

SEP's Chris Gordon addresses Your Rights at Work candidate forum

Socialist Alliance & Greens candidates call for Labor vote

Our reporters
10 August 2010

On Saturday Chris Gordon, Socialist Equality Party candidate for the seat of Parramatta, spoke at a candidates' forum convened by the Parramatta branch of Your Rights at Work (YRAW). The national YRAW organisation was formed by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) in the run-up to the 2007 federal elections to campaign for a Labor election victory.

At the forum, Gordon opposed Labor Party incumbent Julie Owens, Greens candidate Phil Bradley, and Socialist Alliance candidate Duncan Roden. The Liberal-National Coalition's Charles Camenzuli was absent. Each candidate was invited to speak for ten minutes on their party's industrial relations policies, followed by questions and answers from the audience, and a three-minute summing up.

Gordon presented a socialist program, opposing Labor's Fair Work Australia (FWA) workplace legislation that bans most forms of industrial action and calling for a political break from Labor and the unions.

The forum demonstrated the role of the unions, the Greens, and the various ex-radical organisations, such as the Socialist Alliance, in preventing a conscious political break by workers with the Labor Party, and corralling them behind Labor before the federal elections on August 21.

The first speaker, Greens candidate Phil Bradley, is assistant general secretary of the New South Wales Teachers Federation (Post Schools Division). He donned a Your Rights at Work t-shirt and put himself forward as a staunch defender of workers' rights. In fact, he has played a key role in driving through a series of TAFE agreements with the state Labor government that have slashed conditions and pay-rates for TAFE teachers and entrenched privatisation across the sector.

Bradley clearly articulated the class orientation of the Greens party and its complete indifference to the economic and social crisis confronting millions of ordinary working people. He told the audience that prior to becoming a Green, he had been a long-time member of the ALP and declared that he was proud to "fight for the return of the Labor government to help restore a lot of the provisions that had previously existed" (i.e., prior to the Liberals' WorkChoices industrial legislation).

Bradley's remarks underscored the complicity of the Greens in the Rudd-Gillard government's Fair Work Act that retains all of the anti-strike provisions of WorkChoices. "The Greens improved that legislation," Bradley claimed, adding that Greens senators "supported it, not because they thought it was the greatest policy in the world, but because they believed it was a good step in the right direction, but a lot more needs to be done."

"Essentially, to sum up," Bradley concluded "Labor might be bad at the moment in many areas of industrial relations, but the Coalition would be a lot worse, and we have to be mindful of that." Bradley's remarks left the distinct impression that the Greens are working to bolster the Labor vote in lower house seats such as Parramatta.

In opposition to the Greens, the SEP's Chris Gordon advocated the need for a complete political break from Labor and the fight for a genuine socialist alternative in the working class. He began his remarks by pointing to the ousting of Rudd as prime minister, a political execution carried out by Labor's factional bosses on behalf of the mining corporations and other corporate and financial interests. Far from being a "lesser evil", Labor was being prepared, through Gillard's installation, to push through austerity measures in the face of a new stage of the global financial crisis.

Gordon recalled the experience of workers over the past three years: "during the 2007 federal election, the ACTU mobilised its vast resources to campaign for the election of a Labor government that would supposedly repeal the Howard government's hated WorkChoices. This campaign was supported by all the middle class pseudo-lefts—including Socialist Alliance."

The campaign, Gordon said, was a "complete swindle". "Its outcome, Labor's Fair Work Australia legislation, actually strengthens the anti-strike provisions of WorkChoices. It outlaws all industrial action—including strikes, partial stoppages, go-slows, work bans, overtime bans and work-to-rules—except during the limited bargaining periods for enterprise agreements at individual workplaces.

"Under Labor's laws, both the FWA tribunal and the

workplace relations minister can block or terminate industrial action if it could cause ‘significant harm’ to the employer, another company or ‘the Australian economy or part of it’. As under WorkChoices, any industrial action in solidarity with other sections of workers, or over broader economic, social or political issues, is prohibited.”

