

SEP candidate speaks on the Afghan war

James Cogan
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The following is the text of the speech delivered by Socialist Equality Party candidate James Cogan to a public meeting on August 5 in his electorate of Grayndler in inner-western Sydney. Cogan, the SEP's national organiser, concentrated on the issues of militarism and the neo-colonial US-led war in Afghanistan. The meeting was also addressed by Nick Beams, SEP national secretary and candidate for the senate in New South Wales.

The audience was a microcosm of the working class in the inner-west of Sydney: young workers employed on casual rates in the fast food and manufacturing industries; students from the University of Sydney and University of New South Wales; teachers and other professionals; and older workers who have become deeply disaffected from the Labor Party.

The speeches by Cogan and Beams were followed by more than an hour of lively discussion between the candidates and the audience. Questions were raised on the fate of the 1917 Russian Revolution, why the SEP did not carry out protest actions to gain media attention and whether the working class could be won to socialism. The audience responded enthusiastically to the discussion, with many taking boxes of the SEP's election statement to letter-box around the electorate.

The meeting in Grayndler is part of a series organised by the SEP prior to the August 21 election. Meeting details as well as extensive election coverage can be found [here](#).

I am very proud to once again represent the Socialist Equality Party in this election, and very proud to be standing in the seat of Grayndler, an area of Sydney where the SEP has a long history, going back to its very formation as the Australian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International in 1972.

As the chairman referred to in his opening remarks, this election is taking place in the wake of the global financial meltdown in 2008. It takes place under conditions where a massive assault is underway against the living standards of the working class across Europe, in Japan and in the US to pay for the trillions of dollars that were handed over to bailout the banks, the hedge funds and other speculators.

It takes place amid undeniable signs that even greater economic and social shocks and convulsions are on the agenda that will shatter the claims that Australia is somehow immune from the greatest crisis and failure of the capitalist system since the 1930s.

The reality is that world economy and world politics are shaping and determining the policy agenda and actions of all the parties contesting this election, whether they care to admit it or not and however consciously they attempt to prevent it being discussed. Every party has had to respond to a rapidly changing situation, according to the class interests they defend.

The SEP is standing in the election to defend and put forward the independent interests of the working class. We have made in our statement a clear analysis of the international and national context within which the election is taking place and advanced a socialist program against the profit system: to eradicate poverty and massively raise living standards, provide free, high quality education and health care, develop

urgently needed social infrastructure, guarantee democratic rights and put an end to militarism and colonial oppression.

We are explaining that this perspective cannot be carried out through parliament, but only through the development of an independent mass political movement of the working class aimed at the complete reorganisation of society on a world scale in the interests of the majority, not the wealthy few.

As we state in our manifesto, we want the largest possible vote for our candidates. "But the central focus of our campaign is to present ideas and analyses, and to fight for a program. Our campaign is oriented beyond this election, because the working class must prepare for immense political struggles outside the stultifying framework of the two-party system and parliament, which cannot be pressured or reformed to meet its needs."

All our opponents for the seat of Grayndler represent and serve utterly opposed class interests—those of the minority, those of the capitalist financial and corporate elite.

The Labor Party acted on June 24 to remove Kevin Rudd as prime minister at their behest. Big business, through the media, has been demanding, since the beginning of the year, that the government end the stimulus spending it implemented in 2008-2009 and turn to an aggressive program of budget austerity that guarantees surpluses and lowers costs.

The purpose of the coup against Rudd can be seen in the policies outlined by Gillard in the weeks since: the scrapping of the resource super profits tax; her commitment to balance the budget by "unpopular cutbacks" and her declaration that she will specifically target for efficiencies and cost-savings the areas of education, health care, aged care and child care. She has made clear Labor's readiness to ruthlessly confront and suppress the inevitable opposition from the working class. During the election debate she boasted of "staring down" teachers who were opposed to the reactionary system of performance testing, NAPLAN and the MySchool website, that she pushed through as Rudd's education minister.

