

# Thoughtful response at SEP election meetings on the Russian Revolution

**Our reporters**

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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) marked the 90th anniversary of the Russian Revolution at its final election meetings held over the past week, and drew out the prospects for socialism in the twenty-first century.

SEP National Secretary and Senate candidate for NSW, Nick Beams, explained that the Russian Revolution “did not merely shake the world, it shaped all the politics and history that followed ... Ninety years on we are in many ways removed from the society out of which the Russian Revolution erupted. But in a profound sense we live in the epoch of the Russian Revolution.”

He pointed out that “much has changed. But mankind is confronted with the same historical problems that propelled the Russian working class on to the road of revolution, and which saw tens of millions of workers, youth and socialist-minded intellectuals take that road in the years that followed.”

The meetings confirmed that a significant layer of workers and youth are being propelled by the threat of widening war and economic crises, deepening social inequality and attacks on democratic rights, to consider a revolutionary socialist alternative to capitalism. The audiences attentively followed Beams’s report, which provided a comprehensive survey of the complex theoretical and political issues that formed the essential preparation for the Russian Revolution.

The three meetings were well attended, with a diverse cross-section of workers, young people, housewives, pensioners and professionals from the electorates where SEP candidates are standing. Other readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* and the SEP’s election site also came—some traveling hundreds of kilometers. Reflecting the internationalism of the SEP’s perspective, the audience included immigrants from the Asia-Pacific region, the Middle East, the Balkans, Europe and Latin America.

In each case, Beams’s lecture opened up a lively and lengthy discussion, with questions and answers as well as angry comments about the present state of affairs. In Sydney, a Lebanese immigrant denounced the disaster in Iraq and asked who gave Bush the right to invade Iraq. Another member of the audience declared that Bush’s “war on terrorism” was a farce. Other questions focussed on the betrayal of the wave of struggles of the working class in the 1960s and 1970s and the rise of Stalinism. After Beams’s reply, a Polish immigrant added further details of the immense problems facing the Bolshevik party after the revolution and the impact of civil war on the Soviet working class.

In Perth, a member of the audience thanked Beams for his report and for clarifying his former doubts. Discussion developed over the reasons for the degeneration of the first workers’ state; and a Greek immigrant explained the role of Stalin in carving up Europe, with Churchill and Roosevelt, into separate zones of influence and betraying the Greek revolutionary movement after World War II.

In Melbourne, questions continued for more than an hour. Again the emergence of Stalinism was discussed, with other issues ranging over the increasing danger of a US war against Iran, the inevitable conflict between US militarism and democratic rights, the political role of the Greens and

how to combat the false illusions generated by them, and why corporations were seizing on climate change to demand increased taxes, further privatisation and attacks on working people.

Generous collections at each of the meetings raised an impressive total of \$13,745 towards the SEP’s \$50,000 election fund, expressing the high level of support for the SEP’s intervention into the 2007 elections, and its socialist perspective. Many people stayed behind to continue discussion after the meetings, with several signing up to help in the final days of the campaign. More than 70 copies of the SEP’s new pamphlet “Industrial relations and the trade unions under Labour: From Whitlam to Rudd” were sold, along with other literature.

Below is a selection of comments from those who attended the meetings:

**Paul Sims**, a metalworker, came to the Melbourne meeting after recently discovering the SEP’s election web site. His first contact with the Trotskyist movement was in the early 1990s after he had purchased copies of the Socialist Labour League’s newspaper *Workers News* and pamphlets on the US-led attack on Iraq and the occupation of Somalia.

“Tonight’s meeting,” he said, “was very good with a lot of information. I had no detailed idea about the divisions in Russian society. I didn’t know about the role of the peasantry or that the bourgeoisie were pushing for some sort of change, my impression was that it was all unified against the Czar.

“There was a lot to take in but it made clear that the conditions that led to the Russian Revolution 90 years ago are coming again. The conflict between the imperialist powers that led-up to the revolution is starting to develop again and all sorts of complicated economic rivalries now coming up.

“Just like during last century there cannot be a continuation of the sort of imperialist wars now going on in the Middle East by the US and Australia and democracy. Democracy and imperialist war cannot exist together. At first people might support war but as it continues more and more will realise that war is pointless. They will start to oppose it and so the government will attempt to stop that opposition.

“I understand something about this because I was in armed forces for 11 years and know how it works. In the military you have to follow orders, regardless of what your personal opinion is. You’re told not to talk to the media. The government would like to try and make it that way for the civilian population.

“The atmosphere in the military after 9/11 was terrible. People wanted to go to the Middle East and kill Osama bin Laden, hunt down the Taliban and that sort of thing but now things are starting to change. As the casualties grow, ordinary people in the military are starting to change. And look at the way the government treats soldiers who are wounded and injured—they don’t want to know them. When injured soldiers return home they have to fight to get their basic entitlements.”

