

SEP campaign in Victorian election

Australia: workers and young people speak out on jobs and the Iraq war

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The Bracks state Labor government, and all the official opposition parties—Liberal, Greens and Democrats—are working to ensure that the essential issues concerning ordinary working people do not see the light of day in the Victorian election.

The US-led invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan are the first among the great unmentionables. All the major parties have supported the fraudulent “war on terror”, which provided the justification for this aggression.

There is no real discussion of the underlying causes for the deepening social inequality presided over by Labor and Liberal governments, state and federal. The official campaign has been deliberately restricted to “local” or “state” issues.

Having stifled any serious debate, politicians and the media declare that the widespread indifference to the election is proof that people are unconcerned about political and social issues. Labor even made the preposterous claim that the lack of interest was a sign that the majority of people in Victoria were content and happy.

In its campaign in the working class electorate of Broadmeadows, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has found the opposite. The SEP is standing candidate Will Marshall against Labor’s treasurer John Brumby and fighting for a socialist alternative to war, attacks on democratic rights and the ongoing assault on living standards.

Given the opportunity, workers, young people and housewives speak out freely on these vital issues. The “lack of interest” is a reflection of the profound alienation of broad sections of working people from official politics and the two-party system. Their concerns find no expression in the media and the political establishment.

Time and again, people tell us there is no real difference between Labor and Liberal, and voting for either will change nothing. “Both parties are for the rich,” “they both lie to us all the time” and “they care nothing about ordinary people” are constant refrains.

Open support for Labor—in what used to be a Labor stronghold—is a rarity. People vote because it is compulsory. If they vote for Labor, it is reluctantly and because of the lack of any real alternative.

Despite a blackout in the official campaign, many people wanted to speak about the war in Iraq and were almost unanimous in their opposition.

Sumeyya, a young housewife and mother of two, spoke to the SEP outside the Broadmeadows social security office. She had already read the SEP election statement. “I noticed that the first thing it dealt was the war in Iraq. I was pleased and thought I will vote for them. I oppose the war and Australia’s involvement.

“I believe that no government, neither Bush nor Howard, has the right to invade another country and to impose what they want on its people.” She did not support the former Iraqi regime but said the US had not invaded because of Saddam Hussein’s crimes. “The United States is not that righteous,” she observed.

“Clearly, the invasion was to get control of the oil in Iraq and in other countries in the Middle East. You only have to have eyes and ears and to use your mind to understand what is going on. Once the US toppled the old regime in Iraq and gained control they put in a government that would serve their needs. They have a great need to control all the oil reserves.”

Sumeyya also disagreed with the invasion of Afghanistan. “I am suspicious of the issues surrounding the September 11 attack in the US. How was it possible for planes to be hijacked like that with no one in US security knowing it was going to happen? The attack served a purpose for Bush and he used it to justify the invasion of Afghanistan and then Iraq.”

She indicted the Howard government and Labor for the suffering caused by the wars. Labor, at both federal and state levels, has unstintingly supported the so-called “war on terror”.

“None of the politicians care about the terrible cost of these wars. Not only are many thousands of ordinary Iraq and Afghan people being killed, there are also horrible injuries and trauma. You hear about soldiers being killed but what about the thousands who come back disabled and affected mentally? The same occurred with the war in Vietnam. Men returned and just could not cope.”

She opposed the promotion of racism and anti-Muslim sentiments by the Howard government and Labor. “They exploit the threat of terror to create fear and divide people. It has made things very hard for Muslim people here who have done nothing wrong. I have felt the effects since 9/11. It has been used to break up any friendly community feeling and many times people look at you with suspicion.”

Sumeyya was angry that Labor had done nothing to reopen the many public schools closed by the former Liberal government. “I believe they should reopen all the closed schools and make new ones. This would mean better education and more teachers. Young people could be trained and employed as teachers. I agree with your election statement—billions of dollars must be put into education. This makes sense.”

Carine, 19, was strongly opposed to the invasion of Iraq. “The US had no right to go in ... Howard is sending soldiers to be killed on the say-so of the US government. What would they say if the Iraqis or some other nation invaded the US or Australia and tried to take over? They would not accept that.

“The war is criminal. Saddam is being hung for killing many people in Iraq but Bush is responsible for even more deaths. Thousands of innocent people have been killed. Why aren’t he and Howard being put on trial and punished?”

Commenting on the stirring up of anti-Muslim racism, she said: “My father is Muslim and my mother is Christian and many of our friends are from different nationalities and cultures. It is not true that people cannot live together. It is people like Howard who bring in division for their own purposes. I agree with what you are saying about all standing together.”

Carine expressed grave concern about the battery of anti-terror laws. “These laws are disgusting. They are discriminating against people and in particular Muslim and Arab people, labelling them terrorists.” She condemned the jailing of 13 Muslim men in Melbourne. “They have been in jail for one year without trial and no evidence. They probably did nothing. Why were they picked on, because they have beards and Middle Eastern names?”

