

Australian SEP election campaign wins appreciative response

Our reporters
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Over the past five weeks, the Socialist Equality Party's candidates for the March 24 New South Wales (Australia) election have taken the party's program to a wide and generally sympathetic audience, despite an almost total blackout by the mainstream media.

SEP national secretary and *World Socialist Web Site* International Editorial Board member Nick Beams is heading the party's slate of 15 candidates for the Legislative Council (upper house), together with Terry Cook, a founding member of the Socialist Labour League (forerunner of the SEP) in 1972 and a regular WSWs correspondent. In Sydney, the SEP is standing two candidates for the Legislative Assembly (lower house)—James Cogan for the southeastern suburban seat of Heffron, and Patrick O'Connor in the inner-west seat of Marrickville. In Newcastle, a major working class city about 200 kilometres north of Sydney, the party is standing Noel Holt, a former Telstra worker, for the lower house.

In the course of the campaign, the SEP has held public meetings in each of the three electorates, and a final public meeting in Sydney, to discuss and answer questions on the most critical issues facing the working class—the eruption of war and militarism, the mounting offensive against basic democratic rights, the growth of social inequality and the devastating impact of government cuts on the lives of working people.

The SEP's candidates have spoken at every possible election forum, in several cases having to fight for the right to do so, against the anti-democratic efforts of the media and the parliamentary parties—Labor, Liberal and the Greens—to shut them out on the basis that they were not “viable”.

In opposition to the so-called “major” parties and candidates, who have all sought to subordinate, in one way or another, the interests of ordinary people to the profit dictates of big business, the SEP has presented an independent program to meet the needs and aspirations of the working class.

More than 50,000 copies of the SEP election statement have been distributed. On doorknocking and shopping centre campaigns, many people have expressed appreciation for the clarity of the SEP's socialist and internationalist perspective. Generous donations on campaigns and from supporters have so far raised more than \$16,000 for the SEP election fund.

A major focus of the party's campaign has been the establishment of International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) clubs at four campuses—University of Sydney, University of New South Wales (UNSW), University of Technology, Sydney, and University of Newcastle. Thousands of students have received copies of the SEP election statement, the international call for students to join the ISSE and the *World Socialist Web Site* statement “For an international mobilization of workers and youth against the war in Iraq”.

Students attended ISSE campus meetings addressed by the local SEP candidates, including a meeting at UNSW on March 20, where Nick Beams spoke on the underlying causes of the US-led turn to military aggression in the Middle East and answered questions in a lively

exchange. Students have also attended the weekly SEP election committee meetings and participated in the distribution of SEP election statements.

In the two adjoining Sydney electorates, Heffron and Marrickville, the SEP has conducted an important political intervention.

In Heffron, which extends south of Sydney to the airport and Botany Bay, James Cogan and SEP supporters have doorknocked the predominantly working class and student suburbs of Sydenham, Erskineville, Mascot and Eastlakes, and letterboxed almost the entire electorate.

More than 12,000 election statements have been hand-delivered to households, and another 3,000 distributed on campaigns at shopping centres, railway stations and the University of NSW. SEP members have campaigned regularly at the Eastlakes shopping centre, but were undemocratically barred by the management from speaking to voters at the Surrey Hills Shopping Village, which services the Redfern-Waterloo area.

The *Southern Courier*, a local newspaper with a circulation of 45,000, provided the only media coverage of the SEP candidate. The *Courier* published Cogan's answers to a list of 15 questions addressing issues varying from the expansion of Sydney's Kingsford Smith airport—located within the electorate—to public transport, health, education and the role of religion in politics. Cogan's answers are available on the website: www.villagevoice.com.au.

In Marrickville, more than 26,000 SEP statements have been distributed, including at the Marrickville Metro shopping centre, Dulwich Hill shops and King Street, Newtown. During a Portuguese community festival in Marrickville, O'Connor and SEP supporters handed out copies of the SEP statement translated into Portuguese.

O'Connor's campaign has been highly visible, with the candidate speaking at several forums, including one on climate change and another at the Newtown Neighbourhood Centre, where his call for the urgent development of an international movement against the war in Iraq and US preparations for war against Iran helped expose the political gulf that exists between the SEP and the entire official political establishment, including the Greens. (See “SEP candidate speaks at Newtown forum.”)

The *Inner West Courier*, which covers much of the Marrickville electorate, gave O'Connor less than 100 words to sum up his policies, and excluded him from its weekly policy presentations by other candidates, including the Greens and the middle class protest organisation, the Socialist Alliance. The *South Sydney Herald*, an offshoot of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, went even further. In its “election special” the local giveaway paper confined its lists of candidates to the three “front runners” for Marrickville and Heffron, denying voters even the information that the SEP was standing.

