SEP's Patrick O'Connor speaks at Grayndler forum

Socialist Alliance and Greens back Labor

Our reporters
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A candidates' forum held last week in the inner-Sydney seat of Grayndler served to underscore the unbridgeable gulf between the Socialist Equality Party and the entire political establishment, including Labor, Greens and Socialist Alliance.

The forum, part of a series of meetings held across the country by *Your Rights At Work*, asked candidates to discuss their party's policies on industrial relations. *Your Rights At Work* is a "community-based campaign" launched by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) with the express aim of electing a federal Labor government.

The SEP's candidate in the seat of Grayndler, 28-year-old Patrick O'Connor told the audience at Leichhardt Town Hall that if Rudd Labor took office on November 24, it would not reverse the Howard government's IR policies. Instead, it would launch, he said, a major assault on the rights and conditions of working people.

In stark contrast to these warnings, the Socialist Alliance, Greens and the Democrats gave their open backing to Labor.

O'Connor was the first speaker at the November 1st forum. Representing the Labor Party on the platform was George Campbell, a former leading bureaucrat in the metal workers' union and retiring Labor Senator.

From the very outset, O'Connor exposed Labor's purported 'opposition' to the Howard government's despised WorkChoices legislation, which has seen basic conditions for tens of thousands of workers ripped-up.

O'Connor said recent actions by state Labor governments in NSW and Victoria showed the ALP's 'opposition' to WorkChoices was "a sham". The Iemma Labor government had sent in riot police against workers at McArthur Express, who were protesting against their loss of pay and entitlements after the company went into liquidation. In Victoria, the Brumby Labor government had threatened striking nurses with the use of WorkChoices provisions against 'unlawful' industrial action.

"Rudd's so-called 'Forward with Fairness' policy is," O'Connor explained, "in all its essential aspects, identical to Howard's WorkChoices. Labor is committed to retaining Australian Workplace Agreements until December 2011. It will also retain existing anti-strike provisions, imposing mandatory secret ballots before a strike can take place, and outlawing strikes and other forms of industrial action except during a limited negotiating period for a new enterprise agreement.

"Labor promises to crack down on so-called unauthorised strike action, secondary boycotts and pattern- or industry-wide wage contract bargaining. What this effectively means is that any collective industrial action of the working class will remain illegal under a Labor government."

O'Connor pointed to the right-wing character of Labor's election campaign, including Rudd's expulsion of union leaders from the ALP over their use of mild anti-government and anti-employer rhetoric.

"Labor's election campaign is centrally pitched towards convincing big business that the Labor party is most capable of advancing its interests. And it must be noted that Rudd is receiving a favourable response from broad sections of the media and corporate Australia, who now regard Howard as a squeezed lemon."

The fact that Rudd was now openly claiming the mantle of the Hawke-Keating reforms was a warning to working people. "During these thirteen years, Labor and the unions consciously engineered a shift in wealth away from the working class to the ultra-wealthy.

"Big business benefited from the Hawke-Keating program of privatisation, corporate and financial deregulation and the reduction or elimination of taxes on companies and high income earners. The social position of the working class came under unprecedented assault." O'Connor pointed out that George Campbell had been a leading trade union official during the Hawke-Keating governments and bore responsibility for the destruction of the labour movement.

The central task facing workers and young people was the need for a conscious political break from the Labor Party. "We insist that a new mass party of the working class must be built, based on a socialist and internationalist program."

O'Connor then outlined the principled political basis for such a struggle.

"The Socialist Equality Party stands for internationalism because in an epoch of world economy there is no possibility for workers to advance their interests on the basis of a national perspective. We insist that the problem must be tackled at its source—namely the profit system. We fight for a society in which the accumulation of profit and private wealth are subordinated to the social needs of the working class, which comprises the overwhelming majority of society.

"The Socialist Equality Party speaks the truth: there are no easy or short-term solutions to difficult political and historical problems. There is no substitute for a patient and principled struggle, aimed at the construction of an independent mass socialist party.

"No amount of manoeuvring in the Senate by the Greens, Democrats, or any other party will bring about a genuine improvement in ordinary people's working and living conditions. Nor is the radical sloganeering and protest perspective advanced by the Socialist Alliance of any use to the working class.

"The struggle for socialism is an international struggle, involving the political, intellectual and cultural re-awakening of working people and the development of a scientific perspective based on an assimilation of all the key political and strategic lessons of the twentieth century. The Socialist Equality Party's election campaign is centrally oriented towards advancing this perspective."

Following O'Connor's opening remarks, Socialist Alliance candidate Pip Hinman and the Greens' Sayeed Khan sought to defend their support for Labor.

"We think it is CRITICAL to get rid of Howard and his reactionary government. And we are for the replacement of the Howard government by a Labor government," declared Hinman. "But we also think Labor

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should not be given a blank cheque, and, for that same reason we ask you to vote 1 Socialist Alliance, then preference the Greens and then Labor before the Coalition parties. This way you triple the value of your vote to kick out the Howard government."

Khan told the meeting, "We believe Labor's policy is much better than the Liberal's and the Coalition's." The Greens were there to "negotiate with [Labor]" to make sure "Labor's policies are made more effective than they are."