“I don’t vote in elections. Bracks makes promises but he does not keep them. He said he would fix up education after it was destroyed by the last government. He opened a few schools but closed down more. He also cut funding to school children with disabilities. He might throw a few dollars at health but he gives millions and millions to big companies. They say there is no money but there’s plenty of money to build casinos and for what Bracks and Howard want.”

Many people were angry about unemployment and the ongoing devastation of jobs. While the official national jobless rate is about 4.8 percent, it is over 10 percent in many working class and rural areas. The only “jobs growth” in the past decade has been a huge expansion of poorly-paid, part-time and casual positions at the expense of full-time work.

Tens of thousands of manufacturing jobs have been destroyed in Victoria. Broadmeadows, which has been a major centre of industry, is now strewn with closed and abandoned factories.

As the election campaign began, Ford Australia announced the axing of another 640 jobs in Broadmeadows and Geelong before the end of the year. It is a further devastating blow to an area where official unemployment stands at 13.4 percent. Brumby dismissed the inevitable suffering in his own electorate, by saying: “Ford is in a strong position going forward.”

The SEP has spoken to a number of Ford and auto workers. All were deeply concerned about their future, had no faith in the trade unions and were contemptuous of the state Labor government. Fearing victimisation, all asked for their names to be withheld.

A Turkish worker with 15 years service at Ford said he was “scared for the future” because “there’s no more security in the job”. “I didn’t get the sack this time, but next time they’ll push me out.” He was angry that the union refused to oppose the destruction of jobs. “They [the union] say it is okay because it is voluntary and they weren’t pushed out.”

“They [Ford] use everything to make profits, they make us work harder and bring in robots to cut our jobs.” He said the job losses would affect the whole area. “People won’t have a job. They have to pay their houses and raise their kids. Where will they get jobs? How are they going to live? The government has said nothing because they only care about the rich people.”

Asked about the war in Iraq, he said: “I hate this war, I want it finished. All the foreign forces have to get out. This is for the oil interests and it has nothing to do with Al Qaeda.”

A car parts worker from APV Automotive said there were already rumours at his plant, which employs 300, that jobs will go. “The union will do nothing. Labor is friendly to the union leaders, who cover for them, not to the workers.”

A car components worker from Ventura, next to Ford, spoke of the spin off from the cut in Ford production, saying he was “so worried about what’s going to happen now”. “My wife is studying and we barely make ends meet. The unions have done nothing; they just make workers think there is no other choice but to accept what’s happening.”

“All the companies want is more and more profits, and they are getting

this by making us compete with the job conditions in South East Asia. I think the problem is the capitalist system. The rich are so rich and the workers everywhere are poorer. It just can’t keep going like this, we have to do something.”

Young people in particular are struggling to find work and their financial situation is precarious. When they do find work, it is often casual, part-time and badly paid. Without money, life in Broadmeadows can be bleak. It is situated on the outskirts of Melbourne and has long lacked many amenities, including entertainment and sporting facilities.

A young construction worker told the SEP at a shopping centre that he was not working because of the rain. “On such days, we are stood down and not paid. If the weather continues bad like this for long, it will be a big problem for me and I will run short of money.” In the past, building workers were paid when stood down because of inclement weather.

“I have only had this job for a short while,” he said. “Before I worked as a casual in a carpet factory.” The job involved an hour’s drive and there was no holiday pay or sick pay. “After six months the boss said to me that because the work had gone slack I should just go. They want to call you in just when it is good for them,” he said.

Susan Sparks, 16, told a similar story. “There are very few decent jobs in this area for young people. They are all casual jobs, where you are called in when the employer wants you, and they are very badly paid. You might get a better part-time or permanent job if you travel to the city but then it is not worth it because of the cost of travelling. When they leave school many young people can be without a permanent job for two or three years and might never get one.

“I have been unemployed for about one and half months now and there is nothing around, especially just before Christmas. My last job was casual, but the pay was low. I got just \$9.54 an hour and I think that sometimes I was not paid correctly. The way it is structured with all the different hours it is hard to follow.”

She was concerned about the Howard government’s new industrial relations laws, which allow employers to strip back longstanding working conditions. Millions of workers no longer have the limited protection of unfair dismissal laws.

“I think it is really unfair that employers can just get rid of people without giving any reason. The laws really make it easier for them to do this than before. This will make it even worse for young people who don’t have many rights at work.”

Susan said she felt for the Ford workers. “It is just before Christmas and it is really unfair to the workers and their families. Politicians like Howard and Bracks don’t care about this. They do nothing about it and try to confuse people about what is really happening.”

She opposed the war in Iraq, saying: “The money that is spent on war could be better spent on other things like making jobs and education.”



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