Both SEP candidates spoke at forums convened by the community group Redwatch to discuss the state Labor government's Redfern-Waterloo Authority (RWA) and the corporate redevelopment taking place in the area. Before the event, Cogan and O'Connor authored a joint

response to a list of questions posed by Redwatch. Their answers are published on Redwatch.

O'Connor told the Redwatch forum on March 15 that Labor's plans for Redfern-Waterloo involved "the driving out of public housing and low-income residents and the promotion of big business and property investors' interests". This was "an expression of a far broader process occurring throughout Australia and internationally," he said.

"Under the profit system, the globalisation of production has seen each national government around the world compete for international investment by offering the most profitable environment. Working and living conditions of the vast majority of people are being systematically driven down, social services including public housing, transport, health, and education have been deliberately under-funded and run down. This agenda has been pursued over the past three decades by both Liberal and Labor governments at the state and federal levels."

The end result had been a dramatic escalation in social inequality. While the wealthiest 200 individuals in Australia now have a combined wealth of \$101 billion, the 2001 census found that 39 percent of Redfern residents had incomes lower than \$300 a week. In Waterloo the proportion was 66 percent.

"The central conception driving the Labor government's agenda in Redfern and Waterloo is that low-income residents have no future in an area whose prime real estate has been earmarked for big business."

O'Connor cited former premier Bob Carr's February 2004 speech to the Committee for Sydney, a body largely comprised of prominent figures in the business, banking, and investment world, in which he pledged that Redfern would soon become "an area of major commercial redevelopment, because of its proximity to the city and excellent transport facilities".

"These remarks were issued just five days after the death of Aboriginal youth TJ Hickey caused by a police chase which was subsequently covered up by the Redfern police. As a reporter for the *World Socialist Web Site* I had the opportunity to observe the state coroner's disgraceful whitewash as well as the bipartisan parliamentary report backing the government's repressive measures against the local Aboriginal community. This response was indicative of the fact that the political establishment has no solution to the problems caused by social inequality other than police harassment and violence directed against the most vulnerable members of society.

"While racism is no small factor in Redfern-Waterloo, these are essentially class questions, as was demonstrated in February 2005 when youth in Macquarie Fields clashed with police after two teenagers were killed in a high speed chase. In that case also, the Labor government ordered a massive police mobilisation while denying that underlying social conditions were to blame for the situation.

"There can be no genuine democracy in a society marked by the gross disparity of wealth which now marks every aspect of political and social life in Australia. Nor can there be any popular participation in or control over planning decisions. The RWA's structure, and the manner in which the Labor government has concentrated all decision-making power in the hands of a Minister for Redfern-Waterloo, flows logically from the interests Labor serves: those of a corporate and financial oligarchy. No amount of community pressure or protest can force the political establishment to defend the interests of ordinary working people in the area."

O'Connor said the dictates of the profit system had to be "answered by an independent and international socialist movement of the working class which strives to completely reorganise economic and social life and place the major corporations place under public ownership and democratic control".

In question time, both the Greens and Socialist Alliance candidates were asked to explain why, despite their professed opposition to the

redevelopment plan, they were nevertheless allocating second voting preferences to Labor.

The Greens' Fiona Byrne claimed her party was not endorsing Labor. She asserted, however, that a Liberal government would be worse because it would allow the federal "WorkChoices" industrial relations laws into NSW, cut public services and implement draconian law and order policies. In fact, Labor has opposed any mobilisation of workers against the WorkChoices laws, and supported the use of individual work contracts. Over the past 12 years, it has also slashed tens of thousands of public sector jobs, run down public health and education, and introduced unprecedented police powers.

The Socialist Alliance's Pip Hinman was even more explicit in her support for Labor. She literally echoed Labor's own campaign slogan, saying the Labor government had not "done as much as they should have". After referring to the Howard government's WorkChoices laws, she adamantly declared, "of course we think that Labor is a lesser evil to the Liberals, absolutely".

In response, O'Connor reiterated that the SEP would not be giving preferences, because "we reject this whole conception that the Labor Party represents a lesser evil ... [it is] ... a real trap for working people". He described the notion that Labor represented some sort of defence against the Liberal Party's attacks as "quite fantastic". Not only was Labor vowing to cut 5,000 more public sector jobs, but the federal Howard government was only carrying forward the anti-working class program implemented by the Hawke and Keating Labor governments from 1983 to 1996.

