

SEP candidates campaign in South Australia's capital

Our reporters
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James Cogan and Peter Byrne, the Socialist Equality Party candidates for the Senate in South Australia (SA), campaigned extensively among workers, students and unemployed in Adelaide during the final days of the 2013 election.

On August 29, Cogan, the SEP's assistant national secretary, represented the party at a candidates' debate convened by the GetUp organisation at the University of South Australia. Twelve Senate candidates took part, including Greens' Senator Sarah Hanson-Young, Labor Senator Anne McEwan, representatives of parties such as the Australian Democrats, Family First and the Palmer United Party, as well as two independents and single issue parties such as the Animal Justice Party, the Secular Party and Voluntary Euthanasia Party.

Cogan, who was the last to present a two-minute opening statement, used the brief time to oppose and denounce the support being given by the Labor government, the Liberal opposition and the Greens to the Obama administration's preparations for war on Syria.

Cogan received spontaneous applause from many of the 100 or more people in the audience when he stated: "The dubious allegations that the regime in that country has used chemical weapons against its people are being made by the very governments that justified the illegal invasion of Iraq with false claims that it had weapons of mass destruction. Over one million Iraqis were slaughtered. How many Syrians will be slaughtered on the basis of lies?"

The SEP candidate also condemned the establishment of a US marine base in Darwin as part of the wider preparations of the US for war on China and the slashing of workers' conditions at the General Motors Holden plant in Elizabeth, in northern Adelaide. (See: "GM Holden's wage-cutting deal and the Labor

government's 'productivity' agenda".)

The meeting was structured to exclude direct interaction between the audience and the candidates, with only vetted questions submitted in advance permitted. Throughout the evening, Greens' Senator Hanson-Young, Labor Senator McEwan and the other candidates made no reference to the looming war against Syria, the US military build-up in northern Australia, or the assault on the Holden workforce.

Over the following days, the SEP campaign concentrated in the working-class area of Elizabeth, publicising the final election meeting that was held in the suburb on September 5. Campaigns were conducted outside the Holden plant, at the CentreLink welfare offices in Elizabeth and nearby Salisbury, at shopping centres in both suburbs, the Salisbury Technical and Further Education College (TAFE), and the Mawson Lake campus of the University of South Australia.

At the Holden plant in Elizabeth, workers told SEP campaigners that just weeks after the trade unions had assisted Holden eliminate nearly 500 full-time jobs and impose a three-year wage freeze, they are assisting the company increase its use of low-paid casual labour. The job losses have created a chaotic situation, with severe staff shortages. Two labour hire companies are now operating inside the plant filling the gaps.

The SEP met several young workers who are employed by the labour hire firm AMS who had just begun working at the Holden plant. They are ineligible for holiday pay and sick pay, and can be sent home, without pay, for days on end, if there is a slowdown in production.

The Elizabeth area suffers an official unemployment rate of over 14 percent, with the rate for young people more than 40 percent, as a result of decades of job destruction in the car and car components industries. As

is the case across Australia, a large proportion of those classified as employed only have part-time jobs that provide less than 18 hours paid work a week.

At CentreLink offices, unemployed workers spoke with Cogan and other SEP campaigners about the immense stresses they endure trying to meet the quota of job applications they must submit each fortnight to qualify for the poverty-level Newstart allowance. Disability and old age pensioners described their constant struggle to just pay for basic essentials, such as groceries, electricity and housing.

Cogan spoke with a tradesman who was one of the Holden workers who took a redundancy package in July as part of the company's latest round of job losses. He told Cogan: "I thought as a tradesman I would find another job fairly quickly. Instead, there are barely any fitter jobs being advertised. I've put in about 50 applications for all kinds of positions and haven't even got an interview. No-one can live decently on unemployment benefits. They are driving people into total desperation so they will take any job and any conditions."

Cogan and SEP members and supporters also campaigned in Adelaide's city centre, at the entrances to the University of Adelaide and the city campus of the University of South Australia. They distributed hundreds of SEP election statements and discussed a socialist alternative to war and austerity with students and inner-city office, retail and service workers. On the morning of September 5, Cogan was interviewed by the University of Adelaide student radio station, 101.5 FM. (Click here for a Podcast of the interview.)

Mara, a cleaner at an inner-city office complex, spoke to SEP campaigners about the preparations for war on Syria. "I don't believe everything the media says," she explained. "I don't know whether it's genuine or just an attempt by America to gain control of oil. War is a waste of money. There are a lot of better things to spend money on. There are so many starving people in the world."

When asked about the election campaign in Australia, Mara said: "I don't want to vote for Labor or the Liberals. I don't think the major parties represent the people. They're looking after themselves. Meanwhile working class people are suffering. Young people should have jobs and a decent environment. People like Gina Rinehart [a mining industry billionaire] should be

taxed and the vulnerable people should be helped out. I don't like the fact that none of the real policies are discussed in the campaign. We should have a say in the policies that are carried out."

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