

“Capitalism has failed. The only viable alternative is socialism”

Patrick O'Connor speaks with WSWs about key issues in by-election

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Socialist Equality Party candidate for the state seat of Melbourne Patrick O'Connor spoke this week with the *World Socialist Web Site* about the political foundations of the party's campaign in the July 21 by-election.

O'Connor, 32, is a member of the SEP national committee and a regular writer for the WSWs, writing extensively on international and Australian politics, including Canberra's neo-colonial operations in the Asia-Pacific region. He stood as an SEP candidate in the New South Wales state seat of Marrickville in March 2007 and in the federal seat of Grayndler in October 2007. He headed the SEP's senate slate in Victoria in 2010.

WSWS: Your statement says that the SEP is the only organisation that represents the independent interests of the working class. Can you elaborate?

Patrick O'Connor: Broad layers of workers and young people recognise that the establishment parties—Labor and Liberal—are direct representatives of big business and finance capital. There is deep anger and frustration about this and about the situation ordinary people face, but the urgent question is what sort of party and program is required to represent the independent interests of the working class.

We are explaining that workers need to mobilise against the entire capitalist system. What's unfolding in Greece and other European countries is an unprecedented social and economic catastrophe that has been organised by the financial oligarchy and its political representatives. Workers everywhere confront a disaster and it is no different here. A counteroffensive must be developed, and the SEP's central orientation in the Melbourne by-election is outlining the socialist and internationalist program required to advance this counteroffensive.

WSWS: Could you explain something about the electorate and the reasons for the by-election?

PO: The seat covers inner Melbourne, Australia's second largest city, and is very socially diverse. It includes the financial and business district and the Docklands development, which is home to a number of high income earners, but the electorate features significant concentrations of workers and youth. It includes two of the city's largest universities—RMIT and the University of Melbourne—with large numbers of students, including from India, China and many other countries. The GM Holden auto plant is

nearby.

There are also several high-rise public housing estates where low-paid workers and immigrants, including African families and youth—many of them refugees from Sudan and Ethiopia—live.

The by-election is being held because Bronwyn Pike, the former Labor Party member, resigned last month. She had been the education minister in the previous state Labor government.

Labor had been in office since 1999 and was regarded by the media and financial elite as the most pro-business state government in Australia. But after 11 years of Labor's attacks on health, education, transport and other vital social spending there was widespread hostility within the working class. Labor lost the November 2010 state election and the new Liberal government of Premier Ted Baillieu has picked up where Labor left off. It is now working hand-in-hand with the Gillard Labor government to deliver further pro-business “reform” measures and spending cuts.

Last month's state budget saw 4,200 public sector layoffs, more than 10 percent of the entire public service, and numerous other regressive spending cuts. The Technical and Further Education system is being gutted, and the privatisation process begun under the previous Labor government taken forward further. At the same time, the Liberal government has worked with the trade unions to impose regressive new industrial agreements on different sections of public sector workers, including nurses. Baillieu is now preparing to impose the 2.5 percent real wage cut on public school teachers, mental health workers, paramedics and other state sector workers.

WSWS: The ongoing refrain of the mainstream media and Australian governments—Labor and Liberal—is that the global financial crisis is a temporary phenomenon and that in any case Australia is somehow immune.

PO: These claims are false. We live in a world economy with no country immune from the financial crisis.

From the outset the SEP and our international movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International, explained that the 2008-09 financial crisis was not a cyclical down-turn caused by something external to the system. Rather it reflected deep-going contradictions within the capitalist mode of production itself.

Claims that Australia's relationship with China and the record level of mineral exports in the last period will protect Australia is another lie. In fact, the mining boom and the high Australian dollar

have been the economic mechanisms through which sweeping economic restructuring has been pushed through.

Big business and the financial elite in conjunction with the Gillard government and the unions are using this to impose a far-reaching restructure of manufacturing and other trade exposed industries. A significant number of the 130,000 manufacturing jobs destroyed in Australia since the 2008 financial crash have been in this state. The latest data shows that in the last twelve months, 18 percent of full-time manufacturing jobs were destroyed in Melbourne's outer eastern suburbs and nearly a quarter of all full-time manufacturing jobs in the city's south-east suburbs.

The car industry has been a particular target, with major job cuts and attacks on conditions at Ford, GM Holden, Toyota and car parts manufacturers. There is a consensus among federal and state governments and the unions that workers' wages and conditions have to be driven down so that the manufacturing industry can compete with other low cost Asia labour platforms.

This is why a key element of our campaign is for the mobilisation of the working class to defend all jobs and conditions, including the latest two-week shutdown of Ford, and the development of rank-and-file committees of workers. It means a break from the unions and a turn to other layers of workers here and internationally. It is going to require a political fight against the state and federal governments on the basis of a different program—for a workers' government to implement socialist policies.

WSWS: What are the conditions of life for students and young people in the electorate?

PO: Unemployment is high with few opportunities for decent full-time jobs. There are serious levels of poverty affecting young people, with severe shortages of affordable accommodation for students and young people and virtually no housing provided or coordinated by the tertiary education institutions. This is why you see full-time students also having to work the equivalent of full-time jobs. The phenomenon of highly-educated young people, many with multiple degrees, compelled to work in low-wage unskilled insecure employment just to survive is an international issue and another indication that capitalism has failed an entire generation.

WSWS: A key plank of your election campaign is against militarism and war.

PO: That's right. We will be the only party raising this issue in the by-election. None of our opponents can talk about the economic driving forces behind the increasing militarism and war.

The US ruling elite has responded to the decline of American capitalism in world terms by resorting to military force, imperialist violence, to try and gain an advantage over its rivals, particularly China. There's been a relentless series of imperialist wars and interventions over the past 25 years initiated by the US and supported by successive Labor and Liberal governments in Australia.

According to the latest opinion polls, more than two-thirds of Australians want the troops to be withdrawn from Afghanistan, but the ruling elites and their political parties proceed in defiance of these concerns. This further demonstrates that there's not a single question confronting the working class—militarism, war, social

inequality, democratic rights—that does not require a united political struggle against capitalism and its political defenders. We are campaigning for an understanding amongst workers that their fate is bound up with the fate of their brothers and sisters in Greece, throughout Europe, Egypt, the United States and Asia.

WSWS: Can you comment on the Greens, who are contesting the by-election?

PO: The fact that the Greens could win the seat of Melbourne reflects the widespread disgust and alienation with the Labor Party. It also points to illusions amongst students, young people and sections of the middle class in what the Greens are advancing.

The Greens are not some progressive alternative to Labor, but a party of the middle class that supports capitalism and the existing political setup. They are deeply hostile to any independent movement of the working class. The Greens are a party of spending cuts and austerity. They are responsible for all of Gillard's regressive measures imposed since they helped install the minority government after the 2010 hung parliament. The Labor-Greens deal involved Adam Bandt, the Greens member for the federal seat of Melbourne, issuing an unconditional pledge not to support opposition no-confidence motions and to vote for the government's budget every year. This, of course, means voting to fund Australia's involvement in the Afghanistan war and other imperialist military operations, the Northern Territory intervention against Australia's indigenous communities, and other government programs that the Greens hypocritically claim to oppose. The only genuine progressive alternative to the Labor government and its backers, the Greens, is the internationalist and socialist perspective advanced by our party.

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