

Australia: SEP public meetings launch NSW state election campaign

Our reporters
6 March 2007

The Socialist Equality Party opened its campaign last week for the March 24 state elections in New South Wales with public meetings in Sydney and in the regional working class city of Newcastle.

SEP national secretary Nick Beams, who is heading the party's slate of 15 candidates for the Legislative Council (upper house), spoke at all three events along with SEP candidates for the Legislative Assembly—James Cogan for the southeastern Sydney seat of Heffron, Patrick O'Connor for the inner-west seat of Marrickville and Noel Holt in Newcastle—who addressed their respective electorate meetings.

Attended by workers, students and youth, the meetings generated lively discussions on a range of political issues—from the escalating US-led military aggression in the Middle East, to growing social inequality and attacks on basic democratic rights, to the tasks posed by the collapse of the traditional working class parties and organisations. The discussions again underscored that while there is widespread and profound disgust with the major parties and a lack of interest in the official campaign, many people are disturbed by, and seeking to grapple with, broader political and historical questions.

Nick Beams reviewed US preparations for war against Iran and the speech delivered by US Vice President Dick Cheney during his recent visit to Australia. The SEP national secretary explained that behind Cheney's deranged ranting about the prospect of a Muslim "Caliphate", or "empire" being established across much of the globe was a definite logic. He was expressing the desperation of a waning imperialist power to offset its economic decline through military force—the seizure of Middle East oil and gas resources—aimed primarily against its rivals. Beams outlined the historical dimensions of the crisis of US imperialism and elaborated the international socialist program needed to prevent the outbreak of a third global inter-imperialist war (See "Socialism and the struggle against US militarism").

SEP Legislative Assembly (lower house) candidates used the meetings to explain key aspects of the party's program. The candidates related their own political experiences and the reasons why they had decided to join the Trotskyist movement. Their reports demonstrated the pernicious role of protest politics, and the extent of the degeneration of the Labor Party and unions over the past three decades.

James Cogan told the Heffron public meeting that he joined the Socialist Labour League, the forerunner of the SEP, in early 1991, out of disgust with the anti-working class policies of the Hawke and Keating Labor governments and their endorsement of the first US war on Iraq.

He quoted from a statement issued by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) at the time and detailed the bloody

impact of the 1990-91 war and the economic sanctions that were implemented in its aftermath on the Iraqi people. Cogan warned that the carnage being planned against Iran would see even greater devastation than had been experienced over the past five years in Iraq and Afghanistan as a result of the US-led invasions.

"We live in a time where there is open discussion that nuclear weapons will be used for the first time since the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki," he said.

The SEP candidate reviewed the lessons of the antiwar protests in 1990-91 and 2003, in which the Greens, Socialist Alliance and others argued that mass pressure could, via the UN or other official channels, prevent the US from going to war. These claims, he said, sowed political complacency among workers and students and prevented them from understanding the necessity for an independent struggle and perspective.

Cogan pointed to the Greens' endorsement of anti-terror laws in Australia and their support for the mobilisation of Australian troops in East Timor and the South Pacific. He warned the audience: "If you are opposed to militarism and inequality, do not be diverted behind organisations that have no perspective of challenging the cause—the profit system."

At the Marrickville meeting, Patrick O'Connor dealt with the Australian military operations in the South Pacific. He explained that these were taking on an "openly colonial character" and pointed out that Howard told the media last December that Australian people should get used to at least 10 to 20 years of military operations in the region.

"The Australian ruling elite views the Pacific as its sphere of influence," he said, "and is determined to use military force to ensure that rival powers, above all China, do not gain geo-strategic influence and secure markets and resources in the areas that were previously dominated by Australian corporations."

O'Connor reviewed recent Australian interventions in the Solomon Islands and East Timor and the response of the so-called antiwar parties to these developments.

"If one wishes to check the antiwar credentials of these parties there is no better place to begin than by examining their position on the Howard government's operations in the South Pacific. Such an examination reveals that every parliamentary party, without exception, fully backs Howard's actions. Labor, Democrats, and the Greens have all lined up behind the government," he said.

O'Connor reminded the meeting of the critical role played by the Greens and the Socialist Alliance in backing the Howard government's first intervention in East Timor in 1999. "Howard quickly seized upon the pretext of 'humanitarian intervention', as

claimed by these organisations, and has utilised the same justification to throw Australia's weight around the region ever since."

Noel Holt, a retired Telstra worker and former Central Coast president and state branch councillor of the Communication, Electrical and Plumbing Union, told the Newcastle meeting that the eruption of militarism was "the most graphic illustration that the capitalist system has failed".

