Socialist Equality Party stands in Australian by-election

Support the socialist alternative in Werriwa

By Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
25 February 2005

The Socialist Equality Party (Australia) calls on all working people, students, unemployed and retirees to support our campaign for the March 19 by-election in the federal seat of Werriwa. The SEP is standing Mike Head as its candidate in the outer suburban Sydney electorate in order to present a progressive and socialist alternative to the program of war, mounting social inequality and the destruction of democratic rights pursued by Prime Minister John Howard's conservative Liberal-National Party Coalition government and the opposition Australian Labor Party (ALP).

The abrupt resignation of ALP leader Mark Latham and his departure from politics—three months after presiding over Labor's fourth consecutive election defeat since 1996—once again demonstrates the moribund character of the ALP. Millions of ordinary people were shocked by the return of the Howard government and by George Bush's reelection in the United States. Both governments were widely detested and discredited for their blatant lies and war crimes. Yet they won increased majorities due to the lack of any opposition from their official opponents. In Australia, thanks to the ALP, Howard was able to secure a larger parliamentary majority and take control of the Senate for the first time, giving the government unchecked legislative power.

Led by Latham, Labor worked to bury the central question in the 2004 elections—the criminal invasion of Iraq and its worldwide implications—just as the Democrats did in the United States. Less than two years before, in February 2003, around one million Australians joined tens of millions of people around the world in the largest global antiwar demonstrations in history. But the Howard government, like its counterparts in Washington and London, treated their protests with contempt. The ALP and the Democrats supported all the justifications touted by Bush, Blair and Howard—that Saddam Hussein was developing "weapons of mass destruction", that he had relations with Al Qaeda and that the Iraqi people would welcome the US-led troops as liberators—and the invasion of Iraq went ahead as planned.

Since then, an avalanche of material has exposed every one of these lies: there were no "weapons of mass destruction", no ties between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda, and no popular welcome for the invaders. Instead, the Iraqi people's determined resistance has been met by military repression, aerial bombardments and prison torture.

The exposure of the lies has served to underscore the real agenda behind the Iraq war: the US, aided and abetted by Britain and Australia, has utilised the so-called "war on terror" as the pretext to seize control of Iraq's vast oil reserves and to assert its hegemony over the Middle East and Central Asia. The Bush administration is seeking to use American military might to reverse the protracted economic decline of the United States and establish it as the global hegemon against its European and Asian competitors.

Despite the catastrophe it has created in Iraq, Washington has no intention of pulling back. In a transparent effort to help shore up the rapidly disintegrating "coalition of the willing" and help maintain Washington's criminal occupation regime, the Howard government has now pledged to deploy 450 more combat troops. Once again, the decision has been made behind the backs of the Australian people on the basis of the new set of lies being advanced by the Bush administration: that the goal is Iraq's "reconstruction" and "freedom and democracy" for the Iraqi people.

In his January 2005 inaugural address, Bush dropped all reference to "terrorism" and invoked as the new justification for war the struggle against "tyranny" for "liberty" and "freedom". Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has already nominated Iran, Syria, North Korea and Cuba as "outposts of tyranny", that is, potential targets. Washington's increasingly desperate and reckless conduct threatens to ignite new and more terrible conflicts with disastrous consequences for the world's people.

At no time during the 2004 elections did Latham or any other Labor leader denounce or expose the Howard government's lies on 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.

Latham attempted to defuse mass antiwar sentiment by vaguely promising to try to withdraw Australian troops from Iraq by Christmas. But as soon as the Bush administration intervened to declare any Australian withdrawal a threat to the US-Australian alliance, the Labor leader immediately pulled back. To reassure Washington, he resuscitated the flagging career of Beazley, a life-long advocate of the Australia-US alliance, by installing him as shadow defence minister.

The ALP's response to its electoral defeat has been to shift even further to the right. As soon as he was installed as leader, Beazley unequivocally ditched Latham's "troops out" posture and pledged the party's loyalty to the US alliance. At the same time, he has declared his determination to reclaim the heritage of the pro-market policies of the Hawke-Keating Labor governments of 1983 to 1996, which paved the way for Howard. Domestically, both Labor and the Coalition share the same fundamental agenda: meeting the demands of global capital for the continuing erosion of health, education and social facilities in favour of "user pays" and "mutual obligation"; dismantling civil liberties, tearing up basic democratic rights and granting sweeping powers to the police and security agencies.

