Australian SEP meetings discuss socialism, climate change and emissions trading schemes

Our reporters
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Public meetings called by the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) in Sydney and Melbourne this week exposed the real agenda behind emissions trading schemes and the official climate change "debate".

WSWS international editorial board member and SEP national secretary Nick Beams and WSWS writer Patrick O'Connor delivered reports to audiences of students, workers, professional people and retired workers on "The Economics and Politics of the ETS: Socialism and Climate Change".

Against the backdrop of the national conflicts and rivalries dominating the Copenhagen climate change conference, O'Connor explained the financial and political interests involved in buying and selling "carbon credits" via emissions trading schemes (ETS). Beams drew out the underlying inability of the capitalist system, based on private profit and nation-states, to answer the climate change crisis. Together, their reports demonstrated that only the socialist re-organisation of economic life on an international scale could harness the immense resources and technology needed to avert the developing ecological and social catastrophe.

O'Connor said the mass media had provided no serious analysis of the economics and politics of the ETS that the Rudd Labor government had attempted to push through parliament. There was a deliberate strategy to restrict public debate on a scheme that was designed to reward corporate polluters, generate vast profits for the financial elite and impose the full burden of the environment crisis, along with the global financial crisis, on working people.

O'Connor reviewed the experience of the European and other ETS mechanisms, explaining that they did no more than shift pollution from one company or area to another, rather than reduce carbon emissions. He said some companies had actually set up polluting factories in order to receive credits for shutting them down. The carbon trading market, however, was increasingly lucrative, rising exponentially to $118 billion per year by 2008 and predicted to reach $3 trillion over the next decade. The size of this financial market helped explain why the Rudd government was seeking an ETS: to position Sydney as a regional hub for Asian carbon trading.

"The most fundamental problem with carbon trading is that it does not address the basic question as to how to refashion the power-generating basis of the world economy," O'Connor said. "What is required is the vast restructuring of broad areas of social and economic life, such as urban planning, transport, land use and agriculture. Above all, the climate crisis requires an immediate phasing out of fossil fuel-based energy such as oil and coal, and the development of renewable power sources. This can only be achieved on the basis of a massive public investment program, harnessing the world's scientific and technological resources in a rational and planned manner."

Nick Beams warned that unless society's economic, material, scientific and technical resources were systematically mobilised, "humanity faces a catastrophe—not a single event, but rather a continuing worsening of social and economic conditions: drought, increasingly violent weather events, mass population movements, conflicts over land and water resources, and wars, even involving the use of nuclear weapons."

Beams explained that, by its very nature, the problem of climate change was global and had no national solution, yet capitalism was rooted in the nation-state system. It was not beyond the scientific capacity and ingenuity of mankind to develop new technologies that could open the way to a solution. But under capitalism, new technologies were jealously guarded as sources of enormous profits, making impossible the necessary global co-operation and collaboration between scientists, researchers, institutions and the population as a whole.

Drawing on Marx's *Capital*, Beams said there was no separation between the activities of mankind, which was a part and product of nature, and the rest of nature, upon which mankind depended. Far from Marx having no answer to the environmental crisis, Beams stressed that his work had established the necessity for a collective struggle to overcome the damage done by capitalism to the complex set of interactions, or metabolism, that enable life and growth.

"In Volume III of *Capital* Marx put the issue as follows: 'Freedom … can consist only in this, that socialized man, the associated producers, govern the human metabolism with nature in a rational way, bringing it under their collective control instead of being dominated by it as a blind power; accomplishing it with the least expenditure of energy and in conditions most worthy and appropriate for their human nature'."

Beams said all the "green" opponents of Marxism—who opposed the overthrow of the capitalist system, either as "unrealistic" or not immediate enough, or because of some alleged hostility of socialism to nature—advanced a perspective which, in the final analysis, advocated cutting back the productive forces, above all the human population itself.

The reports delivered by O'Connor and Beams will be published on the WSWS next Monday and Tuesday.

At both the Sydney and Melbourne meetings, an extensive discussion ensued, with questions focussing on carbon taxes, the policing of carbon trading schemes and alternative technologies for generating base-load energy.

O'Connor explained that carbon taxes amounted to regressive

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surcharges on consumption, which hit working people the hardest, while raising government revenue, but leaving business free to decide whether or not to make technological changes, depending on their profit calculations.

