

SEP (Australia) meetings discuss how to fight austerity and war

Our correspondents
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The Socialist Equality Party (Australia) held public meetings in Sydney, Melbourne, Newcastle and Perth over the past two weeks on “The socialist answer to Labor’s program of war and austerity.” There were lively discussions at each meeting on the challenges facing workers and youth arising out of the rapid shift globally, and in Australia, to the imposition of austerity measures and toward war, particularly in the Middle East and the Asia-Pacific region.

Members of the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE), the SEP’s youth movement, gave the opening reports at the meetings, focussing on the issues confronting young people flowing from the global failure of the capitalist system, and particularly the attack taking place on the right to a free, high quality education.

Speaking at the Melbourne meeting, ISSE member Will Morrow outlined the sweeping budget cuts to education unveiled by Australian state governments in recent months, and answered the lie of the federal Labor government that these cuts were purely the policy of the conservative Liberal-National state governments. Not only had the first cuts been imposed by the Labor-Green government in Tasmania, but Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s government was spearheading a pro-market “education revolution,” directly aimed at undermining public education.

“The destruction of public education is part of a broader attack on every gain won over more than a century of struggle by the working class, including health care and other essential social services,” Morrow said. “Everywhere, capitalist governments are declaring there is no money to provide them, and moreover, that they are not rights, but privileges that the user should pay for.”

Morrow traced the campaigns mounted by the SEP and ISSE internationally and in Australia for teachers, parents, students and workers to form new organisations, such as rank-and-file action committees, to defend the right to education, against the trade unions that were collaborating in the cuts, and the various pseudo-radical tendencies that covered up for the unions’ betrayals.

“The SEP and the ISSE, the party’s youth movement, fight to

expose and combat pseudo-left politics among students and young people,” Morrow explained. “We tell the truth: that the struggle for the future of the youth is against capitalism and for socialism. It requires that young people turn to the working class and the fight for the establishment of workers’ governments around the globe and the socialist transformation of the world economy.”

SEP national secretary Nick Beams and assistant national secretary James Cogan delivered the main reports, examining how Australian capitalism was now being dragged into the maelstrom of the deepening global economic crisis, and the need to build a new revolutionary leadership in the working class.

Addressing the four meetings in Sydney and Newcastle, Beams began by referring to the mass demonstrations in Athens and other European capitals against the severe spending cuts and austerity measures, and examined the rapid collapse of the Gillard government’s claims that Australia had escaped the impact of the global financial crisis.

“In the last months and weeks the economic landscape has changed dramatically,” Beams said. “The prices for mineral exports have plummeted, prompting warnings from many quarters that the mining boom is over. The federal Labor government has reversed its stimulus measures, never to return, and initiated a program of cuts in line with its commitment to the global financial markets that it will return the budget to a surplus this year. State governments, responsible for the provision of many necessary services, are now taking the axe to public sector jobs and cutting their spending on health, education and other vital services.”

Beams cited economist and former Labor government adviser Ross Garnaut, who said that in Australia, the “salad days are over” and the “dog days are here.”

The SEP national secretary emphasised that what was taking place internationally was not a conjunctural downturn, to be followed by a recovery and return to “normal,” but a systemic breakdown of the global capitalist system. This crisis had also brought to the surface the historic decline of United States capitalism, propelling it to ever more aggressively assert its

military might to secure its pre-eminent position against its rivals, including China.

In Australia, Julia Gillard was installed as prime minister in mid-2010 to bring Australia even more closely into line with the anti-China “pivot to Asia” initiated by the Obama administration, and to effect a switch from the stimulus packages that the Labor government had employed in 2008-09, to the austerity offensive that was now underway.

Beams traced the rightward political shift by what were once considered small “l” liberal sections of the upper middle classes, including their support for the Labor government’s latest policy of sending refugees to Pacific islands. He exposed the role of the Greens, who claimed to provide an alternative, but continued to prop up the Labor government.

The speaker concluded: “The disintegration of the economic buffers that seemingly provided some stability to Australian capitalism in the first phase of the global breakdown means that powerful social and class struggles will develop in this country, the first signs of which we can already see. However, our task here is not to point to the return of overt class struggle but to prepare for it.

“Central to that preparation is to draw the lessons of the experiences so far. They have demonstrated two things very clearly: the dependence of imperialism on the organisations of the pseudo left to try to contain the situation—whether they be forces like the Revolutionary Socialists in Egypt or Syriza in Greece—and the crucial significance of the building of a new leadership of the working class. No matter how great the mass upsurge against it, no situation is impossible for the bourgeoisie to resolve unless and until the working class is equipped with a revolutionary party, guided by a socialist strategy thought through and fought for to the end.

“It is imperative that such a leadership be constructed on the basis of socialist internationalism. The ruling classes have a global strategy. The working class must develop its own. It is on this basis that we call on you to join and build the SEP and its youth movement the ISSE as the most vital preparation for the struggles now unfolding.”

Many important issues arose during the question and answer periods. The first question at the Sydney East meeting was posed by the young woman who asked how class consciousness could be developed when the population was dominated by individualism and consumerism.

In reply, Beams reviewed the intellectual origins of such arguments in the decades-long dominance of postmodernism in the universities and among broad layers of academia. He explained that various intellectuals, including Herbert Marcuse, had written off the working class in the years immediately preceding the revolutionary upheavals of 1968-75. The subsequent rightward shift of broad sections of the French intelligentsia was a product of their hostility to the independent organisation and struggle of the working class.

Beams explained that the objective crisis of capitalism

propels workers into struggle, and made the point that the young woman, and everybody in the room, was part of the same international class as the impoverished workers in China.

At the Parramatta meeting, one worker sought clarification on why the SEP sought to orient the working class away from the trade union movement, citing the Platform of the Left Opposition in the 1920s that “there is no reason to stop work with the trade unions.” Beams explained that Trotsky had written that in the 1920s, and that the unions had since been utterly transformed with the development of globalised production.

Beams said the perspective of socialists had always been the overthrow of the capitalist system, whereas the unions sought to preserve it. In the past, the unions had appealed to their national governments and industries for concessions for workers, a possibility that had been shattered by globalisation. Beams explained that the unions now sought to manage labour in the interests of big business, with a vested interest in maintaining capitalism. It was imperative, Beams stressed, that the working class break out of the straitjacket of the trade unions.

Other questions concerned education, including whether the SEP simply fought to retain existing education conditions and funding. Beams explained that the defence, improvement and expansion of public education, and the right of all students to free high quality education, was bound up with the struggle to overturn capitalism and reorganise society according to need, not profit.

The questions covered a wide range of topics, including the role of the Greens, the European Union, the working class in South Africa, and what workers had to do. Several people asked whether the financial crisis could be alleviated by a return to trading in gold, rather than paper money. Beams explained that no reform within the capitalist system could restore the world order, and in fact any move to trading in gold would trigger a massive international recession.



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