Relishing its control of both houses of parliament—described by Treasurer Peter Costello as a "once in a generation" opportunity—the government has declared its intention to scrap workplace relations safeguards and impose individual work contracts, fully privatise the telecommunications carrier Telstra and dismantle welfare programs for Aboriginal and disabled people. At the same time it will cut income taxes for the highest wage earners.

Labor has opposed none of these measures. Even before Latham departed, the ALP dropped its opposition to the scrapping of "unfair dismissal" laws—making it easier for employers to sack workers—and

© World Socialist Web Site

declared its readiness to relax media ownership restrictions. In his first major announcement as Labor leader, Beazley declared he would be focusing on taking care of the wealthy, and making them feel "comfortable": those "people who are taking advantage of a good situation we [the previous Labor governments] created, a 15 year-long economic expansion with rising real estate and share values". He has already repudiated Latham's "Medicare Gold" plan to give people aged over 70 free access to medical care, together with a scheme to reduce government handouts to the wealthiest private schools.

With Labor's support, Howard is escalating his government's offensive against democratic rights. Laws have been brought forward to strengthen the new powers given to ASIO, the political police, to secretly detain and interrogate anyone without trial, and to permit criminal trials relating to "national security" to be heard behind closed doors. Meanwhile, hundreds of asylum seekers remain incarcerated.

Notwithstanding Labor's role, the widespread opposition to Howard's agenda among ordinary people continues to grow. Just months after the election, the government is facing a barrage of damaging revelations:

* Recently-released Guantánamo Bay detainee Mamdouh Habib has begun detailing the government's complicity in his brutal torture and incarceration.

* Former senior Australian intelligence officer and weapons inspector Rod Barton, who worked with the UN and American intelligence in Iraq, has further exposed the lies on which the war was based and the involvement of Australian officers in the interrogation and torture of Iraqi detainees.

* Public outrage has developed over the shocking treatment of Australian resident and mental health patient Cornelia Rau, who was wrongly detained for 10 months as a suspected "illegal immigrant" by immigration authorities. Her case has revealed the inevitable logic of arbitrary detention, first imposed on refugees by the Labor government in the early 1990s and continued by the Howard government.

* Every day brings new revelations of blatant vote-buying in the 2004 election, through generous government grants to handpicked groups in key marginal electorates.

* At the same time, the central claim made by Howard in the 2004 elections—that his government would be a bulwark against rising interest rates—has been shattered by the Reserve Bank's warnings of imminent rate rises. Any increase threatens to explode the debt-driven bubble economy that has underpinned Howard's nine years in government, with devastating consequences for over-stretched homebuyers. For all the prime minister's declarations that interest rates remain far below the crippling levels of the late 1980s, inflated property prices mean that average mortgage debts and repayments now represent a much higher proportion of household income. In 1993, household debt was 56 percent of total income. By 2004, it had nearly trebled to around 150 percent.

Behind their parliamentary majority, the refusal of the Liberals to stand a candidate in Werriwa highlights the fragility of their political position. Both the government and Labor share a common interest in keeping the entire by-election as low-key as possible. Neither can tolerate any serious political discussion of their foreign or domestic policies.

Herein lies the significance of the Socialist Equality Party's campaign. Our intervention is aimed at encouraging the widest possible debate on the critical political, economic, social and cultural issues facing the world's people. Unlike the mainstream parties, our primary concern is not to win votes. It is to advance the ideas and policies necessary to forge a new, independent political movement of the working class, whose goal is the abolition of the root cause of war and social inequality—the capitalist profit system itself.

None of the pressing problems facing ordinary people in Werriwa—the eruption of militarism, deteriorating public services, declining working and living conditions, increasing insecurity, the household debt crisis and the erosion of basic rights—can be resolved locally, or even nationally. Working people around the world confront the same essential problems. They can only resolve these on the basis of a common international socialist strategy aimed at the fundamental reorganisation of society to meet the needs of the majority, not the profits of a privileged few.

