

London: SEP candidate exposes false housing promises of Labour and Greens

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1 April 2015

A “Meet the Candidates” hustings held last week in the London constituency of Holborn and St. Pancras highlighted the class divide between the Socialist Equality Party and all the other parties contesting the May 7 General Election.

The SEP is running in the election to win workers and youth to its programme of socialism, internationalism and opposition to war and austerity.

David O’Sullivan, the SEP candidate for Holborn and St. Pancras, outlined the party’s programme to an audience of about 50 people at the meeting organised by the Camden Federation of Private Tenants (CFPT).

Green Party leader Natalie Bennett, Labour Party candidate and former director of public prosecutions Sir Keir Starmer and Liberal Democrat Jill Fraser participated. The Conservative and United Kingdom Independence Party candidates did not attend.

The speakers were given five minutes to address the question: “What would your party do to improve the private rented sector for tenants and make housing associations more accountable to their tenants?”

Meeting chairman, Peter Taylor from the CFPT, outlined the huge housing crisis in London. Audience members also described their own experiences. A residents’ association vice-chair described how Peabody, London’s oldest and biggest housing association, has raised rents by 30 percent over the last three years. A tenant described how she was struggling to pay her rent and was outraged to be told by Labour-controlled Camden council that it would keep increasing rents because most tenants would be able to claim benefits to offset the increase. She criticised calls for a cap on rents “because all rents will go up to the cap.”

Another tenant explained how Labour-controlled councils had “effectively rigged elections” to force tenants to relinquish local authority ownership and pave the way for housing to squash the “tenants’ voice” and

install undemocratic quangos. The ineffectiveness of the Housing Ombudsman Service, which is supposed to investigate complaints against landlords, was noted.

Fraser, a former Camden mayor, tried to justify the housing record of the Liberal Democrats, who have been in a coalition government with the Conservatives and have overseen the “social cleansing” of the capital. She put forward a number of pathetic remedies, including the right of tenants to launch petitions to get landlords to meet with them!

Starmer, parachuted into the Holborn and St. Pancras seat just over a year after joining the Labour Party, made empty promises, including a “flexible, fair rent review,” while admitting few of them were official Labour Party policy. “This is me speaking, not the Labour Party”, was his refrain.

Sensing the anger in the audience Starmer was forced to admit, “All political parties who have been in power over the last 20 years have failed.”

For her part, Bennett issued demagogic statements about the Green Party building 500,000 more homes and implementing rent control. Last month, she was left floundering for three minutes in what she admitted was an “absolutely excruciating” car-crash BBC interview due to being unable to explain how her party’s plan for the 500,000 homes was to be paid for or whether the cost would be £2.7 billion, £4.5 billion or £6 billion a year.

SEP candidate David O’Sullivan said that the other speakers were talking as if their parties had no responsibility for the housing crisis. “The actions the speakers are proposing to address these problems are both inadequate and dishonest. Do not accept their promises. Look at their record”, he urged.

Decades of government promises to address the immense problems of high rents, tenants’ rights, homelessness and a grossly inadequate supply of affordable housing have never been honoured, he

continued. O’Sullivan explained how in the early 1980s the Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher had begun the process of selling off public housing, first introduced after World War I to provide protection against slum landlords and racketeers. The best properties were sold off creating a huge revenue stream for the building societies and banks.

He criticised Starmer for failing to mention that the Labour government under Tony Blair had vastly accelerated the privatisation process, with annual sales and transfers exceeding those under the Tories. To the loudest applause of the evening O’Sullivan said, “The only reason the coalition government has got away with its austerity measures is because Labour controlled councils have imposed them.”

O’Sullivan explained how over 800,000 new homes were needed in London by 2021 to meet demand, but that in 2014 only 18,750 new homes had been built. Labour-controlled Camden council was one of the worst offenders—building just 200 of the 1,862 new homes needed by the borough.

The Green Party was not an alternative, O’Sullivan said. The Greens had ruled Brighton and Hove Council since 2011, but there had been an increase of 9,000 individuals, couples or families waiting for housing. In Ireland support for the Green Party had slumped as a result of its role in a coalition government that imposed austerity measures after the 2008 global economic crisis.

The SEP candidate drew attention to the role of Syriza, which had won the general election in Greece in January after promising, like the Greens, to reverse austerity measures. When Europe’s ruling elite told the new Syriza government that there was no alternative to austerity and threatened to bankrupt Athens it agreed to abide by their diktats.

O’Sullivan pointed out that while housing was starved of funds, billions could be found for war, as in the case of Ukraine where the NATO powers, led by the United States and Britain, have used a Western-backed coup to build up military forces in the states bordering Russia. The immediate goal of this build-up is for regime-change in Moscow as part of a drive for world domination.

Any talk of improving the private rented sector for tenants and make housing associations more accountable under the present economic system, said O’Sullivan, was a pipe dream. “There is no answer to austerity outside of a struggle against capitalism and for socialism,” he said.

The SEP, he explained, is calling for a massive

programme of public building to meet the need for affordable homes. “This demands the public ownership of the construction industry and the land and banks owned by the corporate sector, the Church, the Crown, and big landowners run under democratic workers’ control.”

Quoting from the SEP election manifesto, O’Sullivan declared that the establishment of a workers’ government pledged to a socialist programme was an urgent requirement. It would end the anarchy and wastefulness of the profit system by cancelling all debts to the international finance institutions and transforming the banks and major corporations into publicly owned and democratically controlled utilities. Wealth would be taken from the billionaires and diverted to meet essential social needs. All austerity measures would be reversed and billions poured into the economy to end unemployment and provide decent paying jobs, free and high quality health care, housing, education and social services.

Bennett was clearly worried by O’Sullivan’s criticisms of the Green Party. She cynically tried to divert attention from the right-wing policies pursued by the British Green’s sister party in Ireland by declaring in her closing remarks, “I am the leader of the Green Party for England and Wales, so I am not going to take responsibility for the Irish Greens.”

She went on to defend the policies of Syriza by stating, “In Greece the Greens are in Syriza. It is fighting hard. They have the full force of Germany and the EU against them.”

At the conclusion of the meeting several audience members stayed to talk to O’Sullivan. His remarks also found support on Twitter.

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