

NSW state election: SEP candidate speaks at Newtown forum

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Patrick O'Connor, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) candidate for Marrickville in the NSW state election, spoke at a candidates' forum convened by the Newtown Neighbourhood Centre on February 7, calling for the urgent development of an international movement against the war in Iraq and US preparations for war against Iran.

The forum exposed the political gulf that exists between the SEP and the entire official political establishment. It was addressed by sitting Labor MP Carmel Tebbutt, who is Education Minister in the NSW Labor government, Liberal Party candidate Ramzy Mansour, and the Greens and Socialist Alliance candidates.

Billed as "democracy in action", the forum's organisers, led by moderator and academic Eva Cox, attempted to prevent any discussion on a socialist alternative to war and social inequality.

Despite the SEP having made contact with forum organisers on the Monday, they claimed it was too late for O'Connor to be included on the platform. When SEP campaign managers insisted, the organisers finally relented, but arbitrarily declared that O'Connor would have only three minutes to speak, rather than the six allocated for all other candidates.

Before the meeting began Cox made clear the politics behind this bureaucratic suppression of debate, telling O'Connor: "I hope you're going to speak about Marrickville, not international issues". The SEP candidate replied that the central question confronting working people in Marrickville was the Iraq war and the eruption of US militarism, to which Cox cynically retorted, "that's why socialists have never gotten anywhere in 150 years".

In presenting their platform and policies for the NSW state election, each of the candidates suppressed any mention of the escalating war in Iraq, despite opinion polls showing 70 percent of the Australian public believes the Iraq war will be the most important issue in this year's federal poll.

O'Connor opposed the conspiracy of silence, explaining: "I am standing in Marrickville for the Socialist Equality Party in order to provide an independent political voice for

the working class and to advance a socialist and internationalist program necessary to revive and reorient a mass movement against the Iraq war and against Washington's preparations for an attack in Iran.

"On January 10, President Bush announced that his administration was escalating the Iraq war, dispatching more than 20,000 additional troops. This was in direct defiance of the will of the American people, as expressed in last November's Congressional elections. The war has already seen an estimated 655,000 deaths, and 3.7 million Iraqis have been turned into refugees. Now the world is facing the threat of an even bloodier conflagration, with an attack on Iran being readied, including preparations for a nuclear strike."

The SEP's state election campaign, O'Connor said, was aimed at developing an independent political movement of the working class. "None of the pressing problems affecting ordinary people in Marrickville and New South Wales—escalating social inequality, falling working and living standards, the environment, deteriorating public services, and the erosion of basic rights under the so-called war on terror—can be addressed apart from the development of an independent struggle against militarism and war.

"The Socialist Equality Party insists that this struggle can only be advanced by workers and youth breaking with all the parliamentary parties and building a party that genuinely represents their interests, a party founded on socialist and internationalist principles."

O'Connor provoked jeers from supporters of Socialist Alliance and the Greens when he insisted that political lessons had to be drawn from the failure of protest politics. "The historic global antiwar protests in February 2003 ultimately failed to halt the invasion of Iraq—not because of any shortage of opposition to the pending war—but because the political perspective of pressuring the Howard government, appealing to the Labor Party, or France, Germany, or the United Nations was a futile perspective. Contrary to the claims advanced by the Socialist Alliance and other middle class protest groups, protests alone are

insufficient to stop war. What is required is a new perspective, one which harnesses the immense strength of the international working class and addresses the root causes of imperialist war and militarism.”

By contrast, the contributions of Fiona Byrne from the Greens and Pip Hinman from Socialist Alliance were devoted to lobbying Tebbutt and appealing to the Labor Party. Hinman’s opening remarks were a political gift to Labor. Referring to a recent health crisis in her own family, Hinman praised “the wonderful public health system we have here” in Marrickville. She called for “a people’s movement” to “reverse the course of neo-liberalism” and said, “we wish the Labor Party would participate in that campaign”.

Far from reversing the course of “neo-liberalism”, the Carr and Iemma governments have faced growing opposition from nurses, doctors and the general public for their slashing of public health services over the past decade. This agenda, including hospital closures, lengthy waiting lists for essential surgery and overstretched accident and emergency wards resulting in needless patient deaths, has been duplicated nationally. It is in line with the demolition of public health, education and welfare systems taking place on a global scale as governments—whether nominally social-democratic or conservative—have adhered to the dictates of globally mobile capital for the removal of all claims on profit and returns on investment.

The comments of Greens candidate Fiona Byrne were mired in nationalism, state-based parochialism and parliamentarism. The Greens, she declared, were providing “a new vision for NSW” so the state could become an economic and environmental leader. While the Greens won support at the 2004 federal elections, especially among young people who mistakenly believed the party was antiwar, Byrne made no reference to the illegal occupation of Iraq and did not call for the withdrawal of foreign troops. She claimed that the far-reaching global problems associated with climate change and pollution could be resolved via such measures as a carbon tax and the doubling of subsidies for residents who purchase backyard rainwater tanks. She also called for punitive Stage 4 water restrictions on households. Like Hinman, Byrne’s election campaign was directed to the ALP, with a pledge to lobby Tebbutt on environmental issues in the aftermath of the March 24 vote.

Taking full advantage of the support given by the Greens and Socialist Alliance, Tebutt declared “the real choice is between a Liberal and Labor government”. Forum moderator Eva Cox sought to confine discussion to precisely this framework, directing a range of questions on local housing, public transport and industrial relations reform to the Labor and Liberal candidates only. When O’Connor

attempted to answer a question about election campaign funding by pointing to the political significance of the ALP’s reliance on big-business donors and the collapse of any base of support for Labor in the working class, Cox simply cut him off, ruling his remarks out of order.

These attempts to bolster Labor and the two-party system amount to damage control. Both the ALP and Liberals have suffered a wholesale collapse of membership and are little more than bureaucratic shells, held together by the trappings of office. In the 2005 Marrickville by-election, the Greens came close to taking the seat from Labor, while opinion polls published in late 2006 revealed one in three voters would cast their vote against both the ALP and the Liberal-National Coalition parties. The promotion of the ALP as a “lesser evil” by the various middle class protest groups is aimed at preventing the emergence of a conscious socialist opposition among workers and young people to the two-party set-up, and to the profit system that it defends.

After questions from the audience on US war preparations against Iran and the role of the state Labor government in supporting the Howard government’s anti-terror laws, Cox again moved to shift the axis of discussion. She demanded that audience members address “local issues” only. “You can’t ask that question, it’s too general,” she told a member of the audience who wanted to know how each of the candidates was proposing to campaign against the federal workplace reforms that have stripped workers of basic legal protections.

Cox’s interjections were aimed at avoiding any discussion of a socialist alternative. The insistence that only local issues could be raised served this essential purpose. In reality however, the decay of basic infrastructure, of public transport, schools and hospitals and the growth of poverty and job insecurity, while manifesting at a local level, all have a universal content. The “local” problems confronting ordinary people in cities throughout the world—from Sydney to Beijing, from Paris to Chicago—have a common source in the contradictions and crisis of the capitalist system itself.

At the conclusion of the forum, O’Connor and SEP campaign supporters stayed behind to discuss with members of the audience. A young English-language teacher approached the SEP candidate to express her support. “Did you get the idea that they were trying to censor you?” she pointedly asked.



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