Werriwa provides a microcosm of the worsening inequality and social crisis dominating working class life in Australia. Until now, it has been regarded as a traditional Labor seat—it was held for 26 years by Whitlam. After 70 years of Labor representation, it is one of the 10 poorest electorates in the country. Its average income is less than half the wealthiest electorate, just 50 kilometres away on Sydney's North Shore.

Stretching from Liverpool in the north to Campbelltown in the south, Werriwa has one of the youngest populations of any electorate, including many new homebuyers struggling to pay off massive mortgages. Most families cannot manage unless both parents are working, creating huge child care expenses, not to speak of serious personal, health and emotional strains. Werriwa also covers sprawling, badly run-down public housing estates, where the demise of basic industry has meant that less than half the adult residents are employed, leading to large areas of poverty and disadvantage.

Everywhere, the impact of two decades of regressive social policy, under the Hawke-Keating and Howard governments, is evident. The state Labor government of Premier Bob Carr has collaborated closely with the federal government to implement its pro-market agenda. Government schools have sub-standard facilities, and conditions have deteriorated in the public health system, notably at the area's two major hospitals, Liverpool and Campbelltown, to the point where patients do not even feel safe. While whitewashing patient deaths at public hospitals, the Carr government has downgraded and shut the maternity unit at nearby Camden Hospital, despite angry protest rallies involving hundreds of residents. Other basic services, including the railways, are disintegrating.

Many young people, in particular, cannot find permanent 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 chronic under-funding has led to increasingly over-crowded classes, restricted course choices and poor library and other facilities.

These processes will only deepen as all aspects of social life are subordinated to market forces. Every social indicator published since last year's election points to an accelerating gulf between rich and poor throughout the country. Over the past year, average wages rose by only 3.5 percent, while corporate chief executive (CEO) remuneration jumped by almost 30 percent, to an average of $1.7 million. Recent studies have shown that the running down of public health services, designed to force people into private health insurance, has dramatically widened the gap between the wealthiest and poorest patients. Serious medical problems, such as diabetes, tooth decay and mental and behavioural difficulties, are now twice as prevalent in the bottom 20 percent by income as in the top 20 percent.

Latham's exit from politics is symbolic of his party's terminal illness. It came barely 12 months after he was elevated to the leadership in a desperate attempt to revive the party's fortunes, after polling showed its support had plunged to unprecedented lows under Simon Crean.

Latham's replacement by Beazley has been greeted with indifference on the part of ordinary people. The Labor Party, which once commanded the loyalty of the vast majority of working class families, has become irrelevant to their lives. The disintegration of its electoral support, and the massive erosion of its working class base, are products of the collapse of its old national reformist program—the perspective of advocating limited reforms within the framework of the nation state and the profit system. Sweeping changes in world economy over the past 30 years, bound up

© World Socialist Web Site

with vast developments in computer technology and the globalisation of production, have undermined the very foundations of its old program and transformed the ALP into an open agency for globally mobile capital, intent upon dismantling all the past economic and social gains of the working class.

It is now more than 30 years since the Whitlam government attempted the last, limited, social reforms—universal public health insurance, free tertiary education, the extension of welfare benefits to sole parents. Under conditions of a deepening world economic crisis, the bourgeoisie could no longer tolerate such a program. Whitlam was undemocratically dismissed from office in the "Canberra Coup" of 1975 when he failed, despite his best efforts, to suppress the resistance of the working class to the new dictates of the international financial markets. The next Labor administration, the Hawke and Keating government that came to power in 1983, set about "de-regulating" the economy, imposing "free market" policies and dismantling public facilities and social welfare. Working hand in glove with the Australian Council of Trades Unions (ACTU) bureaucracy, the Labor government introduced the Prices and Incomes Accord, which saw the greatest distribution of wealth away from the working class to the rich in history. Labor's policies paved the way for Howard, when, after 13 years of bitter experiences, masses of working people threw out the Keating government in 1996.

