

Western Australia: SEP campaigns in Perth's working class suburbs

Our reporters
6 July 2013

During the past two weeks, Socialist Equality Party (SEP) Senate candidate for Western Australia, Joe Lopez has campaigned, along with SEP members and supporters, in the working class suburbs of Mirrabooka, north of the capital city Perth, and Kwinana in the southern suburbs.

Lopez and supporters spoke with workers and young people about the SEP's election campaign, focusing on the necessity for an international movement against war and austerity and the fight for a workers' government based on a socialist and internationalist program.

The Western Australian economy is now being buffeted by the worsening global economic crisis, in particular the slowdown in China, which has brought about the unravelling of the mining resources boom.

For most working class families and young people, the main impact of the mining boom has been a sharp rise in the cost of living. Many households are experiencing large hikes in the cost of utilities—electricity, gas and water—along with skyrocketing rents.

Up to 5,000 people per month have come to Western Australia seeking jobs in the mining industry but these are now becoming scarce. The influx has led to a lack of affordable housing and placed pressure on already inadequate and underfunded social services, such as public health, childcare and education.

The real beneficiaries of the mining boom have been a tiny layer of the corporate elite who have made staggering profits, such as the multi-billionaire iron ore heiress Gina Rinehart. Her wealth stands at around \$22 billion.

Mirrabooka and the surrounding suburbs of Balga, Girrawheen and Koondoola are home to many low-income families, recently arrived immigrants and refugees.

Daniel, a community worker, told SEP supporters: "Every week the price of food changes. Some weeks food costs us \$150 and the next week it costs \$300. It is affecting many people. The mining boom has meant that the cost of rent has gone up. Mine workers may be able to afford the rent, but many people in the Mirrabooka area work for small companies and don't make much money. Their wage just doesn't change, but the cost of living keeps going up."

Joe Lopez spoke with Sarah, a high school student and part-time supermarket worker, about the SEP's campaign against the drive to war and austerity. He explained the implications of the federal Labor government's support for the Obama administration's pivot to Asia.

High-level government discussions are underway about the possibility of expanding the HMAS Stirling naval base in Rockingham, south of Perth, into a home port for US nuclear armed warships and submarines. Washington regards an Indian Ocean port as crucial to its plans for a possible blockade of the key shipping routes through South East Asia.

Sarah, who admitted that she knew nothing about these plans, commented: "The government should open up to the public and tell us what is going on, because this will impact on young people the most. The base could make us a bigger target and that would be horrible."

Asked about the impact of the mining boom, Sarah said: "The cost of living and the high prices are not going to help anyone. People are doing it tough enough as it is. Only a few people higher up are benefitting from the mining boom. Gina Rinehart could do so much with her money to help a lot of sick and injured people but she doesn't. I think it would be fantastic to start a new political party which talks for the people

and really helps us.”

Ghoulam, a young worker originally from Afghanistan, explained: “When the US came to Afghanistan they said they would leave the country in 2014 but the situation is getting worse.” He did not believe the Obama administration’s promises that it would withdraw all its troops from Afghanistan.

Asked about the Australian government’s support for US war preparations against China, Ghoulam said: “In my opinion the government has to talk to the people and ask them what they think should be done. People here should have demonstrations against war... we don’t want the US (military) here and we don’t want what the US does in other countries.”

George, a refugee from Sudan who has been living in Australia for a number of years, said: “I feel worried for young people who cannot get a home. A mortgage is very high these days and the interest is too high. Paying off property should not be your life. We should be able to rent or buy affordable housing. Rents are as high as \$510 a week for some families in this area. We need public housing.”

George’s son, a high school student, added: “I’m surprised how expensive it is to pay rent or buy a house. I see how difficult it is for my parents. It is really important that families have stable accommodation, to keep the kids stable at school, not moving around all the time.”

Kwinana, a working class district south of Perth, has one of the highest levels of youth unemployment in Australia. The industrial strip once had a sizable steel fabrication and engineering industry that provided thousands of full-time jobs and youth apprenticeships.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, youth unemployment in Kwinana in January 2012 stood at 28.1 percent. Over 2,000 jobs were lost in manufacturing jobs in the area during 2011 alone.

Jason, a young qualified boilermaker, explained that he had only been able to find casual work, through a recruitment agency. “I have a number of tickets [formal trade qualifications] and skills but I still can’t get full-time work,” he said. “Many people in the area are underemployed.”

Companies cut costs by reducing the number of full-time employees, Jason added. “If you work casual, there is no sick pay or holidays. I’m finding the cost of living is increasing. In the past I could afford to pay

rent and didn’t have to share accommodation but now many people have to share in order to pay the rent.”

A mother and daughter spoke about the difficulties of finding work. Kim 17, who works at a local department store said: “I am working casual and I never know what hours I will be doing from week to week.”

Kim’s mother explained: “I have had difficulty getting full-time work too. These days your circumstances can change so quickly. One day you have a full-time job, the next you may be sacked, or you may not be getting enough hours, and then your mortgage can’t be paid. I have seen people become homeless, things are so insecure... It hasn’t been like that before. The governments are not telling the truth.”

Kim’s mother reflected on the international scope of the social crisis. “I have a friend who went to New Orleans for a holiday. She was shocked to see so many people had to walk out of their homes in America because they couldn’t keep up the repayments on their mortgages. So many people there got into financial trouble.”

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