

SEP candidate for Swan speaks on health care

Joe Lopez
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Joe Lopez, the Socialist Equality Party's candidate in the Western Australian electorate of Swan, addressed an SEP public meeting last Sunday held at the Victoria Park Centre for the Arts. In attendance were building workers, teachers, students, health workers, IT professionals and young people, some of whom were met during the election campaign.

Lopez, a health worker for the past 20 years and SEP member since 1984, focussed his remarks on the crisis in the public health system and the myth of general prosperity as a result of the mining boom in Western Australia. Patrick O'Connor, the SEP's candidate for the Senate in Victoria, also spoke. An animated discussion followed the two reports. Questions included what policies the SEP would advance if its candidates were elected to parliament, on the crisis of the global economy and the state of China's industrial expansion, the impact of austerity measures in Europe, how the SEP guards against political degeneration, and what a socialist society would look like.

SEP members and supporters in Perth have campaigned widely throughout the south eastern metropolitan electorate of Swan, including at local shopping centres, growers markets, railway stations, Curtin University, high schools and colleges, as well as at the Royal Perth Hospital in central Perth. More than 12,000 election statements have been letterboxed or distributed in campaigns in predominantly working class suburbs including Belmont, Rivervale, Lynwood, Ferndale, Langford, Beckenham, Queens Park, Cannington and Victoria Park where many young people and international students also reside.

Swan contains pockets of light industry, the Curtin University of Technology campus and the Perth domestic airport. The working class areas in the electorate's east have a high percentage of state housing and many Aboriginal families together with a high concentration of recently arrived migrants. On August 10 Lopez received a warm response at Noongar Radio 100.9FM, a community-based Aboriginal radio network. He was interviewed about the SEP's perspective and campaign by morning show presenter Jeff Michael.

The following is an edited version of Lopez's speech:

The public health system across the nation is in crisis after decades of chronic underfunding, under staffing and the ever-increasing opening up by government of this sector to private

profit operators.

In 1983, Australia had a population of just over 14,600,000. At the time, the number of public hospital beds nationally stood at around 74,000. Now the population in 2010 is just over 22,423,000 and the number of public hospital beds has been slashed to just 54,000. Taking population growth into account, this represents a 60 percent reduction from 4.8 acute beds per 1,000 people to just 2.5 beds per thousand.

These figures come from the federal Labor government's own report by the National Health and Hospital Reform Commission, which also revealed that an estimated 4,550 patients die each year in public hospitals due to "avoidable adverse events"—that is, the equivalent of 13 jumbo jets crashing and killing all on board.

How does this slashing of beds and chronic underfunding and under resourcing manifest in every day life? It reveals itself in the growing surgery waiting lists, on which many patients wait for months and even years for much-needed treatment, and in the overcrowding of accident and emergency departments.

Working in the public health system, I have seen the steady erosion of full time jobs, being more and more replaced by short-term contracts and the casualisation of the workforce. An ever-increasing proliferation of private nursing agencies has taken advantage of staff shortages to provide nurse and allied health workers for huge fees. Frustration and anger grows constantly among staff, patients and their relatives over the limitations of the public health system. Staff turnover is becoming a big problem, which is not conducive to quality care, particularly in specialised health areas.

The public health system is being deliberately run down as part of overall cuts to government spending to provide tax cuts to the corporate sector. Health care along with all aspects of social life are being opened up to private profit making. This is now the policy of the ruling class all over the world to maximise the "international competitiveness" and profits of the corporate elites.

The Labor government has already foreshadowed further

inroads into public health and social services. Prime Minister Julia Gillard spelt this out at a National Press Club address where she pledged to deliver further pro-business reforms in sectors where corporations have had restricted access. Gillard called for “renewal and reform” in those sectors “that were relatively untouched by the Hawke-Keating reforms, sectors like health and education that meet essential public needs”. Across hospitals, aged care centres, schools and employment services, she said, “the challenge is not whether to combine public and private resources in these essential sectors but how best to do it”.

In other words, under Gillard, no aspect of social and economic life will be immune from the full force of the profit system and the market. The whole meaning of the term “reform” has changed over the past three decades. As SEP national secretary Nick Beams explained in a recent article: “Previously ‘reform’ referred to policies that raised the living standards of the general population—a universal health care system and free university, for example, were two key policies initiated by Whitlam. Today, like Orwell’s ‘war is peace’ slogan, economic reform signifies the ever greater subordination of social life to the dictates of the capitalist market—resulting in the scrapping of social advances, privatisation and insisting that the principle of ‘user pays’ for what were once guaranteed social services.”

The Labor government’s latest health reform involves a mechanism for a new centralised hospital and primary care system featuring an activity-based (casemix) funding system. Under this scheme, which is outlined in the government’s National Health and Hospital Network Plan, hospitals will be funded according to pre-determined “efficient” prices for procedures and services they provide. Once in place, these mechanisms will be used to ram through an unprecedented assault on the public health system as part of the Labor government’s austerity drive and to open up the sector to further tendering, contracting and privatisation. The health plan provides for no extra beds and sets no targets for reducing waiting times.

Ensuring the provision of the most basic social necessities for everyone, including hospitals and health services, has become a revolutionary issue. It involves nothing less than the complete reorganisation of society from top to bottom, ending the domination of private profit and replacing it with a social system in which top priority is given to the satisfaction of human needs.

Finally, I want to touch on the government’s claim that Australia has somehow avoided the global financial crisis and the associated myth that the boom in mineral exports to China has benefitted everyone. As we explain in our election

statement, the China boom rests on extremely shaky foundations—massive government stimulus measures and a huge expansion of bank credit. Any slowdown in China, let alone a major economic crisis, would have an immediate impact on the Australian economy threatening to plunge it into recession and worse. Given that the Chinese economy is dependent on demand in the United States and Europe, a Chinese economic contraction is not a matter of if, but when.

The reality for people living in the so-called boom states of Western Australia and Queensland is that a narrow layer has and is profiting from mineral exports. Mining executives and others in the industry are amassing enormous personal fortunes while the working class has been hit with sharply higher costs of living, in particular in recent months staggering hikes in electricity, water and gas charges.

The Western Australian Council of Social Services (WACOSS) last year released a “Cost of Living” report that found between 2007 and 2009 the average cost of living rose by \$105 or 17.7 percent, while average incomes had only increased by \$41 or 5.1 percent. Welfare agencies and charities are seeing record numbers of families and individuals seeking assistance and are being overwhelmed by the demand. The state’s housing waiting list has reached record levels at 24,000 as many families cannot afford rising rents and housing prices.

The record budget surpluses enjoyed by the state and federal governments have not gone to improve and expand social services and raise the living standards of the general population, but into infrastructure for the mining companies, paying back state debt and tax cuts for business.

As part of its socialist program, the SEP calls for the major multi-billion dollar corporations—including mining, energy, telecommunications, agricultural companies along with the banks and giant financial institutions—to be nationalised under the democratic control of the working class. Only in this way can the resources be provided to eliminate poverty and meet the social needs of the Australian and world population.

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