

Australia: Why you should vote for the SEP in the New South Wales election

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The NSW election campaign has again revealed the ever-widening chasm between the major political parties and the concerns of the broad masses of ordinary working people.

Four years ago this week the United States, with the full support of the Australian government, launched its invasion of Iraq, defying all precepts of international law, and committing the same war crimes for which the Nazis were indicted at the Nuremberg Trials.

That decision marked a turning point in world history. It signalled a return to the kind of militarism and wars of aggression that characterised the 1930s and eventually gave rise to World War II.

In the four years since the invasion, Iraq has been turned into a hellish nightmare. More than 650,000 people are dead as a direct result of the war and another 4 million have been turned into refugees or displaced from their homes. But even as the carnage continues, the US is drawing up new plans to attack Iran as part of its agenda of seizing control of the entire Middle East and the vast oil resources there.

In the course of the NSW election campaign, however, there has been no mention of the war in Iraq: Likewise the attacks on basic democratic rights, widening social inequality and the worsening social conditions for millions of ordinary people.

The major parties, together with the Greens and the Democrats, have sought to restrict any discussion to the narrow framework of so-called “local” or state issues, while the so-called Socialist Alliance dutifully trots along behind, insisting that the Labor Party represents the “lesser evil”.

The Socialist Equality Party has stood candidates in order to raise before ordinary working people the necessity for a break from Labor, the Greens and the entire framework of official politics, and the construction of a new mass socialist party of the working class that fights for the total re-organisation of society. Only through the development of such an independent political movement can the struggle against war and social inequality be tackled.

Given the longer-term nature of this task, we have often been asked the question: what is your practical alternative for the situation today? What immediate action do you propose to address the undeniably urgent problems confronting ordinary people?

The very way the question is framed points to the basic political issues that have to be tackled.

There exists among broad layers of working people and youth,

widespread alienation from the entire political establishment, combined with the sentiment that, while things need to change, nothing much can be done. Ordinary people are powerless. They have no say and this election, like previous ones, won’t change a thing.

These positions are the sharpest expression of a deep-going crisis of political perspective. And it is precisely this crisis of perspective, not a lack of “action”, that is the source of the present political problems.

One only has to recall the period leading up to the invasion of Iraq. Hundreds of millions of people around the world opposed the war aims of the United States, saw through the lies about weapons of mass destruction, and understood that the war was motivated by a drive to grab the vital oil resources of the Middle East. Tens of millions of people demonstrated against the war in the largest international protests in history.

But the demonstrations were impotent because the perspective guiding them failed to go beyond a protest to the powers-that-be, combined with the vague hope that the pressure of public opinion would force the Bush administration and its allies to change course.

The recent mid-term Congressional elections in the United States raised the same issues. Millions of people set out to vote against the US war on Iraq and the militarism of the Bush regime, resulting in the return of a Democratic majority in both houses. But in the five months since the elections, the Democrats have made clear that they will not only take no action to end the war, they will back an attack on Iran.

This experience will no doubt be repeated in the federal elections in Australia, due by the end of this year. Millions of ordinary people will give vent to their deep-seated hostility to the Howard government. But the election of a Labor government will not end support for the US militarist agenda and the so-called “war on terror”. It will merely result in certain adjustments in troop numbers: a reduction of forces in Iraq matched by an increase in Afghanistan.

The antiwar movement can only be revived to the extent that it is based on a conscious recognition of the need to take action independent of and against all the parties of the political establishment. And that requires a new perspective, grounded on the understanding that, like the militarism of the 1930s, the US-led wars on Iraq and Afghanistan are the outcome, not simply of the Bush administration, but of an historic crisis of the capitalist order.

In other words, the struggle against war must be based on a revolutionary perspective.

In this election campaign, the Socialist Equality Party has outlined a clear program to meet the pressing needs of working people for decent wages, health care, education and social services. But such a program will not be implemented within the existing economic and political order, where all social needs are subordinated to the drive for profit.

