

Australia: Newcastle newspaper distorts SEP's position on law and order

Our reporter
23 March 2007

On March 21, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) wrote to Chad Watson of the Newcastle Herald strongly protesting an article by journalist Jason Gordon implying that the SEP agreed with the law and order campaign that has dominated the newspaper's election coverage over the last weeks.

Reporting the Law Society's candidate's forum of March 19, Gordon declared "the crowd applauded when anyone spoke of putting more police back on the streets or placing stricter controls on pubs, clubs and even liquor-licensed restaurants and cafes," and then, "All seven election candidates said they would support a lockdown, lockout or curfew".

Noel Holt, the SEP's candidate for Newcastle, was one of the seven candidates participating. In the course of the forum, Holt emphasised his opposition to all such measures and to calls for increased police numbers. The SEP candidate drew out that the underlying causes of anti-social behaviour—the lack of jobs, the gutting of social services and the collapse in social infrastructure—had to be addressed.

The SEP asked the Herald to print a clearly stated retraction of the inferences in Gordon's article. Two days later, on the eve of the state election, it has still failed to do so.

The SEP also protested the Herald's deliberate exclusion from its election reportage of the four "minor" candidates standing in Newcastle and the lack of any coverage of the extensive campaign of the SEP.

This morning the Herald published a quarter-page feature article including photographs of all nine candidates, along with their political affiliation. This last minute response fails to rectify the Herald's utter disregard for the democratic rights of the candidates it has ignored over the past weeks. It also fails to redress the breach of its responsibility to provide its readers

with accurate information.

Below is the full text of the SEP's March 21 letter to the Newcastle Herald.

Dear Mr Watson,

I am writing to reiterate complaints I made, in our discussion of March 20, on behalf of the Socialist Equality Party's lower house candidate, Noel Holt.

The first relates to the lack of coverage by the *Newcastle Herald* of the Socialist Equality Party's election campaign for the NSW seat of Newcastle. During the course of five weeks, the *Herald* has published numerous articles and reports on the campaigns of the five candidates it has determined worthy of covering, while maintaining a complete silence on the SEP's campaign.

Such a policy is anti-democratic to the core. It prevents the residents of Newcastle from being informed about the policies of all the candidates whose nominations have been accepted, while at the same time, attacking the right of our candidate, Noel Holt, to be heard.

The SEP's campaign is focussed on vital issues facing working people—the war in Iraq, growing militarism in Australia and around the world, escalating social inequality, the devastating impact of government cuts on the lives of workers and their families, and the assault on democratic rights. In direct contrast to all the other candidates, we are presenting a socialist—that is, a genuinely egalitarian, democratic and humane—alternative.

Under conditions where it is common knowledge that disenchantment and disgust with the major parties has reached unprecedented levels, our campaign articulates the needs and interests of the working class. And we have received considerable support. So far, with the help of many local residents, we have distributed many

thousands of copies of our election statement, held daily street campaigns and—when permitted to participate—spoken at candidates’ forums and other public events. The SEP is the only political party in the Newcastle electorate to have held a public meeting to present and discuss its policies.

Yet, except for a few lines in the March 16 edition acknowledging the existence of our candidate, the *Newcastle Herald* has chosen to ignore our campaign. On March 18, the *Sun Herald* published an election roundup, with a section headed “Newcastle Candidates”. This only featured photographs and statements of five candidates, even though you are aware that nine are contesting the seat of Newcastle. Again, the SEP was excluded.

Coming just days before the election, this constitutes not only an affront to the democratic rights of the excluded candidates, but a serious breach of your newspapers’ responsibility to provide accurate and unbiased information to its readers.

My second complaint is far more serious, because it involves outright misrepresentation and the lack of journalistic integrity.

Yesterday, as you know, I telephoned your journalist Jason Gordon to strongly protest his coverage of the Law Society candidates’ forum held on March 19. In his article, Gordon gave the impression that the SEP agreed with the law and order campaign that has been raging in Newcastle for some weeks.

After declaring “the crowd applauded when anyone spoke of putting more police back on the streets or placing stricter controls on pubs, clubs and even liquor-licensed restaurants and cafes,” Mr Gordon wrote: “All seven election candidates said they would support a lockdown, lockout or curfew”.

Noel Holt was one of the seven candidates who participated in the forum. The unmistakable implication was that he endorsed this view. In fact, Holt emphasised his opposition to such measures, pointing out that they avoided the real underlying causes of anti-social behaviour. These, he said, lay in the lack of jobs, the gutting of social services and the collapse in social infrastructure that were the direct result of the pro-market policies of both Labor and Liberal governments.

Throughout the evening Holt repeated his rejection of all calls for increased police numbers, curfews and other repressive measures, and was the only candidate

to do so.

That Mr Gordon chose not to report this clearly-stated opposition, together with his sweeping inclusion of Holt in the law and order campaign, amounts to a gross misrepresentation, deliberate or otherwise, of the SEP’s position.

When I spoke to Mr Gordon on this issue, and on the lack of coverage of our campaign, he maintained he had received no information from the SEP. This is not correct.

On February 20, I telephoned Gordon to inform him of Holt’s exclusion from the New Institute’s forum. On the same day, I personally delivered a copy of the SEP’s election statement, marked for his attention, to the *Newcastle Herald*’s offices. During our discussion yesterday, I was unable to raise our concerns about his March 20 article because he rudely hung up on me.

On behalf of the SEP, I am formally requesting that your newspaper print a clearly stated retraction of any and all inferences that our candidate Noel Holt in any way supports or endorses an increase in police numbers or any of the repressive measures that have been proposed by other candidates, and that he advocates, on the contrary, policies that will address the root cause of the terrible social problems that afflict young people and workers in Newcastle and the growing levels of social inequality.

To this end, you may wish to quote directly from Noel’s contribution to the Law Society forum or his speech to the Business Council’s forum, in which he addressed these and other vital issues. Noel is also available to be interviewed to further clarify the SEP’s position.

Yours Sincerely,

Terry Cook

SEP Campaign Manager

Newcastle



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact