

The socialist alternative to war and inequality

Vote 1 Socialist Equality Party in the Australian elections

The Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
7 October 2004

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls on working people, students, unemployed and retirees to vote for the SEP candidates in Saturday's federal election in Australia: Nick Beams and Terry Cook for the Senate in New South Wales, James Cogan in the Sydney eastern suburbs seat of Kingsford Smith, Mike Head in the Sydney western suburbs electorate of Werriwa and Peter Byrne in the northern Melbourne seat of Batman.

The SEP candidates are the only ones advancing a genuine socialist alternative to the official political consensus of war, the subordination of all aspects of life to the corporate dictates of the "free market", and the dismantling of fundamental democratic rights.

Throughout the six-week election campaign, the working class has been completely disenfranchised. The Liberal government, the Labor opposition and the array of minor pro-capitalist parties have all joined ranks to suppress any serious discussion on the primary issues confronting the working class.

One of the central features of the campaign has been that the deep-going and widespread opposition to the Howard government's criminal participation in the ongoing US-led war against Iraq has had no outlet within the framework of parliamentary politics. At the same time, the economic insecurity and poverty afflicting millions of people has been ignored. And barely a mention has been made of the destruction of civil and political liberties—from the indefinite incarceration of refugees, to the introduction of unprecedented Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) detention powers, to the Howard government's complicity in the imprisonment of David Hicks and Mamdouh Habib at the Guantanamo Bay US naval base.

The mass media is totally complicit in preventing any airing of these issues. It is noteworthy that throughout the entire campaign, no major newspaper or network has reported the SEP's campaign and, in particular, our demand for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all Australian, US and foreign troops from occupied Iraq and the prosecution of Prime Minister Howard and his senior ministers for war crimes.

The conspiracy of silence throughout the election reflects an essential unity within the Australian political establishment. There is a complete disconnect between the right-wing program and agenda of the mainstream parties and the lives and concerns of ordinary people. The majority of the population is alienated from the political system and sees no way of advancing their interests and aspirations within it.

Legal requirements oblige voters to indicate a vote, in order of preference, to every candidate on the ballot paper. The SEP, however, is not advising voters on how to allocate their preferences. To do so would be to give credence to the claim that the policies and program of Labor, the Greens, or one or another party or individual, represents a "lesser evil".

The entire structure of compulsory preferential voting is profoundly anti-

democratic. It is designed to entrench the existing two-party system and promote the conception that the working class must, in the final analysis, choose between Labor and the Liberal-led conservative coalition.

Other anti-democratic electoral laws mean our candidates' names will appear on the ballot papers without being identified as representatives of the Socialist Equality Party. Faced with eroding popular support, the major parties have joined hands since 1983 to pass legislation that place onerous restrictions on the registration of new parties, including requiring them to hand over to the authorities the names and addresses of 500 members.

The character of the campaign and the electoral system itself underscores the key issue posed in the 2004 Australian election: the need for working people to make a fundamental break with the entire parliamentary framework and strike out on a new political road. The working class needs to establish its political independence and construct its own mass international socialist party.

The Howard Liberal government ranks as one of the most reviled in Australian history. It lied to the population in order to justify participating in the invasion and occupation of Iraq. Its eight years in office have been marked by misinformation, populist demagoguery, and a free market agenda that has enriched business and the wealthy at the expense of the social services, working conditions and wages of the vast majority.

Millions of Australians now view with utter disgust the way in which desperate asylum seekers from countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq have been treated by the Howard government. Every lie and fabrication that Howard advanced during the 2001 election to whip up hysteria over boat arrivals—for example, that refugees had thrown their children overboard and that they could all be terrorists—has disintegrated.

This week it was confirmed that two-thirds of the mainly Afghan and Iraqi asylum seekers whose boats were intercepted by naval warships in late 2001, and who were transported to detention camps on remote Pacific islands, were eventually found to be genuine refugees. Among them were nearly all the people that Howard falsely accused of tossing infants into the sea.

Former immigration minister Philip Ruddock, who was hailed as the hero of Howard's election win in 2001, is now such an electoral liability that he has hardly been seen in the current campaign.

