NSW state election: SEP campaigners in Marrickville find growing distrust of Greens

An SEP reporting team
14 March 2011

Together with candidates in Auburn, Bankstown and Newcastle, the Socialist Equality Party is standing James Cogan for the electorate of Marrickville in the March 26 New South Wales (NSW) state election. Cogan is the SEP's national organiser and a correspondent for the *World Socialist Web Site*. In last year's federal election, he stood in the seat of Grayndler, the larger federal electorate based on Marrickville.

SEP members and supporters have distributed hundreds of the party's election statement at shopping centres, railway stations, the University of Sydney, which is within the electorate, and the University of New South Wales. Supporters are currently letterboxing copies of the statement in households throughout the electorate.

At the centre of the discussions held by SEP campaigners with workers and youth have been the revolutionary upheavals in Egypt and the Middle East, and the explosive class movements developing in Europe and the United States. Several have expressed agreement that the working class everywhere must develop an independent struggle, based on an international and socialist perspective, to win the fundamental social rights outlined in the SEP statement.

Last Thursday, Cogan used the opportunity of an interview on the "Workers Radio" morning show, broadcast on the community SkidRow radio station, to review the global processes behind the Egyptian revolution. Cogan answered questions from presenters and callers about the factors that would produce open class struggle in Australia, the growing social contradictions in China and the issues that have emerged in the struggles by American workers in Wisconsin. The task, he stressed, was to build and prepare the revolutionary party necessary to lead the working class to take political power into its own hands.

On Saturday morning, Charlie, a worker from China who migrated to Australia 10 years ago, talked with Cogan about the parallels between the inequality and repression that had produced the revolutionary upheavals across the Middle East, and conditions in China and Australia. He said: "I know why the people in Egypt are angry. It is because of the feeling for equality, the feeling that society is unfair. In China, only one party controls the resources of the whole country, so the people feel it is wrong. They want to get the same quality services and products as the rich people, but the government only serves the rich. If you are related to someone in the government, you have more opportunities to get wealth or get power. The people hate this.

"Here, in Australia, most of the money also goes to the rich. The prices are very high for the working class, especially property prices. People are under too much pressure."

Official statistics regarding incomes and unemployment in the Marrickville electorate disguise immense social problems, particularly in regard to accommodation. Housing prices, and along with them rents, in the area are rising at the fastest rate in Sydney. The NSW Housing Department bluntly stated in a recent report: "[I]t is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for lower income households to purchase housing in Marrickville."

The electorate was once a hub of textile factories and other light manufacturing, but as industries were shut down during the 1980s and 1990s, the area's proximity to the centre of Sydney made it increasingly attractive to high-income professionals.

While some of its neighbourhoods have been somewhat gentrified over the past 20 years, thousands of lower-income inner-city workers and students still buy homes or rent in the area, because it is close to where they work or study. Marrickville also has significant pockets of public housing, and one of the highest proportions of boarding houses—where destitute people rent a single room—in the city.

Government agencies have assessed more than half of private renters in Marrickville as experiencing "housing stress"—they pay more than 30 percent of their income on housing. Overcrowded rental accommodation is commonplace. Because of rising mortgage interest rates, more than 60 percent of home buyers in the area also experience housing stress.

Berry, a 25 year-old single mother of three who lives in public housing in Marrickville, expressed her frustration over the lack of affordable childcare, which has prevented her from getting a job.

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"Just because I'm a single mum, it doesn't mean I can't work," she said. "It is all up to the government. They have to make more childcare places available for single mums. I don't want to vote for them. I've got five or six certificates hanging on my wall that are doing nothing because I can't afford childcare. What can I give my kids? You can't give your kids education or a future. I want my rights back."

The gentrification of the area, the high number of students in the electorate and the pervasive hostility toward the 16-year-old Labor Party government have transformed Marrickville from a safe Labor Party domain into one of a handful of seats that the Greens Party believes it can win.

Facing a state-wide electoral debacle, Labor is desperately trying to prevent the defeat of its Marrickville member, Deputy Premier and Health Minister Carmel Tebbutt. Its pamphlets appeal to voters to "Keep Carmel," not on the basis of Labor's policies and record, but on Tebbutt's alleged contribution to the local area. The flyer contains no reference to the Labor Party at all, or the fact that Tebbutt is the deputy premier.

The Greens are standing the local mayor, Fiona Byrne, as their candidate. The Green vote in Marrickville was 33 percent in 2007 and one poll has suggested it could increase to 44 percent this year. The SEP, however, has found that, in addition to general disgust toward the Labor Party, there are also signs of a shift away from the Greens.

Last year, the Greens formed a state minority government with Labor in Tasmania and a de facto coalition at the federal level. In Tasmania, the Labor-Green government is imposing drastic budget cuts, while nationally, the Greens are collaborating with the Gillard government as it continues its participation in the criminal war in Afghanistan, deepens Australian military ties with the United States and draws up plans for savage cutbacks to social welfare and spending on health and education. The Greens have, moreover, become vociferous advocates of Prime Minister Julia Gillard's plans for a carbon tax, which will be passed on to ordinary workers in the form of price rises, especially for electricity, fuel, food and other essentials.

As a result, there is a growing realisation among those who previously harbored illusions in the Greens that behind their seemingly progressive rhetoric is a deeply anti-working class agenda.

On the weekend, the SEP met Marion De Boor. Originally from Germany, she said: "The Greens [in Australia] have now gone into bed in parliament with the rest of them. That's what the Greens did in Germany. The Greens there even worked with the CDU, the Christian-Democrats, who are as far-right as you can imagine."

De Boor explained that the Greens would "in no way have any influence on changing policies, like they might have if they kept completely away from minority governments. It doesn't matter whether it's Tasmania or federally. They're all the same. I said that yesterday to my colleagues at work. There is no better or 'lesser' evil."

Cogan was told by a person who had voted Green in recent elections that the Greens were "prepared to compromise on everything". If they voted for the proposed carbon tax, he said, "it would be their GST"—referring to the collapse of electoral support for the Australian Democrats after they voted in 1999 with the conservative Howard government to impose a Goods and Services Tax.

Committed Green supporters, however, have vocally defended the carbon tax. When Cogan asked a Green voter about his attitude toward the tax, he replied: "There is no gain without pain." Asked to elaborate, he said: "We have to bring in a tax that is so high that it hurts and forces people to use less electricity and petrol. Everyone is to blame and everyone has to pay."

Cogan explained that the threat of climate change was not caused by ordinary people but by the big corporate polluters, which subordinate every consideration, including the environment, to the accumulation of profit.

Cogan has been invited to take part in the "Workers Radio" program again this Wednesday, from 7.30 a.m. to 9 a.m. Australian Eastern Summer Time. He will address Gillard's unconditional commitment to the Obama administration's militarist agenda during her visit to Washington last week, and the Socialist Equality Party's attitude to the Labor-Green carbon tax. SkidRow Radio broadcasts to the inner Sydney suburbs on 88.9FM and also via an online feed.

The SEP's election public meeting in Marrickville will be held on Friday March 18 at 7 p.m., at the Herb Greedy Hall on Petersham Road, near the corner with Marrickville Road. We urge all residents of the area to attend, and to participate in the discussion, following the reports from James Cogan and SEP national secretary Nick Beams. All SEP meeting details are here.

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