Gillard has also defined her government as one of war and militarism, voicing her unconditional support for the US alliance, an indefinite commitment of Australian troops to the war in Afghanistan and joining with Washington to increase sanctions and threats against Iran.

The virtual silence on the war in Afghanistan—which is opposed by the majority of the Australian population—is a striking feature of this election, and a matter I want to spend some time discussing. Contributing to the development of a socialist opposition to militarism through the *World Socialist Web Site* has been a focus of my political work over the past nine years, since the US-led invasion of Afghanistan and the subsequent criminal wars in both that country and Iraq.

Labor and Liberal, both equally committed to the war, do not want to talk about Afghanistan.

Likewise, the Greens have pushed the war into the background to try and avoid causing any problems for Labor, with which they have made a sordid preference deal and are looking to form a de-facto coalition government as they have done at the state level in Tasmania.

The Socialist Equality Party completely opposes the war in Afghanistan. It is not a war against terrorism, or to bring democracy to the Afghan

people, or to save Afghan women from the medieval social attitudes of the Taliban.

The United States invaded Afghanistan in October 2001 in order to transform the country into a strategic base for the efforts of the American corporate elite to dominate over the rich natural resources of Central Asia—in competition with its main rivals in the region, China and Russia. Afghanistan itself lies above an estimated one trillion dollars of untapped deposits of minerals such as iron, copper and gold. The surrounding states lie above massive reserves of oil and natural gas that are exceeded only by those in the Middle East.

Long before 2001, US strategists had been discussing and plotting how to engineer a military intervention into both the Middle East and Central Asia. The events of September 11, and the presence of Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, were used as the pretext to invade. Immediately, the campaign was launched to fabricate the claim that Iraq was seeking to acquire “weapons of mass destruction” and prepare for invasion of that long-suffering country in March 2003.

Over the past nine years in Afghanistan, tens of thousands of innocent civilians, along with thousands of Afghan resistance fighters, have been slaughtered for an imperialist, predatory agenda. Close to 2,000 American and foreign troops have also lost their lives for this reactionary cause, including 17 Australian soldiers.

It is highly significant that Gillard and Labor have not raised as a political point the fact that Tony Abbott declared earlier this year that a coalition government would be willing to send more Australian troops to Afghanistan. It strongly suggests that behind-the-scenes Labor is preparing to do exactly the same.

Indeed, as we have noted on the WSWS, Afghanistan may well have been one of the factors in why Rudd was ousted.

The Obama administration had become increasingly frustrated with Kevin Rudd over his refusal to contribute to the so-called “surge” that was announced last December. There were allegedly sharp exchanges between US and Australian military heads and now unconfirmed claims that relations between Obama and Rudd had become poisoned—with no explanation, as yet, as to why.

What we do know is that on June 23, in response to the death of three more Australian soldiers and fearful of a further decline in Labor’s opinion poll ratings, Rudd’s defence minister, John Faulkner, announced that the Rudd government would look to withdraw Australian troops from Afghanistan within two to four years. Just hours after this announcement, the coup against Rudd went into motion.

The obvious question is: what role did Washington and the US embassy play in bringing on the coup? Within days of Rudd’s ousting, Faulkner had announced he was resigning as defence minister, allegedly due to his concerns over the Afghan war. And Gillard had repudiated any timetable for withdrawal, declaring in a newspaper comment that “bringing home our troops cannot be to a pre-set timetable” and that Labor “will remain steadfast to the mission we have set ourselves in Afghanistan”.

I would like to dwell for a moment on what is the Australian mission in Afghanistan.

The most significant component of the 1,550 Australian troops in Afghanistan is a special forces taskforce made of Special Air Service troopers and Army commandos. To put it as bluntly as possible, they operate as death squads. Their task is to assassinate or sometimes capture alleged Taliban fighters, commanders, financiers and political leaders. At other times, their mission is to locate alleged Taliban hide-outs or bases and direct air strikes or ground artillery against them. They are so proficient at their murderous job that US commanders specifically requested that they be made available for the offensive currently being conducted in the Taliban stronghold of Kandahar.

