

SEP campaigns at Brisbane meatworks

Our correspondents
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Socialist Equality Party members and supporters are campaigning for an SEP 2013 election meeting in the southern Brisbane suburb of Beenleigh, where 800 meatworkers at the Teys/Cargill abattoir are fighting company demands for wage cuts of around 20 percent. The SEP campaign is focusing on the connection between the assault on workers' wages and conditions nationally and internationally, and the US-led war preparations against China, both driven by the global economic breakdown.

A campaign team distributed copies of the SEP election announcement and a *World Socialist Web Site* article on the struggle at the meatworks last week, winning an important response from workers, who include immigrants from the South Pacific, Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe and the Middle East. At the centre of the SEP campaign is the fight to mobilise the working class against the US war drive against China, the agenda of austerity including wage and job cuts, and the drift towards dictatorship.

Team members explained that the company's threats to close down the facility unless workers accept pay cuts and increased workloads are part of an international offensive against the working class amid the deepening financial crisis that began in 2008.

Two long-time meat packers, a married couple, later spoke to SEP Senate candidate Mike Head about the issues they confront. "We are being stuffed by the company," the man commented. "They are dropping everyone's wage. For packers like us, they are cutting the hourly rate from about \$22.15 to \$20."

His partner said that the management had already delayed a pay rise since last October and was refusing to budge from its pay-cutting ultimatum. Two strikes—one for four hours and the other for a day—had made no difference. "They don't give a damn whether we strike and shut down the plant for a week. In fact, they want us all out, so they can replace us with others

on lower pay."

The SEP candidate explained the increasing domination of the worldwide meat and food processing industry by huge conglomerates. He asked what happened after Teys Australia, one of the country's major slaughterhouse operators, entered a joint venture in 2011 with Cargill, the largest private company in the US.

The female packer said: "Teys told us that when Cargill took over, our jobs would be safe. But we have had nothing but trouble ever since. Now Cargill is using standover tactics. They are crying poor, and yet they are one of the biggest companies in America. They want us all out. They are saying: 'Out with the old, and in with the new'."

The two packers said the result was "a nightmare," especially for the many couples, like themselves, who both worked at the plant. Sometimes, couples swapped their children at the gate, with one partner working day shift and the other afternoon shift. "We can't pay our rent. A lot of people are suffering," the female packer said. She added that production rates had also soared, causing physical and mental stress. "They are pumping work twice as hard as before. We have meat falling off the conveyor belt around our feet."

Head asked about their attitude to the Australian Meat Industries Employees Union (AMIEU). He explained that like the ACTU and other unions the AMIEU had a long history of betraying the struggles of workers who took action by isolating them from the rest of the union membership and the working class as a whole. "The union is altogether with the company, not for us," the female packer replied. "I have been out of it for about three years, because they refused to do anything when I was not paid for a day I had to take off."

Last Saturday, an SEP campaign table attracted attention in the main street of Beenleigh, where SEP supporters spoke with residents about the role of the

Gillard Labor government in lining up with US militarism, including Obama's aggressive "pivot to Asia" against China, and in implementing the corporate program of job-shedding, restructuring and austerity.

Guy, who just lost his job at a car yard, and two other jobs over the previous six months, bought a ticket to attend the SEP meeting. He said it was difficult to live with higher costs and rents. All his boss told him, when laying him off was that there was "not enough work." When it was pointed out that this was happening to workers everywhere, Guy commented: "Yes, I saw the meatworkers protesting outside their plant and I felt bad for them."

Asked about the Labor government, Guy replied: "I don't like any of them." However, he thought the government should bring back Kevin Rudd, the prime minister ousted by Julia Gillard and her backers, because "he at least handed out some money during the global financial crisis." Mike Head explained that billions of dollars had been spent under Rudd to prop up business and "save capitalism from itself," to use Rudd's words. That money was now being extracted back from the working class via the Labor government's budget cuts.

Tania, who also bought a ticket for the meeting, said she was "very dissatisfied with political situation." An IT worker, she voted Labor in the past but "I don't support any party at the moment." Asked why, she explained: "I would sum it up as the rich people and the corporations are getting richer, and the poor people are getting poorer. Both Labor and Liberal are doing the same things."

However, Tania thought that Labor might have a long-term plan, like in education, for "a more level playing field." When it was explained that Labor's "education revolution," both in schools and universities, was about privatising and transforming education into a marketplace, she responded: "That's the trouble. It is not explained in those terms, and I haven't got time to check out all the new funding details."

Tania said the threat of war worried her. She was at home on the day that President Obama addressed the Australian parliament in 2010, and watched the event on television. "He gave a speech about a pivot to the Pacific. It came as a shock to me, I have to say. He used the Australian parliament to announce a new policy."

Initially, Tania thought the US conflict with China

was a revival of old capitalist-communist hostilities, but agreed that China was now capitalist and the US ruling elite saw it as a threat to its economic power. She commented: "America should look after her own problems with poverty and inequality, but I'm afraid that America will eventually cause another world war."

Tania was opposed to the secrecy surrounding the basing of US Marines in Darwin, in northern Australia. "With the US having so many enemies, that makes us a target, as far as I am concerned. But who would know the consequences, unless you understand US policy and strategy?" She added that she was opposed to war because "my dad was in World War II, as a paramedic, and he suffered post-traumatic stress syndrome all his life."

Janette, a disabled pensioner, was another who bought a ticket to the SEP meeting. She explained that she was "not very happy at all," because of the soaring cost of electricity and other living expenses. She said: "I always vote Labor, because I thought it was for the working people. Now they are just the same as the other parties. They are always telling us what they are going to do for us, but it never happens, because they have a hidden agenda."

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