

Conferences on the Fight for Socialism Today held in Sydney and Melbourne

Our correspondents
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Socialist Equality Party (SEP) conferences on “The Failure of Capitalism and the Fight for Socialism Today” were held in Sydney and Melbourne over the past two weekends. They discussed the new stage in the breakdown of global capitalism, and the fight for a socialist and internationalist perspective for the working class to answer the intensifying assault on jobs, living standards and basic democratic rights.

The conferences were convened as the deepening economic crisis in Europe and the United States and gyrations on world stock exchanges exposed all claims that the 2008 collapse of the financial markets was just a temporary downturn. In Australia, mass sackings announced by Qantas, the steel companies and major banks had shattered the insistence of the media and the Labor government that Australia was “exceptional” and would escape any significant impact because of soaring mining exports to China and other Asian markets.

The conferences focussed on the need to build a new socialist leadership in the working class to lead the immense struggles ahead, in Australia and all over the world. Three resolutions were presented. After much discussion and debate, each was passed unanimously. They were entitled: “The breakdown of capitalism and the tasks of the working class,” “The economic and political crisis in Australia and the building of the Socialist Equality Party” and “Youth and the fight for socialism”.

More than 120 delegates attended the conferences, including industrial workers, nurses, teachers, academics, public sector workers, professionals, unemployed workers and high school and university students. Some travelled long distances, including from Brisbane, Canberra, Newcastle, and in one case, South Korea. *World Socialist Web Site* correspondent and SEP (US) National Committee member Jerry White brought greetings from the United States.

A feature of the conferences was the participation of young workers and students, some attending their first socialist conference, and thoughtful contributions to the discussion by relatively new members of the SEP and its student movement, the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE).

SEP National Organiser James Cogan, who chaired the

conferences, opened the proceedings by noting that they coincided with the 71st anniversary of the assassination of Leon Trotsky, the founder of the Fourth International, the world party of socialist revolution. Cogan emphasised Trotsky’s firm conviction that the correct and powerful ideas of Marxism would ultimately win the leadership of the working class.

SEP National Secretary Nick Beams delivered the main political report, examining the depth and accelerating pace of the breakdown of the global capitalist economy; the burying of the myth that Australia would be spared the social devastation being unleashed worldwide; and the vicious response of the British ruling class and media to the eruption of riots by youth.

Beams said the tumultuous events of the past few weeks had highlighted the fact that the 2008-09 bailouts by governments of the banks and financial institutions—now estimated to total \$18 trillion—had paved the way for a social counter-revolution. “Private debts were made public and the state took on the task of recouping them by clawing back from the working class all the social concessions that have been made in health, education, pensions and other services since the end of World War II.”

Far from being exempt from these processes, and the resulting turn to repression, war and dictatorial forms of rule, Beams explained that Australian working people had received an early warning of what was to come from the June 2010 backroom coup, backed by big business and Washington, that installed Julia Gillard as prime minister. It had been a pre-emptive strike to more closely align the Labor government with the US in its Asia-Pacific struggle against China and to initiate austerity measures.

Beams drew attention to the crucial role that must be played by the youth. “Outside of the struggle to transform society through the building of a revolutionary leadership of the working class, the only social force that can accomplish this task, young people will not have a life ... at least not one that provides meaningful fulfilment.” (Beams’s speech and the conference resolutions will be published by the WSWs over the coming days.)

In the discussion on the resolutions, many important questions were asked, including how to build a new leadership in the working class, whether the capitalist class could devise rational

solutions to the economic crisis, and how socialist society would protect cultural diversity. Other questions raised the transformation of the trade unions into organisations that did nothing but enforce the attacks on workers and whether it was possible to gradually achieve the goals of socialism by appealing to the financial elite and its political and union representatives to “see reason”.

Young members and supporters joined leading SEP members in addressing these questions. Speakers highlighted the fundamental contradictions of the capitalist economic system, including its division into rival nation-states, and the irreconcilably opposed interests of the working class and the bourgeoisie, demonstrated by the police-state response to the British riots. Young delegates and nurses rose to speak on the deteriorating mental health and social conditions facing young people. Several amendments were moved to the resolutions that will be incorporated in the final documents.

In bringing the greetings of the SEP and ISSE in the US, Jerry White explained that the historic decline of US capitalism was propelling a new turn to militarism—including the naked recolonisation of Libya—and a ruthless drive by America’s ruling elite, now represented by the Obama administration, to destroy the long-standing social achievements of the working class, such as health care and retirement benefits. He outlined the re-emergence of the class struggle after some three decades in which the union bureaucracy had suppressed any resistance to the systemic transfer of wealth into the hands of the financial elite.

As well as this month’s bitter betrayal of the Verizon workers’ strike, White reviewed the political lessons of this year’s month-long struggle of public sector and other workers in Wisconsin against the governor’s plan to strip public employees of workplace rights, virtually criminalise strikes and axe health care and pension benefits. He explained how the powerful movement, which saw the state capitol building occupied by thousands of workers and youth, had been diverted back into the political dead-end of the Democratic Party and a campaign for recall elections.

Patrick O’Connor, a member of the SEP National Committee, moved the resolution on the economic and political crisis in Australia. He explained that the Gillard government, consistent with the Labor Party’s founding commitment to the defence of Australian capitalism, was enforcing a sweeping restructuring of class relations, driven by global economic forces. Since the 2008 financial crisis, mass layoffs in manufacturing—predicted to reach 200,000 by the end of the year—had been accompanied by an onslaught on wages and conditions, such as the imposition of two-tier wages, with a 47 percent cut for new hires, at the PPG paint plant in Melbourne.

“We refer in the resolution to the ruling class’s social counter-revolution. This is not a rhetorical flourish on our part, but expresses the objective reality of what working people confront—a determined drive to eliminate and claw back every single concession granted by the bourgeoisie in the twentieth century. This underscores the urgency of the need for workers and youth to

take up the fight for a socialist perspective.”

O’Connor said the resolution recognised that “a socialist movement of the working class is not going to spontaneously emerge—it has to be consciously fought for.” He explained: “The Socialist Equality Party aims to imbue the working class with a socialist consciousness. There are no short cuts in this process. The struggle for socialism involves the political, intellectual and cultural reawakening of working people and the development of a scientific perspective based on an assimilation of the strategic lessons of the international working class in the twentieth century.”

Zac Hambides, a leading member of the ISSE, introduced the resolution on youth. He particularly addressed point 11 of the resolution, which appealed to young people to take up the banner of world socialist revolution, and reject the position of “no politics” advanced by various pseudo-left groups, as well as the promotion of “identity” issues, such as race, nationalist, gender or sexual orientation, over the common interests of the international working class.

Hambides explained: “The call for ‘no politics’ cynically exploits the disgust felt by youth to the existing parties that for decades have betrayed the interests of the working class ... But not every party leads to corruption. The Fourth International has an unbroken and documented history in fighting for the independent interests of the working class.”

Summing up the discussion at the end of the conferences, Nick Beams said the capitalist breakdown and the re-emergence of working class struggles were now intersecting with the decisive theoretical development made by the International Committee of the Fourth International over the past two decades. He concluded that the conferences were a powerful step forward in building a new socialist movement of the working class.



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