

SEP candidate Noel Holt for Newcastle addresses community forum

Our correspondent
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The Socialist Equality Party candidate for Newcastle Noel Holt addressed a candidates' forum organised on Sunday by the Throsby Village Alliance. He was the only candidate on the platform to raise the issue of the political coup in June that ousted Kevin Rudd and installed Julian Gillard as prime minister, and to warn of its implications for the working class.

Holt said that the coup demonstrated “that real political power lies not with elected representatives in parliament but with giant corporate and financial interests.” “Behind parliamentary procedure and national elections stands the naked dictatorship of capital,” he said.

Holt warned that the installation of Gillard was to fashion “a far more right-wing government” to implement the austerity measures demanded by the financial markets to force workers to pay for the global economic crisis. “She [Gillard] has demonstrated by her immediate scrapping of the proposed Resource Super Profits Tax that she will comply with these demands,” he said.

Holt's address and response to questions stood in stark contrast to the other candidates who evaded issues and sought to confine discussion to the small change of electoral politics. Asked from the floor about Rudd's ousting, Labor Party parliamentarian Sharon Grierson demonstrated her contempt for those who voted for Rudd as Labor's leader in the 2007 election by declaring that his removal was “an internal matter for the Labor Party”.

Sharp divisions emerged on a series of issues, including climate change, industrial relations laws and the Afghan war.

In his address, Greens candidate Michael Osborne

declared “human impact is the biggest cause” of global warming, inferring that everyone was responsible. He said that leadership was urgently needed from government “to make the polluters pay”. He outlined the Greens' proposal for a market based-solution to put a price on carbon “to fund renewable energy”.

Osborne praised the Labor government for “signing up to a climate adaptation fund as part of the Copenhagen Accord” to assist small Pacific Island countries threatened with rising sea levels. In fact, as Osborne was compelled to concede, the fund is grossly inadequate—“a tenth of what needs to happen.” The Greens have reached a backroom preference deal with Labor and are looking to form a de-facto coalition with Labor if it wins.

Holt made clear that capitalism was responsible for global warming, not ordinary working people. He rejected the notion that climate change or other pressing issues—economic insecurity, unemployment, declining living standards, attacks on democratic rights, militarism and the threat of war—could be “addressed through the parliamentary system” or “by putting pressure on governments to act”.

“Gillard's back down on the Labor's Resource Super Profits Tax demonstrated that she would not increase tax on the coal companies and on other corporate polluters,” Holt said. Market-based measures could not end the danger of climate change, he explained, pointing out that it was the market that was responsible for the situation in the first place. Global warming could only be tackled on an internationalist and socialist basis, he said.

Asked about the prosecution of workers under Labor's Fair Work Australia (FWA) industrial relations legislation, Labor MP Grierson attempted to evade the issue by declaring that she “was proud to be part of a

government that abolished the former Howard government's WorkChoices industrial relations laws to bring in fairer conditions in the workplace".

However, as Holt pointed out, Labor's FWA laws "were no different from Work Choices except for the fact that in many aspects they are worse". All strikes were illegal outside of the narrow period of negotiating a new enterprise agreement. He explained that even after workers "jump through hoops in the protracted process to call a strike, including secret ballots, the FWA tribunal or the workplace relations minister can intervene to end industrial action if it was deemed harmful to the employer, a third party or the economic national interest."

Holt reported a revealing exchange between Grierson and an SEP supporter in a shopping centre the previous day. Asked about Labor's backing for huge individual fines on construction workers on Woodside Petroleum's Pluto project in Western Australia, the Labor MP declared that the strike was "illegal" and that "the unions did not support them". Holt explained that what Grierson had said about the unions was true but that it demonstrated that their role as industrial policemen for the Labor government in suppressing action by workers.

Holt said: "Rather than giving support, the unions have dumped the men advising them to accept the situation and to try and get reduced fine in mediation due in September. So much for the claims of the Socialist Alliance that what workers need is strong unions to protect their rights".

Socialist Alliance candidate Zane Alcorn reacted defensively. In his previous remarks to the forum, Alcorn had argued that protests and strong activist unions would defend workers' rights. It should be noted that throughout the forum, he made no mention of socialism or socialist policies.

Responding to Holt, Alcorn admitted that he did not know much about the Pluto dispute but added "some unions are not strong and are dodgy but it is important to recognise there are other activist unions". In this case, the union involved in the Pluto dispute was precisely one that Alcorn had held up in the earlier comments as model of activism—the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union.

The Afghan war was raised by an SEP supporter in the audience. He said he understood that both Labor

and the Coalition supported the illegal occupation of Afghanistan and asked other candidates to state their position. He also asked the Greens candidate if his party advocated using troops from Afghanistan to bolster Australian neo-colonial operations in the Pacific.

Greens candidate Osborne declared that the Greens were committed to "bringing the troops home" from Afghanistan, but said nothing about the Greens' support for Australian interventions in East Timor and the Solomon Islands.

Alcorn said Socialist Alliance "called for the withdrawal of all Australian troops from Afghanistan" and supported the sending of "clean energy, doctors and aid around the world not imperialist troops". Like Osborne, Alcorn had nothing to say about his party's support for the Australian-led intervention of East Timor in 1999 or the continuing Australian military presence.

Holt explained that the SEP called for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all foreign troops from Afghanistan and Iraq as well as from East Timor and the Solomon Islands. He said that these operations had nothing to do with establishing democracy or helping the population but were in pursuit of the material and strategic interests of US and Australian imperialism.

"The only way to put an end to war was to put an end to the profit system that was the root cause," Holt explained. "This required the building a mass revolutionary party on the basis of a socialist program to reorganise society to meet need not profit".

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Authorised by N. Beams, 307 Macquarie St, Liverpool, NSW 2170



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