

Socialist Equality Party wins support in Melbourne election campaign

Our reporters
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Patrick O'Connor, the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for the Melbourne by-election, and SEP campaigners spoke with workers and young people in the suburbs of Flemington and Kensington over the weekend. Many people were keen to discuss the political issues in the SEP's election statement, which had been widely distributed in people's letterboxes.

Flemington and Kensington feature large concentrations of public housing, including high rise estates (see "Public housing residents speak with Patrick O'Connor"). Just four kilometres from the Melbourne CBD, parts of the two suburbs, especially in Kensington, are being gentrified. They nevertheless remain predominantly working-class neighbourhoods. Recently published census data showed that 61 percent of Flemington residents rented their homes, twice the national average, and the suburb's median individual weekly income was \$550.

Hostility among ordinary people toward the political establishment was palpable. Disillusionment in the Labor Party was especially pronounced, and many workers are actively seeking alternatives.

O'Connor spoke with **Fay**, who has lived in a public housing commission flat for the past 28 years. "When I was growing up I first voted Labor," she explained. "I thought Labor was for the workers. You know with Whitlam—'times are changing' and all that. I voted for Whitlam [in 1972], and voted all of the time for Labor, even though a lot of the time, I have got to be honest, I never looked at their policies..."

"Then about 10 years ago I decided to stop voting

Labor. I went independent first off, and then I went Greens. Now I don't know who to vote for. People are disaffected from politics. For a while there I was thinking I would just get my name marked off when I vote, and just cross the ballot so I don't get a fine. Then I thought to myself that is not right... It's hard to know what to do."

Rochelle bought a ticket to the SEP's forthcoming election public meeting on July 15. Having recently moved to Melbourne from Western Australia, she criticised the media-promoted myths about the mining boom. "The mining boom is benefiting only a handful of people," she said. "It creates a divide between the rich and the rest. I don't think it is benefiting the community. In Perth, the lower socio-economic areas are ignored. They are widespread, but you don't hear anything about it. There are a lot of homeless people, yet there are no avenues for them to be heard or helped... I previously supported the Greens, but I'm not partisan."

Hussim, a hospital worker originally from Ethiopia, told a SEP campaigner that he had already cast a pre-poll vote for O'Connor. "I think capitalism controls people," he explained. "Bankers control populations, it is finance that controls everything... The media talks about the unemployed and how the taxpayer subsidises them—but big business is subsidised far more! If you take the CEOs of ANZ, NAB and Westpac [banks], their salaries equal one year of social security payments for how many people?"

He continued: "I voted for Patrick O'Connor—it is good to see new leaders. In the last election I voted Greens, but we were disappointed. He [federal Greens

MP Adam Bandt] is not interested in us, he is only interested in himself. I accept gay rights, but you can't waste time, about a year, on the one issue. People are dying, there is unemployment, poverty, and problems with education."

Gary is a music teacher at a public high school. Like many others with whom the SEP spoke, he raised social inequality as one of his major concerns. He suggested that those with incomes of more than \$5 million should be taxed at 100 percent. Gary also spoke about the housing crisis in inner-Melbourne, another important issue for many working people. "I think the rising price of houses is ridiculous, and immoral," he explained. "To buy a house anywhere around here in Flemington you need at least \$800,000. Young people will have to take out a mortgage that they'll probably never be able to pay back. I think you'll see a whole generation without their own property."

Gary had voted for the Greens in the 2010 federal election. O'Connor asked what he thought about the Greens' subsequent support in parliament for the minority Gillard government. "The alternative was too terrible," he replied, referring to the prospect of Liberal Party opposition leader Tony Abbott becoming prime minister. "You'd have done the same thing, wouldn't you?"

O'Connor replied: "No, we wouldn't. If we had a representative in the hung parliament, we would have opposed both the Labor and Liberal parties. The Greens' deal with Labor means that they bear direct political responsibility for all the Gillard government's measures. Their pledge to vote for Labor's annual budget, means for example, that they vote for the continuation of the Australian military's involvement in the war in Afghanistan."

Max, a former TAFE teacher, now has a small business with a coffee-making van. He was keen to engage in a political discussion with O'Connor. Max lives in the western suburbs of Melbourne, in Prime Minister Julia Gillard's electorate, and voted for her in the 2010 federal election. "Next time I won't be voting for the Labor Party," he said. "I would vote for a socialist candidate if there was one with an alternative

platform."

Max added: "The government is totally attached to the US and Obama. The US coming here with troops in Darwin, is the US keeping a foothold in the area, like the situation in the Philippines. I am sure it is about China rising as an economy. The American troops based in Darwin means we are definitely a target."

Max also raised the treatment of WikiLeaks editor Julian Assange. "I think that Assange should be given a Nobel peace prize for his services to humanity," he said. "Even if he's a bit eccentric as a person, he has exposed the truth and that is the last thing that America and any other country want to see happening—the actual truth being exposed... How embarrassing for America that on YouTube people can see the atrocities in Iraq and Afghanistan. They turned the place into a slaughter house. People in the Middle East have paid many times over what happened in New York, and those poor souls in Iraq had nothing to do with it. Now the US has Iran in its sights... I don't know whether people realise how mistreated the people of the Middle East have been, especially those in the oil-rich countries."

A Qantas worker who agreed to help distribute copies of the SEP's election statement, said he strongly agreed with the party's call for workers to break from the trade unions. "I agree that the unions are not for the workers," he explained. "I like the section of the SEP program on setting up independent rank and file committees in every workplace. There are many other workers losing their jobs, in Toyota, in Ford, at Fairfax. We should join with them. In our union, a lot of the members want to resign [from the union]."

See the SEP website for further information on the election campaign.

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