Since then both Labor and the Coalition have been engaged in the same essential process: the repackaging of their deeply unpopular free market agenda in order to win office—only to implement even more regressive policies. Howard's modus operandi, as anger and hostility to his government has escalated, has been to launch carefully timed scare campaigns, appealing to people's insecurities and sense of vulnerability. Thus the vilification of refugees and the embrace of the "war on terror" in 2001, the lies about WMD in 2002 and 2003, and the "interest rate" scare in 2004.

Labor's approach, in the immediate aftermath of its 1996 electoral debacle, was to try and distance itself from the Hawke-Keating policies, without committing to any genuine alternative. After two consecutive election defeats, Beazley was replaced by Crean, who, after support for the party continued to haemorrhage, was in turn replaced by Latham.

Latham's rise was bound up with another attempt at repackaging. An unabashed advocate of "economic reform", his elevation to the leadership was backed by the media and major corporate interests. Latham focused his appeal to the so-called "aspirational" and "upwardly mobile" voters residing in the "mortgage belt" suburbs of the major cities. Behind his rhetoric about a "ladder of opportunity for all Australians" was the argument that individuals, not society, should be responsible for providing for their own health, education and welfare. The unemployed and welfare recipients—portrayed by Latham as "slackers"—would be forced to give up "welfare dependency" to enable them to climb the social "ladder".

In the event, Howard's scare campaign prevailed, with Labor offering no alternative, and Latham lost the election. Labor's nominee to replace Latham in Werriwa underscores the fact that the party no longer identifies itself with the working class, or seeks, in any way, to advance its interests. Chris Hayes was installed, unopposed, as the candidate by the party's head office, just as Latham was in 1994. Hayes is a life-long union bureaucrat, who rose to become assistant national secretary of the right-wing Australian Workers Union and then an adviser to the Police Federation, before going into business for himself in 1999, offering his services to major employers as an industrial relations mediator.

He rose through the ranks of the union bureaucracy—becoming a Public Service Professional Officers Association official in 1978, an AWU industrial officer in 1986 and AWU assistant national secretary in 1995—as it increasingly functioned in a corporatist partnership with big business and government, enforcing their demands for "international competitiveness". During this period, all resistance by union members was ruthlessly crushed by the union and Labor leaders, from isolation and betrayal of the SEQEB workers in 1985, to the deregistration and destruction of the Builders Labourers Federation in 1986 to the mobilisation of the air force against the airline pilots' strike in 1989 and the betrayal of the APPM paper workers' strike in 1992.

Like many other union officials, Hayes sought to cash in on this record. He worked directly for the employers as a consultant on how best to suppress industrial unrest. Since 1999, his clients have included the Sydney Airport Corporation, the National Crime Authority, printing employers, and health and aged care providers. One of his main achievements was preventing industrial disputes at Sydney airport during the 2000 Olympic Games.

This seamless transition from Labor and union boss to industrial consultant has become a well-worn path. Among the better-known examples are ex-ACTU assistant secretary Gary Weaven, former NSW Labor Council secretary Michael Easson, and one-time ALP national president Stephen Loosely. To present such a figure as a Labor candidate is nothing but pledge to the corporate elite that the ALP will police its demands. It is little wonder that his candidature was immediately praised by Howard's former department head, Max Moore-Wilton, who currently runs the Sydney Airport Corporation. Moore-Wilton, who functioned as Howard's chief hatchet man for years, said that, in his dealings with Hayes as head of the prime minister's department, "I found him very agreeable, down to earth and practical".

During last October's federal election campaign, various groups, notably the Greens and the Socialist Alliance, advocated the return of a Latham-led Labor government as a "lesser evil" to Howard. Greens' leader Bob Brown went so far as to publicly endorse Latham as the next prime minister. Their arguments raise decisive issues of political perspective for all those seeking a genuine way out of the present morass. The purpose of "lesser evilism" is to sow the illusion that, in one way or another, it is possible to revive the Labor Party; that it can, through mass pressure, be pushed to the "left"; that someone will turn up to return the party to its national reformist past. The outcome is that the working class remains trapped with the framework of the two-party system—waiting, passively, for something to happen, outside of its own independent intervention—while the attacks on its social conditions and democratic rights escalates.

