

SEP candidate Carolyn Kennett campaigns in Reid

Increasing social hardship in Sydney's west

Our correspondents
20 August 2010

The Socialist Equality Party's campaign in the seat of Reid, which covers Sydney's mid-western suburbs along the southern shore of the Parramatta River, has found widespread concerns about high unemployment, housing stress and rising inequality. The social reality throughout the electorate is a far cry from the claims of the Labor government and the media that Australia has avoided recession and "defied the gravity" of the global economic breakdown.

The SEP candidate, Carolyn Kennett, and party members and supporters have circulated thousands of copies of the SEP's election manifesto and discussed the party's program with workers and their families, newly-arrived immigrants and students at railway stations, shopping centres and technical colleges, and on doorknocks.

Reid is extraordinarily diverse, extending from better-off riverside suburbs such as Drummoyne and Chiswick in the east to some of the poorest areas in Sydney at the western end of the electorate, in Lidcombe and Auburn. The local government area of Auburn is officially ranked as the second most disadvantaged in the Sydney metropolitan area.

Auburn is home to many refugees and new immigrants, who are anxious over the attempts of both the Labor government and the Liberal opposition to demonise refugees and blame new arrivals for the deteriorating living conditions and inadequate public transport and other social infrastructure. Auburn has the highest proportion of people born overseas (53.2 percent) of any local council in the state of New South Wales and the highest percentage of new arrivals from refugee backgrounds. Between the 2001 and the 2006 census, its population increased by 16.4 percent, the fastest rate in western Sydney.

The overwhelming response to the official election campaign among broad sections of the community is that there is no difference between the major parties, and that neither has anything to offer ordinary working people. As one elderly woman from Homebush who met Carolyn Kennett on a doorknock said: "I wouldn't vote for either of them." Reflecting on the future, she added: "I'm worried about what is going to happen, I don't think it's going to be all that good."

Alex, a retired truck driver who had migrated from Yugoslavia in 1971, also told Kennett he did not want to vote for either Labor or Liberal. "It's not a democracy anymore in this country." He sarcastically denounced the Labor government's decision to raise the pension age to 67. "So, before you get the pension, you die! If you are a manual worker, you can't work that long. Your body's worn out."

Alex also expressed contempt for Labor's boast that it had relieved the pressure on pensioners by increasing their payments by about \$30 a week. He said he had not turned on his heater this winter because he could not afford it. The pension rise had been swallowed up by price increases. "What they give you they take back," he commented.

Many of the people who have spoken to the SEP have expressed discontent about unemployment and the rising cost of living. According to 2006 census data, more than 25 percent of households in Auburn had incomes of less than \$500 per week, compared to a Sydney-wide average of 16.2 percent. More than 60 percent of Auburn workers earn less than \$1,000 a week.

In these areas, decades of real wage reduction and destruction of permanency and other working conditions

has been followed by two years of slump since the global financial crisis broke out in 2008. Auburn has one of the highest official unemployment rates in the greater Sydney region, standing at 11.5 percent in March 2010, a rise of 2.4 percentage points since March 2009.

Kennett met a young father who recently lost his job, despite having tertiary qualifications from Macquarie University. With a wife, children and a mortgage he could not afford to work for less than \$750 per week. The repayments on a 30-year mortgage for a median-priced unit in Auburn are \$380 per week. He was making ends meet by driving a taxi, a job that frequently involves 12-hour shifts, with the night shift starting at either 3 pm or 4 pm.

The run-down state of public education is another major issue in the electorate. Bhagya, a worker and mother of two, spoke to SEP members campaigning at the Auburn shopping centre. With an 11-year-old child about to start high school, she was worried about the lack of spending on public education. In her view, young people's potential was not encouraged or developed if they missed out on a place at a selective school and their parents could not afford private education.

Since the mid-1970s, government spending on public schools in Australia has halved as a proportion of GDP, from 5.9 percent to 2.7 percent, while both Labor and Liberal governments have poured record amounts of public money into the private school system. Labor won office in 2007 promising an "education revolution" to supposedly overcome years of chronic under-funding. In reality, the standardised NAPLAN testing and MySchool web site pursued by Gillard, first as education minister, then prime minister, have accelerated the breakup of public education by naming and shaming "under-performing" schools and putting pressure on parents to transfer their children to private schools.

The lack of affordable housing was also of concern to Bhagya. "We don't want anything special," she commented. "I'm not talking about a villa, just a two-bedroom apartment. The rents keep going up but our income doesn't." The median rent for units in Auburn, one of the cheapest areas in Sydney, is \$280 per week—almost 40 percent of the median household income for NSW. Households are considered to be in housing stress if they spend more than 30 percent of their

disposable income on housing.

Bhagya spoke of the difficulties that she and her friends have had finding work. She has a job that does not use her professional qualifications and it takes her one and a half hours to get to work by public transport. She complained that when migrants arrive they cannot find jobs, either because their qualifications are not recognised or employers demand Australian experience.

Omar and Nader, two young engineers from New Zealand visiting relatives in Auburn, told Kennett that the situation they faced at home was similar. "We need someone that's going to represent the average person and the average person is the majority of people," Omar said. "And the average person is not a millionaire. In New Zealand you are lucky to have a job, but if you do, you'll do anything to keep it, no matter how badly you are treated, because you're not going to get another one any time soon."

Omar said the ousting of Kevin Rudd as prime minister to make way for Julia Gillard was "undemocratic". He commented: "I think it all went wrong for Rudd when he started talking about the mining tax. Now, the mining companies are huge and they didn't want such a thing. I think they had a hand in the ousting of Rudd. Not too long after this he was gone."

As the SEP explained in its election statement, the problems of workers in Australia—economic insecurity, declining living standards, attacks on democratic rights, the threat of war and environmental degradation—are essentially the same as those facing workers in every part of the world and require a unified struggle for a socialist solution.

Click here for full coverage of the SEP 2010 election campaign

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