Gordon outlined Gillard’s role in imposing Labor’s new anti-strike provisions against workers, including construction workers, paramedics, teachers, Qantas baggage handlers and workers at Telstra and Australia Post. He also exposed the role of the unions. “They played a critical role in assisting Gillard to draw up the Fair Work regime. Their payoff was that the legislation reinforces their role as industrial policemen, by granting them automatic representation rights in FWA hearings.”

Concluding his remarks, Gordon drew attention to events in Greece, explaining that Australia’s industrial relations reforms were not taking place in a vacuum: “Last week the Papandreou government, a social-democratic government, mobilised the military to break up a six-day strike by Greek truck drivers.

“The events in Greece have sent shockwaves through Greece, Europe and around the world, reviving memories of the military coup that brought to power a brutal military dictatorship from 1967 to 1974.

“Greece has become a testing ground for the implementation of savage austerity programmes that are being planned across Europe in the face of a new stage of the global financial crisis that erupted in 2008. These measures are so broad and so severe—billions are being slashed from wages and social spending—that they cannot be achieved by democratic means.

“These events, like the coup against Rudd, must serve as a warning to the working class. It is time to make a break from the parties and organisations of big business—PASOK in Greece, the Labor Party here—and begin the fight for a new mass party of the working class. I urge all workers and young people to study the program and policies of the Socialist Equality Party, participate in our campaign and join this party.”

In her own presentation, Labor MP Julie Owens made no attempt to refute Gordon. She claimed that “we are all on the left side of politics”, described the election as a “very real choice” between two fundamentally different parties, one that “introduced WorkChoices, and one that abolished it,” and repeated Gillard’s empty scare campaign that “the Liberals’ WorkChoices monster is not dead.”

Owens pointed to the unions’ role in enforcing Labor’s Fair Work Act, “the most significant thing about this new system is that it creates a tri-partite body with unions at the table along with employers and government ... The consultation has been extensive, the consultation continues to be extensive.”

Socialist Alliance candidate Duncan Roden did not refute Owens’ assertion that Labor was a “party of the left”. While criticising Labor’s Fair Work Act, Roden nevertheless concurred with Owen that it was better than WorkChoices,

describing Labor’s legislation as “WorkChoices Lite”. That Labor’s laws had been wielded against striking workers, and that one worker—Ark Tribe—faced jail under Labor’s ABCC, was merely “proof of the ALP’s weak, or non-existent, working class cred.”

“Of course, as disappointing as Labor has been,” Roden concluded, “the threat of a return to WorkChoices under the Coalition is very real.” The Socialist Alliance, he explained, “calls for a vote for Labor ahead of the Coalition. Put Abbott last.”

Having explained why workers and young people should support Labor against the Coalition, Roden proceeded to outline an equally dead-end perspective: “Socialist Alliance believes that the union movement in Australia needs to establish its political independence from the major parties.” “Unions should follow the lead of the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) in Victoria,” Roden declared, calling on them to disaffiliate from the Labor Party.

As the Socialist Equality Party has previously explained, the claim that the ETU is establishing its “political independence” via disaffiliation from Labor is utter nonsense. The ETU was not an unwilling captive of the Labor Party struggling to break free. On the contrary, like every other union, the ETU shares the pro-market politics of the Labor Party and has collaborated closely with governments—Labor and Coalition—in imposing this agenda on the working class.

After disaffiliating from the ALP, the ETU has thrown its financial and organisational backing behind the Greens, that is, it has merely shifted its support from one capitalist party to another. But this is precisely what attracts the Socialist Alliance group. They promote the Greens as a “progressive alternative” to the major parties even as Greens leaders have made clear their willingness to participate in a de facto or actual coalition government with Labor, driving through free market policies, including spending cuts, in the “national interest” (see: “Greens manoeuvre for defacto coalition with Labor”).

In the question and answer session that followed, Gordon rejected the Socialist Alliance claim that Labor was a “lesser evil” and opposed Owens’ description of Labor as a “party of the left”. “Labor is the party of big business,” he said. It is the party that big business relies on in times of crisis, and we’ve seen this throughout the past 100 years.”

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