It is precisely this conception from which ordinary working people must break. The SEP is contesting the Werriwa by-election to advance an entirely opposed perspective: that the working class must intervene, on the basis of an internationalist and socialist perspective that articulates its own independent interests, and build its own political party.

The Socialist Equality Party advances a program for the complete reorganisation of society in the interests of the majority. We advocate the creation of a new social and economic order, based on public ownership and democratic control. Only when need, not private profit, becomes the organising principle for production and all aspects of social life, will the extraordinary human and technical resources that are now available be utilised to provide a better living standard and safe environment for all.

*** Stop the war in Iraq. For a socialist foreign policy**

The Socialist Equality Party condemns the US occupation of Iraq and the Howard government's role in the entire criminal enterprise. We demand the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Australian, US and all foreign troops. We call for the release of all prisoners taken in the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, including those now incarcerated at Guantánamo Bay and at other US prisons and detention camps around the world.

We unequivocally oppose Canberra's neo-colonial interventions and demand the immediate withdrawal of all Australian and foreign troops and police from East Timor, the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea and elsewhere in the region. We propose, instead, a socialist foreign policy,

© World Socialist Web Site

based on international working class solidarity. The resources and technology of the advanced industrialised countries should be employed, not to oppress and exploit the people of the "Third World" but to raise living standards for all working people to a decent level and create, for the first time in world history, conditions of genuine social equality.

*** Defend democratic rights**

The SEP indefatigably defends every past democratic gain, including voting and electoral rights, and civil liberties. Every law against strikes and pickets must be repealed and all discrimination based on nationality, ethnic background, religion, gender or sexual preference outlawed. Refugees held in detention centres must be released immediately. We call for an end to all forms of immigration control and restriction. Workers must have the right to live and work wherever they wish, with full citizenship rights and full access to social benefits. Women must have the unrestricted right to abortion on demand.

But the very concept of democratic rights must be extended beyond formal equality before the law, which masks ever-greater social and economic inequality. Genuine democracy requires real control by ordinary people over economic decision-making, working conditions and the circumstances of their daily lives. Ultimately, true democracy can be achieved only through the political mobilisation of an informed and articulate working population in the struggle for socialism.

*** Public ownership:** We advocate the transformation of all large industrial, mining and agricultural corporations, together with the banking and financial institutions, into publicly owned enterprises, with full compensation for small shareholders and, for large shareholders, the public negotiation of the terms of compensation.

*** Jobs:** To guarantee full employment, with well-paid and secure jobs for all, a massive program of public works must be established to improve living standards throughout the country. To create jobs and allow workers to more fully participate in political and cultural life, the working week must be reduced to 30 hours, with no loss of pay. All workers should receive at least five weeks' annual leave.

*** Social security:** Poverty and the exploitation of the unemployed as a pool of cheap labour must be ended. Every working person must be guaranteed a well-paid and secure job and an income sufficient to raise a family in comfort. Those who cannot work—the disabled, the elderly, single parents, the ill—must be provided with the equivalent of a living wage, so that they are able to live a dignified, decent and comfortable life.

*** Social services:** Billions of dollars must be poured into the upgrading, expansion and staffing of public hospitals, schools, universities and child care facilities so that these services are equipped with the latest technologies and are freely available to all. The sell-off of public housing must be halted, new high quality housing units constructed, and rents and house payments reduced so that no worker pays more than 20 percent of his or her income for shelter.

These demands are incompatible with the continued domination of the private profit system. We advocate the establishment of a workers' government, which will represent the social and economic interests of working people and give them democratic control over the decisions that affect their lives.

Socialism means equality, human solidarity and freedom from oppression and want. These goals—eminently achievable, given the tremendous advances in science, technology and humanity's productive forces—are embodied in the program of the world Trotskyist party, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), and its internet centre, the *World Socialist Web Site*.

We urge all those who want to participate in the development of a genuine alternative to war, social inequality and reaction to actively support our election campaign. Help publicise our public meetings, discuss our election material with your friends and workmates, visit our election office in Macquarie Fields, contribute financially to our election fund and encourage the widest possible audience for the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Above all, we call on everyone who agrees with our program and perspective to join and build the Socialist Equality Party as the new political party of the working class.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site