

Key historical issues discussed at SEP's final New South Wales election meeting

Our reporters
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Socialist Equality Party candidates in the New South Wales state election addressed a well-attended and very lively public meeting of workers, students, youth and retirees on Sunday at the Ashfield Civic Centre in the inner-western Sydney electorate of Summer Hill.

The main speaker was newly-elected SEP national secretary James Cogan whose report provoked an animated discussion and debate on the nature and historical significance of the Russian Revolution, the emergence of the Stalinist bureaucracy within the Soviet Union, whether any workers' government would inevitably become corrupt, and the revolutionary internationalist alternative to Stalinism advanced by Leon Trotsky, the Left Opposition and the Fourth International against Stalinism.

Cogan began his report by explaining that few people were listening to the mind-numbing campaigns of the Liberal-National government of Mike Baird and the Labor opposition of Luke Foley. "After decades of steadily eroding living standards under both Labor and Liberal governments, the majority of the population, especially youth, are alienated from the official political establishment and have no confidence or belief in the statements of its representatives," he declared.

"The votes cast next Saturday will not determine the policies of the next government in NSW, let alone those that will be pursued by the ruling elite on a national and international scale. They will be determined by the intractable contradictions wracking global capitalism, which have led to a systemic breakdown and ushered in a new period of wars and revolutions."

The purpose of the SEP's election campaign, Cogan emphasised, was to win the best layers of workers, youth and professionals to a revolutionary socialist perspective. "Our campaign is aimed at convincing you that it is necessary to join the SEP, the Australian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, and fight to build it as the mass political movement of the working class."

The speaker went on to review the deepening global economic and financial crisis, and its accelerating impact in every country. "The failure of capitalism threatens hundreds of millions of people with social devastation, far exceeding the terrible conditions they already endure. Moreover, the profound

instability and growing tensions lie behind the ever-escalating international geo-political conflicts and the very real dangers of global war...

"World politics increasingly resembles the years prior to the outbreak of World War I and World War II. The outlines of military blocs are beginning to emerge and tensions are becoming so fraught they cannot be reconciled through diplomatic methods.

"The crucial question is the political preparation of the working class for the struggles into which it will enter—against war, in defence of democratic rights and civil liberties, for the right to a decent job and a living income, against the destruction of essential social services, for a future for the next generation. It must learn, from the bitter strategic experiences of the 20th century and the first 15 years of the 21st, what program and party represents its interests, and which programs and parties do not.

"The catastrophes of World War I and World War II did not just 'happen,'" Cogan explained, but were the outcome of the political betrayal of the working class by the parties and leaderships that had claimed to represent its interests.

In World War I, only the Bolshevik Party in Russia, and Marxist leaders such as Leon Trotsky, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht had withstood the pressure of national chauvinism and the betrayal of the parties of the Second International, and fought for the working class everywhere to mount a revolutionary response to the war. "The struggles of Lenin and Trotsky, in particular, created the political conditions for the revolutionary struggles of the Russian working class to develop into the fight for workers' power on the basis of the program and perspective of world socialist revolution," he said.

The speaker drew out the world historic significance of the October 1917 Revolution and the continuation of the fight for revolutionary Marxism by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and the Socialist Equality Party today.

He went on: "We have been asked in the course of this campaign: Why should we trust you? How are you different? What guarantee is there is that your party won't betray like other parties?

"The answer is that the ICFI has not betrayed. The entire

history of the Trotskyist movement is bound up with the struggle against every tendency that abandoned the perspective of world socialism, adapted itself to the capitalist nation-state system and became an agency of the ruling class.

“We have been told that our perspective is too ambitious, that it is doomed to fail.” At a recent SEP election meeting in the Wyong electorate, “a worker said that we had to be realistic and work within the existing system to get what changes we could.

“In fact, the conception that the consequences of capitalist breakdown can be addressed without the revolutionary overthrow of the entire social order is the most unrealistic perspective of all,” Cogan said.

Referring to the recent election of the Syriza government in Greece and its capitulation to the austerity demands of the European banks, Cogan warned that its betrayal of the Greek working class contained crucial lessons for workers and youth around the world, and had exposed all the pseudo-left organisations that had promoted it.

“The political forces in Australia who regard Syriza as their model—factions of the Greens and organisations like Socialist Alliance—represent exactly the same affluent, petty bourgeois social layers. They are seeking, as Syriza has done, to channel the anger in the working class behind the perspective of electing a left-sounding bourgeois government into Canberra that would do everything it could to defend Australian capitalism.”

Cogan concluded his speech by emphasising that the struggle to put an end to capitalism, war and social inequality required, above all, the growth of political and historical consciousness in the most advanced sections of the working class and the serious study of the Russian Revolution and the historical struggle of the Trotskyist movement.

Other SEP candidates reviewed various aspects of the party’s analysis and program. Oscar Grenfell explained that the social nightmare facing tens of thousands of working class youth was an indictment of the capitalist system. He drew out that the multi-million dollar government-corporate campaign to glorify World War I and Anzac Day sought to dragoon another generation of youth into the military as cannon fodder for another world war.

Carolyn Kennett attacked the whipping up of xenophobia and racism against Muslims, which aimed at “dividing and disorientating” workers and “justifying the escalating attack on democratic rights and Australian military deployments to the Middle East.” She said the SEP’s program upheld the democratic right of every person to live and work in whatever country they choose, with the full rights of citizenship.

Noel Holt, a former Telstra worker, told the meeting that while it was “near impossible” to find anyone willing to defend any of the mainstream political parties, the unions were desperately attempting “to present Labor as the lesser of two evils.” He reviewed former federal and state Labor

governments’ privatisation and job destruction record and explained that workers had to make a political break with the unions and Labor, and to build the SEP.

Replying to the question about the inevitability of corruption in the discussion that ensued, Cogan and other SEP speakers explained that there were objective material reasons for the emergence of Stalinism and the bureaucratic degeneration of the Soviet Union, and these had to be carefully studied. They centred on the isolation of the first workers’ state following the betrayal and defeat of revolutionary struggles in Germany and other countries. These had deprived the Soviet Union, with its relatively backward economy, and devastated by years of civil war, of critical economic and technical assistance. Under these conditions, the bureaucracy arose, under Stalin, as the “arbiter of inequality.” Stalin’s theory of “socialism in one country” represented a betrayal of socialism and the internationalist perspective of the revolution. Cogan said the most important means of fighting corruption was “a high level of political consciousness in the working class and the development of a unified world party.”

In answer to an audience member who continued to argue that “everyone can be corrupted,” an SEP member explained that this position was aimed at politically paralysing the working class and preventing it from putting an end to the historically bankrupt capitalist system. In fact, the party fought to win the most advanced, courageous and self-sacrificing layers of the working class, and the past century provided millions of examples of just such layers.

The discussion continued on these and a range of other issues, including the nature of the East European buffer states, whether a “model” or “blueprint” could be provided for socialism and how to solve the problem of declining resources. The appreciation of audience members for the reports and discussion was expressed in a powerful collection of more than \$4,400 for the SEP’s election fund and sales of \$300 in socialist literature.

Authorised by James Cogan, 12-13 Bankstown City Plaza, Bankstown, NSW 2200

The authors also recommend:

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