

SEP campaigns in Mark Latham's seat:

War, social conditions dominate discussion in Australian working class

Our reporters
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Over the past four weeks of campaigning by the Socialist Equality Party and its candidate, Mike Head, for the outer southwestern Sydney seat of Werriwa in the Australian federal election, two issues have dominated discussions with workers, young people and students: the war in Iraq and the social crisis.

Werriwa, which has been held since 1994 by Labor Party leader Mark Latham, has one of the fastest growing, youngest and most disadvantaged populations of any electorate in Australia. Stretching from Liverpool in the north to Campbelltown in the south, it covers sprawling working class suburbs. Everywhere, the impact of two decades of regressive social policy under the Labor governments of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating from 1983 to 1996 and the Howard Liberal government can be seen.

Many young people, in particular, can no longer find secure, well-paying work, and have little hope of ever buying their own homes. If they want to study, they face annual fees of up to \$1,000 at Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges or crippling Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) fees at the University of Western Sydney (UWS), where protracted funding cuts also mean over-crowded classes, restricted course choices and sub-standard library and other facilities.

The SEP is standing in Werriwa against Latham in opposition to all the so-called "third" parties—the Greens, Democrats and Socialist Alliance—that are calling for the election of a Latham government and claiming that it would represent a "lesser evil" to the Howard government.

Since the October 9 election was called four weeks ago, Latham and Labor have not called a single election meeting in Werriwa, or provided any other forum for ordinary people to express their concerns. Efforts by the Students Association at the UWS Campbelltown campus, where Head lectures in law, to hold a candidates' debate at the university have failed. Except for the SEP, no other party, including Labor, has accepted the invitation.

This contempt for democratic debate sums up Labor's indifference toward the plight of students and working people, as well as the concern of the mainstream parties to avoid any discussion on the war and social inequality.

The SEP campaign has had to directly challenge the erosion of democratic rights since the declaration of the "war on terror". Police, security guards and local council rangers, acting at the behest of shopping mall owners, federal employment agency officials, and local Labor Party-led authorities, have made numerous attempts to stop SEP teams from campaigning for support in public places.

Police were called to halt campaigns at Minto Mall and Glenquarie town centre; security guards demanded that SEP supporters leave Casula Mall and the Miller shopping centre; and council rangers even ordered SEP supporters off the public footpath outside Centrelink offices in Liverpool and Ingleburn.

The SEP wrote to Campbelltown council general manager Paul Tosi to protest against the Ingleburn incident, to request that he instruct his rangers to desist from further interference with the campaign, and to call on the council to permit election campaigns to proceed.

The letter stated: "This is a serious infringement of the basic democratic and constitutional rights of the SEP—and, indeed, any other political party or election candidate—to both inform and win support from voters in Werriwa. Conducting political discussion in public areas is a long-standing tradition in Australia, and a critical aspect of the right to freedom of speech. Moreover, it is protected by the Australian Constitution, which, the High Court has ruled, includes implied freedoms of political communication, association and participation in parliamentary elections."

In his reply, Tosi denied there was any democratic right to campaign, even in an election period, and defended his officers' insistence that council permits had to be obtained for each event. Nevertheless, council rangers have made no further attempt to enforce this edict, and SEP supporters have continued to campaign broadly across the electorate.

While campaigning in the main street of Campbelltown, Mike Head spoke to Ben, 20, a part-time music industry road-crew member, who had been unable to find regular work since leaving school. Ben said he had taken part in last year's global marches against the Iraq war, and wanted to know why the invasion had taken place anyway, despite the opposition of

millions of people worldwide. He opposed Latham's call for Australian troops to be deployed in the Asia-Pacific region.

At the Miller shopping centre in Green Valley, Toufic, a young worker, told SEP campaigners he had watched the debate between Howard and Latham and had waited for Latham to say he opposed the war in Iraq. "But he said nothing. I thought: does this mean he will follow in Howard's steps if elected?" Toufic said the situation in Iraq would only worsen until all foreign troops were pulled out. He added: "Australia is now a terrorist target because of the war in Iraq. The only safety is to get the troops out."

At the Claymore shops, Michael, an injured worker, told Head: "I get so angry about the war in Iraq. I've been called a terrorist at the train station, just because I've got a shaved head. The government is using fear to get its brownie points, and that is causing people headaches. Latham has got all these local problems to fix, so he shouldn't be calling for troops to be used in the Asia-Pacific region either. War is so costly."

Many students at UWS Campbelltown campus voiced their opposition to the war. One student welcomed the SEP's refusal to allocate voting preferences to Labor or Liberal, or any other party. She said she strongly objected to the preferential voting system, which forces voters to cast a ballot in favour of one of the major parties, whose policies are indistinguishable.

Across Werriwa, residents voiced disgust at the prevailing social conditions. At the Glenquarie shopping centre, a mother who had fled from war-torn Yugoslavia told SEP campaigners she was shocked by the poor state of the schools in Macquarie Fields—those in Yugoslavia had been "palaces" by comparison, she said—and the widespread asthma among local children.

Many unemployed workers complained about being forced to toil for \$5 a week on "work-for-the-dole" schemes that did not lead to jobs. Instead, they said, these schemes used the jobless to perform tasks that should be fully paid. Commuters and students condemned the state Labor government for running down the railway system to the point where trains were often late or cancelled, making it doubly difficult to study or hold down a job.

Workers reported being employed in factories year after year as casuals, never knowing from one day to the next whether they would be required to work. One worker was still denied permanency after seven years, and only averaged five days' pay per fortnight. UWS students spoke of working long hours to cover their living and studying expenses, while recent UWS graduates explained that they had to work on Sundays to keep their jobs.

Campaigning in Liverpool, SEP teams discovered a particularly bitter legacy of Latham's policies. We spoke to families and friends of some of the 100 or so council workers laid off at Liverpool Council while Latham was mayor in the early 1990s.

Another major concern was the deterioration of the public health system, notably at the area's two major hospitals,

Liverpool and Campbelltown. At Miller, Toufic's mother explained that her husband had cancer and initially received poor treatment at Liverpool hospital, where he had waited in the emergency room for two days.

A nurse at Camden hospital, near Campbelltown, told Head: "Emergency ward patients at Campbelltown hospital are in corridors waiting for anything up to eight hours on ambulance trolleys. They're just sitting there. They're fed there, they get their medications there, and they are discharged from the trolleys. It is just terrible.

"At Camden, the government is downgrading the hospital. The decision is being made in October whether to make it an urgent care centre, so it opens only 16 hours a day and the doors are shut at night. Patients that are left there will have to be transferred to Campbelltown, which is pretty awful.

"The Walker inquiry [into 19 patient deaths at Campbelltown and Camden hospitals] has recommended the closure—to stop ambulances going to Camden. So, that has happened and now they have decided to cut services back even further. But it is not the fault of the staff, it is the fault of governments, state and federal, that have failed to provide the necessary funding.

"They are diverting all the funds into private medical funds and private hospitals. Private hospitals can't take a lot of these patients. They don't have 24-hour medical cover, for example, or cardiac beds, intensive care beds. The government is trying to say that patients can go to medical centres, but the great majority of people who need beds are very sick. They need to be admitted, but there are no beds. The private hospitals only want the profitable areas that they can make money from. Health care should not be a business."



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