Commenting on the federal election, he said: “People are not really expecting the dramatic change that is coming, they hope that Labor might

somehow be a bit better. But there are no differences between Labor and Liberal and the Greens are no different either. There is more awareness of this than ever before.

“I have no confidence in Labor because they were the ones that started the big attacks on the working class in 1983 with the Hawke and Keating governments. And if Labor is elected it will just continue where the Howard government left off. People are told there is only Liberal and Labor, that there are no other alternatives. It’s clear that for anything to change it has to come from us.”

**Marko**, an unemployed 24-year-old, came to the Sydney meeting. He explained he had been reading the WWSW for 3 to 4 years, particularly the articles on the Balkans. “I am from Serbia. I decided I wanted to know more of the party’s analysis about other things. Before I started reading the site, I wasn’t aware of the magnitude of the class struggle that had a big part to play in the Balkans. I thought it was about national rivalries, but not class issues.”

He said that he had become unhappy about what was going on and tried to distance himself from politics. “But now that I see that there are people telling the truth I am becoming more interested in politics. I remember when I was 16 or 17, I was completely demoralised by the Balkans War. I couldn’t understand how such things could happen.

“As far as the elections here are concerned, both major parties are the same. There’s got to be something more. I can see that people are becoming more politicised, looking for an alternative. I’d like to think that World War III won’t happen, but the way things are going and when you look back at history there are similarities.”

**Caroline**, a lecturer, explained that she had previously considered herself a Green. “But I’ve been watching them do deals over time and not standing by their principles. I have gotten more concerned about the general way that politics is going and I guess I’ve joined the large number of people that are disillusioned with the system as it stands. So I’ve been reading a bit more about what your party has to offer and thinking—well I’d have to know a lot more—but certainly in terms of general principles I’m moving more towards what you think.

“Mostly I’m concerned about betrayals. I really want to see someone stand up for their principles and not count the cost and not be pragmatic. I’ve just looked around at my friends who are involved with political parties and it’s just pragmatism every single time. It’s not about what the principles are. I talked to somebody who was the campaign manager of one of the Greens’ candidates. He just said we’ll have to see about preference deals without knowing anything about what people were standing for. It was really horrible.

“About the election campaign, there’s a lot of things I’ve been depressed about, but not surprised at. So the fact that the Labor government has done backflip after backflip on things that you thought they would stand for, particularly on WorkChoices, which it doesn’t look as though they’re going to do anything substantially different from the Liberals. And the huge amount of money that’s being spent is just sickening and not on things that are really important. I can see that it doesn’t make any difference whoever gets into power if we just go for the two party options. And the people who say that the Greens will make Labor do things, well that’s just patently ridiculous.

I’ve come to see more clearly that the trade union movement is not doing the right thing. I first became conscious of that when WorkChoices was first brought in. People wanted to do something. There were a lot of workers that were calling for unprotected industrial action, to actually go out, a lot of people and I think at that point the unions just dampened down on that and the trade union leaders tried to redirect that energy rather than take the risk of pulling the entire country out. They didn’t want to do that. They wanted to squash people and they just advised minimal type actions and they just channeled people’s anger into other forms. So I watched the trade union movement take people’s anger and turn it in a

way that wasn’t at all useful or helpful.

**William Fulgenzi**, a high school student in Melbourne, said: “It is becoming popular for people to say that socialism cannot work and that this was proved in Russia. But these opinions are made without knowing all the variants that were involved or that these conditions are around today. The collapse of the Soviet Union was not, as Fukuyama said the ‘end of history’. The Russian Revolution was just one of the many opportunities for socialism that will present themselves out of capitalism.

Fulgenzi, who is involved in the SEP’s election campaign, said that he had found some difficulty talking about the Russian Revolution during the election campaign. “The Russian Revolution is a huge issue and many people don’t necessarily see a connection between it and the conditions they confront and developments going on underneath the surface. But as their problems increase and conditions get worse people are being forced to look at these historical issues and the question of socialism.”

**Caila**, an occupational therapy student in Perth, said: “I thought Nick’s report was really good because it gave a really good overview of the history of socialism—its foundations going as far back to the Russian Revolution. It clarified for me a lot of the similarities between socialism and communism. It also gave a really good view of where the Party is looking at for the future—what practical things can be done and the future for socialism and the world.”

**Jorge**, an electrical worker, found out about the Sydney meeting via an email from friends. “There was a really strong response from those attending the meeting. People wanted to lift their consciousness which was great. What I liked about what was said in the meeting was that the Socialist Equality Party is not just about getting numbers of votes and people but the quality of your campaign. It is not just about getting powerful posts in parliament but about creating a movement of workers that are aware of what they want to achieve in society.”