Australian forces are responsible for an unknown number, but certainly hundreds, of deaths, including of numerous civilians when they were

mistaken for Taliban, and airstrikes were called in against their villages, homes or vehicles.

After nine years of slaughter, the entire US-led war in Afghanistan is in deep crisis. To prevail over a growing insurgency, fueled by the legitimate hatred of the occupation army and its puppet government by the population, the Obama administration is being driven by the logic of its predatory aims to send even more troops and to demand its allies do the same.

If more Australian troops are sent, they will most likely be frontline infantry, that have not been sent into a major war since Vietnam. Former army general Jim Molan has repeatedly voiced the view of sections of the military and Washington that Australia should deploy an entire battle-group of 4,000 to 5,000 troops to replace the Dutch troops being withdrawn from the southern province of Uruzgan, where an Australian engineering unit is currently operating.

Labor and Liberal have Australian soldiers killing and dying in Afghanistan as a *quid pro quo* for the US alliance. In the South Pacific region, the Australian government and corporate interests depend on Washington’s backing to dominate over the Pacific Island states like Papua New Guinea, East Timor and the Solomon Islands. Numerous flashpoints are emerging in this region as a result of the growth of China’s geo-political and economic influence, over countries such as Fiji for example. The coming period may well see open confrontations and further US-backed interventions by the Australian military to shore up Australian and US domination in the region.

The working class has no interest in and must actively oppose the imperialist struggle to dominate markets, resources and profits—whether in Iraq and Afghanistan or in the Asia Pacific region.

The SEP stands for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all Australian military and police personnel and other foreign forces from Iraq, Afghanistan, East Timor, and the countries of the South Pacific. We advocate paying compensation to the victims of Australian war crimes, and insist that those responsible, including political leaders of both the Liberal and Labor parties, face war crimes’ trials. We stand for the repudiation of the ANZUS Treaty with US imperialism, the closure of all US military facilities in Australia, including Pine Gap, and the ending of all Australian intelligence operations against the peoples of the Asia-Pacific region and at home.

We advocate the establishment of a workers’ government, which will implement a socialist foreign policy and use the vast resources available to assist the people of this region end the terrible poverty and deprivation they endure.

The transparent imperialist nature of the Labor government’s foreign policy underscores the reactionary character of the attempts of the Greens and the pseudo-left Socialist Alliance to portray Labor as a “lesser evil” to the Liberals. They are promoting as a “better option” for the working class a party that is committed to the killing and colonial oppression of peoples in this region and around the world for the benefit of Australian-based banks and corporations.

Two of the major mining companies in whose interests the Labor Party ousted Rudd—BHP-Billiton and Rio Tinto—are among the giant corporations lining up to take a stake of Afghanistan’s mineral wealth, if the US military ultimately manages to drown Afghan resistance in blood.

In Iraq, Australian corporations have profited from the slaughter of over one million Iraqis with agricultural, security and construction contracts.

The fraud of the claims by the Greens and Socialist Alliance to be opposed to imperialism is exposed most clearly by the fact that they both supported the dispatch of Australian troops to East Timor in 1999 to ensure that the oil and gas in the Timor Sea remained under the control of Australian and US corporate interests.

To conclude my remarks, I want to restate why we are standing. It is to build the SEP as the new political leadership and party of the working

class. The development of the SEP is the only basis on which a struggle can be developed against austerity and militarism and for social equality and democratic rights.

I joined the International Committee of the Fourth International in 1991, after the first Gulf war, recognising then that it was the only movement that advanced a genuine solution to inequality and the threat of war. The future will only be guaranteed by the unity of the international working class and the achievement of world socialism.

I urge you to participate in our campaign, help letter-box our statement, come to our committee meeting at our office in Marrickville next Wednesday, help us on polling day hand out how-to-votes, vote SEP in Grayndler and for the Senate and above all, seriously study our perspective, read our Statement of Principles, and if you agree, apply to become a member of the SEP.

Click here for full coverage of the SEP 2010 election campaign

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