

NSW (Australia) election:

SEP candidates address Sydney election meeting

Our reporters
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The Socialist Equality Party (Australia) held its final public meeting yesterday in its campaign for the March 24 New South Wales (NSW) state election. Before an attentive audience of students and working people, young and old, the party's candidates focussed on the central issues of political perspective raised by the SEP's intervention in the election.

The keynote speaker was SEP national secretary and WSWs International Editorial Board member Nick Beams, who is heading the party's slate of 15 candidates for the Legislative Council (upper house). Also speaking were the SEP candidates for the Legislative Assembly—James Cogan for the southeastern Sydney seat of Heffron, Patrick O'Connor in the inner-west seat of Marrickville and Noel Holt in the working class city of Newcastle.

Chairing the meeting, SEP assistant national secretary Linda Tenenbaum explained that the primary purpose of the SEP's campaign was not to canvass for votes. It was to clarify, discuss with and educate ordinary working people, and especially young people, on the political tasks posed by war, escalating social inequality and the never-ending encroachment on democratic and civil rights, and to outline the alternative socialist perspective needed to advance the independent interests and needs of the international working class.

She observed that the mainstream media—from the Murdoch and Fairfax newspapers to the government-run Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and Special Broadcasting Services (SBS)—had refused to even mention the SEP's candidates. This was despite admitting that voters faced a “bleak choice” in the election, with opinion polls showing intense dissatisfaction with both the state Labor government and its official Liberal Party opposition.

Tenenbaum emphasised that the SEP was the only party in the election refusing to allocate second-voting preferences to any other party or candidate. “Both the Greens and the so-called Socialist Alliance have openly argued, along with the *Sydney Morning Herald*, that Labor is the ‘lesser evil’ in this campaign and should, ultimately, be supported.

“We refuse to lend our weight and support in any manner to the bankrupt conception that voting Labor is preferable to voting Liberal. Our campaign has made clear that for the working class a complete political break from Labor and the two-party system itself is long overdue. What is needed is the building of an independent political movement of the working class on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective—a perspective that challenges the very foundations of the current social order, not only in Australia but internationally. There are no other means of averting the descent into another world war.”

The first speaker was the SEP candidate for Heffron, James Cogan, a staff writer for the WSWs, who joined the Trotskyist movement after opposing the first US-led war against Iraq in 1990-91. He said the SEP campaign was insisting that the pre-eminent issue confronting the working class in Australia and around the world was the eruption of US militarism.

“This election is taking place under conditions of an escalation of US military operations in both Afghanistan and Iraq, and the steady build-up of US air and naval power in the Persian Gulf targetted against Iran,” he said. “Each week witnesses a new stream of propaganda from Washington, accusing the Iranian regime of supplying weapons for use against American troops occupying Iraq and of attempting to construct nuclear weapons.

“The parallels with the months leading up to the US invasion of Iraq, exactly four years ago this coming Tuesday, are both obvious and ominous. The Bush administration is seeking to fabricate a climate in which it can launch a third, criminal war of aggression. Having already seized Iraq and the world's second largest reserves of oil, Iran is being targetted as it lies above massive oil and gas fields and is the strategic intersection of Central Asia and the Middle East.”

Cogan continued: “The SEP and the WSWs have stressed that the war policy of the Bush administration is not the outcome of a few deranged individuals in the White House. It is the inevitable outcome of the fierce global competition that is raging between the world's major financial and industrial corporations, and the national governments that serve them, for control over resources, markets and profits. US imperialism is using military force to establish hegemony over the key resource of modern economy—oil and gas...

“The motive for the war is congealed in the draft oil law that is being pushed by the puppet government the US has installed in Baghdad. The law will put as many as 65 of Iraq's 80 known untapped oil fields up for bid by foreign companies, on the most lucrative of terms. American energy transnationals will be first in line.”

Cogan stated: “An international mass working class movement must be developed against militarism. Our campaign has been aimed at clarifying the perspective upon which such a movement must be built.”

He illustrated the necessity for that axis by referring to the “political travesty” that had occurred at the supposed antiwar rally convened in Sydney the day before by the Stop the War Coalition, which included the Socialist Alliance and a variety of other protest groups that labelled themselves socialist.

