

Socialist candidate speaks on Brisbane radio

Our reporter
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Mike Head, a Socialist Equality Party candidate for the Senate in Queensland, was interviewed on Brisbane commercial radio last Sunday morning. Radio station 4BC, a Fairfax Media outlet, requested the interview in response to an article on the World Socialist Web Site about the SEP's election campaign in Beenleigh and other southern suburbs of Brisbane, the state capital. The article, "Low wages rife in Brisbane's southern suburbs", had been republished on a number of social media sites. The interview was conducted by Chris Bombolas, a presenter of the weekend "Big Backyard" program.

Chris Bombolas: Today, I was looking at low wages rife in Brisbane's southern suburbs and this is an issue that perplexes me. I thought, and sorry, I might be a little naïve, that we had standards that we need to uphold, wages, conditions; that the primary role of unions when they first came around was to help us to secure decent wages and decent working conditions. Well, it seems that not everyone is in that same boat, and that in Brisbane's southern suburbs there are people working for ridiculously low rates and not necessarily in great working conditions.

Mike Head is the Socialist Equality Party candidate for the Senate in Queensland and a regular contributor to the *World Socialist Web Site*, www.wsws.org. He joins us this morning.

So Mike, you have found widespread instances of workers, especially young people, being paid extremely low wages in some of Brisbane's suburbs, and in this day and age I find that really, really hard to swallow.

Mike Head: Yes, we've been campaigning for the election in the working class areas. We've held public meetings in areas like Inala, and in Beenleigh, and we're about to hold a meeting in South Brisbane, and everywhere we've gone we've found young people in particular, but not just young people, now being forced to work for what I would describe as below-poverty

level wages.

These conditions are being used by companies quite consciously to drive down wages and demand pay cuts. For example, at the Beenleigh meat works, the company has given workers an ultimatum to take a 20 percent or so pay cut across the board, or it will shut down the plant.

This is not just Brisbane, of course. It is happening all over. In Melbourne and Adelaide, General Motors Holden has issued a similar demand for its workers take pay cuts of up to a \$200 a week, or it will end car production. It is the big conglomerates that are driving the wage-cutting, but it filters right down through the economy.

We found, for example, a woman at the age of 36 being paid \$12 an hour to work in a café at Eagleby. She told me she was shocked and disgusted that it had come to this. She had never worked for such a low wage in her life.

CB: Well Mike, how can we get away with this? Surely, we have minimum standards that people are allowed to be paid? Surely?

MH: Well, in some cases this is illegal. In some cases, this is cash-in-hand work, which is very prevalent now, particularly in cafes and restaurants, and those workers have no protection of any kind whatsoever.

You have to look at the big corporate entities, though. Through enterprise bargaining, they have driven down conditions, particularly since 2008, since the global financial crisis, which is now flowing through ever more to Australia, as it is around the world.

You mentioned before the unions. The unions today don't protect workers at all. The unions today have become partners in enforcing these conditions. At Beenleigh meat works, for example, the union has kept the workers isolated. It hasn't taken up a campaign throughout the meat industry, or industry more broadly.

At General Motors Holden, the union has basically told the company that workers will be prepared to be flexible and will take whatever cuts they need to supposedly keep their jobs.

CB: Well to me, that is against their [the unions'] fundamental ideology. The whole idea of them is for them to come up with standard wages and standard conditions and to improve them.

MH: That is long gone. It goes back to the Hawke-Keating [government] days, where the ACTU worked with the Labor government, through the Accords, to carry out the greatest shift of wealth from the working class to the wealthy ever seen in history in this country. It was reflected around the world, through Thatcher in Britain and Reagan in the US.

The unions became completely transformed into agencies that just enforce the dictates of the corporate elite. The globalisation of production pulled the rug from underneath their previous program of trying to get a few concessions out of companies within the national framework. That is all long gone.

CB: Well, I'm sorry, I've got no sympathy for Ford and Holden and these big conglomerates; they have been making money for a long time. Yes, we've all got to tighten our belts, but to take away fundamental rights of workers, to me is just wrong and should be made illegal and people should be brought to the attention of authorities.

MH: But this is not just happening in Australia. This is a global issue. For example at the Beenleigh meat works, the company there is called Cargill. They are the joint venture owners of the meat works with Teys, an Australian company. Cargill is one of the biggest food companies in the world. It is the largest private company in America. It operates on every continent, in food, meat processing and agribusiness.

Such companies, especially since 2008, since the crash, since the breakdown in the world economy, are shifting their production around the world relentlessly, pitting workers in one country off against the other, to demand ever lower wages and conditions. You cannot fight that through the existing legal system.

The working class has to unify its struggles on a global scale in order to overturn this entire system based on private profit.

We are socialists. We are fighting for a socialist answer, which is the working class taking power and

taking control of the means of production, taking over the factories and the banks, and running them democratically in the interests of all, not just the wealthy elite, as currently exists.

CB: One final question. If people are having concerns about their rights, give us some general employment rules that all employers need to abide by, and that employees need to understand.

MH: Well, I would just say this: the working class and young people have got to stand up and form new kinds of organisation. You can't trust the Labor Party. You can't trust the unions. We are fighting for the formation of rank-and-file committees in the factories and workplaces to organise independently in the interests of the working people themselves.

It requires a new perspective. The old hopes of getting a few crumbs off the table that the unions held out for so many years; that is gone. Workers have to become aware and conscious of that. We are fighting to develop a deeper understanding in the working class of the international and historical dimension of the tasks that we confront.

The old political system is completely dead as far as the working class is concerned. We have to strike out on a new road entirely.

CB: Alright, well Mike, thanks for bringing that to our attention and, of course, for giving us some more details about it.

MH: Thanks Chris. We are having a meeting in the Jagera Arts Centre at South Brisbane next Sunday at 5 p.m. to discuss all these issues.

CB: Alright, thanks very much. Mike Head there from the Socialist Equality Party, talking about low wages rife in Brisbane's southern suburbs.

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