"We are told that people are concerned only with local issues," he said. "If this is true then my colleagues and I must be talking to the wrong people. We find that an overwhelming majority of ordinary people are sickened by the death and destruction being carried out by the US-led coalition forces in Iraq and strongly condemn support for the war by Labor and Liberal."

Holt told the meeting that he had been an "active participant" in the Labor Party and the unions during his working life but became deeply disillusioned with the betrayals of working people by these organisations. He reviewed Labor's record in office and, in particular, the ruthless assault on jobs and living standards during the 13 years of Hawke and Keating federal Labor governments. The SEP candidate said he came into sharp conflict with the union bureaucracy over his determination to challenge the ACTU/Labor accord and Enterprise Bargaining Agreements.

After quitting the Labor Party, Holt said that he had "many unanswered questions" about why Labor and the unions had failed the working class. "Fortunately, I met the Socialist Labour League (now the SEP). It was not this or that leader, the party explained to me, but their program and perspective of reformism that failed the working class," he declared.

At each of the meetings, audience members took the opportunity to ask a range of questions and add their own comments. Questions covered the current turmoil on world share markets, the long-term implications of American military interventions in the Middle East and Central Asia, why capitalism caused poverty, and why the Greens had backed the electoral legislation that restricted the SEP and other parties from registering.

In Heffron, a worker commented at length on the role of US and European oil and petro-chemical companies during the twentieth century, suggesting that the lesson that had to be drawn was how powerful they were. This provoked important discussion.

SEP members pointed out that the twentieth century was not simply a period of big-business conspiracies, but of tremendous class conflict and revolutionary struggles. They explained that the primary lessons that had to be drawn was how and why those struggles had been betrayed and defeated. The most crucial question—then and now—was the necessity for the development of revolutionary consciousness in the working class.

After the meetings, WSWS reporters interviewed some of those who attended.

Larissa, who has joined the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) at Newcastle University, said: "Hearing Nick Beams speak reminded me of the issues that face the world today and which I'm concerned about. The meeting has inspired me to get involved and not take a back seat, and to understand that there isn't a division between understanding socialism and being politically aware. You can't separate the two.

"The meeting clarified for me why the SEP has chosen the war as the cornerstone of the party's message. What Nick Beams was saying was that war is produced by capitalism and the SEP wants to change the way in which the world operates. In that sense, the SEP can

oppose militarism because they are fighting its root causes. I didn't understand that link at first. I kept asking myself, why is it all about the war; aren't there other issues?"

"I come from South Africa, where a lot was promised and there was a lot of struggle involving everyone, not just those who are in power now. But nothing has been gained in terms of the everyday person. Things have remained the way they always were. We don't have signs anymore, saying you can't sit on that bench, and that beach. But if you don't have a car to get to the beach, you are excluded anyway, so what's the point?"

Zach, 19, who was also born in South Africa, attended the Marrickville meeting.

"I bumped into one of your representatives last week at the university, went to an International Students for Social Equality meeting and really liked what I heard," he said. "And I liked what Patrick O'Connor and Nick Beams said tonight because they told the truth about what is going on in the world today and they explained socialist principles, which now make more sense to me."

Zach said that a US-led war with Iran was inevitable and had been since the invasion of Afghanistan. "The United States wants to take over one country after another. Your party has done here what no one else has been able to and that is to answer some pretty sticky questions about what is happening in the world and why the United States is doing this now. What was explained in tonight's meeting was pretty perceptive on these questions and rings true," he said.

Trevor, who also attended the Marrickville meeting, has been reading the *World Socialist Web Site* since receiving a leaflet at one of the antiwar demonstrations in 2003. He said that the Liberal and Labor parties were "not the answer to the problems facing workers today. As was pointed out at tonight's meeting, they both support war, as do all the other minor parties involved."

Asked to comment on Labor's attempts to promote NSW state premier Morris Iemma as an "ordinary guy," Trevor, said: "Well he is an ordinary guy; very ordinary. In fact, they're all very ordinary guys and they have no interest or concern about the working class. I must admit I haven't had a lot of respect for the official politicians for a very long time."

Trevor said that the US preparation for a military attack on Iran was a "major issue, not just in the NSW elections but for everyone in the world today. This is particularly important for youth who are going to be dragged into war, wherever it is."

When asked why these issues were being screened out of the state election he replied: "Because more and more people would begin to understand that the two major parties have no answers and will start to look somewhere else. The powers-that-be obviously doesn't want to encourage that. This was obvious at the Newtown Neighbourhood public meeting where they tried to restrict Patrick O'Connor to purely local issues."



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