

SEP campaigns at Melbourne's Victoria Markets

Our reporters
18 June 2012

The Socialist Equality Party's candidate in the July 21 Melbourne by-election, Patrick O'Connor, and SEP campaigners spoke with many workers, students, and young people over the weekend and distributed copies of the party's election statement.

The SEP campaigned near the Queen Victoria Markets, a popular inner-city, open air market that attracts local residents, people throughout Melbourne, and interstate and international tourists. Almost no-one who spoke with our campaigners was aware there was an upcoming by-election, reflecting widespread political alienation as well as limited media coverage of the initial stages of the by-election campaign. Workers and young people were nevertheless keen to engage in a discussion. Many expressed deep concern over the savage austerity cuts imposed in Greece and Europe, and spoke about the growing economic and social crisis in Australia.

Dean works casually as a forklift driver. He previously injured the tendons in his wrist and has heart problems and has been receiving the disability support pension (DSP) for one and a half years. "I think what will happen in 20 years in Australia is that there will be no manufacturing or construction jobs," he said. "All there will be is warehousing for products manufactured in Asia, and maybe food production as well... Wages have gone down a lot. One of my friends used to be a plasterer, but he left the job and is now working as a driver. It's not a very highly-skilled job, but he's only getting paid \$684 per week! That's what I used to get 20 years ago."

Dean continued: "In general I support Labor—I have always supported Labor. But they're as bad as one another... The Labor government is making it so much harder for all these people to get the DSP and other welfare benefits. Now if you're a single mother and your child is six years old, you have to go out and find a job. I agree that at that age a parent could get a job if the child was looked after. But the sort of jobs people are expected to get—only between hours where your kid is at school—those jobs just don't exist, it's impossible."

George works as a butcher in one of the market stores. Asked

about the Labor Party, he initially said: "Gillard is not as bad as the Liberals." When asked why, he said: "It's hard to say why. Labor has changed now to basically the same as the Liberals, but the Liberals have gotten worse too."

"The international situation is terrible. It's like they're turning the whole world into a third world country—all for the sake of the companies and the shareholders to make massive profits. And it's all going to come here too—it's already coming here. I've noticed in the last six months a downturn. So many people have lost their jobs. People I know, but also you pick up the paper and every day there's some other company that has closed and more jobs have gone. The way the media puts it, everything seems to be working, but the average everyday person is struggling," he added.

Asked about the SEP's program, he replied: "I have not thought about socialism before, but I know things need to change and I'm looking for some answers."

Patrick O'Connor spoke with **Ani** from Spain who teaches Spanish part-time in a public school. "I have family living in Spain," Ani explained. "My aunt is 84, and she told me that the situation there now is worse than under Franco. That is really something, for her to say that. I didn't agree with the bailout of the banks. It's a quick fix that suits the rich, but the average person has to pay for it."

Ani spoke about the destruction of public education in Australia. "I'm allocated a budget of just \$150 per year to provide my students with a decent education. So a lot of stuff I produce and pay for myself. That means that although I only get paid for two days of work per week, I end up working five days. It's the same for a lot of teachers... I have been a contract teacher for four years—I have to reapply for my job each year."

Jim, a Greek immigrant who previously worked as an art gallery conservator but was now caring for his aged parents, spoke about his family's experiences: "I have family in Greece—uncles and cousins. Some of them are supporting SYRIZA, and some New Democracy. I think the elite is

responsible for this crisis. I didn't agree with the austerity measures—it's the ordinary people that are paying for it."

O'Connor explained that the assault on the working class in Greece was only the most advanced expression of a process taking place in every country. "That's right," Jim replied. "Everyone is picking at Greece at the moment, but Greece didn't start the crisis. No one is talking about Lehman Brothers, but they started the whole thing four years ago."

Andrea recently moved to Australia from Italy to live with his girlfriend. "In Europe, there's no jobs, there's no opportunities," he explained. "I had to leave the country. I have friends still living there—all of them are either unemployed or have just found jobs. I went to London, but they're having a big economic crisis too. I met many English people who had lost their jobs." He added: "I'm looking for paid work at the moment. I'm working unpaid here as an intern, so I've been working as a bartender and doing other jobs."

Andrea explained that he had been a member of the Stalinist Rifondazione Comunista party. "I was a member, but I quit when I was 20 years old," he said. "I did not agree with them supporting the war in Afghanistan. I saw that they were like the other parties."

Kim, 22, a theology student, recently moved to Melbourne from Tasmania. She spoke about the Tasmanian Labor-Greens coalition government.

"In Tasmania the trust in people for the government is totally lost," she said. "The health system is very bad. My mother has had to move to Melbourne for that reason—to be treated after one year on the waiting list instead of six years. This upsets family dynamics, it splits families apart... The job situation there is very bad. I was a receptionist for a company that helped job seekers, and I could see the list of job seekers was growing all the time."

She went on: "The political parties are all just the same, although they are calling themselves different. Deep down they all have the same motives. Take the Labor-Greens government in Tasmania—the Greens put themselves across all the time, saying 'yes, we'll do this' in order to get into power, and then contradicting themselves when they're in. Labor is the same—to get into power they will say anything and then not do it at all."

Mark, an air-conditioner installer, and **Rayleigh**, a fashion designer, were on holiday from the New South Wales city of Newcastle.

Asked about the Labor government's claim that Australia had avoided the global economic crisis. Mark replied: "No way!

There is less and less work available in Newcastle. The government isn't putting enough funding into construction, and the carbon tax isn't helping. There are a number of jobs and companies that have gone down recently... A lot of my friends got sacked with the collapse of Hastie [engineering, electrical and construction group]."

Rayleigh said: "Young families used to be able to buy a house, but now you're seeing them move back in with their parents. Things have definitely gotten harder in the last five to six years."

Mark said he was considering going to Western Australia to work in the mining industry. "It's not good but you've got to do it, otherwise it's too stressful thinking about whether there'll be enough work where we are. It's like in the Sylvester Stallone movie *The Cobra*—this is 'the new normal'... Our wage doesn't seem to go up anymore. I always used to think tradesmen were pretty comfortable—you might be able to get a car and your own house. But my wage is about the same as a manager at McDonald's now, per hour. It's not right for the work we do."

He added: "I don't support the Gillard government, but we try to steer clear as much as we can from politics. They all say they'll do one thing, and then do another. I think we're going the way of America—soon we'll be in the situation where you're living on the street, there's no unemployment benefits."

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