

SEP candidate for Parramatta discusses urban infrastructure crisis

Chris Gordon
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The following is the edited text of a speech delivered by Socialist Equality Party candidate Chris Gordon at a public meeting last Sunday in his electorate of Parramatta in western Sydney. Gordon, who is a university mathematics teacher, concentrated on the crisis of public housing, transport and other infrastructure in the working class suburbs of Sydney's west.

The meeting in Parramatta was addressed by Gordon and SEP national WSWs editor Peter Symonds. The reports led to an animated discussion among the workers and young people present about housing and interest rates. Further questions were asked about the significance of a recent discussion in Germany about the benefits of dictatorship, the dangers of a further economic meltdown and the SEP's answer to sovereign debt. The final meetings of the SEP's election campaign will be held in Melbourne and Sydney respectively on Wednesday, August 18 and Thursday, August 19. Details, as well as further extensive election coverage, can be found [here](#).

I want to focus my report today on the crisis of infrastructure facing working people in major cities and to outline the program advanced by the Socialist Equality Party to resolve these mounting problems. Our program—a socialist program—stands in diametric opposition to the retrograde agenda of “sustainable population” being promoted by Labor, Liberal and the Greens.

It is a hallmark of a bankrupt social order that it blames people for the problems it causes. The issue is not “sustainable population”, but the unsustainability of the profit system and its fundamental incapacity to deal with the complexities of a mass society.

Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard used a conference in western Sydney on July 20 to promote the theme of “sustainable population”. “Can we really ask Western Sydney to keep absorbing hundreds and hundreds of thousands of people without regard for the key issue of quality of life?” she asked. “How many more people can fit onto the sardine express to Central, Town Hall or Wynyard [train stations]? And on our motorways and roads?... [H]urtling towards a big Australia is not only undesirable, it's irresponsible.”

In the first place, what Gillard was really advancing was a form of Australian exceptionalism. She is suggesting that

somehow Australia can be made “sustainable” on a national basis, if only the right controls and regulations—including racist immigration restrictions—are put in place. This is a reactionary fantasy. The problems that confront the working class in Australia and in western Sydney are a direct product of the contradictions of global capitalism, which have produced a deepening world financial crisis that will directly determine the policies and program of whichever government takes office on August 21.

Gillard's speech was completely cynical. After all, it is successive Labor and Liberal governments that are directly responsible for the decay of basic infrastructure, including transport, and the massive cost-of-living pressures confronting so many households. It was the Hawke and Keating Labor governments that began the process in the 1980s of slashing public spending for hospitals, schools, roads and public transport, as they cut corporate and personal income tax rates for the ultra-rich. Under Labor in the 1980s, the greatest income redistribution in Australian history took place from the poor to the rich—a process that has continued unabated during the three decades since.

The legacy of these measures can be seen in Parramatta and throughout western Sydney, where workers live with the daily pressures, stress and frustrations of congested roads, rundown or non-existent public transport, a severe shortage of affordable housing and woefully under-resourced hospitals and schools.

A report published last year by Alex Gooding, former executive director of the Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils, pointed to chronic under-funding. Since the late 1990s, investment in additional public transport infrastructure in Western Sydney has been less than \$1 billion. This compares with the more than \$3 billion spent in eastern Sydney on major rail links over the same period. Sydney is increasingly being divided into two cities: the east, which is relatively well-served by trains, buses, trams, and ferries, and the greater west, which relies principally on cars, with many families having to run 2, 3 or even 4 cars to get everyone to and from work and school each day.

Long commuting times have become a fact of life. With a minimum travel time of 1 hour each way to work, this accumulates over a year to at least 12 full working weeks. Over

a 40-year working life, the figure is 20,000 hours, or 500 weeks stuck in traffic! Of course many people spend double that time.

The major arterial motorways built over the past decade have all been financed by the private sector—they are not freeways, but tollways. The Western Sydney Orbital is being constructed by a consortium known as WestLink, which is made up of Macquarie Bank and Leighton Construction. The problems with these tollways are legion, as evidenced by the daily peak-hour gridlock across Sydney. Their primary concern is not urban planning and the interests of commuters and residents, but rather the pursuit of profit and the ongoing milking of commuters.

There is a chronic shortage of affordable housing throughout western Sydney. A Housing Industry Association report earlier this year found that nationally, the demand for houses exceeded supply by 178,000, and that, based on current building trends, the gap would increase to 308,000 by 2014. For many, the houses that are available are simply unaffordable. Data released in July by Bankwest showed that for first home buyers, the average deposit for a home in Sydney is \$128,200. The time taken to save for the deposit has risen by 12 months in the past year alone, and now stands at an average of six years.

The situation in public housing is diabolical. Under the Howard government, \$3 billion was slashed from funding for public housing, which has not been restored by the Labor government. The waiting list stands at 233,000 applicants. In addition, Labor has now decided to hand over public housing to private developers, meaning residents will be forcibly removed from their communities.

Those who do own their home also face serious difficulty. Around 40 percent of the 225,000 first home buyers who entered the market after late 2008 are now suffering mortgage stress. More than 30,000 defaults are expected this year. Many who manage to hold onto their homes only do so by cutting expenditure on other basic necessities. A report released last month revealed that some people in Sydney's western suburbs reduced the amount they ate so they could meet their repayments. The Australian housing market has been described as a "time bomb", with house prices at least 42 percent above the long-term trend. When the bubble bursts, hundreds of thousands of people will be left owing more than their homes are worth.

The doctrine of "sustainable population" is being advanced by Liberal, Labor and the Greens to deflect attention from the real problems confronting society. It is a thinly-veiled attempt to scapegoat refugees and immigrants for the problems of failing infrastructure and lack of housing, and to set working people against one another. In this campaign, both major parties are drawing deeply from the reactionary traditions of the White Australia policy as they invoke the need for "border protection".

In its fight for the international unification of the working class, the SEP defends the basic right of workers and youth to

live, work and study anywhere they choose, with full citizenship rights. We defend the unconditional right of refugees to asylum and demand their immediate release from detention centres. The social crisis in Australia's major urban centres is not due to overpopulation or refugees, but to systematic government underfunding and to the privatisation of public infrastructure.

The SEP is advancing a socialist program to resolve the crisis of infrastructure in the cities as well as in regional and rural areas. The accumulated wealth created by the working class must be directed to meeting the pressing social needs of the majority. The banks and giant financial institutions must be expropriated, with full protection to small depositors, and placed under public ownership, democratically controlled by the working class. Likewise the major corporations—including telecommunications, energy, mining and agriculture—must be nationalised and subjected to public ownership and democratic control. Only when social need, not private profit, becomes the organising principle of production and all aspects of social life, will the extraordinary human and technical resources that are now available be utilised to provide a decent living standard and safe environment for all.

The SEP insists that this program cannot be carried out through parliament, but only through the development of an independent mass political movement of the working class, in Australia and internationally, to put an end to the profit system and establish a world-planned socialist economy. To fight for this program a new party of the working class must be built. That party is the Socialist Equality Party, and I urge workers and young people to study the SEP's program, join our campaign and build the SEP as the new mass party of the working class.

Click here for full coverage of the SEP 2010 election campaign

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