Socialist Equality Party challenges Greg Combet to debate industrial relations

Terry Cook, Socialist Equality Party candidate for Charlton
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Last week, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) issued an open letter challenging Labor's candidate for the federal seat of Charlton, Greg Combet, to debate industrial relations and other vital issues facing the working class. The letter was handed to Combet personally as he entered his election launch at the Wallsend Bowling Club.

With the Howard government unleashing a wholesale assault on hard-won working conditions and workers' rights under its new WorkChoices legislation, clarification on exactly where each political party stands on industrial relations is of vital concern to ordinary working people.

One would expect, therefore, that Combet, the former secretary of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), who claims to be a leading campaigner against Howard's hated IR laws, would have welcomed the opportunity to outline Labor's position.

Combet's reaction to the invitation, however, demonstrated the opposite. Within minutes of him receiving our open letter, Labor and union functionaries sprang into action, attempting to intimidate me and other SEP members campaigning outside his launch, and trying to stop us from distributing copies of the letter to people going inside.

A group of Labor stewards, led by Newcastle Trades Hall Council secretary Gary Kennedy, confronted me and ordered me to leave the club premises. A cordon of stewards then moved to block the main entrance.

When the SEP team continued to campaign in the car park, Kennedy insisted that this was "not allowed". But he backed off when it became clear the team would not be intimidated. Nevertheless, he kept approaching SEP campaigners, claiming people were being harassed—without being able to cite a single complaint.

The incident sheds light, not only on Labor's attitude to open debate and discussion during an election campaign, but to democratic rights in general. The Labor Party's attempt to prevent the SEP from distributing its material constitutes a violation of one of the most basic principles of genuine democracy—the right to provide and receive information.

This was evident, as well, in the very organisation of Combet's launch. The affair was not open to the general public. On the contrary, it was restricted to a hand-picked audience of around 300 people, made up of party functionaries, union officials and Labor faithful—and, of course, the media.

To ensure that ordinary people were kept away, details of the event were only released the day before. One SEP supporter who telephoned Combet's election office to ask for details was told the launch had been booked out weeks in advance and was, in any case, "only a media event".

The reason any meetings held by either the Liberal or Labor parties are so highly vetted is to shield their candidates from any unexpected questions or deeper probing of their policies or challenge that might puncture the official hype churned out in their election propaganda.

For Combet, whose spin doctors work overtime to present him as a champion of workers' rights, such protection is essential. He could not defend, before any remotely critical working class audience, his unreserved support for Labor's industrial relations platform—the misnamed *Forward with Fairness*—because it is identical, in all essential aspects, to Howard's WorkChoices.

Labor's platform pledges to retain the Howard government's Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs) until December, 2011. These are the individual work contracts that underpin WorkChoices

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and that have allowed employers to tear up longstanding working conditions.

Forward with Fairness also contains the very same anti-strike provisions outlawing strikes and other forms of industrial action, except during the limited negotiating period for a new enterprise agreement, and imposing "mandatory" secret ballots before a strike can take place.

As well, Labor promises to crack down on 'unauthorised' strike action, secondary boycotts and pattern or industry-wide wage contract bargaining. In other words, it will ruthlessly act against any attempt by working people to take industrial action over pressing issues, such as the Iraq war, or against repressive industrial relations laws, or in support of other workers, or to defend conditions or basic rights in collaboration with other workers.

One further point needs to be made. The unions, of which Combet was, until recently, the national leader, unanimously endorsed *Forward with Fairness* at Labor's national conference in April this year. They are now offering their services as industrial police and enforcers for a future Labor government. Precisely the same standover tactics used against SEP members at Combet's launch will be carried out with even greater force to suppress all opposition to Labor's attacks on working and social conditions.

The unions' past collaboration with a Labor government were the subject of the speech by the keynote speaker at Combet's launch, former Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating. During his address, Keating referred to notes he had archived of a meeting he held in May 1995 with former ACTU secretary Bill Kelty, and leading union officials, Martin Ferguson and Jennie George.

Hatched at that meeting was what was to be the final "Accord" between Labor and the ACTU before the Keating government was swept from office in 1996—in the greatest swing ever recorded against Labor in working class electorates. Under the previous Accords from 1983 to 1996, wages were suppressed, working conditions axed and jobs destroyed wholesale.

The unions also collaborated in the ruthless disciplining of the working class, which involved strike breaking, union busting and the smashing of the most militant sections of workers. The labour movement was, for all intents and purposes, gutted and demolished under Labor.

Under the 1995 Accord with the Keating government, the unions agreed to continue suppressing wages in order to keep the inflation rate down to 3 percent. "Unions were the progenitors of low inflation in this country. They were the inventors of the 2 to 3 percent [target]," Keating boasted.

To rapturous applause, Keating went on to attack Howard, not for his support for the criminal war in Iraq, his assault on democratic rights or for his attacks on jobs, through the escalating casualisation of the workforce. Nor did Keating assail the prime minister for undermining working conditions, public health and public education. His criticism of Howard was that he presided over "the biggest wages explosion in postwar history," during his time as treasurer in the Fraser government in 1982. In other words, Keating's beef with Howard was that the latter failed to deal with the working class.

Keating's remarks, and their enthusiastic reception by his audience, should serve as a dire warning to all working people. A Rudd Labor government, will, with the assistance of the unions, implement the demands of big business for an acceleration and deepening of Howard's assault on the economic and social position of the working class.

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