

Revealing candidates forum in NSW election

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A “Meet the Candidates” forum last Monday night in the inner-west Sydney electorate of Summer Hill highlighted the class divide between the Socialist Equality Party and all the other parties contesting Saturday’s New South Wales state election. The SEP is running in the election to win workers and youth to its socialist and internationalist program.

James Cogan, the newly-elected SEP national secretary and candidate for Summer Hill, concisely outlined the party’s program and answered questions from an audience of about 70 residents. Candidates Jo Haylen for Labor, Max Phillips for the Greens and Susan Price for Socialist Alliance (SA) also participated. The Liberal candidate, Julie Passas, was invited but did not attend.

Apart from Cogan, all the speakers who were given five minutes to present their policies, sought to confine the debate to so-called local issues, while promoting illusions that the myriad issues confronting ordinary people could be addressed through the moribund parliamentary system.

Labor’s Haylen, a former local mayor, made empty promises to defend health care and education and oppose the sale of the NSW electricity grid. The previous state Labor government privatised all the other components of the power network.

SA candidate Price issued demagogic statements against big business, but praised the state’s preferential voting system, an anti-democratic process in which a person’s vote is apportioned to one of the major parliamentary parties through preferences.

“Thanks to our preferential voting system you can give your first vote to Socialist Alliance then to the Greens or other progressive candidates and put Labor ahead of the Liberals or other less progressive candidates,” Price declared, promoting the lie that Labor and the Greens are a “lesser evil.”

Phillips, a media advisor to state Greens MP Jeremy Buckingham, said nothing about the Greens’ preference vote deal with Labor or made any reference to poverty, unemployment or the growing danger of war.

In his presentation, Cogan provided an overview of the

SEP’s socialist and international program and pointed to the essential political and historical issues confronting the working class.

“When I entered politics, the dissolution of the Soviet Union was declared to be the end of socialism and the triumph of the capitalist free market. In fact, the end of the bureaucratic, anti-Marxist and dictatorial Stalinist regimes flowed from the collapse of the mechanisms that had stabilised world capitalism after World War II. Today, we face the consequences of the total breakdown of capitalism as a social order.”

Cogan said the state election had a “surreal character.” The establishment parties proceeded “as though NSW exists on a different planet from the one where immense economic crises and geopolitical tensions are facing the population and shaping every development in Australia.

“The crucial question today,” Cogan stressed, “is the political preparation of the working class for the struggles it will enter—against the danger of war, in defence of democratic rights, for its living standards and for a future for the next generation.”

Several audience questions focused on concerns about the multi-billion dollar WestConnex project, a 33-kilometre toll road system. Other questions were asked about public transport, pollution and housing costs. According to research company BIS Shrapnel, Sydney’s median house price is expected to exceed \$1 million by mid-next year, following an almost 14 percent increase over the past 12 months. One resident asked candidates about their attitude to inner city high-density housing.

Cogan answered these questions by explaining that no social issue—including transport, housing and health—could be resolved within the parliamentary framework. What was required was the fight for a workers’ government and socialist program to challenge the banks and big business, put an end to the profit system and pour millions of dollars into vital social programs.

The other candidates paid lip service to audience concerns without offering any solutions.

Two questions from the audience made clear there was

no fundamental difference between Labor, the Greens and SA on the key issues that Cogan had raised.

A member of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality asked the candidates to explain their party's position on the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia."

Cogan, who condemned the "pivot" as a "militarist agenda against China" in his opening remarks, called for the ending of the US-Australia alliance and drew attention to the basing arrangements made by the Gillard Labor government with the US, including for US Marines in Darwin, and the Pine Gap spying facility, which is central to Washington's drone assassination program.

The Greens and Labor candidates refused to answer the question. Phillips declared: "I don't really have an opinion." Haylen said she would rather keep her comments "to state-based issues."

SA candidate Price briefly mentioned the US-backed Trans Pacific Partnership but did not condemn the US and Australian preparations for war with China. This is of a piece with SA's response to Washington's "pivot" and Australia's role in it. Like Labor, the Greens and the corporate media, Socialist Alliance has maintained a conspiracy of silence over the issue.

Another audience member noted that in order to defend jobs and wages and fight for high-quality health care and education, it would be necessary to confront the banks and major corporations. "If Syriza [the Coalition of the Radical Left that heads the Greek government] can't do it, I'd like you to tell me how you'd be any different?"

Apart from Cogan, none of the candidates answered the question. Haylen admitted that "people had lost faith in Labor" but simply repeated her party's campaign slogan that "public assets will stay in public hands" under a Labor government.

Price said she could "speak all night on Greece," yet said nothing about Syriza and its agreement to impose the austerity demands of the European banks. She claimed that jobs, wages and social services could be defended by placing pressure on the existing parties through trade unions and "community activists." Phillips issued a vague call for increased taxes to pay for social services.

In his response, Cogan noted that the other candidates' answers echoed claims made by Syriza during last year's Greek elections.

"Behind its rhetoric, Syriza accepted capitalist property relations. Within four weeks of forming government, the European banks and governments told Syriza that it must intensify the austerity measures that it claimed it would

end, or they would bankrupt the Greek economy. Because of its programmatic foundations, Syriza agreed and has utterly betrayed the Greek working people whose votes placed it in power."

Another audience member asked why there was no "socialist unity" between Socialist Alliance and the Socialist Equality Party.

Price claimed that SA was formed in 2001 through the "unification" of "socialist groups" and proudly referred to campaigns launched with the Greens.

None of the groups that formed SA were socialist or had anything to do with the struggle for Marxism. Socialist Alliance, like other pseudo-left groupings in Australia and internationally, reflects the interests of privileged middle class layers who are hostile to any struggle by the working class for socialism.

Cogan rejected any unity with SA. He explained: "Socialist Alliance and the Socialist Equality Party represent entirely different class tendencies. Syriza includes numerous organisations that call themselves socialist but their role is not to fight for left-wing or socialist policies. They served to dupe the Greek workers.

"The result has been that the government now in power serves the interests of the Greek capitalist class and is continuing the policies that workers voted against. The type of unity called for by Socialist Alliance is a unity of forces whose primary concern is to keep workers here confined to a national, parliamentary and pro-capitalist program."

The forum further demonstrated that the Socialist Equality Party is the only party that genuinely represents the working class. Those looking for answers to the critical issues facing workers and youth should study the SEP's election program and seriously consider joining its ranks.

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