SEP holds second public meeting in Australian by-election

James Cogan
15 March 2005

On March 13, the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) held the second public meeting of its campaign in the by-election for the western Sydney seat of Werriwa. The meeting, which took place in the suburb of Green Valley, was addressed by the SEP's candidate, Mike Head, and SEP national secretary Nick Beams.

The speeches of Head and Beams elaborated on the four central issues of the SEP's campaign: the implications of the illegal US-led conquest of Iraq; social inequality and the deterioration in living standards affecting working people the world over; the erosion of democratic rights and civil liberties; and the need for a new international socialist party.

Mike Head, speaking first, reviewed how the efforts of the SEP to generate political discussion with ordinary working people stood in stark contrast with the conduct of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) and the other candidates. In all, 16 parties and independents are contesting the seat, the second largest number in any Australian by-election.

The official launch of the Labor campaign only took place on March 11—just eight days before polling day. The Labor candidate, Chris Hayes, had made no official statements on two of the most important developments in the course of the election: the Australian government's escalating military involvement in the occupation of Iraq and the state Labor government's mobilisation of police into the impoverished suburb of Macquarie Fields. The intervention followed the death of two teenagers in a police car chase, provoking four nights of violent confrontations between the police and local youth.

Discussing the Iraq war, Head stressed the opposition of the SEP to the invasion and the campaign of lies employed by the conservative Liberal Party-led government of John Howard to justify its support for the Bush administration. He reviewed how Labor had derailed and disenfranchised the mass sentiment against the war during the 2004 Australian elections. The ALP and its leader Mark Latham, the former member for Werriwa, suppressed any discussion on the falsifications of Howard and Bush over "weapons of mass destruction" and on the real economic and political motives behind the invasion.

Labor had no essential disagreements with the foreign and domestic policies of the Howard government. Its criticisms of the Australian deployment in Iraq centred on the fact that the occupation was becoming a quagmire and that the troops should be utilised to pursue the strategic, diplomatic and business interests of Australian capitalism in the Asia-Pacific region.

Head discussed how the vast changes associated with the globalisation of production had undermined the old nationalist and reformist program of the ALP and the trade unions. From the 1980s, they had transformed into "open agencies for globally mobile capital, intent upon breaking up all the past concessions and democratic rights obtained by the working class". The most dramatic reversals in working class living standards had been carried out by the Hawke and Keating Labor governments from 1983 to 1996.

In order to highlight Labor's repudiation of even the limited reformist agenda it once advanced, Head drew attention to the reports that the Labor Party mayor in the area, Brenton Banfield, had been ruled out as the candidate for Werriwa because, while working as a lawyer, he had defended people charged with sex offences. The ALP, Head said, "would not allow itself to be identified with a candidate who, even as part of his professional responsibilities, was not completely aligned with the 'law and order' politics of the party".

Head explained how the events in Macquarie Fields had demonstrated "the hostility of the Labor Party and the entire ruling establishment towards the well-being and basic rights of working people". The suburb had become a "testing ground for new methods of suppressing the kind of social unrest" that inequality and deprivation inevitably trigger.

The SEP candidate dwelt on the significance of the statements by Labor premier Bob Carr rejecting any relationship between crime and the social disadvantage affecting people in suburbs like Macquarie Fields. Carr's comments, Head remarked, were a repudiation of the understanding "that the intellectual and personal development of individuals is fundamentally a product of their social, cultural and economic development". Under conditions where the ruling elite could "no longer even hold out the promise" of improving the conditions of life, the only answer of its representatives, such as Carr, was police repression.

Head concluded by explaining how organisations such as the Greens and Socialist Alliance worked to prevent a political development by the working class by promoting the conception that Labor, despite its history and program, was a "lesser evil" to the conservative parties.

The Greens statement on the events in Macquarie Fields, for example, described them as a "wake-up call" for the Carr government, calling on the ALP to "pay more attention" to overcoming social disadvantage. "The problem," Head pointed out, "is not that Carr is asleep. He and his government are fully aware of the deteriorating conditions for which they are responsible. They have run down public housing, hospitals, schools, public transport and social services..."

Head called on workers and youth to support the SEP and to give serious consideration to joining the party. "The purpose of our campaign," he said, "is to advance the ideas and policies necessary to forge a new, independent and international political movement of the working class, whose goal is the abolition of the root cause of war, social inequality and the assault on democratic rights—the capitalist profit system itself."

Nick Beams, the SEP's national secretary, began his remarks by recalling the reactionary conceptions advanced just over two years ago by author Keith Windschuttle in his book, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*. The book claimed to disprove the previous historical analysis that the British colonial settlement of Tasmania was responsible for the complete destruction of the indigenous Aboriginal population within just two generations.

Windschuttle argued that the Aboriginal people of Tasmania were responsible for their own fate because they did not "take advantage" of the "benefits" of the free market capitalist society which British

© World Socialist Web Site

colonialism had brought to Australia. Instead, according to Windschuttle, they resorted to theft and criminality and were responsible for their own demise. Windschuttle referred to Aborigines confronting British colonialism as no different to “junkies raiding a service station”.