Beams emphasised the fundamental importance of the development of scientific research, which, under capitalism, was increasingly subordinated to vested corporate interests, including in the universities, and dominated by the patenting of every scientific and technological advance.

Following the discussion, WSWS correspondents spoke to several audience members.

In Sydney, Michelle, a child-care student and casual fast-food worker, was attending her first SEP public meeting, after reading the WSWS for some time. She was impressed by how clearly the speakers exposed the Rudd government's ETS and the claim that the capitalist market could solve the environmental problems that it itself had created.

"I was expecting not to understand some things, but the speakers delivered the information very well. I was not very aware of the ETS before I came to the meeting. I was amazed to hear how it functions! It is despicable that companies are paid to stop polluting, so that they keep opening more plants in order to be paid to stop.

"I didn't know much about what is happening at the Copenhagen conference either. But I agree that you can't bring down the master's house with the master's tools. You can't bring down the system that is responsible for the climate crisis by using its methods.

"I read the WSWS whenever I get the chance, between working and studying. It gives me a lot of information that I would otherwise have no idea about—such as China's coal mine disasters and its treatment of miners' lives. I feel a need to understand what is happening, and not rely on what the media and others say."

Harry, a young finance industry worker, originally from India, began by commenting that working in a bank had an irony to it. "I have absolutely no say in the bank's policies. It's not me who dictates how the money flows. We don't have a say.

"Until I walked in that door, I had no idea how the ETS works and I do a lot of reading. I am someone who does keep in tune with the facts around me but no matter how much I had tried to research it, nothing made too much sense to me. You are beaten down to a pulp by the mainstream media. 'You have to follow this. You must do this. Otherwise you are not exactly a person belonging to the country. You don't fit in; you are an outsider.'

"As Nick Beams said, there is no investment in the intellectual and scientific capacity of society. The third world is practically becoming a dumping ground for waste products, outsourced call centres, and so on. There has been no real focus on raising the intellectual level of these societies.

"I grew up in a third world country and have spent the last five years in a first world country. While in the third world people are very ignorant because of the lack of education, in the first world the education exists but people are being kept too busy with their own lives and that makes them equally ignorant. You might have a 100 percent literacy rate, but people are being kept in the dark by their own governments."

At the Melbourne meeting, Igor, a civil engineering student, said he had not been able to get a grip on the ETS issue through the Australian media. "What I found out, as Nick Beams said, is that that wasn't accidental. The media don't really want the public to understand it thoroughly. The ETS is another way to make profit, not to have any impact on global warming.

"From what Patrick O'Connor was saying, the polluters are passing credits from one to the other. If they pollute more they will have to pay a bit more or get the extra credits from someone else. It is not a scheme at all to reduce pollution. It's a way of making carbon a commodity in the market and integrating Australia into that global market which has already grown since 2004 to $118 billion a year.

"A problem created by the market cannot be solved by the market. There are the contradictions that define the capitalist system, as Nick Beams pointed out. It is a system organised within rival nation-states that are trying to pass the burden onto the next country. But climate change is a global problem. A solution cannot happen under this system that has national boundaries.

"By 2050 for the carbon emissions to be halved there has to be $100 billion in research. Those are the steps that need to be taken to find a viable solution to the problem. But obviously that costs money and there is no profit out of that."

Adam, a physics graduate who designs software and circuit prototypes, attended the meeting after receiving an SEP leaflet at a Walk Against Warming rally. He said he wished all of Australia had been at the meeting listening to the reports delivered by Beams and O'Connor.

"I really didn't know anything about the ETS. I had heard of it, but I was sceptical. As Patrick O'Connor showed in his presentation, it's so easy for the government to have its data and audits to justify its agenda with the ETS, and very easy for corporations to abuse the ETS for their own profits. I didn't realise why the governments can't agree at the Copenhagen meeting, but it's clearly because they all have their own interests.

"I had never really heard about Marxism or socialism, but I found it very interesting. But now I can see it's the only idea that will actually work. It's unreasonable to continue under this system. What Nick Beams explained about the Greens was also interesting. I have always wondered where they stood, and why they put forward going back to a previous stage. Their solution is to resolve things individually or stop population growth. It's extremely pessimistic if you throw away all the advances and technology."

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