

Australia: SEP candidate for Werriwa, Mike Head, addresses university forum

Our reporters
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As part of the Socialist Equality Party's campaign for Werriwa, in Sydney's outer southwestern suburbs, SEP candidate Mike Head spoke at two candidates' forums this week. On Wednesday, he addressed a University of Western Sydney (UWS) Students Association forum at the Parramatta campus entitled "The Federal Elections and the Future of UWS". As well as Head, representatives from Labor, the Democrats, Greens and the Socialist Alliance spoke. Local Liberal MP Ross Cameron declined to attend.

Head explained that the SEP alone was advocating socialism as the only alternative to the program of war, the sacrifice of all social programs, including education, to market forces and the destruction of basic democratic rights. While the forum was focused on the issue of universities, he made clear that the central issue in the federal election was the eruption of US militarism and its consequences for students and working people around the world.

None of the other speakers mentioned the invasion of Iraq throughout the two-hour debate. Their silence mirrored the efforts of both major parties, Labor and Liberal, and the mass media to stifle any discussion on the implications of the illegal war.

There were cheers throughout the audience of about 50 students and academics when the SEP candidate declared that Howard and his ministers should be placed on trial as war criminals. He warned that the occupation of Iraq signalled a new period of war and colonialism, which contained the seeds of another world war.

Head, who is standing for the seat of Werriwa against Labor leader Mark Latham, said: "We reject Mark Latham's characterisation of the war as a 'mistake'. It represents an historic war crime. Latham does not oppose the US occupation of Iraq. He only wants to

withdraw a small number of the Australian troops deployed in the Persian Gulf in order to use them in the Asia-Pacific region, where corporate Australia wants to establish its own mini-empire, under US protection."

Turning to education, Head, a senior lecturer in law at UWS, said: "The SEP stands unconditionally for the right to free, first class education for all young people, from kindergarten to higher education. This is an elementary democratic right in modern society."

Head exposed the claim made by Labor's representative, Parramatta candidate Julie Owens, that Labor stood for equal access to higher education because it had abolished university fees under the Whitlam government in the 1970s. He pointed out that the next Labor government, under Bob Hawke, reintroduced fees.

"We condemn both the Howard government and the previous Labor government for the relentless assault on students and universities, which began in 1987, when the Hawke government abolished free tertiary education, first for overseas students and then for all students."

Head said students, like the entire working class, faced a crisis of political perspective. This year they had seen cash-starved universities announce crippling fee hikes, despite nationwide protests, including occupations of university premises. In many cases, universities had imposed the maximum 25 percent rise in HECS (Higher Education Contribution Scheme) payments permitted by the Howard government's Higher Education Reform Act, passed last December.

"The rush to raise fees confirms that the legislation represents a qualitative turning point in the 'user pays' agenda that was initially introduced by the Hawke government in the 1980s. Increasingly, the norm will be that students will have to pay full fees to get into the

course of their choice, or even to simply go to university.

“Despite the Labor Party’s hypocritical claims to oppose the legislation, Mark Latham spelt out the logic of the government’s scheme as far back as November 1999, when he proposed a four-tier university system.

“On top would be a ‘small but significant group’ of private universities, followed by a second layer of high-prestige institutions primarily relying upon full fee-paying international students and other private income sources. The third tier would consist of universities continuing to scrape by on HECS funds as they do at present. On the bottom would be ‘free’ public universities—like UWS—providing short, vocational degrees in ‘depressed regional areas’. The Howard government’s legislation represents a major step in this direction.”

Head pointed out that the mounting assault on public education over the past two decades was deeply rooted in the crisis of the private profit system worldwide. Genuinely free, universal and first-class education for all could only be realised through the complete reorganisation of economic and social life along socialist lines.

He concluded by emphasising that the SEP campaign was not focused on votes, preference deals, and discussions about which party might or might not constitute the lesser evil. It was about ideas; great socialist and Marxist ideas. “We are confident that under today’s conditions, these ideas will increasingly appeal to young people and working people worldwide.”

Responding to Head’s remarks, the other candidates, except for Labor’s, claimed to support the right to free education. Each suggested, however, that this could be achieved within the current economic framework, and advocated electing and placing pressure on a Labor government. Insisting that policies had to be “realistic,” the Greens Senate aspirant John Kaye vehemently disagreed with Head’s suggestion that overseas students should also have free access to Australian universities.

Students and academics in the audience, however, expressed strong opposition to the “user pays” system that has transformed tertiary education into a multi-billion dollar business. Owens, for example, was condemned for defending the Hawke government’s

imposition of the HECS fee system. One law student, a single mother, said the HECS debt that she had incurred would mean that her children would not be able to afford university. Along with others in the audience, she challenged Owens to reconcile her claim that Labor stood for a university entrance on the basis of merit, with its support for a user-pays system. After twisting and turning, Owens finally admitted that she fully supported the HECS system, declaring that she and the student would simply have to disagree.

The most revealing response, however, came from the Socialist Alliance candidate, Kylie Moon. Her silence on the war was matched by her failure to utter the word “socialism”. Among her proposals for funding public education was to halve defence spending. Implicit in her suggestion was that the remainder of the military budget should be retained. Finally, reacting to Head’s comments, she declared that it was all very well to speak about “political ideals”, but the real issue was taking “action”. This was a statement of classic opportunism—that socialist principles and policies, articulating the objective interests of the vast majority, must be put aside in favour of what is considered “realistic” within the profit system itself.

Earlier in the week, Head spoke at a Western Sydney Community Forum on *Silencing Dissent*, a recent study which showed that 70 percent of non-government and community welfare organisations now report that their ability to comment on official policy has been restricted by threats of government funding withdrawal.

Significantly, Head was the only candidate to attend the forum, even though all other candidates across western Sydney were invited. He said the SEP stood unconditionally opposed to the efforts of federal and state governments, both Liberal and Labor, to intimidate and stifle NGOs, welfare advocates and all other critics of official social policy. He said the source of such attacks on basic democratic rights lay in the mounting social inequality in Australia and worldwide, and the eruption of a new period of war and colonialism with the invasion of Iraq.



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