

Workers speak at Fight for Socialism Today conference in 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.

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 newer members of the SEP and its student movement, the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE). Yesterday, we published interviews with some of the Sydney delegates, and today we publish interviews from Melbourne.

Gai Tito Reng, 25, is a cold storage worker who was involved in a six-week strike earlier this year against meat corporation Swift—a struggle that was sold out and shut down by the National Union of Workers.

“I have worked five and a half years as a cold storage worker,” he explained. “We had a long strike. If I had known then what I know now, I would have gone out on strike with the right principles. BlueScope steel workers now face a huge struggle, and they need this socialist perspective to guide them against the company, the government and the unions.

“The conference was great. We learned a lot more about the content of the SEP’s Statement of Principles. The speakers gave us the means to send the message outside to workers in other industries.

“When you look at the crisis in the global economy, especially the downgrading of American debt, the only way to address it is the political way, by working with the SEP. The working class is global and needs to base itself on the principle of social class and join the party. They can’t turn to the unions.

“Across Africa, as in the Asia-Pacific region, tensions

were rising between the US and China. The United States still want to keep on top of everybody in the world. This is coming into conflict with China.”

Reng agreed with the conference discussion about asylum seekers. “Refugees should not be sent back to the same situation they came from. Under the Geneva Convention it is a violation of their human rights. Tamils from Sri Lanka or other refugees from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan should not be sent back. The SEP says you have the right to live where you want to live.

“Also the Northern Territory intervention is not going to fix the problems of Aboriginal people—it is going to make them worse. The government says they won’t look for jobs, and then cuts their welfare. The mining companies want a cheap labour force. This is part of the workers’ struggles, and can only be answered by the working class and the SEP.

“All other parties other than the SEP defend capitalism. The way forward for us is to unify as a class. Young people in Britain face unemployment and have no decent schools. To fight for their rights as part of the social movement of the working class, they need to know what to do—not just to protest, but to have a socialist perspective.”

Kevin Hopkins, an actor and teacher, said he was impressed by the conference. “I was aware of a lot of the issues through reading the *World Socialist Web Site*, but the passion at the conference was important and to see the commitment from the presenters and the speakers. It’s not just an intellectual issue but an issue that affects everyone personally.

“Since the global economic crisis and the events that have happened since then, things really came home to me—especially the way that the US government bailed out the banks and now all that money has to be paid back from somewhere. The conference brought home to me that it was a global phenomenon and that we can expect that many more sacrifices will be demanded of the working class in Australia.

“[SEP National Secretary] Nick Beams was quite clear in his final summation. The task is to educate ourselves. My task is to educate myself in the policies of socialism and pass it onto other people who will in the future be involved in uprising. And let people know as much as I can. All of us can do that.”

Mohamad, 21, who is studying mechanical engineering at Melbourne’s Victoria University and is an ISSE member, commented: “I thought Nick Beams’s report was very illuminating. He’s got a way of explaining things which make complex topics more intelligible to us. He demystified a lot of things which I thought were beyond my grasp.

“I learnt a lot about capitalism that I didn’t know before, about its inherent contradictions—about how humanity has developed through of different stages of production, and how capitalism has reached a crisis now because of its contradictions, and there is a potential for conflict and war.

“The other aspect I found quite disturbing was the discussion about science and its domination by corporations within universities. I thought science was an objective pursuit and independent, so I found that shocking as well—that capitalism has infiltrated even such a noble pursuit as science. Science is our only way to facilitate progress but under capitalism it is controlled by private interests, which use it in their pursuit of making profit at the expense of ordinary people.”

Ben, 28, a secondary school science teacher, said: “The conference gave me a different perspective on a lot of what I hear in the mainstream media and gave me food for thought.

“Jerry White’s report on the US gave me an insight to the political situation there and the struggles working people are having. The idea that the unions are not supporting workers is something that I wasn’t aware of. I think it would be very scary, especially the vulnerability of the public school system.

“I’m on a 12-month contract, so I guess it’s not the job security I’d like. I don’t know if the situation is getting worse here—I’ve only been in the system for two years—but I think it’s not improving.

“I am concerned about the environment and I gained a bit more of a perspective at the conference on the carbon tax about how carbon can be traded as a commodity. It seems to be the government’s agenda just to allow the trading of carbon, so that polluters can buy and sell carbon credits and it’s not really about addressing carbon change.”

Among the delegates who spoke was a **mental health nurse**, who particularly addressed the resolution, “Youth and the fight for socialism.” A Registered Nurse for 12 years, she has worked for the past 6 years in mental health,

for the past 3 years as a case manager at a community clinic that delivers clinical services to over 700,000 people.

In her catchment area there were only 117 inpatient hospital beds. With clinicians’ case loads having exceeded 40-45 clients, they were under constant pressure to “move people through.” While clients were turned away daily, clinicians were blamed for having poor time management skills or “over servicing clients.”

“The average length of stay for an acute psychiatric admission has been pushed down to 7-10 days. Health care is now no more than another corporate organisation.

“The majority of the people I work with are under 30 years of age. Many of the young people are homeless or suffer recurring homelessness. Approximately 80 percent are substance users/dependent... Poverty, distress and anger are the norm... Many of these youth struggle on a daily basis just to survive and they desperately want a future.

“The recent London riots were of no surprise to many people. As once said by Dr Martin Luther King: ‘When you cut the facilities, slash jobs, abuse power, discriminate, drive people deeper into poverty and shoot people dead whilst refusing to provide answers or justice, the people will rise up and express their anger and frustration if you refuse to hear their cries. A riot is the language of the unheard.’

“But as has been pointed out by the SEP, anger is not a perspective. Large sections of young people do feel completely alienated from the rest of society. They are concerned about their future and the future of their generation and are looking for answers.

“Sections of them are being drawn towards what you have termed ‘identity politics.’ As outlined in the resolution, the youth need to be educated that this is a class struggle and they need to be educated that they do have a place in society. That place is the working class, the revolutionary class.

“As Trotsky points out in the Transitional Program, ‘only the fresh enthusiasm and aggressive spirit of the youth can guarantee the preliminary successes of the struggle.’ The anger and energy of the youth needs to be harnessed and directed by the revolutionary party.”



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