O'Connor insisted that working people needed to break from the entire framework of "lesser evil" politics, "which is primarily aimed at preventing the development of an independent political movement". His remarks drew applause.

In Newcastle, Noel Holt spoke at several forums. On March 19, he addressed a regional Law Society forum attended by nearly 500 people, where he opposed the "law and order" hysteria being whipped up by the local media and the major parties.

Asked for his stance on "public drunkenness and violence on the street," Holt emphasised the SEP's opposition to "candidates in this election who vilify the youth and unemployed and offer no solution other than to try to outbid each other by pledging to put more police on the streets, open up closed police stations and implement stricter sentencing."

Holt continued: "Petty crime and social lawlessness are a product of social inequality. We must first confront the root cause of social inequality, which is the profit-driven market system, which strives to maximise profits in opposition to the social needs of the people.

"Urgent social programs must be implemented to lift the standard of living of all disadvantaged families and youth. The taking of drugs is a social issue, which requires immediate treatment and assistance for those caught in the cycle of drug-taking to assist them to break the habit.

"More fundamentally, it requires the launching of a massive public works program to provide decent well-paid jobs for all who need them, and access to high quality recreation, culture and the arts. Funds need to be poured into libraries, museums, theatre, orchestras, public television and radio.

"Under our conditions of the development of genuine social equality the need for police on the streets would be diminished dramatically."

Holt added that the SEP opposed the "war on terror" and all those using it to generate fear campaigns to justify increasing the number of police and giving them added powers, laying the foundations for a police state.

"NSW police have unprecedented powers to search homes and offices without informing the occupants, as well as extended powers to bug suspects continuously for up to three months.... None of these measures are needed to protect people from terrorists.

"The SEP calls for the repeal of all police-state anti-terrorism laws and

an end to attacks on civil rights.”

The local daily newspaper, the *Newcastle Herald* reported the meeting, but gave the impression that the SEP lined up with the other candidates behind the newspaper’s months-long “law and order” crusade. After stating, “the crowd applauded when anyone spoke of putting more police back on the streets or placing stricter controls on pubs, clubs and even liquor-licensed restaurants and cafes,” it declared: “All seven election candidates said they would support a lockdown, lockout or curfew”.

The SEP wrote to the *Herald* demanding a retraction of the inference that Noel Holt in anyway supports increased police numbers and powers, or any of the repressive measures endorsed by the other candidates.

The *Herald’s* distortion is part of a pattern. During the past five weeks, it has blacked out all mention of Holt, while publishing numerous articles on the five candidates it regards as “mainstream”. Another local paper, the *Star*, has printed only a 200-word statement from the SEP candidate in its election roundup. The local ABC radio station interviewed Holt for three minutes when he insisted on the right to put forward the party’s program after being excluded from a New Institute candidates’ forum on February 22. (See “SEP opposes exclusion of Noel Holt from Newcastle candidates’ forum”.)

On March 17, SEP upper house candidate Terry Cook addressed a rally organised by the Newcastle NoWAR Collective, called to mark the fourth anniversary of the US-led occupation of Iraq. He told the gathering the “SEP unequivocally opposes the US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and preparations for war against Iran” and “calls for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all foreign troops from both countries”.

Cook warned: “We are again witnessing the re-emergence of a ruthless struggle for control over the world’s resources and territory—the same inter-imperialist antagonisms and fracture lines that gave rise to two world wars now threaten a third”.

Cook emphasised that the SEP also opposed the Howard government’s neo-colonial interventions in the South Pacific, including in East Timor and the Solomon Islands, and rejected claims by the media and political establishment—Labor, the Greens and Australian Democrats—that Australian soldiers and police were engaged in “humanitarian” work. “They are there to secure the domination of Australian imperialism over the region and advance its predatory colonial interests,” he said.

“The revival of the global antiwar movement requires an urgent critical assessment of experiences since 2003,” Cook told the rally, explaining that the outlook that had dominated the mass global antiwar demonstrations was “that the invasion would be stopped through protest, by pressuring capitalist governments, by enlisting the support of opposition parties, or by appealing to the UN. This perspective has proved to be completely bankrupt.”

Cook said that unlike the various radical protest groups, such as Socialist Alliance and Resistance, the SEP insisted that “only by mobilising independently of, and in opposition to, all the parties and institutions that defend the capitalist order and by building a new international socialist movement to challenge the very framework of the profit system can working people around the world halt the descent into a new and terrifying era of imperialist barbarism”.



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