

SEP candidate campaigns at Newcastle university

Terry Cook
6 August 2010

Socialist Equality Party candidate Noel Holt campaigned at the University of Newcastle this week. He had been invited to address a meeting organised by the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) to discuss the SEP policies in the 2010 federal election in opposition to war, growing social hardship and the threat of environmental disasters.

The campus with its 20,000 students is located on the edge of the Newcastle electorate. The city of Newcastle, to the north of Sydney, was once a thriving industrial centre that included manufacturing, shipbuilding and steel production providing jobs, apprenticeships and training for young people.

Over the past two decades these industries have been largely eliminated, along with many thousands of jobs, as result of the policies of Labor and Liberal governments. The closure of the BHP steel plant was the outcome of a steel plan drawn up in the 1980s by the Hawke-Keating Labor government. At its peak, the plant provided 30,000 jobs. Its closure helped push the unemployment rate to a peak of 16 percent in the mid-1990s—4 percent above the average for the state of New South Wales.

The June labour force statistics show unemployment across the Newcastle region at 4.9 percent. Official figures, however, only serve to cover up the real situation. In line with long-term national trends, thousands of better-paying full-time jobs have been replaced with low-paid, part-time and casual employment mainly in the hospitality, retail and fast food sectors. Students are often forced to take such jobs because of inadequate government allowances.

Many students told the SEP campaign team they were unable to meet the high cost of accommodation on campus and had to move into privately rented accommodation. Some said they are paying as much as \$150 a week for a small room in a modest house. Overseas students are denied access

to student concession fares on public transport—a blatantly discriminatory measure—and as a result many are forced to find accommodation close to the university and end up paying exorbitant rents.

Addressing the ISSE meeting, Holt explained that the removal of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd through a political coup backed by the giant mining companies and other sections of the corporate and financial elite “had punctured the façade of parliamentary democracy and given millions of people a glimpse of dictatorship”.

“Whichever government comes to power after the August 21 election, Labor or Liberal, it will carry out the dictates of big business to slash spending on education, health and aged care and social programs and to attack wages, jobs and working conditions to load the cost of the global crisis onto working people,” Holt said.

Holt also warned about the danger of escalating military conflicts that would increasingly see youth dragooned into service and sent to kill and be killed to defend the interests of the ruling class. He condemned Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s continued support for the criminal US war in Afghanistan.

Holt’s comments led to a number of questions and a discussion over a range of issues. After the meeting and during the campaign, students spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about their concerns.

Allan, an education student, said he was highly disturbed by the growing gulf between rich and poor. “I am very frustrated not just about the levels of social inequality in Australia but in the world generally. Nothing is done by any of the governments to reduce the levels of poverty and the levels of suffering. I think that around 25,000 children die every day because of poverty and preventable causes.

“I think that fighting to rid the world of social inequality is the greatest goal that can be set. But in this election I do not see that any of the major parties have any program or intention to contribute to this. I find it immensely disturbing that there is only a choice of two parties and neither of them even remotely represent what I desire to be done.”

On the issue of war, Allan said: “I find it troubling that Australian governments have followed the US and supported the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The United States has been far from a world leader as defenders of peoples’ rights for years, even over the last 10 years, it has been responsible for countless atrocities. It has a massive military arsenal including nuclear weapons and has shown it will use them. We need to ask—is that the lead we should be following?”

“I think it is also worth noting that besides launching wars over oil and other material interests, US corporations make huge profits out of weapons and war materials. The US is still one of the biggest arm dealers in the world.”

Asked about socialism, Allan said “It is something new to me and I need to know more about it. However, the claim that capitalism works is fair enough, but it only works for a very few people who are at the top. How did they get their enormous wealth—by exploiting those at the bottom and in particular people in underdeveloped nations. This has to change.”

Candace Wellington said that neither Prime Minister Julia Gillard nor opposition leader Tony Abbott had anything to say on the issues that concern ordinary people.

“If you take the issue of climate change, that is a real concern especially for young people, yet neither of the major parties has any policy to do anything meaningful about it, despite the urgency. The excuse they use that they will not do anything until some other countries do something is self-reinforcing and simple means nothing is going to get done. The real truth is they will not act because it might affect the profits of big corporations such as the coal companies that are major contributors to pollution and green house gases.”

Speaking about university education, Candice commented: “What shocked me when I came to university is just how commercially run the whole thing is. Everything is designed to make money. I believed that university was about education and gaining knowledge but everything is about making the institution run profitably. Fees are high and students end up with HECS debts and overseas students have to pay fees up front. I truly believe that education should be

free and available to everyone. It is a basic right.”

Candace also condemned the policies of the Labor and Liberal parties on refugees. “This is a major issue for me,” she said. “I do not agree with the so-called border protection policy of the two main parties. I personally think if people flee their countries and risk their lives to get on small leaky boats to come here then obviously they were facing extremely serious conditions at home. Uprooting yourself and leaving your home, relatives and friends is not something you do lightly. The major reasons for them leaving are war, other forms of repression, lack of food and poverty. Border protection and attacks on refugees are being raised again to distract from the real issues in this election just like Howard did with the Tampa issue. It should be rejected.”

Joan, a social science student, said she never liked Kevin Rudd but was shocked by the way he was removed and replaced by Julia Gillard.

“It says a lot about democracy and elections,” she explained. “It’s not the people who decide who is prime minister but the big mining companies. I am absolutely outraged by this election campaign. They think they can treat people like idiots. Gillard says she is taking over her campaign and moving off script and now we will see the real Julia Gillard. In other words, the first attempt has failed so now we get new spin.

“The reason this is happening is because neither Gillard nor Abbott want to talk about real issues like unemployment, homelessness, rising prices, the lack of social services ... because they do not have any answers to them. We have seen how they both agree with the intervention into indigenous communities in the Northern Territory that had nothing to do with fixing the problems there. The truth is both parties are the same and are only interested in looking after big business.”

Click here for full coverage of the SEP 2010 election campaign

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



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact