

Werriwa by-election

A record number of candidates, but no policies for working people

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The four-week campaign for the Australian seat of Werriwa, a mainly working class electorate located in Sydney's outer western suburbs, has further highlighted the moribund character of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) and the rightward degeneration of Australian parliamentary politics.

The by-election was called following ALP leader Mark Latham's abrupt resignation from parliament in January. Latham, who held the seat for 11 years, quit three months after the party's devastating federal election defeat last October. The seat, which is the 10th poorest electorate in Australia, can no longer be regarded as "safe" for the ALP. Few workers and youth in the area voice any political confidence in the organisation.

Into this political vacuum has stepped a range of candidates, 16 in all, hoping to capitalise on the mounting frustration and anger over the ever-worsening unemployment and poverty. This includes anti-tax and "law and order" populists, anti-immigration parties, Christian fundamentalists, the Greens and a contestant calling for a republican constitution. Notwithstanding their various tactical differences, the overwhelming majority defends the existing order, claiming that there is a local or national solution to the problems facing working people.

The only candidate offering a genuine alternative and articulating the interest of workers and young people in Werriwa is Mike Head, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) candidate. Head is advancing a socialist program to oppose the Iraq war and counter the increasing militarism, social inequality and attacks on democratic rights.

The Labor Party, which has controlled the seat for over 70 years, has not called a single public meeting during the campaign. In fact Labor, and its candidate Chris Hayes, are all but invisible, and for good reason. The ALP, which marches lockstep with the Howard government on all the essential issues, is regarded with suspicion, indifference or outright contempt in Werriwa.

Hayes officially launched his campaign, eight days before the vote at a small gathering of journalists and party bureaucrats at his Werriwa election office. This dismal event was presided over by current Labor leader Kim Beazley who told those assembled that the Labor candidate, a former union official and advisor to the police association, who currently runs an industrial relations consultancy for employers, was "everything" the Labor Party wanted.

Hayes, despite Beazley's recommendations, has distinguished himself during the campaign by trying to say as little as possible about anything. His only reported public statement was to endorse NSW Labor premier Bob Carr's mobilisation of heavily-armed police against youth in Macquarie Fields, following a police chase that led to the death of two teenagers.

Labor, which previously argued that it could provide a decent future for ordinary people by reforming capitalism, once had a broad and active base

of support and could mobilise workers and youth during elections and for other events. This foundation no longer exists.

Today the party, which no longer identifies in any way with the lives and problems of working people and the poor, is one the chief instruments for undermining and attacking living standards and basic rights. Any conflicts that erupt within the organisation have nothing to do with principle or how to defend working people, but largely centre on differences between party officials, union bureaucrats and small business people over personal ambition and business dealings.

The candidacy of Sam Bargshoon, an ex-ALP member and small businessman, is a case in point.

Bargshoon, a former numbers man for Mark Latham, quit the party last year, just before the federal election, and decided to run against Latham. While Bargshoon denounced the party for "not caring" about local people and their jobs, his "opposition" only developed after the closure of Orange Grove, a large local retail outlet. Bargshoon had a lucrative cleaning contract for the shopping complex, which he lost when the state Labor government ordered the outlet closed, claiming it had contravened zoning regulations.

While Bargshoon feigns concern about Labor's job destruction, there is no record that he made any complaints against the tens of thousands of public sector jobs axed by the NSW Labor government or the previous Hawke and Keating federal Labor regime.

Ned Mannoun is another former ALP member and typical of those elements attracted by Latham's right-wing policies. A former president of the Liverpool Youth Council, the 23-year-old's campaign slogan is "I tell it like it is". This consists of demagogic calls for improvements in local transport, health and education, but no policy statement on how any of this can be achieved.

Mannoun, who endorses the occupation of Iraq and the Carr Labor government's mobilisation of riot police against Macquarie Fields residents, quit the ALP following Latham's resignation and immediately joined the Liberal Party.

While the Liberal Party has decided not to run an official candidate in the by-election, Mannoun is one of two Liberal Party members contesting the seat, the other being James Young, a 31-year-old sales advisor. Both of these so-called "independents" appear to be using the election to advance their status within the Liberal Party and secure its endorsement for future elections.

The Greens and the Progressive Labour Party (PLP) are also running candidates in Werriwa, Ben Raue and Patricia McGookin, respectively. Both parties defend the profit system while promoting illusions in the ALP as a "lesser evil" to the Howard government. They have called on their supporters to give their second preference vote to Labor.

In a press statement Raue claimed that Labor had "let down" Werriwa

residents because it “lacked policies and purpose”. Carr’s response to the Macquarie Fields riots, he claimed, demonstrated that Labor was “no longer capable of helping the people of Western Sydney.”

Contrary to Raue’s claims, the Carr government has very definite policies and a very clear agenda—acting on the orders of its corporate backers it has conducted an ongoing assault on the living standards, jobs and basic democratic rights of working people, in Werriwa and throughout NSW. Its only response to the inevitable outbreak of social tensions caused by these policies is brutal police repression.