Conscious of the mass disaffection, the Liberal strategy in the course of the 2004 election has been to use multi-million dollar hand-outs to placate the grievances of specific layers of society, combined with another scare campaign. Howard's warnings that home loan interest rates will rise under a Labor government, however, only highlight the mirage-like character of the economic bubble of soaring property prices and household debt on which his government has rested for the past eight years. It is true, as Howard asserts, that millions of people will face

crippling repayment burdens if interest rates rise even slightly over the next few years. But that is the imminent prospect—dictated by debt-laden global financial markets—under a Liberal or Labor government.

Above all, the Liberal campaign for reelection has relied on the lack of enthusiasm among the population for the so-called alternative—Labor and its leader Mark Latham.

If the media opinion polls are any guide, Labor may hand Howard another victory in what should be, by any traditional measure, an unloseable election.

Latham's characterisation of the Iraq war as a "mistake"—from which he wants to help Washington recover—demonstrates the purely tactical character of his differences with Howard. He has no opposition to the US occupation and its ongoing war crimes. Insofar as he would pull out any Australian forces from Iraq, it would be to make them available for deployment in the Asia-Pacific region, to reinforce the strategic and commercial interests of corporate Australia, under US protection.

To this end, Latham has declared that, if elected, he would be the "best friend" of Washington of any Australian prime minister in history. Without a whimper from the Labor "lefts", Latham and his defence spokesman, former leader Kim Beazley, have sought to outbid Howard on military spending, boosting the new powers of ASIO and the other security agencies, and maintaining the mandatory detention of refugees.

While keeping virtually silent on the Iraq war, refugees and democratic rights, Latham has made several populist attempts to differentiate himself from Howard. His main pitch has been a scheme—dubbed "Medicare Gold"—to provide universal hospital insurance for Australian citizens aged 75 and over. Yet, more than anything else, the proposal underscores the disgraceful state of the public health system, in which many uninsured patients wait more than a year for badly needed surgery.

As Howard has had no difficulty pointing out, Latham's promise to end the queues for the elderly is a fraud, unless billions more dollars are poured into public health to build new facilities, provide extra beds and train new medical staff. Howard's answer has been that it is impossible to supply such essential resources, leaving patients no choice except to purchase private insurance. But Labor, too, has pledged to maintain the \$3.7 billion annual subsidy paid to private health funds, ensuring that the private hospital chains, medical clinics and pharmaceutical giants will continue to prosper at the expense of public health.

At the same time, Latham has revealed the vicious content of his central slogan—the "ladder of opportunity". It amounts to turning back the clock to nineteenth century conceptions of "individual responsibility". His perspective is to force the jobless, sole parents, the disabled and retired workers off pensions and benefits and into low-paid jobs, private business ventures or voluntary work to increase their work experience.

Labor once used to contest elections by claiming it could ameliorate the plight of the working class, including the most disadvantaged and impoverished. In this election, for the first time, it has advanced a blatantly socially regressive policy. Labor's tax and family benefit package would leave the lowest income families, either unemployed or earning a wage of less than \$35,000, hundreds of dollars a year worse off than under the Howard government's present system. When challenged to defend his punitive policy, Latham was unapologetic, declaring that a Labor government would give single mothers a "chance" to work, but not a "choice."

Given the lack of any real differences between Labor and Liberal, the official election campaign has become the most farcical in living memory, with bemused voters being inundated with an avalanche of promises that bears no relationship to their everyday experiences and concerns. Both major parties have indulged in a last-ditch orgy of vote-buying to the tune of \$60 billion over the next four years. Apart from the fact that few people even know what they are, these pledges have one thing in common. They offer further subsidies to boost the profits of private operators, at the

expense of public services, whether in health, education, child care or aged care.

With the opinion polls indicating that Labor's support is still languishing at, or even below, the near-record low of 39 percent it registered in the 1996 landslide defeat of the Keating government, Latham is relying on Green preference votes in order to gain office. His efforts culminated in this week's pledge to conduct a review of Tasmania's forests with a view to saving some areas from logging. Greens leader Bob Brown immediately hailed the plan, continuing to push the illusion that Labor would be more likely than Howard to put environmental concerns before corporate profits.

