

Socialist Equality Party meetings launch Australian election campaign

Our reporters
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The Socialist Equality Party held public meetings during the past week in Perth, Melbourne, Sydney and Newcastle, launching its campaign for the 2007 federal election.

The meetings were addressed by the party's nine lower house candidates, and its senate candidates in New South Wales and Victoria, led by SEP national secretary Nick Beams. The meetings opened up lively discussion on the program, policies and perspective of the party.

Beams told audiences in Western Australia, New South Wales and Victoria that growing conflicts between the US and other major powers in the Middle East and Central Asia were setting the stage for global military conflict.

"Not since the days of the Hitler regime in the 1930s have we seen such an eruption of imperialist gangsterism and such dangers to the future of mankind."

The turn to militarism, Beams explained, was an expression of deep-going contradictions at the heart of world capitalism between the development of world economy and its division into rival national states.

"How is the plunge into militarism and war to be fought?" Beams asked. "How can the growing threats to civilisation be defeated? These are the issues which are at the heart of the SEP's election intervention."

SEP candidates explained that war, growing social inequality, the attack on democratic rights and environmental destruction could only be tackled on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program. The SEP's campaign was aimed, they insisted, at establishing the political independence of the working class from Labor, the Greens and all the parties and institutions that, in one way or another, defend the profit system.

In **Perth**, the SEP's meeting was held in the seat of Swan, encompassing the city's south-eastern suburbs. Those in attendance included health, construction and education workers, high school students and readers and supporters of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

SEP candidate Joe Lopez joined Beams on the platform and spoke about the social reality behind Western Australia's much vaunted resources boom. "You read some ridiculous comments about the economic success of the boom economy in WA. One example I read was in a *New Zealand Herald* article published late last year titled—'Boom Times for Western Australia'.

"It quoted John Nicolaou, an economist at the WA Chamber of Commerce and Industry who said: 'In Perth shoppers are deciding the colour of their new Porsche whilst a Sydney shopper is trying to afford another box of cereal.'

"This sort of statement," Lopez said, "is an expression of just how far removed the lives of the financial elites and their political servants are from the experiences and conditions confronting ordinary working class people."

Lopez said the boom was exerting massive upward pressure on housing prices and that large sections of the population were now struggling with higher mortgage repayments and rental costs. While WA's population

was expanding rapidly as workers from other states relocated in search of work, social infrastructure including hospitals and schools, was crumbling. A financial aristocracy was raking in billions of dollars in additional export revenue, while ordinary families were sinking further into debt. This process of wealth polarisation was reflected throughout Australia and around the world.

In **Melbourne**, SEP candidates Frank Gaglioti for Calwell and Will Marshall for the seat of Melbourne, addressed an audience drawn from both electorates. They were joined by SEP senate candidates Peter Byrne, Tania Baptist and Nick Beams.

Marshall, a teacher, used his address to condemn the Howard government's campaign of racist vilification against African migrants. "At the start of this month, Federal Immigration Minister Kevin Andrews suddenly announced that he was cutting the immigration quota of African immigrants. This had been decided months in advance. However Andrews was determined to initiate a campaign particularly against Sudanese migrants for failing to 'integrate' and 'adjust into the Australian way of life'."

Marshall described the television news media's "dirty campaign" portraying Sudanese immigrants as a danger to society. He explained that similar attempts at racist scapegoating had been launched by the Howard government during the 2001 and 2004 elections—against refugees and Muslims. But this time a majority of the population had rejected the government's diversionary tactics.

The Liberals racist policies, Marshall emphasised, were supported entirely by Labor. "The shadow minister for immigration, Tony Burke, announced that Labor too would cut back the quotas for African immigrants into Australia. Burke emphasised that immigration policy was 'bipartisan' which is entirely true." Marshall went on to review the history of the Australian Labor Party, pointing out that its founding platform enshrined the racist White Australia policy.

"In opposition to the official political framework, the working class must embrace a new set of universal values, grounded on the global realities of the twenty-first century. Such values must champion the rights and interests of humanity as a whole—against war and militarism, against social inequality and all forms of oppression, in defence of democratic rights and civil liberties and for freedom of movement for all, accompanied by full citizenship rights in any part of world."

SEP senate candidate, architect Peter Byrne spoke about the anti-terror measures enacted since 2001, referring to the barrage of attacks that have followed, including the incarceration of David Hicks, the control order placed on Melbourne man Jack Thomas and the attempted frame-up of Gold Coast doctor Mohamad Haneef. "Millions of Australians were genuinely shocked by these attacks and can legitimately ask 'who's next?'"

Frank Gaglioti, the party's candidate in Calwell and a teacher in the public school system for more than 20 years, related from first-hand experience the gutting of public education. Since the 1980s Labor and

Liberal governments had closed hundreds of Victorian schools, while private education was experiencing a major boom, further undermining public schools and entrenching a two-class education system.

The SEP's second senate candidate in Victoria, Tania Baptist, delivered a powerful address to the meeting about the experiences that had led her to make the decision to join the party. She appealed to all those present to do likewise, and build the SEP as the new mass socialist party of the working class. (See "SEP candidate explains why she joined the party")

In **Sydney**, meetings were held this week in the western suburbs and inner-west. The SEP's James Cogan and Chris Gordon joined Beams at Wentworthville Community Hall on October 23, while Alex Safari, Patrick O'Connor and Carol Divjak spoke with Beams the following evening at Erskineville Town Hall.

Chris Gordon, the party's candidate in Parramatta, said the election campaign conducted by the mainstream parties and media had an extraordinary air of unreality. "Consider the front page of the *Sydney Morning Herald* on day one of the campaign. Under the title, 'No risk of a revolution', the Herald claimed the election presented 'a choice between two men appealing to a comfortable country with limited discontents'."

