SEP election meeting in Melbourne discusses Ford closure, imperialist war drive

Our reporters
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The Socialist Equality Party held a successful public meeting in the Melbourne suburb of Footscray on Sunday. Attended by workers, students and young people, many of whom had met SEP campaigners in Melbourne's western suburbs during the previous fortnight, the meeting involved a lively discussion on the party's socialist perspective.

Tania Baptist, one of the SEP's Senate candidates in Victoria, chaired the meeting. She began by discussing the devastating implications of the threatened closure of Ford's two plants in Victoria, at Broadmeadows and Geelong.

Baptist stressed the international character of the party's campaign. "At the same time that we are standing in the election here, our sister party in Germany, the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit, is standing in national elections scheduled for September 22," she explained. "The PSG is campaigning among auto workers confronting the threatened closure of a plant in Bochum owned by General Motors subsidiary Opel, marking the first auto plant slated for closure in Germany since World War II.

"In the US, the Socialist Equality Party is standing in the mayoral election in Detroit, the centre of the US auto industry, where the working class has been devastated by decades of restructuring, and is at the forefront of the global offensive against car workers, spearheaded by the Obama administration in collaboration with the United Auto Workers union."

Patrick O'Connor, the SEP's other Senate candidate in Victoria, delivered the opening report and used a series of projected maps and graphs to explain the preparations being made by US imperialism for a military attack on China. O'Connor exposed the Labor government's active collaboration with the Obama administration's strategic and military "pivot" to Asia, and explained that Australian imperialism had long required US backing for its predatory operations in the South Pacific.

The SEP candidate concluded by recalling the 2003 global antiwar protests, before the invasion of Iraq. "In our election campaign we are seeking to advance and build a new antiwar movement," he said. "But we are not talking about another protest movement, aimed at pressuring existing governments, urging them to step back, to not be quite so reckless... The 2003 experience was an acid test of this protest politics perspective—if there was any movement capable of influencing government policy, through the weight of public opinion and the pressure of protest appeals, it would have been this one.

"But, of course, as we know, the Australian, American and British governments proceeded anyway. The fight against militarism and war is a revolutionary issue. It requires nothing less than the building of a new revolutionary movement of the working class, unifying working people internationally on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective."

Nick Beams, the SEP's national secretary and lead Senate candidate in New South Wales, delivered the main report. He began by noting that in addition to the official cover up of the US-led preparation for war against China, the domestic agenda to be pursued by the next government, whether Labor or Liberal, was being similarly concealed.

After exposing the preparations being made within ruling circles for a stepped up austerity and pro-business economic restructuring drive after the September election, Beams discussed the need for Ford workers to mobilise in opposition to the threatened shutdown of production, as part of a counter-offensive of the entire working class in defence of its independent

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interests. He exposed the claims made by Ford management and the trade union bureaucracy that there was no alternative to the plants' closure because of the dictates of the market.

"In ancient times, various peoples in the Middle East region sacrificed their children to their god, Moloch, so that their communities might prosper," Beams said. "We look upon such practices today as barbaric. But what happens today? The Moloch of the market puts his ancient predecessor in the shade. Hundreds of thousands—no millions—of workers, their families, their children, have their lives sacrificed to the Moloch of the market. But what is the market—this seemingly all-powerful entity that determines the fate of millions? It has not been placed on earth by God, nor is it a product of nature, notwithstanding all the attempts to present it as such. It is a social mechanism, a product of the socio-economic organisation of society—a particular kind of society, capitalism, in which the working class, which produces all the wealth, does not have control over it and cannot determine the purposes to which it is used."

Beams explained: "Only the most radical program, that is, in the real sense of this word, that tackles the problem at its root can resolve the issues confronting the working class. The situation can be ended in only one way—through the fight to establish a workers' government that will expropriate the corporations, the banks and finance houses."

After the reports, members of the audience raised numbers of questions, including the composition and nature of the working class, the SEP's assessment of the bourgeois nationalist governments in Venezuela and Ecuador, and the divisions within the Australian ruling class over an orientation toward the US or China. Further discussion was generated by questions about whether socialism was really viable and whether the Bolsheviks were justified in seizing power and forming a workers' government in Russia in 1917.

After the meeting, several of those who attended spoke with WSWS reporters.

Peter, a construction worker, attended after receiving a leaflet from an SEP campaigner outside a nearby train station. "The media and politicians cover up all of these issues," he said. "All we are ever fed is a series of lies... The US will never let any other country dominate the world. I remember watching a 'Lateline' [news] program several years back. The US ambassador in Australia was interviewed. He said: 'We [Washington] will never let another country in the world dominate us economically.' What he was talking about was China. It was really frightening, I remember it clearly."

Peter continued: "Whoever gets in after the election in September will make no difference for ordinary people. It is like choosing between Coke or Pepsi—they are exactly the same. I agree we need to learn about history. Workers need to understand what has happened before."

Ricardo, a TAFE student, originally from Colombia, said: "I liked the meeting. I think it's really important to have this kind of meeting… It's one thing to just know that something is happening, and it's another thing to discuss it and raise, OK, what's my responsibility? I'm interested in your campaign, I'd like to participate."

Duncan, a signwriter, raised the questions during the meeting about the Russian Revolution and the viability of a socialist perspective. Afterward, he said: "Before this meeting I didn't know socialists still existed. I didn't realise Trotsky's socialism existed. I was impressed with the speeches, particularly from Nick Beams."

Jim, an applied science student at RMIT university, said: "I thought both the reports were really clarifying. The maps of the trade routes between China and other countries were very stark. It shows how central Australia is in this conflict, and on whose side it stands."

Jim continued: "The issue of war and austerity touched on something else I was thinking. What was put forward at the meeting was that capitalism is not going to collapse like a top-down thing, where it just happens from above. I think that's an informative part of your party's principles. Nick Beams made clear that the working class can't just let capitalism work itself out and go through its 'stages.' If capitalism collapses, that means war. So we've got to stop it."

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