

Australia: SEP launches Werriwa by-election campaign

Richard Phillips
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The Socialist Equality Party (Australia) officially launched its campaign for the March 19 Werriwa by-election with a successful public meeting in Ingleburn on Friday night. The by-election in Werriwa, a mainly working class electorate in western Sydney with high levels of unemployment, was called after the sudden resignation of Australian Labor Party leader Mark Latham in January, just three months after leading Labor to its fourth consecutive election defeat since 1996.

Mike Head, the SEP's candidate for Werriwa, and SEP central committee member Terry Cook were the main speakers at Friday's meeting, which was attended by local residents as well as SEP members and supporters.

SEP campaign manager James Cogan, who chaired the meeting, explained that although there were 16 candidates, the SEP was the only organisation that represented the interests of the working class. The purpose of the SEP intervention, he said, was to develop the broadest discussion on the central political issues facing working people and youth: the war in Iraq and growing social inequality and poverty.

Mike Head, who is a regular contributor to the *World Socialist Web Site* and a law lecturer at the University of Western Sydney, contested Werriwa for the SEP in the 2004 federal election. Head began his address by explaining that the SEP unequivocally condemned the Howard government's decision last week to send 450 combat troops to the US-led occupation of Iraq.

"At the very centre of our campaign," he said, "is the demand for the complete and immediate withdrawal of all Australian, American, British, Japanese and other foreign troops from Iraq. We also call for the payment of reparations and compensation to the people of Iraq for the devastation and looting of their country."

Howard's claims that the additional troops were required to guarantee democracy in Iraq after the recent election were "absurd and nonsensical", the SEP candidate said. "The truth is that, far from being a step toward democracy, the stage-managed poll was held under the gun barrels of foreign occupation, and in conditions of martial law imposed by the puppet US-installed government."

The dispatch of additional Australian troops to Iraq had nothing to do with democracy but further exposed the illegal

and neo-colonial character of the war on Iraq, he said. "By Howard's own admission, the request for troops came not from the supposedly democratically-elected authorities in Iraq but from the major occupying powers."

Head explained that Australia was one of the few countries willing to maintain its support for Washington's disintegrating "coalition of the willing", as European countries either refused to assist or were withdrawing their troops from the worsening military and political quagmire in Iraq.

The US-led military aggression would not stop in Iraq, he warned. "Washington's militarism marked the opening of a new period of neo-colonialism and great power rivalry, with the Bush administration seeking to use American military might to reverse the protracted US economic decline and establish the US as the supreme nation-state against its European and Asian competitors."

Howard's participation in this criminal enterprise was to ensure Washington's support for increasing Australian militarism in the Asia-Pacific region. The new Australia troop commitment also allowed it to cement closer ties with Japan—Australia's largest trading partner, he said.

The SEP candidate explained that Howard was confident sending troops, knowing that there would be no genuine opposition from the Labor Party. "At no time did Latham or any other Labor leader denounce the falsifications and criminality of the Bush and Howard governments in invading Iraq. Nor did they condemn the rounding up and torture of Iraqi civilians and others illegally branded as 'enemy combatants', including Australian citizens David Hicks and Mamdouh Habib.

"Labor's bipartisanship with the Liberals," Head said, "is not confined to foreign policy." Labor leader Beazley fully supported policies designed to undermine public health, education and other basic social needs. Labor also agreed with the Howard government's attack on democratic rights and assisted the introduction of sweeping new powers to the police and security agencies to secretly detain and interrogate people.

Head explained that behind these policies lay a deepening crisis of the profit system. The only progressive answer to the eruption of militarism and war and the mounting inequality and the destruction of democratic rights, he said, was the

construction an independent movement of working people, in Australia and internationally, on a socialist program. The SEP's election intervention in Werriwa was a vital part of that struggle.

SEP central committee member Terry Cook examined the historical record of the Labor and trade union bureaucracy, focusing in particular on the 13-year rule of the Hawke-Keating Labor government.

The installation of former union official and small businessman Chris Hayes as Labor's Werriwa candidate, he said, reinforced the comments of newly-installed Labor leader Kim Beazley who has openly declared that the ALP would work in the interests of the wealthy.

Hayes, a former assistant national secretary of the right-wing Australian Workers Union and then an adviser to the Police Federation, personified the transformation of the Labor Party and union movement into a direct tool of big business, Cook emphasised.

Hayes cashed in on his record as a union bureaucrat and in 1999 went into business for himself as an "industrial relations mediator". "This," Cook said, "is a polite title for an agent who advises employers on how best to suppress industrial unrest while ripping back hard-won conditions." His clients include the Sydney Airport Corporation, the National Crime Authority, employers in the printing industry, and health and aged care providers.

After noting recent complaints from the union bureaucracy about Howard's new industrial relations reforms, the speaker pointed out that the Coalition government had not done what the Hawke-Keating government did—destroyed a union, the Builders Labourers Federation, and mobilised the military against the working people.

Labor's offensive against the working class, he said, ensured a major shift from wages to profits, destroyed hard-won working conditions and other measures to establish a cheap labour, and prepared the way for the election of the Howard government in 1996. The unions had continued to police the assault on wages and conditions under Howard.

Cook said the transformation of Labor and the unions into direct agencies for big business was bound up with the globalised character of production that had undermined forever the basis for Labor's national reformist program. "Labor cannot be revived," he emphasised, "nor can the perspective of national reformism on which it was once based."

Questions from the audience on Labor's record, its Werriwa by-election campaign and the Howard government's criminal treatment of Mamdouh Habib, provided Head and Cook with the opportunity to further discuss the SEP's political program. The meeting concluded with a collection for the SEP's Election Fund and an appeal for those present to assist the SEP campaign over the next three weeks.

Lu Jian, who immigrated to Australia from China in 1989, following the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989, spoke with

the *World Socialist Web Site*. Lu said he previously supported the Labor Party, but decided to attend the meeting because he was concerned about Labor's refusal to oppose Howard's announcement that another 450 Australian troops would be sent to Iraq.

"I thought Labor would say something in opposition to the war during the last election. But they didn't say anything and so Howard was reelected because he was able to scare people about interest rates.

"I'm confused about why they kept quiet. Maybe they were trying to get the support of the average person, but all the people that I know didn't support the invasion of Iraq. I agree with your speakers tonight that this has to be the main issue discussed in this election.

"It's obvious the situation in Iraq is going to get worse and it's very worrying to hear Bush threatening other countries all the time. I'm also concerned about the problems of unemployment in the local community. Like Iraq, none of the politicians wanted to talk about this in the last election either, and I don't think anyone really wants to discuss it this time."

Unemployed single mother Narelle Kelly from Eschol Park also spoke with WSWS reporters. She opposed the invasion in Iraq and did not accept any of the reasons previously advanced to justify the war. "But Bush, Howard and all the others took no notice of the opposition and just railroaded people into this.

"I studied welfare at Campbelltown TAFE college and know all about social inequality, but the meeting tonight opened my eyes to a lot of other social injustices," she said.

Having worked for the charity Mission Australia, she said that the government's welfare agency Centrelink, as well as Mission Australia, were "terrorising" welfare recipients, constantly threatening to cut them off welfare. Although she'd always been told to vote for the Labor Party, Kelly said, "I agree with your assessment of Labor's evolution. It doesn't represent workers."



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