Gordon explained that there was an unbridgeable gap between these sentiments and the actual social conditions, the living reality, of the working class. He detailed the financial hardship confronting families, pensioners and welfare recipients throughout Sydney's west, including record levels of housing repossessions.

The SEP's candidate for Chifley, James Cogan, told supporters that the entire official election campaign was aimed at suppressing the political and social issues facing working people.

"There is an attempt to suppress the views of any candidate who challenges the Liberal-National coalition and the Labor Party: the two tried and tested parties of the Australian political and corporate establishment whose differences on fundamental issues are negligible. Tremendous practical and financial obstacles have been placed in the way of registering an alternative party and standing candidates."

Cogan said the SEP's registration was an important political victory, laying the basis for an ambitious election campaign across three states.

In the inner-west, SEP candidate for Kingsford-Smith, Alex Safari told the audience of high school and university students, workers and professional people that war against Iran was looming: "I am from Iran—and I want to use the opportunity of this federal election to sound a warning: The biggest and most immediate threat to humanity is war."

An agricultural scientist with the NSW Department of Primary Industries, Safari also discussed the far-reaching impact of climate change. He insisted, in opposition to the Greens and Labor, that environmental devastation could not be resolved within the framework of the capitalist market system.

Patrick O'Connor spoke in opposition to the Howard government's military intervention against Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory. The SEP, O'Connor explained, had opposed the Liberal-Labor bi-partisan military plan from the outset.

"We pointed out the Howard government's actions had nothing to do with the stated purpose of protecting the welfare of Aboriginal children. In a comparable manner to which Canberra has launched its predatory takeovers of East Timor and the Solomon Islands under the banner of humanitarianism, Howard used the terrible social problems facing many Aboriginal communities as a cover for his pro-business agenda."

O'Connor also made clear the SEP's opposition to "Reconciliation" which posited an identity of interests between Aborigines and the Australian nation. The SEP advocated not reconciliation, but the unification of the working class regardless of skin colour, culture or religious background against the capitalist nation-state system.

"The essential purpose of Reconciliation is to conceal the reality that

class not race constitutes the fundamental divide in Australian society. While both Howard and Rudd appeal to Australian nationalism, the reality is that there are two nations—one for the ultra-wealthy and one for everyone else."

The SEP's second senate candidate in NSW, Carol Divjak, also addressed the meeting, recounting the bitter experiences that led her to publicly resign from the ALP in 1984.

Divjak said she had joined the ALP after the Whitlam government was dismissed from office by the Governor-General in 1975. "I was outraged that a democratically elected government could be ousted, especially after 23 years of Liberal rule."

With the coming to power of the Hawke government in 1983, and the signing of the Accord between Labor, the ACTU and employer groups, Divjak said the anti-working class character of the government soon became clear.

She said the strength of the Socialist Labour League (forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party) was its ability to provide a unified conception of political events. The party had placed Labor's right-ward shift in the context of historical and international processes, providing an independent socialist orientation for the working class. Divjak reviewed the subsequent evolution of the Labor party, pointing out that Rudd was now hailing the record of the Hawke and Keating governments.

In **Newcastle**, SEP candidate Terry Cook, who is challenging former Australian Council of Trade Unions chief Greg Combet in the seat of Charlton, warned that the insertion of leading trade union officials into safe Labor seats was a warning to working people. Rudd Labor would rely on these officials to enforce savage attacks on working class living standards, just as they had done under the various Accords between 1983 and 1996.

Already, explained Cook, Rudd Labor had pledged to retain the central features of Howard's hated WorkChoices regime—with no opposition from the unions. "They will be an essential mechanism to enforce Labor's pro-market program and to stamp out any resistance by the working class."

Noel Holt, the party's candidate in the seat of Newcastle said the gap between rich and poor was growing rapidly and this was reflected in the social transformation of Newcastle, with high rates of youth unemployment, workplace casualisation, increased "housing stress" and personal indebtedness.

"Just this week, Samaritans, a Newcastle welfare group, revealed that every week some 250 families or individuals in the region approach them because they are in financial crisis and can't afford their weekly groceries. Samaritans said these people have usually gone without food for at least one day before coming to them. They are from low income households with no savings and when something unexpected happens such as family illness or death in the family, they struggle to pay the bills, but often can't buy their weekly shopping."

Cook and Holt were joined by SEP Central Committee member Peter Symonds, a leading staff writer for the *World Socialist Web Site*, who delivered the main report.

Candidates' reports provoked extended question and answer sessions at each meeting. In Perth, after a young worker asked "how can you guarantee that the SEP won't simply betray as other parties have?" a lively discussion ensued, dealing with the history of the Russian Revolution, the reasons for the emergence of the Stalinist bureaucracy, how the Spanish revolution was betrayed, and the internationalist program advanced by Leon Trotsky and the Fourth International against Stalinism and all forms of national opportunism.

In Melbourne, Beams discussed the Howard government's recently unveiled tax cut plan. Why were both parties offering tax cuts, Beams asked, when all opinion polls revealed overwhelming public preference for spending on public health, education and basic infrastructure? Beams

pointed to major structural changes in the global economy—which had led to two decades of privatisation and the opening up of every area of social life to private profit-making, entrenching powerful economic interests opposed to any expansion of public facilities.

In Sydney, after a student asked for further information about Labor's evolution between 1975 and 1996, Beams, Divjak and other speakers explained that Labor and the ACTU had effectively destroyed the previously existing workers' movement. The labour movement at the beginning of the twenty-first century could only be rebuilt on the basis of an internationalist program and orientation.

At each meeting audience members signed-up to assist with various aspects of the SEP's election campaign, including the distribution of election manifestos throughout the electorates. Collections for the SEP's \$50,000 election fund raised a total of more than \$8,500.

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