“The major parties’ policies I would describe as extremism of the centre: To a point where you can’t hardly distinguish between them at all. About preferences I don’t view things in terms of Labor being a lesser evil. I have for a long time been a member of a union who supports the Labor party but I have not voted for Labor or Liberal. As a worker I know I can survive at the moment even if I don’t like society but going along with the policies of the major parties is against my principles and ethics.”

**Peter**, a former industrial chemist who came to the Perth meeting, explained: “I was part of the No War movement, then I got a pamphlet that listed the SEP web site that gave a very concise and honest appraisal of the situation in Iraq and I started reading the web site pretty much religiously everyday. It’s a perspective I have a lot of time for. I believe it is a globalised world, it’s where everyone is interconnected and has got to have humanity as their goal not just profit which is destroying the environment, leading again to inequality and war. I find the comments on the WWSW are to my mind the most accurate and I follow the daily analysis and perspective and historical processes and in that way become more enlightened perhaps and more active.

“My parents were always Labor voters. It was the working class tradition but in those days I think you had a lot more literature, a lot more activity. Nowadays it seems there are no other parties. It’s a Howard or Howard-lite situation. The main thing that worries me is that you have got wars. I am the product of a migrant son who started life again after the wars in Europe. They have done all right and were happy to be here. They were hard working migrants and for a long time I just subscribed to the

status quo. The Vietnam War was a wake up and in a way that is a chapter that has been left behind. Now we have this global problem of oil and wars in the Middle East and possibly Iran. It seems the same thing happening again without people really realising it. There is no real analysis or viewpoints given in the media. It's just frustrating that there are no outlets."

**Campbell Pallot**, a teacher, who traveled from Horsham, a rural town about 300 kilometres west of Melbourne, said: "One of the most important things raised tonight was Nick Beams's evaluation of the current state of world capitalism and how it relates to the reemergence of conditions that led to the Russian Revolution.

"The quotes from Trotsky that Nick referred to were very powerful. What Trotsky wrote in the 1930s is even more relevant today. The fact that people like Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg were so clear and correct in their analysis is a testament to the power of Marxism.

"The question and answers were also important because they made clear that in order to understand the political situation today you cannot look at things in isolation. No event in the world is isolated but inter-connected in all sorts of different ways and it must be analysed closely and carefully. I knew that before, of course, but the meeting reinforced this very powerfully.

"These are crucial issues that have to be discussed and developed in the working class. It is clear to me that I can't play a role in this process unless I'm involved with the Socialist Equality Party.

"I read the *World Socialist Web Site* everyday and it is clear to me. There is no other party or group that can offer these political truths and express them in such a way that educates the working class. It is not a question of sort of talking up a revolution but to make workers politically conscious and aware of what is emerging and their independent historic tasks."

**Eamon Harrold**, a labourer for a landscape gardener, said: "The meeting about the anniversary of the Russian Revolution is not only to promote the history of the revolution but how it affects us and the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries. Your attitude towards the revolution also reflects your attitude towards the economic system today.

"A lot of people think that because the Soviet Union has collapsed therefore socialism doesn't work—that's especially the attitude of the people in power and historians. They maintain it was socialism and communism, when it really wasn't it was Stalinism and a bureaucracy. And that attitude translates into your attitude on socialism and whether it is viable today.

"The war by the United States against Iraq obviously makes people more politically aware about what is going on. It focuses your attention on a range of questions. Why are they invading this country? It is because of the resources there. And why do they want to control all the resources? It is because of the capitalist profit system.

"These developments have directly affected my life because I am coming to these meetings now, coming towards the Socialist Equality Party, and becoming more aware about what is happening in the world today.

"I first became aware of the *World Socialist Web Site* after 9/11. I searched the Internet looking for various answers about what is going on in the world. I read a lot more about the Russian Revolution and became very interested in Trotsky and the history of the International Committee and the SEP as well.

"A lot of the other so-called socialist parties out there today have no problems creating alliances with bourgeois parties, or any capitalist parties, if they can get into power. They don't stick by their principles, whereas the International Committee seems to stand by its principles and this is the way that it works."

Commenting on the federal election, he said: "Labor and the Coalition are the same really—it's just about who can exploit us more. And you can

see that if there is a Labor government it will turn more to the right, just as it has done in the history of Australia. As for the Greens, I just ignore them because I see them as part of the Labor Party—they will just back Labor so what makes them any different? They give their preferences to Labor, but the Socialist Equality Party is trying not to give preferences to any party because they are all capitalist parties.

"The Socialist Equality Party election campaign has definitely been more out there than it has in the past ... [but] its campaign is not just about votes, but about political awareness of the working class."

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Visit the Socialist Equality Party Election Web Site



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