

Sydney meeting reviews Australian, US election results

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Nick Beams, the national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia), addressed a public meeting on December 7 on the political lessons of the Australian and US elections. Held at the University of Technology in the city centre, the meeting was attended by several workers, students and youth who participated in the SEP's election campaign, and who were keen to learn more about the program and perspective of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).

Beams opened his report by raising the common features of the election results in both countries. The Bush and Howard governments were deeply opposed by millions of people, but both were reelected with increased majorities. The outcomes, Beams noted, were greeted with a degree of shock and the question: "How could it happen?"

Beams' report was a considered answer to, and a rebuttal of the superficial assessments made by a range of political commentators and organisations.

In Australia, right-wing media analysts hailed the reelection of the Howard government on October 9 as a sign that ordinary people sympathised with its conservative program. So-called "left" commentators essentially agreed, but from the standpoint of denouncing the electorate as complacent and selfish. The reaction in the US to Bush's victory has proceeded along similar lines.

Beams pointed to the opinion polling highlighting the role of religious conceptions, or "values", in determining the way many Americans voted on November 2. One of the most striking aspects of American political life over the past 25 years, he said, has been the ability of the Republican Party—long viewed as the party of the corporate establishment and the privileged—to harness support from some of the most impoverished sections of society on issues such as opposition to abortion, gay marriage and gun control.

A parallel process was evident in Australia, where the Liberals, the traditional party of business, have been able to substantially increase their vote in working class areas, particularly where many households are struggling to pay off home mortgages. The Howard government conducted a fear campaign that a victory for the Labor Party opposition would lead to higher interest rates—a terrifying prospect for hundreds of thousands of families who can barely finance their current debt obligations.

To explain the reelection of Bush and Howard, however, Beams stressed it was not enough to simply point to these surface facts. It was necessary to trace the political situation back to its socio-economic roots and examine the experiences of the working class

in the last decades of the twentieth century.

"Why," Beams asked, "has the growth of economic insecurity, inequality, and social tensions taken the form of a growth of a religious sentiment and a kind of cultural backlash against what are seen as 'liberal' values. Why could the Democrats not counter the appeal made by the Republicans? What is the source of the hallucinatory power of religious sentiment? To simply ascribe the victory of the Republicans to the power of religious sentiments and their ability to mobilise them, is not an explanation of the Bush election victory, but merely another description of it..."

Beams proceeded to review what he described as the "most significant feature" of the last two decades: the collapse of the old labour movement in the face of the globalisation of capitalist production. The organisations that once claimed that lasting improvements in living standards could be achieved under capitalism, such as the Democrats and Labor, had universally abandoned their reformist agendas. In Australia, the Labor government from 1983 to 1996, with the open collaboration of the trade unions, deregulated the economy and implemented sweeping attacks on workers' conditions in order to satisfy the demands of globally mobile capital. Those sections of the working class that resisted were openly attacked by the state and the corporations.

The ability of the conservatives to draw support from sections of workers with religious and demagogic appeals was bound up with the fact that the Democrats and unions in the US, and the Labor Party and the trade union movement in Australia, had "ceased to function as a force which in any way advances an alternative socially progressive program".

The central task today, Beams stressed, was the political reeducation of the working class, the redevelopment of a broad socialist outlook and the construction of a mass movement fighting for the program of international socialism. This perspective had guided the intervention of the party in the Australian and the US elections.

Beams explained that the SEP campaigns were conducted in opposition to all those organisations that insisted that the working class—despite all its experiences—had to support Labor or the Democrats as a "lesser evil". Other tendencies had insisted that workers rally behind third party candidates such as Ralph Nader or the Australian Greens—all of whom advocated the defence of the profit system. Beams specifically dealt with the positions of radical author Tariq Ali, Alex Callinicos of the British Socialist Workers Party and the Socialist Alliance in Australia.

The Socialist Alliance had declared in an editorial just prior to the election that the Greens could evolve into an anti-capitalist party that fought for “socialism in deed, if not in word”. Beams observed that “in these few words are summed up the position of all the opportunist tendencies who believe that they can short cut and somehow cheat the historical process”. The history of the twentieth century had demonstrated that socialism could only develop as a consciously articulated program.

Beams posed the question: “how viable is this perspective?” Did not the global domination of US imperialism, and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, demonstrate that the achievement of socialism was impossible? In reply, he demonstrated that militarily, economically and socially, the United States was wracked by crisis arising from the central contradiction of world capitalism—between world economy and the nation-state system. The eruption of militarism stemmed not from its strength, but from a desperate attempt by the American ruling elite to offset the weakness and decline of US capitalism and establish its hegemony over all others.

The elections in both Australia and the US, Beams stated, “have revealed that the political divisions are not between the major parties, but between the official political apparatus and the vast mass of the population”. The period ahead, he concluded, “would provide no lack of opportunities to take forward the construction of a revolutionary alternative”.

The report was followed by a lively exchange of questions and answers between Beams and members of the audience. One noted that the election map in the US showed parallels between the slave states in the US before the American Civil War, and the states that were won by the Republicans in 2000 and 2004. He asked whether the underlying divisions in the country stretched back that far and whether there was the possibility of the US fracturing along similar lines to 1861.

Beams answered by explaining that the divisions in the US went beyond the resemblance to the Civil War map. The essential question was, what were the conflicts that led to the breakdown into civil war, and what were the conflicts wracking American society now. In 1861, the divisions were over slavery. Today, the fundamental division in the US was between labour and capital, most graphically revealed in the staggering inequalities of wealth and income, which have widened exponentially over the past 25 years.

Answering the simplistic explanations that the vote for the Bush administration reflected deeply-held agreement in the working class with its agenda, Beams stressed that the collapse of the old labour movement had produced the situation where the anger generated by inequality and insecurity could not, at this point, find progressive political expression. Large sections of the population had been left susceptible to the propaganda of religious fundamentalism and the right-wing backlash which has dominated the mass media.

Beams explained: “You only have the rise of these phenomena under conditions where the social anger and tension felt by millions of people cannot find an outlet. When it does find a progressive outlet, then the American working class will move, as Trotsky once said, with American speed and force.... Just as the

civil war sounded, as Marx said, the tocsin of the struggles of the European working class, the development of the struggles of the American working class in the coming period will be no less momentous.”

Another audience member asked why the Labor Party had been incapable before the elections of bringing forward coherent policies addressing health care, education or any of the other social issues facing millions of working people. Beams outlined the transformation of reformist parties such as Labor under the impact of globalization, explaining that they no longer sought to win government by advancing a program that would appeal to the mass of workers, but, rather, by seeking to convince the most powerful sections of the ruling class that they could take forward its agenda more effectively than the conservatives.

Beams cited the scare campaign of the Liberal government over interest rates. To oppose this would have required raising a direct challenge to the operations of the capitalist market. The irrational rise in property prices due to speculation throughout the 1990s had left millions of people with mortgages on the edge of financial ruin. Beams cited a recent study that found the largest number of abortions in Sydney were being performed on married women, who simply could not afford to take time off work to have children. To deal with the housing crisis a program was needed “that tackles the whole of the capitalist economy and aims at the fundamental reorganisation of society from top to bottom”. This perspective was utterly opposed by the Labor Party. That is why it was incapable of answering the Liberal campaign.

A collection at the conclusion of the meeting raised over \$1,400 for the SEP monthly fund. Discussion continued informally, with several students expressing interest in membership and attending future events.



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