

Socialist Equality Party in Australia achieves party registration

By Socialist Equality Party
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The Socialist Equality Party in Australia has gained federal party registration, allowing it to contest the forthcoming federal elections under its own name. The SEP was registered by the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) on September 17, following a concerted campaign by party members.

As a result, every SEP candidate in the House of Representatives will have “Socialist Equality Party” listed beside his or her name. Where the SEP fields candidates in the Senate, the party’s name will appear “above the line” on the ballot paper distributed to all voters throughout the state. The decision clears the way for a bold intervention by the party into the 2007 federal election campaign in opposition to war, social inequality and the growing assault on basic democratic rights.

Over the past two decades, as support for the Labor Party and Liberal-National Coalition has plummeted, minor and third parties have faced growing restrictions on their ability to contest elections.

Recent amendments to the Commonwealth Electoral Act mean that without recourse to legal advice, a full-time staff, a large membership and significant financial resources, the founding or registration of a political party has become a near-impossible uphill battle.

At the same time, while the AEC has launched a public advertising campaign proclaiming “your vote is precious”, the right to vote is itself under attack. The Howard government recently legislated to close electoral rolls on the day that federal elections are announced, effectively blocking new voter enrolments and effectively disenfranchising hundreds of thousands of particularly young voters.

Under the Electoral Act’s anti-democratic provisions, name and address details for at least 500 members must be supplied to the AEC for verification. Parties without

500 members—a completely arbitrary number—do not qualify for registration as a party.

New and “minor” parties seeking registration face a vicious “catch-22” situation. How do they gain the necessary hundreds of members required for a registration application if they are effectively barred from contesting elections under their own name, and thereby from attracting support?

And even if a party has 500 or more members, the methods employed by the AEC to verify membership lists are highly arbitrary. Once the names are submitted, a random sample of 20 members is selected. Unless 19 out of 20 can be reached within three phone call attempts, or respond to a subsequent letter, the party’s sample will fail.

It is not uncommon for membership samples from applicant parties to fail on a first or even subsequent random check. So far this year at least three parties—the Human Rights Party, Brandon Raynor’s Green Liberals and the Cheaper Petrol Party—have been refused party registration on the grounds that their membership lists failed such random checks for “membership fraud”. In the Australian Capital Territory the Australian Democrats have been deregistered because they were unable to provide a minimum of 100 members.

The SEP submitted its application for party registration on August 1. A first membership sample of 20 was nearly failed when two party members could not be reached. While the AEC would not divulge the identity of these “missing” members, party campaign workers soon located them—through a lengthy process of elimination—and discovered that the AEC’s call attempts had not been entirely rigorous. One of these members, from Brisbane, received a letter from the AEC on August 16 and immediately contacted the SEP’s national office, indignant that he had not

received any phone call from the AEC during business hours at his place of work, despite having provided the contact details on his membership form, which had been submitted, with all the others, by the SEP to the AEC. Had the member in question failed to check his mailbox, had he been away, or had the AEC's letter gone astray, the SEP's entire membership application would have been jeopardised.

The electoral laws are also highly invasive, containing innumerable trip-mechanisms that can ensnare unsuspecting parties, leaving them open to debilitating fines and even jail terms. In August 2003, Pauline Hanson and David Ettridge, leaders of the right-wing populist One Nation party, were each sentenced to three years jail without parole on charges of electoral fraud under the criminal code. They were accused of supplying the names and addresses of 500 members whom a court later ruled, on the basis of an organisational technicality, to be merely supporters. As the SEP explained, the jailing of the two One Nation leaders constituted "a warning of the ruthless, underhanded and anti-democratic methods being honed for use against parties which, unlike Hanson's, advance a genuine and progressive alternative to the entire political establishment and to the capitalist profit system itself." Hanson and Ettridge were subsequently freed after successfully appealing their conviction.

Since then, further amendments to the Electoral Act have augmented the anti-democratic provisions used to block "third" or "minor" parties from contesting elections.

On 22 December 2006, the Australian Electoral Commission wrote to 19 registered political parties—those without present or past parliamentary representation—advising that they would be deregistered in five days. This unprecedented measure, legislated by an amended schedule of the Electoral and Referendum Amendment (Electoral Integrity and Other Measures) Act 2006 meant that at the start of this election year there were effectively only 11 parties with federal registration: the ALP, Liberals, Nationals, Democrats, Greens, Family First, Country Labor Party, Democratic Labour Party, Nuclear Disarmament Party, One Nation and Peter Andren Independent Group. And this in a country with nearly 21 million people!

The deregistered organisations were forced to reapply under new "naming provisions" that widen the grounds

on which a challenge to their registration can be mounted.

The SEP was last federally registered in 1998, but voluntarily deregistered itself in February 2002, as legal moves against One Nation's leaders were in full-swing. Having obtained comprehensive legal advice on the scope of the recent amendments to the Electoral Act, and their implications, the SEP launched a renewed campaign for federal registration in May of this year.

The party submitted the names of more than 500 members and completed all the other requirements under the Act. Its application for registration was then advertised by the AEC in national newspapers in mid-August, inviting public objections by no later than September 14. No public challenge was lodged and on September 18 the party received confirmation that it had been officially registered the previous day.

The SEP will shortly be launching its campaign, announcing its candidates in both House of Representatives and Senate seats. We urge all WSWS readers and party supporters to give their fullest possible assistance to this campaign by joining local election committees, helping to distribute the party's manifesto and regular candidate statements in their local areas, donating generously to the party's election fund and helping in this way to take the genuine socialist alternative in the 2007 federal election to the widest possible sections of the working class.

Click here to offer your support to the SEP's election campaign.



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