

A revealing political divide

Australia: SEP candidate addresses climate change meeting

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A local election forum on climate change this week further exposed the political gulf between the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and other parties contesting the inner-Sydney seat of Marrickville in the March 24 New South Wales ballot.

Convened by Climate Action Now, the meeting was addressed by Carmel Tebbutt, the current Labor member for Marrickville, Fiona Byrne for the Greens, Pip Hinman from Socialist Alliance and SEP candidate Patrick O'Connor. Speakers were given six minutes to outline their policies. The Liberal Party did not send a representative.

O'Connor's opening remarks and his contributions during the question and answer session were applauded by the small, but attentive, audience. The SEP candidate was able to demonstrate that Labor and the Greens have no serious answers to global warming and other major environmental problems, and that Socialist Alliance, rather than challenging these parties, promotes the illusion that they could be "pressured" to introduce minor reforms.

Labor, the Greens and Socialist Alliance play upon the genuine concerns of ordinary people about environmental dangers to attract votes. Apart from O'Connor, all the other candidates claimed, either openly or implicitly, that it was possible to stop global warming within the framework of the profit system.

The first speakers, Byrne and Tebbutt, paid lip service to the necessity for "global, national and community-based solutions" but then offered a series of parochial, piecemeal and thoroughly inadequate measures to what is a worldwide problem and one that requires a global response. Both candidates made clear that their policies would not impinge on the profits of the major corporations.

Hinman from the Socialist Alliance immediately solidarised herself with the Greens and advanced a series of limited reforms, not unlike those suggested by the Greens and primarily aimed at cleaning up Australian companies. While Socialist Alliance postures as an opponent of capitalism, none of Hinman's proposals, including her call for the "renationalisation" of the power, freight and transport industries, fundamentally challenge the major corporations or profit system as whole.

Patrick O'Connor outlined the SEP's policies, which were further elaborated in a candidate statement distributed at the meeting. (See "The NSW state election and the climate change debate")

"Global warming," he told the meeting, "can be systematically addressed only on an international scale and only through the cooperative mobilisation of the world's scientific, technological and economic resources, and in a struggle against the profit system."

The SEP candidate exposed the proposals suggested by Greens and Labor policies, explaining the origins and political consequences of carbon trading, which both parties support, and which allows the biggest industrial polluters to continue their destructive practices.

He rejected the view that humanity as a whole was responsible for the crisis or that restricting production or reducing individual consumption, as suggested by the Greens and Socialist Alliance, would solve the problem. This hid the essential class issues at the heart of the environmental crisis, he said. "It is the ruling elite that is responsible for global warming," he continued, "not the working class."

The SEP candidate concluded by asking the audience to consider why climate change was the only international issue the local political establishment allowed to be discussed during the NSW election campaign.

“While the environment is acknowledged as an important issue,” he said, “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 political divide between O’Connor and the other speakers became even more apparent during the meeting’s Q & A session.

An SEP supporter pointed out that the biggest polluters were the major industrial companies. “Contrary to Carmel Tebbutt’s claims, it is not government or cabinet that determines policy but the big corporations which dictate the policies that you implement,” he said. He asked Tebbutt and Byrne to explain why they believed it possible to produce lasting change in the environment without challenging the profit system.

Both speakers tried to evade the question. Tebbutt attempted to appeal to crude anti-socialist prejudice by declaring that Australia was “still a democracy”, then bluntly added that she had “to work within the profit system”. Byrne simply restated her claims that renewable energy projects would improve jobs and the quality of life, and the Greens would introduce legislation to make public all corporate donations to political parties.

Dr Chris Riedy from the Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology, Sydney, had been invited to act as an independent expert. He also proclaimed his faith in the profit system, arguing that climate change reforms and renewable energy projects could be highly profitable and would therefore compel corporations to change. He did not explain, however, how the anarchic mechanism of the market would substitute for a coordinated, global plan to avert the crisis.

One other question—about allocating preferences to other parties at the March 24 ballot—produced the same political line up. Tebbutt and Byrne, whose organisations spend considerable effort during elections negotiating backroom and thoroughly unprincipled preference swapping deals in order to win office, disingenuously claimed they didn’t know which way their respective parties would direct preferences.

Hinman explained that Socialist Alliance was directing its preferences to the Greens in some electorates and Labor in others. The Labor Party in power, she said, was

better than the Liberals because it “could be pressured” by ordinary people. This patently false claim ignores the fact that over the past two decades, state and federal Labor governments, have paid scant attention to the protests of workers and overseen the never-ending process of cutbacks to jobs, conditions and essential public services.

In contrast to the other parties, Patrick O’Connor explained that the SEP was not allocating any preferences. The party was contesting the NSW elections in order to explain to youth and workers that they had to break from Labor and build their own independent political party based on socialist and international principles.

The meeting concluded with candidates given two minutes to sum up their policies. Like a previous Marrickville election forum in Newtown on February 7, Tebbutt had already left the meeting, claiming another appointment.

O’Connor concluded by answering those, such as Tebbutt, who claimed a socialist perspective was “unrealistic” and it was necessary “to work within the system”. Much could be said about this position, he said, “but one thing is clear, climate change is a perfect case study of an issue where it is utterly unrealistic to search for a solution within capitalism.”

O’Connor explained that the dramatic changes in the global economy over the past three decades and the imposition of the free-market deregulation and privatisation meant that corporations were “free to roam the world in search of the least number of regulations, lowest wages and the most profitable environment.”

“These objective processes cannot be reversed within any given national economy nor is there any solution in NSW. What is required is an international socialist strategy by the working class and the building of a party that fights on that basis. This is why we are standing in the NSW elections and urge your assistance and support,” the SEP candidate said.



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