

SEP takes election campaign to steel city of Wollongong

Our correspondents
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The Socialist Equality Party held an election meeting in the regional New South Wales city of Wollongong last Sunday. Over the previous three weeks, SEP members and supporters campaigned in different parts of the city, distributing the party's election statement and discussing with workers and young people the necessity to build an international, socialist movement against the dangers of war, the assault on working-class living standards and attacks on basic democratic rights.

The working class in Wollongong and the surrounding Illawarra region—historically a centre of steel, manufacturing and coal mining—has suffered a major social reversal over the past 30 years. Between 1983 and 1996, tens of thousands of full-time jobs were eliminated as a result of the restructuring of industry enforced under the Accords between the Hawke-Keating Labor governments and the trade unions, and conditions for many thousands of working-class families have deteriorated drastically since then.

The city's Port Kembla steelworks, which employed over 20,000 workers in 1983, now has a permanent workforce of barely 2,000 after the last round of mass layoffs in August 2011. BlueScope Steel, which was created when the conglomerate BHP sold off its steel assets in 2002, ended export production in 2011. Following last month's announcement by Ford that it is ending car production in Australia in 2016, the future of the steel industry is also in doubt.

An SEP campaign team on Saturday met many people who have been unable to find stable, full-time work since losing jobs in the steel or steel-related industries. Opportunities have also dried up for youth to obtain apprenticeships and the prospect of skilled work. Unemployment among people aged 15 to 24 wanting work in the Illawarra region averages close to 18 percent. The global slump since the 2008 meltdown in

the financial system is now plunging Australia toward recession as the mineral export boom to China collapses, worsening the prospects for the younger generation.

SEP members and supporters explained the relationship between the economic breakdown of world capitalism, the deepening assault on the conditions of the working class, and the drive towards war. American imperialism, wracked by economic decline, is seeking to use its military superiority to extricate itself from its historic decline at the expense of its rivals. In the Asia-Pacific region, Washington's provocative build-up of military and diplomatic pressure on China is fully backed by the Labor government and all the parties of the official political establishment.

At the SEP meeting last Sunday, as at earlier election meetings held in May, a speaker from the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the youth movement of the SEP, gave a report on the conditions of young people around the world and the urgency of youth turning to a revolutionary, socialist perspective. Nick Beams, the SEP's national secretary and lead candidate for the Senate in NSW, presented the main report. The meeting was chaired by James Cogan, the SEP's assistant national secretary, who is standing as one of the party's Senate candidates in South Australia—where the jobs of thousands of workers in the steel and car industries are also threatened.

Among those who attended was Hamish, a young telecommunications worker interested in socialist ideas who met Cogan during a campaign the day before. After a discussion on the SEP's program, he purchased a ticket to attend the public meeting, saying he was "curious about who would attend and what would be talked about."

Following the reports, an important discussion developed at the meeting around issues that Hamish raised. While he agreed that the US pivot to Asia posed the danger of war, he questioned whether the working class would take up a socialist perspective. He said: “The people who are oppressed and are affected by these decisions are the people who don’t actually have any say. They’ve stepped out of the political scene altogether, so the only people who have a say are the people with money.” Workers had “lost faith in the system,” he continued, but he did not think they were looking for an alternative. The problem for the SEP, he said, was “the word ‘socialism’.”

Beams said the issues Hamish had posed were critical. He explained: “What has the working class passed through? All over the world, it has seen the organisations that it built over generations collapse or be transformed into its greatest opponents.” The working class had been betrayed, above all, by the Stalinist bureaucracy that emerged within the first workers’ state in the Soviet Union, which workers still wrongly associated with socialism. “That weighs heavily on the consciousness of workers,” he stressed. “That is why we have confusion. That is why we have disorientation.”

The confusion could only be clarified, Beams said, “on the basis of the historical lessons drawn from the twentieth century by the Trotskyist movement and the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI),” which had fought Stalinism and all the other organisations that defended the capitalist system.

The task that stood before serious workers and youth, he said, was building the SEP and the ICFI. “How does socialist consciousness develop? Can it develop spontaneously within capitalist society?” Beams asked. “No. Socialist consciousness has to be brought into the working class from outside its immediate experiences, which are dominated by the social relations of capitalism. Precisely because the capitalist class has the means of culture, resources, education and the media, the revolutionary party is necessary. It involves the most politically conscious sections of the working class, whose task is to educate the rest of the class and transform it, as Trotsky once said, from a class in itself—without consciousness and just material for exploitation—into a class for itself, a class that understands it is the agency of the next great historical

step for humanity, the overthrow of capitalism and establishment of world socialism.” Beams called on all those at the meeting to join the SEP and commit to that struggle.

Discussion continued after the meeting. Stefan, a university student, particularly responded to the stress in the meeting on the need to oppose the persecution of refugees, as part of the fight for the international unity of the working class. “I really don’t like what they’re doing to refugees,” he said. “I believe in human rights. They came from war-torn countries, they’re from poverty and they have kids. They’re not war criminals or terrorists. I think we should abolish all the refugee centres in Australia, have the refugees, in and a government initiative to build them homes.”

Josif, a casual worker at the steel plant, said he came to the meeting because of earlier discussions with SEP members on the 2011 BlueScope job cuts. “I found what they said interesting,” he said, “and I thought I’d go to the meeting to find out more. With the meeting and reading your statement on the Ford sackings, I have got a broader picture and a better understanding of what is going on.”

Josif commented: “During the meeting I was struck by the discussion on the war. Not many people know about this and no other parties are talking about it. I was shocked by what I heard and the fact that they are going ahead with their plans behind our backs. According to the news media, Australia and China are getting together. You have to work out yourself what is really going on. It’s a hidden agenda, which the government is hiding. How are you going to find out about it unless you come to a party like the SEP?”

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