

NSW election campaign

SEP opposes exclusion of Noel Holt from Newcastle candidates' forum

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Members and supporters of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) distributed an open letter at a forum for NSW state candidates for the seat of Newcastle organised by the New Institute on February 22. The letter called on those who attended to oppose the New Institute's decision to exclude SEP candidate Noel Holt from participating. The New Institute had advertised the forum "as a rare chance to join a genuine 'town meeting' with all parties taking part."

The SEP's open letter to the New Institute's chairman Ross Kerridge strongly protested Holt's exclusion and called on the institute to reverse its decision, which, it insisted, was "entirely undemocratic", "denying the people of Newcastle the right to hear and discuss the program of the Socialist Equality Party."

Kerridge had originally stated that he did know the SEP was standing a candidate in Newcastle and that the institute had invited all candidates who had "declared". He also claimed that it was impossible to alter the forum's structure to allow Holt's participation.

As the SEP pointed out, however, writs for the NSW state election had not yet been issued and therefore no one had officially declared their intention to stand. The SEP "had publicly declared that it was fielding three candidates in the NSW Legislative Assembly, including Noel Holt in Newcastle, and a slate of 15 candidates in the Legislative Council in its election statement posted on the widely-read *World Socialist Web Site* on February 10." Any changes to the forum's format needed to allow Holt's late inclusion would have been minimal.

In fact, despite its claims to the contrary, the New Institute was not committed to facilitating a genuine

democratic debate or making available all political views. In discussion with the SEP, Kerridge had admitted that the organisation had already decided to exclude so-called minor parties from the forum, arbitrarily imposing a 'cut off line' to restrict participation to those it decided would achieve more than 10 percent of the vote.

As the SEP letter declared: "This position amounts to a self-fulfilling prophecy." The New Institute was aligning itself with the entire official political and media establishment, which worked constantly "to deny minor parties such as the SEP access to the public so as to undermine the growth of their influence and thereby preserve the domination of the two-party system."

It made clear that the decision to exclude Holt amounted to censorship of the views and policies of the SEP within a climate, fomented by both the Labor and Liberal parties at state and federal level, of escalating attacks on democratic and civil rights.

At the start of the meeting, attended by around 180 Newcastle residents, the SEP moved a motion from the floor for the suspension of standing orders to allow the audience to discuss and vote on a resolution supporting Holt's democratic right to participate.

The forum's chairperson Felicity Biggins, a journalist with radio station 2NUR and a New Institute interim management committee member, attempted to ignore the mover, but eventually declared she was only willing to put a resolution that the forum continue along the lines of the planned format—including the exclusion of Holt. When the SEP objected, Biggins admitted that the institute had decided to invite only major parties and so-called "high profile" candidates "who would attract an

audience”.

While a majority of the audience, which was mostly comprised of members and supporters of the five candidates on the platform—voted in favour of Biggins’s proposal, a significant minority voted to uphold Holt’s right to participate. Several abstained, while members of the middle class protest organisation, the Socialist Alliance, voted in favour of excluding the SEP candidate.

The anti-democratic character of the Greens was particularly exposed. Greens’ candidate Michael Osborne, one of the five on the platform, refused to raise any objection to the SEP’s exclusion, and in the course of the meeting failed to mention the US-led war in Iraq or the growing threat of US military aggression against Iran. By excluding Holt, the Greens joined the forum organisers to ensure that the most vital issue confronting working people in Newcastle and around the country was neither raised nor discussed.

Predictably, the forum turned out to be a sterile, stage-managed affair. Questions from the floor were not allowed. Instead, the candidates were quizzed by a panel of so-called experts, who restricted their questions to the most parochial issues.

Despite extensive reportage of the event in the media the following day, the exclusion of the SEP was not mentioned. When the SEP complained to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), the radio station eventually agreed to conduct a short interview with Holt, which was broadcast the morning after the forum. Garth Russell, the station’s morning presenter asked the candidate why he thought the SEP had been excluded from the forum. Holt referred to the organisers’ “10 percent cut-off limit” and explained that this was part of general policy on the part of the media and the official establishment to ignore minor parties and deny them the right to participate in election events.

Under such conditions “what chance is the SEP being given to address the people of Newcastle?” the candidate asked. “The SEP is the voice of the working class. But the working class was denied the right to hear us speak.”

Russell then questioned Holt on what percentage of the vote the SEP had gained in previous elections. Holt replied that the party had stood in both state and federal elections and the vote it had received “was not the

point”.

“All parties should have been on the forum’s platform,” Holt declared. “The message that we have is not the same as the major parties.”

The candidate continued: “We are talking about the issues facing the working class and the biggest issue is the war in Iraq. The people on the forum’s platform behaved as if the war did not exist. But this war will have a major impact on people in Newcastle and everywhere”.

At this point Russell interrupted saying “we appreciate you putting your point forward” and abruptly brought the interview to a close. Later, the station confirmed that its policy was to give all candidates four minutes when being interviewed. The interview with Holt lasted barely three.



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