

SEP candidate speaks at comprehensive school hustings in Oxford East

“The working class has to take control of its own destiny”

Steve James
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David O’Sullivan, Socialist Equality Party candidate in the Oxford East constituency, took part in an election hustings organised by the Parent Teacher Association at Cheney School in Oxford. Cheney is a popular comprehensive school with 1,500 secondary pupils. Some 200 school students, parents and teachers came to listen to the candidates.

Following short statements from the other six candidates, O’Sullivan stressed that the General Election is a political fraud. As the SEP manifesto states, “Whatever the make-up of the next government, its agenda has already been determined. The international financial institutions, the major corporations and all the official parties intend to make working people foot the bill for an economic crisis that is not of their making.... The unfolding financial catastrophe is not just a temporary downturn, we are not experiencing a blip in a generally health economy, but the failure of an entire system, capitalism.”

The first question from the floor was on the economic crisis, asking candidates, “What do you believe is the basis for a more sound and stable economy in the future?”

Sushila Dhall for the Greens and Steve Goddard for the Liberal Democrats proposed more investment in public transport, more environmentally sustainable investment and some restrictions on bankers’ bonuses. The Labour candidate and sitting MP Andrew Smith upheld the record of the Brown government and claimed Labour intended to protect “frontline” social, education and police services. Conservative candidate Ed Arger called for more tax breaks for business. UK Independence Party (UKIP) candidate Julia Gasper blamed the European Union.

O’Sullivan pointed to the transformation of the Labour Party into a party that is “intensely satisfied about people getting filthy rich.”

He continued, “It is ridiculous to discuss protecting frontline services by building up a national economy when one country can’t isolate itself from the global economy. Look at Greece. We are not just seeing the collapse of banks but entire states. And if Greece goes then the economies of other countries will follow.

“You cannot have a nationally based solution to an international crisis. That is why, at the centre of the policies of the SEP is for workers government, not just in one country, but for the United Socialist States of Europe and a socialist world.”

Questioners wanted candidates to outline their policies for education and health funding, asking, “Would there be cuts?” “Would the parties trust local communities?”

Labour’s Andrew Smith denied cuts would happen, saying, “Instead, the school’s budget will be increasing less fast than it has been increasing.” The Liberal Democrats and Tory candidates evasively proposed slightly differing versions of schemes which, under the guise of offering local choice, subordinated education and health spending to the market.

O’Sullivan rejected the Labour candidate’s remarks. “Labour came to power in 1997 on the mantra ‘Education, education, education,’” he said. “Large amounts of money have been spent on reforms. But these reforms have been to allow private companies to profit from education. Everything from pre-school to higher education is now dominated by the market and the corporate ethos. This has led to a terrible deterioration in the quality of education.

“Under Tory policies after 1979 and continued under Labour, you’ve had the selling off of school land so many schools have no playing fields. There have been school closures, the introduction of tuition fees, the creation of foundation and trust schools tailored to the interests of big business. We are for the removal of the private sector from education, so that education is dedicated to developing young people’s understanding of cultural history and the world today.”

Speaking on health, O’Sullivan asked, “How can you calculate how much it is going to cost to make someone better? That’s the rationale being put forward by people on this platform. They all talk about local needs for local people, but what they actually mean is establishing the equivalent of a beauty contest, with each hospital fighting over a smaller and smaller pot of money and saying, ‘We want this money because we are better at this service, or that service, so invest here. Give us the money.’”

“The fundamental question is the economy. They are talking about 20 percent cuts being necessary to save the British economy. What does this mean?—mass austerity, the closure of schools and hospitals. This is what’s really going to take place in the next period.”

A student then asked, “Considering the failure of the Copenhagen summit, should the UK start imposing radical emission targets?”

The other candidates, including the Greens, all put forward versions of a more environmentally friendly capitalism and stressed the need for home insulation projects, renewable energy, and so on. In response to the Copenhagen failure, the Green candidate proposed Britain should unilaterally take steps, while the main parties insisted that some form of international agreement should be sought. None of them considered why Copenhagen had failed, while the United Kingdom Independence Party candidate claimed that global warming was a myth.

O’Sullivan said, “We believe that the science behind climate change is indisputable. Melting ice caps and glaciers prove global warming. Decisions have to be taken now on emissions and greenhouse gases, but look what happened last December at the climate summit in Copenhagen. Everyone paid lip service to united action in the weeks before the summit, but on the day each national delegation sought to defend their own narrow economic interests, at the expense of their rivals. The

only agreement was on the extension of carbon trading schemes that have been proven to be a complete failure.

“The chasm between what is scientifically needed and what was discussed at Copenhagen underscores the incapacity of the profit system to meet the basic needs of mankind, including the long-term viability of the environment.”

“The dangers of global warming are crying out for an integrated planned international response, but this is not possible in a world divided into antagonistic nation states and subject to the anarchy of the market and the profit motive. Nothing less than the complete re-organisation of global economy on a socialist basis is required. We need an internationally coordinated plan to restructure the world’s industry and agriculture. We have to reorganise energy generation, transportation, urban planning, not just to address the danger of climate breakdown, but to provide every human being with a decent life.”

Asked to conclude with 30 seconds remaining, O’Sullivan asked, “What is fairness in British society today? We see this as a class question. How can you have fairness when you see the vast growth of inequality under a Labour government? How can you have fairness when you’ve bailed out the Royal Bank of Scotland to the tune of billions, and the bankers are giving themselves multi-million-pound bonuses, which we cannot challenge? No one is being held to account for this. No one is being held responsible. All the parties agree that the working class has got to pay for the crisis through massive cuts. That’s not fairness. The working class has got to take control of its own destiny.”

O’Sullivan’s remarks were well received and a number of teachers and parents made a point of congratulating him afterwards. One pupil said O’Sullivan was “the best” candidate.



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