The question that must surely have occurred to many in the audience was why the Greens and Socialist Alliance bothered to stand at all, since they were supporting Labor so openly. In reality, they play a critical political function, seeking to direct mass opposition to the Howard government back behind Labor.

Senator George Campbell, standing in for Grayndler's sitting member Anthony Albanese, was forced to frame his entire contribution as a reply to O'Connor. His central argument was that the working class was incapable of advancing an independent political struggle for its interests and therefore the only available avenue on November 24 was a vote for Rudd Labor.

"If we're waiting for socialism we'll be waiting a long time for any change," Campbell cynically told the audience. "It's easy to say, Patrick, that the ... workers will rebel and solve the problems themselves. It is much more difficult to actually do it in real practice." Campbell pointed to what he described as "objective circumstances that we currently face" including anti-strike laws, low rates of unionization and fear by workers that if they took industrial action they would lose their jobs. But he omitted critical information. These "objective circumstances" did not fall from the sky. Rather, they were a direct product of policies introduced by the Hawke-Keating Labor governments, of which Campbell was a key part.

During the question and answer session an audience member challenged Campbell's dishonest presentation of Labor's record. Campbell had maintained a deliberate silence on Rudd's support for WorkChoices, including its anti-strike provisions and the retention of AWAs. Where did Senator Campbell stand on this?

Campbell replied: "I haven't sat in homes round armchairs, round fires, drinking chardonnay and talking about revolution. I've been out there fighting for workers...." Unfortunately this claim was somewhat undermined in the very next breath; as the senator went on to explain that Rudd's anti-strike provisions were no big deal, because the right to strike had never existed in Australia. In a similar vein he defended Rudd's retention of AWAs until 2011 with the insistence that "You can't abrogate contracts."

O'Connor responded by reviewing the period since 1968, when a general strike against the jailing of Victorian tramways union official Clarrie O'Shea effectively rendered anti-strike statutes a dead letter. While Campbell had declared that anti-strike laws "were then gradually moved back into place" after the '68 strike movement, he had not explained that they were moved there by the Hawke and Keating Labor governments, which conducted a relentless campaign of strike breaking and union-busting operations throughout the 1980s—with the full collaboration of Campbell and the ACTU.

As discussion proceeded, a campaign worker for Albanese took to the floor and directed a question to O'Connor: "You didn't waste one breath attacking Tories ... Here's the question for you. It's dead straight. Do you really want to get rid of the Howard government, and if so, aren't the only people who can do that on November 24 the Labor Party?

O'Connor replied: "The critical question is not who here can sound off the loudest against the Howard government. Rather it is this: how can workers oppose the agenda being implemented by the government? Does the Labor Party's program offer any alternative? No it doesn't. The critical question in this election is not whether or not the Howard government is thrown out. The critical question is the extent to which ordinary working people and youth break from this whole framework of Labor, Laborism, and the parliamentary apparatus, and begin to build a new party.

"Your position," O'Connor continued, "along with that of Mr Campbell, is the classic statement of political opportunism ... 'Socialism is not realistic, we need a practical solution right now, and this means supporting Labor.' Well, this has been put forward at virtually every single election in Australia's history, and where has it left the working class? Where are we now? Why are we in this position?"

"Do you want to defeat Howard, yes or no?" the ALP campaign worker retorted.

"Let me state clearly," replied O'Connor, "the Labor Party is not the lesser evil to the Howard government. We do not preference them or anyone else."

Throughout this exchange the candidates from Socialist Alliance, the Greens and Democrats sat silently. Not one of them uttered a single word of criticism against the outrageous falsifications by Campbell and his claim that workers could mount no independent struggle in defence of their conditions, independently of the Australian Labor Party.

The opposition of Socialist Alliance to the fight for a socialist perspective and its glorification of spontaneity was spelled out graphically by Pip Hinman in her closing remarks: "Ideology is important but action is more important and that is where the Socialist Alliance puts most of its energy and strength, into action.... ideology on its own is nothing, it means nothing ..."

Here was a clear illustration of Socialist Alliance's fundamental opposition to the fight for Marxist theory and program. And the political content of this opposition was just as clearly established: an orientation to Labor, Greens and the existing political establishment. "I think there is a difference between Labor and Liberal policy," declared Hinman, "and I think it comes down to WorkChoices. There is a lesser evil in this election campaign, I can say that unequivocally ..."

Hinman's praise for the Greens, a capitalist party, was just as fulsome. "We're giving our preferences to the Greens because the Greens are the party that have the closest interests and policies to the Socialist Alliance. And you know the Greens also agree ... with activism in the workplace, in other social movements and campaigns. But we say and we think that there should be more activism because in the end you cannot simply trust politicians. There might be very good ones in parliament, and there are some very good ones in parliament, namely the Greens."

At the conclusion of the meeting workers in the audience approached O'Connor to express their support for the SEP's intervention. "You were like the ghost of yore, speaking the truth," said one older worker. He particularly thanked the SEP candidate for reviewing the lessons of Labor in office from Whitlam, through Hawke and Keating, to Rudd. A migrant worker also congratulated the SEP for exposing the role of Campbell during the 1980s and 90s.

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