

Australia: SEP candidate Noel Holt raises vital issues at Newcastle business forum

Terry Cook, SEP candidate for NSW (Australia) Legislative Council
17 March 2007

Noel Holt, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) candidate for Newcastle in the March 24 New South Wales state election, raised vital issues facing working people and small businesses when he spoke at a candidates' forum convened by the Hunter Business Chamber on March 14.

Out of a platform of nine candidates from two Hunter region electorates, including Labor, Greens, the Christian Democratic Party and two independents, Holt was the only one to raise the dangers posed by the war in Iraq and growing US belligerence against Iran.

"The SEP is standing in the election to advance a socialist and internationalist program to fight militarism and war, social inequality and the growing attacks on democratic rights," Holt explained. He said the eruption of US militarism was the "pre-eminent political issue facing people internationally" and warned that the resulting breakdown of the world order "threatens a global catastrophe".

Holt, a former Telstra worker, then addressed the topics set by the forum's organisers, including health and safety regulations, infrastructure, the skills shortage and tax.

"As I said, ours is a socialist program. I'm sure everyone here will immediately think we advocate the immediate nationalisation of everything, including small and medium sized businesses. This is not the case. We do advocate the conversion of all large industrial, service, pharmaceutical, mining, and agricultural corporations, together with the banking and financial institutions, into publicly owned enterprises, with full compensation to small shareholders, and transparent and fully accountable negotiations with other investors."

Holt said small and medium businesses, however, played a vital part in the economy, "providing many

jobs and essential services". They were "being squeezed from all sides," leading to "enormous pressures on owners and their families".

"Under a rationally planned socialist economy, such enterprises would receive government support," he explained, "including ready access to credit at reasonable rates and more stable market conditions, provided they guarantee decent wages and working conditions".

Help would include "government assistance to ensure a safe and healthy work environment" to end the current situation "where the full responsibility for health, safety and insurance costs in small business devolves on the owners themselves—to meet the demands and profit requirements of the major insurance companies," he said. "Workers' compensation, for example, and safety training should be fully funded by the government."

Holt said a uniform tax regime should be established throughout Australia "to end the current dog-eat-dog battle by state governments to attract investment away from their competitors by granting tax concessions to large business investors through the destruction of social conditions".

He called for the abolition of all regressive taxes such as the Howard government's Goods and Service Tax (GST) "that shifts the burden of tax from high-income earners to ordinary working people" and "the state payroll tax, which is a regressive tax on small business".

"Instead a progressive tax should be made on large corporations that extract billions of dollars in profits, in order to fund social programs and the development of social and public infrastructure," Holt stated.

Newcastle, once a major industrial centre, has been hit over the past two decades by massive plant closures

and the slashing of jobs in mining and steel in particular. Teenage employment in Newcastle stands at 28.9 percent, while the vast majority of jobs created are low-paid, part-time and casual positions. There exists a deepening crisis in chronically under-funded services and social and public infrastructure.

Holt pointed out that the current shortage of skilled workers was one of the “major consequences of three decades of spending cutbacks” by Labor and Liberal governments. He called for a program to provide “free high-quality education at all levels” with “job training, apprenticeship programs and higher education made available to all who want them”.

The gulf between the policies of the SEP and those of other candidates became even clearer during question time. Asked to state their position on “law and order”, every other candidate declared the central problem was a lack of police.

Their response was completely in tune with a frenzied media campaign over the past two weeks highlighting a number of late night altercations in inner Newcastle and wild claims that “thugs” and “bashers” control the streets.

All the well-publicised Newcastle candidates—Labor’s Jodie McKay, Liberal’s Martin Babakhan, the Greens’ John Osborne and independents Bryce Gaudry and John Tate—are on record calling for a massive increase in police numbers to crack down on youth and “outsiders” coming into the city. At a previous forum, Osborne called for the reopening of all closed police stations.

Holt was the only candidate to oppose these calls. “The media hysteria on law and order, supported by all the official political parties, is a diversion from the real causes, which have their roots in the staggering levels of social inequality presided over by both Labor and Liberal governments.”

Holt explained that the social problems could only be addressed by a program to create well-paying decent jobs and by pouring billions of dollars into funding education, health and other social infrastructure.

Given that every candidate had referred to problems with infrastructure and services, a member of the audience asked them to state their positions on the Liberal pledge to slash 20,000 public sector jobs and Labor’s plan to axe 5,000.

While decrying the Liberal plan, Labor’s McKay

reiterated her earlier position that Labor’s elimination of 5,000 jobs was “responsible trimming”. Independent candidate Gaudry said the shedding of 20,000 workers, “would decimate services” and the destruction of 5,000 jobs would also impact on frontline services.

Gaudry’s concern would have been more believable if not for the fact that he served as the Labor MP for Newcastle for 19 years and only quit the Labor Party when it failed to re-endorse him as its candidate. During that time, Gaudry happily went along with the axing of many thousands of public sector jobs in rail, electricity and other vital areas.

Holt rejected outright any cuts to public sector jobs, saying they were vital to the provision of essential services, which were being continually gutted. “These services are being sacrificed to make funding available for decaying infrastructure, which should have been addressed years ago” and “to provide tax breaks and concessions to big business”.

Unlike every other speaker, Holt made clear that the issue of jobs, crumbling public infrastructure and cuts to social services could be addressed only by making deep inroads into private ownership by big corporations.

“Large corporations must be turned over to public ownership and genuine democratic control, allowing the massive profits made by such enterprises to be used to provide adequate public and social services,” he said. “This would provide for many more decent-paying jobs, because we would need more public sector workers, not less.”



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