fine you if you don't do what we ask you to do.' And I thought—where's the democracy?"

A University of New South Wales student, formerly from India, said: "I really liked the last speech [from Nick Beams], because I'm still in the process of clearing my doubts about socialism, so I really appreciated it," he said. "The main problem is that people don't know what is happening. They're educated but they're not *actually* educated. And the main thing we need to do is go out there and tell people what's happening. And that's what the Socialist Equality Party is doing, I appreciate that.

"Before I talked with you guys I thought that Labor were better than the Liberals, but if you really think about it there's no difference between them. Whether its Labor or the Liberals, it won't make a significant difference—in the end it will all turn out the same way. They've got similar agendas, they're both promoting the same things. So the more I listen to you, the more I agree we need to change the entire system."



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