

SEP candidate exposes hypocrisy of Labor and the Greens at election forum

Our correspondents
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Richard Phillips, the Socialist Equality Party candidate for Bankstown in the March 26 New South Wales state election, spoke at a lively candidates' forum in the western Sydney suburb on Wednesday night, cutting through the fraud and hypocrisy of the Labor Party and Greens. About 80 people, many of them from Middle Eastern and other immigrant backgrounds, attended the event, hosted by a local newspaper, the *Canterbury-Bankstown Express*.

Hostility toward the Labor Party—which has held the seat for decades—erupted throughout the meeting, particularly over its notorious ties to property developers, failure to provide decent rail, hospital and other basic services, and the high levels of youth unemployment in the area, which exceeds 25 percent. The derision that greeted Labor's candidate, local mayor Tania Mihailuk, was a revealing display of the collapse of Labor's support in the working class.

Once a major industrial centre, Bankstown has been devastated by closures and job downsizing over the past three decades, at the hands of consecutive Labor and Liberal governments, state and federal alike. Household income is among the lowest in Australia—recent figures indicate that over 30 percent of families in the area attempt to survive on less than \$650 per week.

The five candidates present at the forum—Phillips, Mihailuk, the Greens' Malikeh Michels and two Independents, Rebecca Kay and Edmond Taouk—were each allocated three minutes to make an opening statement, to be followed by questions from the floor.

Phillips began his initial contribution by stating that the SEP was the Australian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement. He warned that the election was a sham because none of the essential issues confronting

working people and the youth were being discussed by Labor, Liberal or the Greens, all of which defended big business and the profit system.

Phillips explained that the political program of the next government, whichever took office, had already been determined by the banks and the financial aristocracy, and it would work hand in hand with the federal Gillard Labor government to impose its program of budget slashing and austerity measures.

The SEP candidate said that following the greatest financial breakdown of world capitalism since the 1930s, revolutionary upsurges had begun in Tunisia and Egypt and were now reverberating throughout the Middle East and internationally. In the US, starting in the state of Wisconsin, as well as in Europe, mass opposition was emerging to brutal cuts to jobs, wages and social spending.

Phillips said: “The eruption of class struggles on this scale will emerge in Australia, where the extent of social inequality and political disaffection parallels the situation internationally. For three decades, successive Labor and Liberal governments, at both federal and state levels, have imposed a free-market agenda of deregulation, privatisation and tax cuts for companies and the wealthy.”

Phillips emphasised that the SEP was advancing a socialist program to fight for a unified international political movement of working people against these social attacks and the growing assault on democratic rights and the eruption of militarism and war.

The other candidates all sought to confine the debate to so-called local issues. For the Greens, Michels was at pains to elaborate her ties to Bankstown, stressing that she shopped in the area. At the same time, she demonstrated the Greens' backing for the NSW Labor government, saying she gave “credit” to Premier Kristina Keneally for ending developer donations to political parties—a suggestion that drew laughs.

A teacher asked the first question, about the high rate of youth joblessness, the lack of apprenticeships and the closures of factories. After the Greens and Labor candidates both paid lip service to these concerns, without offering any solutions, Phillips denounced their “breathtaking hypocrisy”. He pointed out that the Labor-Greens coalition government in the state of Tasmania had just announced budget cuts that threatened 2,300 public service jobs, and that in the mid-1990s the NSW Labor government had shut down the largest factory in the Bankstown area—the Chullora railway workshops. Phillips added that the state government and the Bankstown council, headed by Labor’s Mihailuk, were moving to shut down the HomeBass Youth Cafe drop-in centre for “at-risk” young people in Bankstown.

“Capitalism cannot provide young people with jobs and a decent future,” the SEP candidate explained. “We demand full-time, well paid employment and a living wage for all. No such policies will be legislated by Labor and the Greens. They must be fought for through a political struggle by the working class, independent of, and against, these entities.”

An SEP supporter asked each candidate to state where they stood on the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, which were seeking to secure US hegemony over the entire energy-rich and strategic region of the Middle East and Central Asia. Michels falsely asserted that the Greens opposed the wars, while Mihailuk refused to answer, whereupon the chairperson cut off the issue and proceeded to the next question, despite objections.

A question on public education elicited further confected claims of concern from the Greens and Labor. Phillips pointed out that the Greens were in an alliance with the Gillard government, which had launched an assault on public education via the NAPLAN testing and ranking system, which was driving cuts to schools in working class areas and would lead to school closures and the further privatisation of education.

Another SEP supporter challenged Mihailuk to explain why she represented a party that was full of property developers and dominated by faction bosses like the multi-millionaire Eddie Obeid and federal minister Mark Arbib, who, as the WikiLeaks cables had documented, reported directly to the US embassy. How different, she asked, was this apparatus to Hosni Mubarak’s regime in Egypt.

Mihailuk responded by saying she did not represent the Labor Party, only herself, “a person with good values ... I don’t associate with the people you mention.” Apart from the fact that Mihailuk, like all Labor candidates, was

selected by the faction heavyweights, her reply was in keeping with Labor’s campaign strategy of seeking to retain at least some seats by presenting its candidates as “locals” and avoiding mention of the damaged Labor “brand” as far as possible.

Phillips commented: “In Labor’s campaign, all its candidates are trying to disguise their party affiliation. Everyone must be clear: this party won’t change. It is a direct representative of the interests of big business—it has no fundamental differences with the Liberals. The working class has to build its own organisations—it needs a new political leadership and a new socialist perspective. If workers get sucked into the merry-go-round of Labor/Liberal/Greens governments, they are doomed.”

There was a final instructive line-up when the *Canterbury-Bankstown Express* newspaper’s editor, Joanne Vella, asked the candidates where they stood on “crime, community safety and police resources”. Michels, the Greens candidate, agreed that more policing was required—“yes, that’s important,” she volunteered—while suggesting that the police should not be aggressive and racist. Labor’s Mihailuk boasted that under Labor, Bankstown had become one of the largest police commands in the state, and “we need more and more resources”.

Phillips said the answer to the social problems confronting young people—the lack of decent jobs, educational opportunities and basic facilities—was not more police. There were calls of support from the audience as he pointed out that former Labor premier Bob Carr had vilified Lebanese youth in Bankstown and mobilised huge police operations against them. “Labor has promoted ‘law and order’ for 15 years, blaming the victims for the results of its own pro-business policies,” he said to loud applause.

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