

SEP meetings discuss the agenda behind the attack on refugees

Our reporters
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As part of its federal election campaign, the Socialist Equality Party held meetings last weekend in Wollongong, an industrial town hit by mass sackings at the BlueScope Steel plant, and Newcastle, a port city that has undergone major cuts to industry. The meetings were addressed by the SEP's Senate candidates for New South Wales, Nick Beams, SEP national secretary, and Zac Hambides, a leader of its youth movement, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE).

The meetings were attended by a cross section of workers and youth, including students from Wollongong and Newcastle universities, current and retired industrial workers, teachers, and healthcare employees.

Delivering the opening report, Hambides denounced the recent conviction of whistleblower Bradley Manning, and the ongoing persecution of Edward Snowden. US authorities were determined to silence the young men for exposing the Obama administration's crimes at home and abroad. Hambides outlined the Australian government's involvement in the massive spying operation being conducted by the US National Security Agency (NSA). He warned that it represented a major attack on democratic rights and the preparation for police state forms of rule.

Nick Beams began by referring to the traditional conception of bourgeois elections as the means for voters to pass judgment on the policies and program of the government. He explained, however, that none of the fundamental questions confronting the electorate, including Australia's involvement in the US war drive against China, the preparations for savage austerity measures after the election, or the mass surveillance of the population, were up for discussion in the official campaign.

Instead, the election was dominated by the question of "boat people", asylum seekers arriving to Australia by boat, and the Rudd government's anti-democratic policy of consigning them to Papua New Guinea.

Beams explained that the purpose of the hysteria being whipped up over the arrival of a few thousand asylum seekers was twofold: "First of all, to cover up any discussion

of the real issues at stake, and prevent an examination of the agenda to be implemented by whatever government comes to power following the elections. Secondly, to prepare the way for sweeping attacks on democratic rights, and authoritarian forms of rule, which are already being tested out in the measures taken against refugees."

Beams reviewed the context in which the Australian elections were being held, the deepening crisis of global capitalism, and posed a series of questions. "Five years after the eruption of the global financial crisis, have the ruling classes, governments, and central banks around the world come up with any policies to restore capitalist equilibrium?" he asked.

Beams pointed out that the US economy, the world's largest, was growing at just 1.7 percent, China's growth was slowing, and Europe was mired in depression-era economic conditions. "What are the implications of the fact that in the midst of all of these developments in the real economy, the US stock market, fuelled by ultra-cheap money from the Federal Reserve, is booming? Have we entered a new 'nirvana' in which money begets money, or are the conditions being created for a new financial catastrophe even greater than 2008?" Beams asked.

He concluded by insisting that the breakdown of global capitalism, and the turn to war, austerity and authoritarianism, posed the working class with the alternatives of revolution and counter-revolution. It was necessary, Beams stressed, to "politically arm the working class for the immense social struggles it faces," through the construction of a new revolutionary party, the SEP.

Both meetings were followed by lively discussion.

In reply to a question at the Wollongong meeting about the party's position on refugees, Beams said that the SEP defended the right of everyone to live and work wherever they chose with full citizenship rights. He explained that every other party, including the Greens, upheld the framework of border protection and the mandatory incarceration of asylum seekers.

Asked about the situation in Egypt, Beams explained that

the upheavals in that country were the product of global processes, including the imposition of the dictates of the IMF, privatisation and deepening social inequality. The initial overthrow of Mubarak was followed by the testing out of various political forces. At every stage, the pseudo-left Revolutionary Socialists had played a critical role in subordinating the working class to whichever section of the bourgeois political establishment was on the offensive.

Beams stated that while conditions in Australia were not the same as in Egypt, the pseudo-left tendencies, such as Socialist Alliance and Socialist Alternative played the same role. "Here, they tell workers to support the Labor Party based on the fraudulent claim that it is a 'lesser evil'," Beams explained. "In Egypt, they told workers that the Muslim Brotherhood would mobilise the masses against counter-revolution. Now they are claiming that the seizure of power by the military is not a coup." In each instance, he said, the role of the pseudo-left was to "poison the consciousness of the working class", and divert it from the central task of constructing a genuine socialist movement.

At the Newcastle meeting, one student said he was "distressed" that many people he spoke to did not grasp the seriousness of the political situation, and asked what he could do "as an individual" to educate people. In reply, Beams explained that the crisis of capitalism, and the turn to austerity, war and dictatorship was transforming the consciousness of broad layers of workers, and propelling them into major social struggles.

Beams said that the decisive question was the development of a revolutionary party to lead these struggles. "Speaking on the eve of World War II, Trotsky declared that the crisis of humanity is the crisis of revolutionary leadership. That crisis can only be overcome through the building of the International Committee of the Fourth International as the revolutionary leadership. It is to that task that an individual must dedicate himself."

Workers and youth at the two meetings donated almost \$1000 to the SEP's election fund. Following the meeting a number of attendees stayed back for informal discussion with the candidates and spoke to WSWS reporters.

Stefan, a Wollongong University student, said: "I consider myself left-wing, and I'm interested in socialism. I agree with what the speakers said about American imperialism. I've always thought that a world war would take place at some point in the future, but until the SEP explained it, I didn't realise the US was actually planning for a war against China."

Asked about the attacks on democratic rights, Stefan referred to the lockdown of Boston carried out by the Obama administration. "The act of terrorism [in Boston] was used to justify imposing martial law and you had CIA agents

running around all over the place. They use terrorism to increase surveillance of the population, and boost claims that we need to fight more wars abroad. They might call it protecting the people, but I think these are police state measures."

Joan, a retired teacher, commented: "I got very disillusioned with unionism and the Australian Labor Party in the 1980s. I haven't been as political but certainly I've always championed the underdog and sought justice where people are being unjustly harmed." She had asked the question about refugees. "At first I thought the SEP's position sounded a bit naïve. Just everybody coming. And yet the way it was explained, I thought why can't we have it like that? Why can't we have a faith that this can happen and that people can work together?"

One young worker in Newcastle said: "The meeting made clear that they are preparing to deal with mass opposition by millions of people to their policies. It is incredible that Manning is being jailed for life for exposing the war crimes that were being committed by the United States government.

"It is the government, not Manning, that is involved in criminal activity. They are the ones who are invading countries and murdering people. Yet Manning is the one punished and put into jail for the rest of his life. That is not justice. It is being done to silence anyone who speaks out."

Saw, a University of Newcastle student from Burma, agreed with the SEP on the issue of refugees: "Many people in Australia are focusing on this issue; however it is not a real issue." Saw said it was being used to divert attention from "real issues such as the drive to war with the American military invading countries around the world and Australia supporting them, and falling living conditions facing the working class."

"I think the SEP is doing very good things for the working class. They are raising the consciousness of what is happening around the world. I am able to learn from the SEP. Even though I am just a beginner I can see that the capitalist system is destroying our world. That is why I am supporting the SEP Election Campaign."

Authorised by Nick Beams, 113/55 Flemington Rd, North Melbourne VIC 3051



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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