The rise of the Greens—now polling as high as 12 percent—is a symptom of the breakup of the two-party system that has prevailed in Australia for the past century.

To some extent, the Greens have benefited from the plunge in support for the Australian Democrats, who have occupied the "balance of power" between Labor and Liberal in the Senate since the early 1980s. The Democrats have never recovered from their backing for the Howard government's introduction of the regressive Goods and Services Tax in 1998.

The chief factor in this surge in the numbers intending to vote for the Greens stems largely from its claims to oppose the Iraq war and to advance more progressive social policies than Labor. But the truth of the matter is that the Greens—like Labor—support the UN-endorsed occupation of Iraq. Like Latham, Greens' leader Brown has advocated repositioning troops in the Asia-Pacific region, in line with his backing for Howard's neo-colonial military interventions in East Timor and the Solomon Islands.

The Greens are a pro-capitalist party, reflecting the interests of small and national-based sections of business. Senator Brown has made it abundantly clear that his aspiration is to become a coalition partner with either a Howard or Latham government. At the Greens' campaign launch, he declared that his party would "hold the line" during any future budgetary crisis as it did in the late 1980s, when it collaborated with the Labor government in Tasmania to impose the greatest cuts to public service jobs in that state's history.

As for the Socialist Alliance (SA)—an amalgam of various middle class radical protest groups—the election campaign has exposed it as little more than a cheerleader for the Greens and Labor. The SA has aligned itself almost completely with the Greens, to the point of claiming, in the latest editorial of its journal *Seeing Red*, that the Greens can evolve into a party that is socialist "in deed if not in word". Like the Greens, the SA calls for a Latham government, arguing that "massive pressure" can prevent Latham's Labor from following in the footsteps of Hawke and Keating. Together with the Greens, Socialist Alliance functions to disorientate the rising social and political discontent and channel it back into the safe waters of the parliamentary order.

In complete opposition to the nationalist and opportunist conceptions advanced by the Greens and Socialist Alliance, the SEP has placed at the centre of its campaign the unification of working people of all countries, based on a common international and socialist strategy.

Our election campaign has been conducted as part of a series of initiatives by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), the world Trotskyist party. In the United States, the SEP is standing candidates in the 2004 presidential elections, and, earlier this year, ICFI candidates were fielded in the European and Sri Lankan elections.

All these campaigns have stressed that a genuine counteroffensive against war and social reaction requires a unified international political movement, armed with a conscious political orientation and perspective, which stops at nothing short of abolishing the capitalist profit system.

Throughout our campaign, the SEP has held public meetings—in Sydney,

Melbourne and Newcastle—to open up a serious discussion in the working class on our policies. Our candidates have spoken at every available forum and contributed a stream of articles, statements and comments, published on the *World Socialist Web Site*, to clarify our perspective and our attitude to every other political tendency. In some places, notably Latham's electorate of Werriwa, SEP candidates and supporters have had to fight for the basic democratic and constitutional right to campaign for support, in the face of threats by police, security guards and local council rangers.

The SEP has advanced a clear socialist alternative, based on the complete reorganisation of economic, social and political life along genuinely egalitarian, democratic and socialist lines. We have outlined the need for public ownership of the basic means of production and finance, to liberate them from the destructive and irrational grip of the private profit system. We have insisted upon the right of all working people to well-paid and secure jobs, decent social support, and free and universal access to first-class public hospitals, schools, universities, child care facilities and aged care services.

While indefatigably defending every basic democratic right, we have explained that genuine democracy requires real control by ordinary people over economic decision-making and the circumstances of their daily lives. Ultimately, as we have argued, democracy can be achieved only through the political mobilisation of an informed and articulate working population in the struggle for socialism.

From the beginning, the SEP has explained that our campaign is not about votes, but about ideas; restoring the great liberating ideas of Marxism and socialism to the centre of the struggles of the international working class. We are confident that our program is intersecting with the deeply-felt sentiments of young people and workers worldwide. We urge all our readers not only to vote SEP, but to participate with us in the final days of our campaign, contribute to the development of the *World Socialist Web Site* and, above all, give serious consideration to joining the Socialist Equality Party.



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