

Socialist Equality Party to contest Australian by-election

The Socialist Equality Party
15 February 2005

The Socialist Equality Party will contest the March 19 by-election for the western Sydney electorate of Werriwa, in order to present a socialist alternative to the program of war and social reaction advanced by the conservative Liberal Party government of Prime Minister John Howard and the opposition Australian Labor Party (ALP).

The by-election has been called because of the resignation of Mark Latham as Labor leader on January 18, just three months after he led the ALP to its fourth consecutive defeat in the recent federal elections. Latham's abrupt departure from politics for health reasons is symbolic of the collapse of the Labor Party as a whole. Like its former leader, Labor is exhausted and incapable of making any appeal to the concerns of ordinary people.

Throughout the 2004 election, Labor refused to oppose or challenge any of the Howard government's key policies. Its overriding concern was to prevent the election becoming a referendum on the Iraq war and the government's unconditional support for the criminal policies of the Bush administration. Labor remained silent on the war crimes committed by the Howard government when it deployed Australian military forces to the invasion and occupation of Iraq. At no time did Latham or any senior Labor leader indict the government for its role in the campaign of lies that the Iraqi regime possessed "weapons of mass destruction". Nor did they condemn the murderous actions of the US military against Iraqi civilians, or the illegal imprisonment of hundreds of people without charges—including Australian citizens David Hicks and Mamdouh Habib—at Guantánamo Bay in Cuba.

The primary consequence of Labor's election campaign was to disenfranchise the mass antiwar sentiment, expressed 18 months earlier in the unprecedented antiwar rallies held in Australia and worldwide on February 16-17. The ALP worked to suppress the widespread

opposition to the Howard government's assault on democratic rights, in the name of the "war on terror", and its offensive against wages and social infrastructure.

In terms of economic policy, Labor sought to compete with the government in attracting the support of big business. Latham's right-wing economic nostrums of individual responsibility and work-for-welfare promised to cut even further the living standards of the poorest sections of society.

The exclusion of any of the major issues confronting millions of ordinary people from the election campaign enabled Howard to base his electoral pitch on a populist scare campaign that home-loan interest rates would rapidly increase if the ALP were elected to office. In suburban areas with large numbers of highly indebted households, the result was an increased vote for the Liberals. The government won not only reelection, but control of both houses of parliament.

Labor recorded its lowest vote since 1931—37.63 percent. Its reaction has been a further shift to the right. Without any public debate on the reasons for its fourth consecutive defeat, the ALP unanimously replaced Latham with Kim Beazley—a noted rightwinger and avowed militarist—who led the party to two of its election debacles.

Beazley wasted no time in proclaiming as his model the pro-market policies of the Hawke-Keating Labor governments. In office from 1983 to 1996, with Beazley as a senior minister, these governments presided over a massive redistribution of wealth away from the working class to the corporate and financial elite, before being thrown out of office in a landslide. In one of his first interviews upon reclaiming the leadership, Beazley declared a central aim of Labor would be tax reforms to benefit high income earners. He wanted, he said, to make the wealthy "feel comfortable".

Notwithstanding Labor's role in propping up the

Howard government, and Howard's own populist appeals, objective events are already threatening to undermine the government's very existence.

* The Bush administration's militarist agenda is escalating, with US threats of preemptive military strikes against Iran and tensions flaring on the Korean peninsula. The coming weeks will see the second anniversary of the Iraq war and renewed focus on the criminality of the invasion and the dangerous and predatory character of US foreign policy.

* Guantánamo Bay detainee Mamdouh Habib—who was finally released in January after three years imprisonment—has alleged that Australian government officials were present while he was being beaten and tortured, yet made no attempt to defend his rights.

* Former high-level Australian weapons inspector Rod Barton, who worked with Hans Blix, UNSCOM, the CIA and British intelligence in Iraq, has come forward to publicly expose the lies on which the war was based and the complicity of the Australian government and its officials in the interrogation and torture of Iraq detainees.

* Despite Howard's rhetoric about being a sound economic manager, the debt-driven real estate boom is showing signs of coming to an end. Within just four months of the election, another two interest rate rises have been foreshadowed by the Australian Reserve Bank, which will severely aggravate the financial difficulties of the very families that were swayed into voting Liberal.

* Corporate Australia is demanding that Howard use his government's control of both houses of parliament to push through a raft of unpopular measures aimed at further slashing the conditions of the working class and enriching the upper echelons of society. Legislation has been foreshadowed to restrict unfair dismissal complaints by laid-off workers, limit disabled people's access to welfare, lower income tax on the highest wage earners and carry through the full privatisation of Australia's main communications carrier, Telstra.

* Mandatory detention is under renewed condemnation following the shocking revelation that a mentally-ill Australian resident, Cornelia Rau, was imprisoned for 10 months in a detention centre due to police suspicions that she was an "illegal immigrant".

Under these conditions, both the government and the ALP are trying to ensure that the Werriwa by-election is as low-key as possible. The Labor Party has nominated a low-profile local small businessman and former union official as its candidate, and appears to be devoting few resources to his campaign. At this point, the Liberals are

indicating they may not even stand, despite opinion polls showing that they could win the formerly safe Labor seat.

The 2004 election and the events that have transpired since have served to underscore the fact that while wide layers of the population are deeply hostile to both major political parties, and feel profoundly alienated from the entire official political setup, they see, at this point, no means of mounting any effective challenge.

The SEP is standing in Werriwa to articulate the independent interests of the working class and generate debate on the real issues it confronts. We will campaign for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US, Australian and foreign troops from Iraq; socialist policies to raise incomes and end inequality; the defence of democratic rights; and for the building of the SEP as the new socialist party of the working class, based on a socialist and internationalist perspective.

Our candidate in the by-election will be Mike Head, who stood for the SEP in Werriwa in the October 2004 federal elections. Head entered socialist politics in 1975 and was the editor of the party's newspaper, *Workers News*, from 1985 to 1998. Married with three children, he is now a lecturer in law at the University of Western Sydney and a regular contributor to the *World Socialist Web Site* on Australian and international politics.

The SEP urges all our supporters to actively participate in the campaign by distributing election material, promoting and attending SEP public meetings in the electorate and manning polling booths on March 19. For those who would like to volunteer to assist, please write to sep@sep.org.au. In addition, the SEP appeals to all our supporters and WSWs readers to send in generous donations to help meet the costs of the campaign. Cheques and money orders can be mailed to: the Socialist Equality Party, PO Box 367, Bankstown, NSW, 1885.



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