“The rally was not an antiwar rally. It was a ‘vote for Labor’ rally. Not only did Socialist Alliance and Green figures implicitly call for support for Labor, one of the main speakers was Labor MP Meredith Burgmann, the president of the NSW upper house since 1999.

“Organisations that claim to be socialist are promoting the lie that Labor

holds an antiwar position and can be pressured to speak for the mass antiwar sentiment because [federal Labor leader] Kevin Rudd has stated he will withdraw Australian troops from Iraq.

“What is the truth? In 2003, Labor’s only disagreement with the Iraq war was that it was not expressly sanctioned by a UN resolution, as the 1991 Gulf War was. Labor has given the Bush administration a guarantee that it will support the ongoing presence of American military forces in Iraq and will only withdraw 500 of the 1,400 Australian military personnel deployed there, primarily to enable their redeployment to Afghanistan or the South Pacific. Rudd declared on Friday he would support any increase in Australian troop numbers in Afghanistan.

“Labor is committed to the US alliance and US bases in Australia and if it won government would protect Howard and his cabinet from necessary war crimes prosecution. Moreover, Labor is already on record lending support and credibility to the campaign of lies and propaganda against Iran.”

Cogan concluded: “The Iraq war has the same significance today as the German Nazi regime’s militarist campaign in the 1930s had for the generations who endured World War I and II. It represents the initial stage in a desperate and reckless attempt by the US ruling elite to use military force to retain its diminishing global dominance. It threatens to unleash open conflict between the major capitalist powers and ultimately, a third world war.

“The perspective spelt out in the election manifesto we have been distributing throughout this election represents the necessary political answer to the barbarism, inequality and injustice that is generated by the profit system. We outline the basis for the independent and international mobilisation of the working class to bring an end to the destructive and irrational capitalist market and nation-state and lay the foundations for resolving all the great issues confronting humanity. I encourage you to join our party and our struggle for a socialist future.”

The second speaker was the SEP candidate for Marrickville, Patrick O’Connor, a history honours graduate who joined the SEP in 2003 and since 2005 has worked as a WWSW correspondent in the UK, US and France as well as Australia.

O’Connor explained why, in making the struggle against war and militarism the axis of its election campaign, the SEP had placed particular emphasis on the Howard government’s US-backed aggressive military operations in East Timor and the South Pacific. Quoting the SEP election statement, he said: “We completely reject the claim advanced by the media and political establishment—including the Labor Party, Greens, and Democrats—that Australian soldiers and police are engaged in ‘humanitarian’ work. They have been deployed in order to secure the Australian ruling elite’s domination of its own special ‘sphere of influence.’”

Events in East Timor during the election campaign had vindicated that analysis, he said. O’Connor pointed to the Australian forces’ killing of two men who were resisting efforts by the occupying troops and the Timorese government to evict internally displaced refugees from a camp outside Dili airport on February 23, and the killing of five East Timorese rebel soldiers on March 4, ostensibly in pursuit of former major Alfredo Reinado.

“Canberra has demonstrated its readiness to eliminate anyone in the region considered an obstacle to its agenda. Recent events can be understood as something of a watershed, a moment in which Australian imperialism’s humanitarian mask slipped and its true character was revealed for all to see.”

O’Connor asked why these killings had aroused no outrage or protests in Australia. To understand, it was necessary to review recent history, notably the enthusiastic support given by the Greens and middle class protest movements to the Howard government’s dispatch of troops to Timor in 1999.

The speaker explained that the downfall of Suharto’s Indonesian military dictatorship in 1998 threatened Australia’s lucrative arrangements with the Indonesian regime, which had signed the 1989 Timor Gap Treaty with the Hawke Labor government, giving Australia the lion’s share of the oil and gas fields beneath the Timor Sea.

“The Howard government finally decided that the only way in which the multi-billion dollar interests of Australia’s oil and gas firms could be secured was by sending in the troops to occupy the territory while overseeing its transition to formal independence. This so-called independent state would then be under Canberra’s direct domination, thereby advancing the economic and geo-strategic interests of the Australian ruling elite.”

Critical to Howard’s phony pretext of “humanitarian intervention” was the support he received from national “troops in” rallies, where organisers insisted that the only answer to the violence wreaked by pro-Indonesian militias in East Timor was to send in the Australian military.