Like the Greens, the PLP, which was established by remnants of the Stalinist Communist Party of Australia, disgruntled union bureaucrats and Labor “lefts”, has “criticised” the ALP and the war in Iraq. Its opposition to the war, however, is thoroughly nationalist: Australian troops should be withdrawn so they can be deployed to support Australian interests closer to home. Neither of these parties has held public meetings in the electorate to discuss or defend their policies.

Other Werriwa candidates include Janey Woodger for Australians Against Further Immigration, and Charles Doggett for One Nation. These racist parties claim that the unemployment, poverty and myriad problems in Werriwa will be resolved by cutting immigration. There are also two right-wing Christian candidates—Greg Tan for the Christian Democratic Party and Mick Sykes for Family First. Espousing so-called family values, they oppose the democratic right to abortion on demand, call for a stricter censorship regime, and endorse the US-led war in Iraq.

One of the more revealing events during the four-week election campaign was a forum on March 10, organised by Joe Bryant, a former deputy mayor of Blacktown, who is also contesting the seat. Bryant, an anti-tax demagogue, who at various times has called for tariff protection and other national regulatory measures, describes himself as a “patriotic activist”. The event, which was held inside a local hotel, adjoining a noisy bar, and attended by six contestants, exposed the right-wing character of the so-called “independents”.

Ned Mannoun spoke first, calling for improvements in local transport, health and education and the reestablishment of family values. He left the meeting straight after his speech and was not available during question time.

Robert Vogler said he was contesting the election in order to discuss a republican constitution. After unfurling his proposal for a new Australian flag and explaining that he wanted an “elected monarch” as head of state. Voters would choose from one candidate picked by the prime minister and 200 others nominated at random from the electoral roll. After outlining this oddball proposal, he ran out of things to say in his allocated time and sat down.

Liberal Party member James Young used every opportunity to regurgitate and endorse the Howard government’s policies, while calling for tax relief and for public health to be taken from the state governments and given to Canberra.

Deborah Locke, from People’s Power, a right-wing grouping initially established by a former political staffer for the Kennett Liberal government in Victoria, also spoke. Locke, a retired NSW police detective, denounced the major parties, called for tax cuts, support for small business and a protest vote against the ALP.

Christian Democratic Party candidate Greg Tan brought his children on stage to join him in performing a religious song and then explained that better transport, health and education were “superficial issues of life”. He called for stricter adherence to the Bible, whose “principles should be incorporated into law”, and left the meeting, not waiting to discuss his policies or answer any questions.

During question time this writer asked the candidates still present to explain their position on the Iraq war and the Carr government’s police crackdown against Macquarie Fields youth.

Young supported the invasion and declared that anyone opposing it was

giving tacit support to Saddam Hussein. Joe Bryant said the invasion was “immoral”, demagogically denounced Howard as a dictator, and called for the withdrawal of Australian troops. His reasoning, however, was a combination of ignorance and prejudice. Iraqis, he claimed, “had been fighting each other for thousands of years” and “nothing, apart from a return of Saddam Hussein, would change that.”

Vogler said he opposed the invasion of Iraq but insisted that the US-led operation, including Australian troops, should remain because “we have a duty to bring some resolution to the conflict.” Deborah Locke, the Peoples Power candidate, who told the audience she didn’t like to speak about things she “knew nothing about”, echoed this in a largely unintelligible answer.

Apart from Vogler, who voiced some reservations about the violent police operation in Macquarie Fields, all the other candidates backed the police and called for more ruthless crackdowns.

Bryant said the problem was a “lack of discipline” in society and proposed the introduction of compulsory military service for youth. The previously befuddled Locke was now more forthright. “The problem is not the police,” she declared. “We have young police heroes out there standing in the frontline getting bricks thrown at them.” What’s necessary, she continued, was even harsher measures, including the abolition of bail for anyone arrested for stealing cars.

Given the right-wing character of this event it attracted little outside interest. Apart from a couple of supporters for the respective candidates, only three or four other people attended.

The record number of “independent” candidates in Werriwa is a reflection of the disintegration of the ALP and the lack of popular support for the official political parties. But the overwhelming majority of these contestants, whose support for the illegal occupation of Iraq, and Australian participation in it, and Labor’s police repression of local youth and residents, offer no way forward. In fact, rather than challenge the rightward trajectory of Australia’s ruling elite, they simply advance the same reactionary agenda, with minor political variations.

The anger, frustration and contempt of wide layers of workers and youth with official politics, is entirely understandable but no answer to the ongoing rightward lurch of Australian bourgeois politics. Those looking for a genuine alternative to the big business policies of the ALP and its props, the Greens and the PLP, should study the Socialist Equality Party’s program and vote for Mike Head.

Irrespective of the outcome of the March 19 election, the urgent question facing working people, youth and students is the construction of a new socialist and internationalist party, as the only alternative to the escalating militarism and war and attacks on jobs, living standards and basic rights.



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