Beams traced how the outpouring of praise for Windschuttle’s book within the Australian establishment, especially by columnists writing for the Murdoch press, related to the ideological issues of today.

He drew attention to the way that defenders of the US invasion of Iraq were justifying the numerous crimes associated with the war with the claim that the United States had to establish “a global empire, to bring order and stability to the world of the twenty-first century as the British empire did in the nineteenth...” In the same way that “a cancer unless treated will metastasize and spread throughout the body,” Beams explained, fundamental legal rights were under attack flowing from the US war of aggression.

Beams also noted the parallel between Windschuttle’s assertion that criminality on the part of Tasmanian Aborigines was responsible for their destruction, with Carr’s claims that the problems in suburbs like Macquarie Fields were the result of “criminal behaviour”, not the product of social conditions, and could only be dealt with by police measures.

Under conditions where capitalist society could no longer advance any reforms, Beams stated, the ideology being promoted was that “everyone must scramble up the ‘ladder of opportunity’, clawing at those above and kicking at those below. This is the doctrine of the ‘free market’ imposed by the power of the state”.

Beams stressed to the audience there was a “profound connection between the eruption of imperialist war and the police-state response to deepening social inequality”.

The war in Iraq, he said, was “a pre-emptive strike by the US against its rivals in Europe and Asia to establish domination and control over resources, raw materials and markets.... This conflict for resources, markets and ultimately profit is prosecuted on the home front as well. It is undertaken by the means of a never-ending offensive against the social position of the working class”. Social polarisation, Beams said, was being answered with increased state repression and “the methods deployed in Macquarie Fields today will be used more broadly tomorrow”.

Beams emphasised that the solution to the problems of society depended on the development of political consciousness. No answer could be found “within the existing political order” or “in conflicts with the police and the state”. A far more radical task had to be undertaken, he said, “the complete reconstruction of society as a whole”.

The problems confronting the working class, Beams insisted, were, above all, problems of perspective. Central was the political campaign of the ruling class over the past decade-and-a-half to argue that socialism had died with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Beams reviewed the history of the Russian Revolution and clarified that it was not socialism that collapsed in the former USSR, but Stalinism. The demise of the Stalinist regime had marked the disintegration of all programs that were based on nationalist ideology and that stood in opposition to an internationalist and socialist program, including those of the Labor Party and the trade union bureaucracy.

Beams told the audience: “Our focus in this election has been on ideas. The most important task facing the working class is the development of a perspective and an understanding of the history of the twentieth century. The very development of mankind’s productive forces has completely shattered the old framework of national states. There is not a single problem that we confront today that can be solved on a national basis.”

What was required, Beams concluded, was an international revolutionary party, the construction of which was being developed by the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Following the reports, audience members raised a number of questions. A local worker said that the problem was that most working people were afraid, and asked how the SEP could overcome their reluctance to engage in politics.

Head emphasised that the problems in the working class were not fear, but the tremendous disorientation caused by the collapse of what was alleged to be socialism—the regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe—and the failure of reformist parties such as Labor. “There are no short cuts,” Head said, “to clarifying big historical questions”.

Beams explained the task of the socialist movement was “not to agitate or excite” the working class into struggle. The opposition generated by the Iraq war had produced the largest globally coordinated demonstrations in history in February 2003. The problem was not that millions of people weren’t prepared to take action or did not recognise that they faced global problems. It was that the participants in the movement were not equipped with the necessary level of consciousness to reject those tendencies who said that a solution could be found within the existing political framework. “The unique task of the revolutionary movement,” Beams said, “is to arm the working class with a political understanding”.

A 58-year-old Green Valley resident put to the SEP speakers that jobs could be defended by refusing to buy American and other foreign goods imported into Australia. A discussion ensued about national conceptions such as these, which clarified how protectionism and trade war served to align the working people with their own oppressors—the ruling class in the country they lived in—whereas the working class was, objectively, a unified international class.

Members of the audience showed their appreciation for the seriousness of the party’s approach, remaining behind after the meeting concluded to continue discussing with Beams, Head and other members of the SEP.

Janet, a student at the University of Western Sydney, who has joined the SEP Student Club being formed on the campus, told the WSWS after the meeting: “Coming to this meeting is probably the first political thing I’ve done. I wanted to become involved with the party so I could learn about politics. I want to have my say. I’m against wars. I want to change society. Lots of things are wrong with it. It’s unfair. I’ve had a chance to speak to people living in substandard situations. It doesn’t feel like there’s a chance for a lot of people to move up.”

A collection to support the SEP election campaign raised over $500. Several audience members took bundles of the SEP election statement to distribute in the electorate and volunteered to work on polling booths on March 19 to distribute the party’s election statement and how-to-vote cards.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site