This continuing political line-up—Labor, the Greens and Socialist Alliance—behind Australian militarism bore the responsibility for the fact that working people in Australia were yet to grasp the full significance of the Howard government’s commitment to escalate military operations throughout the Asia-Pacific region, as part of Canberra’s global alignment with Washington against its emerging rivals, such as China.

O’Connor concluded: “The Socialist Equality Party is the only party contesting the NSW election which opposes Canberra’s predatory operations in the South Pacific. We seek to clarify the driving forces behind these operations and explain the objective necessity for a united and independent political struggle of Australian working people and the impoverished masses of the South Pacific against our common enemy—the Howard government and all its accomplices in the political establishment.

“The re-emergence of Australian colonialism in the Pacific is being accompanied by a wholesale assault on democratic and constitutional rights at home. Democratic forms of rule are ultimately incompatible with a state of permanent military mobilisation. Australian society is already being thoroughly militarised, with young people facing the prospect of being dragooned into the military. Demands for conscription will inevitably intensify as recruitment targets continue to go unfulfilled.

“Meanwhile, the media and major parties will step up their ferocious ideological offensive which has already coalesced around the bipartisan promotion of ‘Australian values’. Every form of nationalism, anti-Muslim chauvinism, and backwardness is being whipped up in order to divert opposition and create a political and social climate conducive to war and militarism.

“But these methods have definite limits and there is no doubt that these limits are already being reached. There is enormous opposition towards, and disgust with, the entire political and media establishment. The critical question, however, is how these oppositional sentiments can find a genuine and progressive political outlet. Our insistence that what is required is the establishment of the political independence of the working class, on a socialist and internationalist program, is being met with a serious and thoughtful response, as this meeting itself testifies. I encourage you all to read the *World Socialist Web Site*, support the party’s campaign in the final week, and give serious consideration to joining our international movement.”

The third speaker was the SEP candidate for Newcastle, Noel Holt, a Telstra worker for 41 years, who actively opposed the Accords signed by the trade unions with the Hawke-Keating Labor government to cut real wages and conditions and joined the SEP in 1996. Holt explained the connection between militarism abroad and the domestic assault on the working class and young people.

“This election is being held in a time of the rapid escalation of militarism and war in the Middle East and rivalry between the nation states over global resources and trade. At the same time a war is being carried out against ordinary working people at home.

“Around the world social programs such as health, education, public housing and social welfare are being starved of much needed funds while billions of dollars are being diverted from the public purse to pay for massive increases to military budgets.”

In Australia, “while public funds are being diverted to the military and police, workers and their families are forced to queue for hours in ‘bulk-billing’ medical clinics or wait on a hospital admission list for weeks, months, or in some cases, years to get medical treatment. Meanwhile their children are forced to attend schools with overcrowded classrooms and in many cases in gross need of maintenance work. In NSW, the maintenance budget for public schools is estimated to be \$100 million under funded.

“The people of Newcastle have been hard hit by big business restructures. Over the past two decades, large industrial companies like BHP, Commonwealth Steel and shipbuilding yards have closed, eliminating tens of thousands of jobs.”

Thousands of coal mining jobs had also been destroyed through mine closures, new open cut extraction processes and the introduction of 12-hour shifts, with the agreement of the unions. Over the same period, 42,000 Telstra workers had been forced out the door, starting under the Hawke-Keating government.

“With a teenage unemployment rate of 28.9 percent Newcastle is now facing huge social problems, particularly among the youth. In Windale, a Newcastle suburb with a large proportion of public housing, the total unemployment rate is a staggering 37 percent.”

Holt denounced the local media, aided and abetted by Labor, the Liberals and the Greens who jumped onto a “law and order” bandwagon to divert attention away from the resulting social problems.

“These politicians have saturated all media outlets by trying to outbid each other with promises to increase police numbers, open up closed police stations and bring in more severe penalties. The SEP is the only political party pointing out that the issues of poverty and social inequality, with their root cause in the profit-driven market system, must be addressed...

“The social imbalance between the rich and ordinary working people is growing wider every day. At least 3.5 million Australians live in households earning a combined income of less than \$400 per week, while at the top end of town the wealthy 200 individuals have a combined income of \$101 billion, up by an extraordinary 22 percent since 2005.”