That is why the realisation of these policies depends upon the development of an independent mass political movement of the working class, which has as its goal the taking of power and the establishment of a workers government, committed to ensuring that economic activity is organised to meet social needs, not private profit. In other words, the most important immediate practical activity is to educate working people and youth—to raise their understanding of the nature of the task that confronts them.

What is the alternative? Certainly it does not reside in the trade unions. These organisations have not only ceased to function as defence organisations of the working class, their leaderships have played the central role in imposing cuts in jobs, wages and conditions over the past quarter of a century.

The transformation of the unions is the outcome of far-reaching economic processes. The globalisation of production, which has transformed the world economy over the past three decades, has rendered completely anachronistic the old program of trade unionism, which sought concessions for workers by means of militant trade union struggle aimed at pressuring the national state.

Consider the statistics on the level of industrial action carried out over the past 20 years. They show a marked decline in industrial disputes across the various economic sectors between 1985 and 2004, ranging from a 95 percent fall in mining to a 53 percent drop in education, health and community services. In 1985 the number of working days lost per 1,000 employees each year was 223. In 2004 it was just 46. The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) has welcomed the decline as representing a “major change in Australian workplace relations since workplace reform commenced” and a sign that employers and employees were “getting on with business.”

In fact, the fall in industrial stoppages is not the product of rising living standards and increased social equality. Inequality is actually escalating. In the period from 1996 to 2003, the share of income received by each of the bottom four quintiles, representing 80 percent of the population, declined. The top quintile, representing the top 20 percent, increased its share of national income from 37.3 to 38.3 percent.

According to a paper published by the Catholic social welfare agency, the St Vincent de Paul Society, more than 8 million people, some 42 percent of the population, had a disposable income of less than \$21,000 per year, while 4.5 million of them (23 percent of the population) were in households with an aggregate income of less than \$400 per week.

The agency concluded that Australia was on a “headlong dash into the chasm of inequality” with the Gini coefficient, the widely recognised measure of inequality, rising from 0.296 in 1996-97 to 0.309 in 2002-2003.

Notwithstanding the hopes of the ACCI, the virtual

disappearance of trade union activity does not mean that class conflict has ended. It means that the inevitable eruption of class struggles will assume new and more explosive forms. Anger is growing over myriad issues, including the Iraq war, the growth of militarism and the deepening attacks on democratic rights. The large shift in public sentiment on the detention of David Hicks at Guantánamo Bay is an expression of the process that is underway.

Herein lies the significance of the fight to develop socialist consciousness, which forms the core of all the work of the Socialist Equality Party. This does not mean trying to convince workers, by means of agitation and slogans, that they should fight against capitalism. Rather, it proceeds from the scientific understanding that the ever-deepening contradictions of the world capitalist economy, expressed in the eruption of militarism, war and deepening social inequality, and the increasing instability of the entire economic and financial system, will inevitably give rise to enormous social and political struggles.

The crucial issue in determining the outcome of these struggles will be the development of a politically educated and conscious mass movement, guided by a political leadership with a historical understanding of the contradictions of capitalism and the social and political relations produced by them, and able to develop the necessary revolutionary strategy.

The widespread alienation from, and hostility to, the existing political establishment, the deep dissatisfaction with the present social order, the general feeling that there must be a change—these sentiments, themselves an expression of the historical malaise of capitalist society, constitute the starting point of political struggle. But only the starting point. They must be transformed into a conscious mass socialist movement.

This is the SEP’s perspective. And this is why we call on all WSWS readers in NSW to vote for our party in this election. Every vote constitutes a small, but important, step. It signifies a conscious choice to reject all forms of bourgeois and nationalist politics and to embrace the necessity for the genuine socialist and internationalist alternative. Most importantly, we urge all WSWS readers to study the policies and program of the SEP and our sister parties around the world, and take the most important practical step of all by joining our ranks.



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