

The NSW state elections and the climate change debate

The Patrick O'Connor, SEP candidate for Marrickville, NSW (Australia)
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The following comment by Socialist Equality Party candidate Patrick O'Connor was distributed to a local candidates forum convened by the Climate Action Now group in Marrickville. O'Connor was one of four candidates contesting the inner-Sydney seat in the March 24 New South Wales election who addressed the meeting. Other speakers were Carmel Tebbutt, the current Labor member for Marrickville, Fiona Byrne for the Greens and Pip Hinman from Socialist Alliance.

O'Connor's opening remarks, which were based on the comment below, were warmly received by the small, but attentive, audience. The SEP candidate explained that climate change was a class issue and one that required a socialist and internationalist program. O'Connor demarcated the SEP from the ad hoc and piecemeal policies offered by the Greens, Labor and Socialist Alliance and argued that no solution to the pressing dangers of global warming was possible within the framework of the capitalist market and the profit system.

Amid growing popular concern over climate change, Labor, Liberal, and the Greens have all paraded their environmental credentials in an attempt to win support in the New South Wales state election on March 24. None of the various proposals, however, amounts to a realistic solution to global warming. All are aimed at obscuring the fundamental cause of the crisis, namely the organisation of economic life on the basis of profit.

There is now overwhelming scientific evidence of the potentially devastating consequences of climate change. While all the implications are still not fully understood, scientists agree that without a dramatic reduction in the emission of greenhouse gases, every part of the world will be affected by severe temperature and weather shifts. A recent study conducted by the CSIRO forecast that Sydney's average temperature will rise by 1.6 degrees by 2030 and 4.8 degrees by 2070, with rainfall dropping by 40 percent.

The severity of the threat stands in sharp contrast to the miniscule reforms advanced by all the parliamentary parties in the New South Wales campaign. The Liberals propose to

provide a rebate to householders who install a solar hot water system. The Labor government has promised to create a minister for climate change and advocates the creation of a national "carbon trading" market. The Greens have advanced a series of measures, including the imposition of a carbon tax, aimed at reducing NSW's greenhouse gas emissions by 80 percent below 1990 levels by 2050.

None of the establishment parties proposes to challenge the domination of big business and the major polluters. On the contrary, they all appeal for corporate support and advance the illusion that a solution to climate change can be found within the framework of the capitalist market. On this point the two main parties of big business, Labor and Liberal, are joined by the Greens, who have appealed for support on the basis of making New South Wales a centre for new "eco-businesses".

In his report, commissioned last year by the British government, former World Bank chief economist Nicholas Stern described climate change as the "greatest and widest-ranging market failure ever seen". However, rather than drawing the logical conclusion that the market itself was the problem and should be abolished, Stern, like all the parties of the Australian political establishment, proposed to "correct" this market failure by extending the market itself, through mechanisms such as carbon trading.

A national carbon trading market in Australia, as proposed by Labor, would do nothing to address climate change. Pollution trading schemes were first implemented in the US by the Reagan administration as a means of evading the imposition of regulations on the activities of big business. Several scientific studies have demonstrated that carbon trading does nothing to sufficiently reduce emissions. Instead it makes it effectively cheaper for the biggest industrial polluters to continue their destructive production practices. Corporations reap additional profits through the multi-billion dollar industry created by the legal conversion of pollution quotas into tradeable property.

The Socialist Equality Party insists that the only realistic solution to climate change is the abolition of the profit

system and the destructive division of the globe into rival nation-states. Global warming—and indeed every environmental problem—cannot be addressed without examining who owns the means of production and in whose interests they are deployed. Under capitalism, human and social needs, including the maintenance of a healthy environment, are sacrificed to the drive for ever-greater levels of personal wealth. Facing constant pressure from big investors, only those corporations that cut production costs the most and maximise profits can survive.

The profit system, moreover, is organically rooted within the nation-state system. Global warming can only be systematically addressed on an international scale. Only through the cooperative mobilisation of the world's scientific, technological and economic resources can such an immense challenge be tackled. International agreements such as the Kyoto Protocol—which is itself a completely inadequate solution—founder on the rocks of national competition. Defending the interests of their own national ruling elites, the Bush administration and the Howard government have simply withdrawn from the Kyoto framework.

Only through the rational and international organisation of production can environmental problems such as climate change be resolved. A globally and democratically planned economy would utilise the most advanced technologies and the latest scientific developments in order to further develop humanity's productive forces, abolish poverty and social inequality, and preserve the long-term health and stability of the earth's eco-system. Abundant resources exist to establish such a plan, but under capitalism everything from renewable energy to public transport to education must prove capable of generating profit before being implemented.

The Socialist Equality Party rejects the position that humanity as a whole is responsible for the environmental crisis and its corollary, that living standards must be reduced by restricting economic production to the national, or even local, level. Such a proposal, to turn back the clock of economic and historical development, generally underlines the Greens' approach to environmental issues. It is as utopian as it is reactionary. Inevitably it is ordinary working people who will bear the brunt of job losses and deteriorating living standards. The solution is not to hark back to a more primitive mode of existence, but to liberate the vast international productive capacities developed under capitalism from the social relations in which they are constrained.

The position that “we are all responsible” is aimed at covering over the class issues that lie at the very heart of the environmental crisis. It is the ruling elite that is responsible

for global warming, not the working class. The SEP opposes the Greens' proposal for a carbon tax of \$25 per tonne of carbon dioxide, which would be equally levied on the major corporate polluters and ordinary people who drive to work, heat their homes, etc. This regressive tax would hit workers who have already suffered a steady erosion of their living and working conditions, and would do nothing to address the real source of the problem.

It is important to note that the only reason climate change has become such a major issue in recent times is that it is beginning to affect the entire population—including the rich. If global warming only seriously impacted the lives of the working class and rural poor—as is the case with most environmental problems—very little would be heard about it.

There is also, however, a significant element of political diversion involved. Climate change is the only global issue officially permitted to be raised in the NSW election campaign. The eruption of US militarism in the Middle East, on the other hand, is deemed to be completely irrelevant. This is despite the fact that Washington appears increasingly determined to go to war against Iran and seize control of that country's oil and gas reserves, setting in motion a conflict that would rapidly threaten a global conflagration with potentially catastrophic implications for the entire world's population.

The Socialist Equality Party is fielding candidates in the NSW election in order to advance the only independent political means through which working people can counter the frenzied drive to war and, at the same time, address all the fundamental challenges they face, including global warming. The precondition for the revolutionary reorganisation of economic and social life is the development of a mass political party of the working class founded on socialist and internationalist principles. I urge all those workers and young people who support these aims to participate in our campaign and to join and build the SEP.



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