Holt concluded: “Against the pro-market policies of all the existing parliamentary parties, the SEP advances definite measures to ensure well-paid, decent jobs for all. Instead of boosting corporate coffers, and diverting billions of dollars into war and militarism, this money must be injected into urgently needed public works in areas such as housing, health, education, childcare and public transport...”

“Such a socially progressive program is inconceivable without challenging the very framework of the private profit system. The overriding task facing working people is the building of a mass party to fight for the reorganisation of society on the basis of new priorities—to meet social need not corporate profit.”

Nick Beams, the final speaker, reviewed the underlying economic contradictions, particularly the declining position of US capitalism, propelling the major powers toward military conflicts. He examined the historical lessons New Zealand, the UK, and the US Democrats and the Australian Labor Party and the failure of the mass antiwar protest movement of 2003 to halt the drive to militarism. Finally, he tackled the resulting conception that “nothing can be done,” explaining that the political movement of the international working class could go forward only on the basis of a socialist strategy to reorganise the global economy to provide for human need, not corporate profit (see “Nick Beams outlines socialist perspective to fight war and militarism”).

After the speakers, a generous collection raised more than \$800 for the SEP election fund. During question time, numbers of important issues were raised. One question asked about the SEP’s attitude to Richard Dawkins’s *The God Delusion*. As part of his reply, Nick Beams urged members of the audience to read the WWSW review of the book.

Another question, about why the SEP’s name would not appear on ballot papers, led to a discussion of the anti-democratic laws passed by the established parliamentary parties in recent years to block the registration of new parties.

One regular reader of the WWSW asked a series of questions about what immediate “practical” steps the SEP advocated, as distinct from providing the analysis published on the WWSW. The questioner said he agreed with the speakers’ exposure of the role played by the other parties, but wanted a concrete plan of action.

In the course of their replies, Nick Beams and other speakers explained that the essential political problem facing working people was not an inability to take action but the lack of a clear alternative perspective. They emphasised that the turn to war meant there would be no shortage of political convulsions and mass struggles in the coming period, as there had been at critical points of the twentieth century.

Already, deep disaffection existed toward the old parties, but this had to be translated into a conscious political break from their entire framework. What was needed was the development of a new mass socialist movement, grounded on a scientific internationalist outlook. The key issue was clarifying the working class and young people about the political lessons of the previous century and the need for an independent, socialist and global perspective to transform society.

After the meeting, an international exchange student from Malaysia, studying a business degree at University of Technology, Sydney, spoke to the WWSW. Asked what he thought were the main reasons for the US drive to war in the Middle East, he said: “They are trying to control China. They cannot fight them economically, where China is strong, and too big, so they are trying to control China’s resources. Most of the oil comes from Iraq and around the region. The US is trying to control the oil so it can control the world.”

The student had not been very aware before the meeting of the extent of Australia’s military involvement in East Timor and the south Pacific region, and how that related to Australia’s support for US imperialism. Australia’s intervention in East Timor was also about “controlling resources”, he said.

He commented that in the 2003 antiwar demonstrations, “a lot of people participated but nothing happened actually,” and governments were not “getting the point”. When told about the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) emergency conference being held at Ann Arbor in the US at the end of this month, he replied that this was good as, “it is only the Americans who can stop America from doing what it is doing”. He said

Bush and those responsible for the Iraq war should be criminally punished before a tribunal.

Maxine, a young German-born student from Newcastle, said the meeting was enjoyable and “most interesting”. She said she came to the meeting because she wanted to have a clearer picture of what was happening politically, not just in Australia but internationally. “Usually you don’t find that when you go to a meeting.”

“What was said about the Solomon Islands, for example, was quite new to me. Without the information that I received today, I don’t think I would have conceived that the Australian intervention was something in the political interests of Australia, rather than something to help the local people.

“In Germany I used to support the SPD [Social Democratic Party] but they were the ones who, in coalition with the Greens, sent German troops overseas for the first time since World War II. The general conception in Germany is that the troops have been sent to Afghanistan not for Germany’s interests but to help the people, under the cover of humanitarian reasons. Members of society are quite mis-educated. This meeting clarified some things for me.”



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