

SEP candidate speaks with high school teachers

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Patrick O'Connor, the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for the Melbourne by-election, spoke to several public school teachers on Wednesday in the outer working-class suburb of Dandenong.

The meeting was organised by Dandenong High School teacher and SEP member Ollie Gordon. Eleven teachers listened attentively as O'Connor opened up the discussion by explaining that the SEP's by-election campaign provided a genuine alternative for the working class, against the Labor, Liberal, and Greens parties. He emphasised that the SEP fought for the recognition of fundamental social rights including the right to a job, decent and affordable housing, and freely provided and high quality public services, including education.

"But in Australia and every advanced capitalist country none of these are recognised as rights," O'Connor continued. "In education, for example, there is a concerted drive by governments, whether they be nominally of the 'left' or the right, to smash up the public school system and promote a privatised, user-pays model. This forms a central part of the ruling elites' response to the 2008 financial crash, which has ushered in a new period of capitalist breakdown."

The SEP candidate briefly reviewed the growing crisis in the European Union and in the US. "The situation in Greece is only the sharpest expression of a wider international process," O'Connor continued, "National governments are attempting to claw back every concession granted to the working class in the course of the 20th century, including higher wages, better living and working conditions, and access to public health, education and other services." The same process was underway in Australia, the candidate explained, with the federal Labor government and Labor and Liberal state governments imposing

spending cuts to satisfy the financial markets and credit rating agencies.

O'Connor pointed out that current industrial dispute between Victorian teachers and the state Liberal government of Premier Ted Baillieu took place amid this wider austerity drive and the bipartisan assault on public education across the country. The federal Labor and state Liberal governments have a common agenda," the candidate stated, "of seeking to shift students out of the public system into the private, close and amalgamate schools, particularly in working-class areas, narrow the curriculum to meet the immediate needs of business for a productive workforce, and divide the teaching work force through so-called performance pay, pitting teachers against one another."

O'Connor concluded by warning the Australian Education Union (AEU) leadership would sell out the teachers' industrial campaign. He called on teachers to take their struggle out of the hands of the AEU, form rank-and-file committees in every school to unite teachers, parents, and students, and then turn out to other sections of the working class confronting similar attacks, developing a political fight against the Gillard and Baillieu governments.

O'Connor's opening remarks was followed by a lively and wide-ranging discussion. Teachers asked about the outcome of the recent Egyptian elections, the SEP's assessment of the Occupy Wall Street movement, and on the experience of the Soviet Union and Stalinism internationally.

Much of the discussion centred on one teacher's disagreements with the SEP's opposition to the Labor Party, the Greens, and the AEU. The teacher raised that by standing in the Melbourne by-election in opposition to the Labor Party and the Greens, the SEP was "dividing people that share leftist or progressive

concepts and ideas”, when the “left” ought to be uniting in opposition to the state government’s spending cuts. She also raised that teachers should not organise independently of the AEU, and instead seek to pressure the union leadership.

In response, O’Connor detailed the record of the Labor Party, Greens and the AEU. “The Labor Party can’t be considered a ‘left’ or working-class organisation in any sense,” he said. “It has in fact proven itself as the most ruthless instrument of big business and finance capital in Australia. In the 1980s, the measures carried in the US by Reagan and in Britain by Margaret Thatcher were carried out by the Labor Party here under Hawke and Keating, with the critical collaboration of the trade unions. During this period there was a massive economic restructuring, in which whole sections of industry were destroyed and an unprecedented shift in wealth from the bottom of society to the top was engineered.”

Now the federal Labor government was again orchestrating far-reaching economic restructuring, O’Connor continued. Baillieu’s cuts are entirely consistent with the austerity drive signalled by Gillard’s May 8 federal budget, and also directly follow the pro-business measures imposed by the previous state Labor government between 1999 and 2010.

The SEP candidate explained that the Greens were a pro-capitalist party advancing the interests of a well off section of the middle class and were a critical prop for the minority Labor government. “At the state level,” he said, “the Labor-Greens coalition government in Tasmania has imposed the sharpest spending cuts out of any state government in the country. The Greens leader in Tasmania, Nick McKim, is also the education minister and eagerly embraced his assigned task of slashing education spending and shutting down 20 public schools across the state.”

On the AEU, O’Connor first reviewed the transformed role of the trade unions with the emergence of a globally integrated capitalist market. “One needs to look at this in an historical and international framework,” he explained. “In country after country, the trade union bureaucracies’ privileges now function as the enforcers of job cuts, productivity concessions, wage cuts, all in the name of boosting the ‘international competitiveness’ of the national economy. We have

seen this process again demonstrated here in Melbourne in the last period. How many mass layoffs have been announced? Toyota, Ford, BlueScope, Alcoa, many other manufacturers, public sector job cuts. In how many instances have the trade unions opposed these cuts? Not a single one. Far from opposing the sackings, the unions are consulted beforehand and actively assist implementing the cuts.”

The SEP candidate then reviewed the long record of the AEU’s betrayals, including the last 2007-2008 enterprise bargaining campaign waged by teachers and also the AEU’s shutdown of the threatened boycott of the NAPLAN tests in 2010.

The teacher who initially expressed her disagreement with the SEP’s perspective remained unconvinced, but several of the others in attendance later voiced their appreciation for the discussion on a range of issues.

A young teachers’ assistant said, “I thought Patrick’s idea that democracy is not just voting in elections was important, and that it should involve people having a say in their workplace and everyday life.” Another young teacher said, “It was good to listen about the overall situation with the world economy and how finance has become global. The trouble is ‘socialism’ and ‘communism’ are still considered not feasible by most people ... but I think that is changing. It was a good meeting.”

Another teacher said, “The really interesting thing was how he attacked the ‘left’, like Labor and the Greens and the trade unions. He was right—they don’t really represent what workers need, they are in cahoots with the bosses. People need to get political and the SEP is clearly different from the other lefts when it promotes democracy and makes people aware of history and what is really happening right now.”

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