

SEP (Australia) campaigns against attempted censorship by Bankstown Council officers

Our reporters
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Last Saturday, a Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaign team won strong support from local residents in opposing attempts by Bankstown City Council officers to prevent the SEP from conducting political work in the Sydney working-class suburb.

SEP members and supporters distributed leaflets advertising the July 5 SEP public meeting, “Oppose the US-Australian war drive against China!” and discussed with workers and young people the clear connection between the advanced preparations for war in the Asia-Pacific and the anti-democratic efforts by various authorities to suppress the SEP’s campaigns.

The previous weekend, on Saturday June 6, SEP campaigners were accosted by two Bankstown Council rangers, who claimed that political activities on a public footpath area required prior approval from the local council.

The rangers insisted that this requirement was outlined in section 68 of the New South Wales Local Government Act. One said political campaigning without a permit was allowed only in the 28 days before an election. When SEP campaigners challenged these assertions and demanded to know which provisions of section 68 specifically covered political campaigning, the rangers were unable to respond. Instead, they claimed that the legislation applied to “any activity” on “council land.”

SEP campaigners decided to leave the area, and seek legal advice. As they were departing, one ranger warned that if they were seen campaigning in Bankstown again, the police would be called, and hefty fines would be levelled against the SEP.

In fact, section 68 of the Local Government Act contains no provisions placing restrictions on political activities, such as leaflet distribution. The SEP sent a letter to Bankstown Council general manager Matthew Stewart on June 10, outlining the anti-democratic character of the rangers’ conduct and stated that it was “even more extraordinary given the fact that the SEP and its predecessor, the Socialist Labour League, have conducted political work in Bankstown for more than four decades, including countless leaflet

distribution campaigns, without ever being required to seek prior approval for street campaigns.”

The letter stated that the rangers’ actions “could well be interpreted as a violation of the implied right to freedom of political communication in the Australian Constitution.” It concluded: “We await a timely reply confirming that they over-stepped the bounds of their jurisdiction, and that the SEP will not be subjected to further interference when conducting political work within the Bankstown City Council area.”

The council, whose mayor represents the Labor Party, has not acknowledged receipt of the SEP’s letter, or issued any response.

The actions of the council rangers are the latest in a series of attempts to silence the SEP’s anti-war campaigns. In April, nearby Burwood Council tried to block an SEP public meeting titled “Anzac Day, the glorification of militarism, and the drive to World War III.” The council cancelled a booking following “complaints” from supporters of the far-right, nationalist “Reclaim Australia” movement. The University of Sydney then refused to allow the meeting to be held on its campus, on the grounds that it would create a risk of disruption to other activities on campus that day. The public meeting was only able to proceed at a different location after an intensive campaign won widespread support from workers and young people across Australia and internationally.

Underlying the growing turn to political censorship is Australia’s complete integration into the advanced, US-led preparations for war against China. The ongoing crisis in the South China Sea, in which Washington and its allies, including Australia and the Philippines, have sought to provoke China into a conflict, underscores the timeliness of the SEP’s warnings about the threat of a new world war.

Under conditions of widespread hostility to war in the working class and among young people, the political establishment is seeking to prevent the development of a mass anti-war movement based on a socialist program—a perspective for which the SEP alone fights.

Significantly, last Saturday, Bankstown Council officials did not seek to prevent the SEP's campaign. The SEP will continue to conduct political work in the Bankstown area, and demands that the council provide written confirmation that SEP campaigns will not be obstructed.

During last Saturday's campaign, workers and young people spoke out against the drive to war and the attempted political censorship.

Marty, an IT student, was initially surprised that the moves to block the SEP campaigns had reached down to the level of a local council. "But I've learned over the years that everything we're told officially is wrong. In school we are taught how everything works in government, and what-not, but none of that is basically correct."

On hearing of the range of attempts by authorities to ban SEP meetings and campaigns, Marty commented: "There's good reason for silencing your voice about the dangers of war because there's a lot of money made off war... When you say that wars are always launched on lies, you are preaching to the choir. The whole thing in Iraq about 'weapons of mass destruction' was a cover-up for US debt. They are in debt and they need war."

"It is America which is the aggressor around the world. And Australia isn't really given a choice about joining in. We're forced into it, aren't we? I'm sure there's a connection with the fact that Bankstown Council rangers are trying to stop you. You are trying to get the right message out, and that is always suppressed."

Marty was particularly concerned by the recent official celebrations of Anzac Day, commemorating World War I. The government campaign was "definitely used to confuse the working class." He explained: "With the promotion of patriotism and stuff like that, I'm fully aware of how Hitler's people used patriotism to get Germany to go to war, so this does ring alarm bells for me."

Rene, from a Greek-Cypriot background, was outraged by the Bankstown Council officer's actions. "This is wrong. People should have the right to express their opinion in a demonstration or a meeting, and no-one must be able to stop them."

"The problem in Australia is that the foreign policy of Labor and Liberal is the same, even if they have some domestic differences, and that is why they cannot allow any demonstration of opposition."

Rene was also alarmed by the government's World War I celebrations. "It's because they need heroes! They are trying to imbue the soldiers of Australia with patriotism. I think it is wrong to celebrate Anzac Day, but if I say this openly, I am afraid I can be arrested. They want to control everything—what they are saying and doing. People must have the right to express their opinions without having to

give an explanation."

Rene was deeply worried by the prospect of war. "War is the policy of America," she said. "Its economy is based on the profits from the manufacture of weapons. The other thing is that the American government does not want any drop in the price of oil, which they have now found in large quantities in Syria. That is why they are trying to conquer Syria."

"America trained ISIS [Islamic State]! It gave them the guns, through Turkey, through the most disgusting people. They claim to be fighting for democracy and to feed the people, but in reality they destroy other countries. They can't tolerate other countries becoming equal to them, or higher than them. Sooner or later, I believe we are going to have a third world war. America will not give in, because China is growing. And a war today will be nuclear, with sickness and death."

"We have nothing to celebrate in Australia. War after war, that is all there is to celebrate. I feel sorry for the soldiers who died, and for their families, but they were often so poor that they offered to go to fight."

Anna, an Iraqi refugee who fled Syria, condemned the US invasion of Iraq. "They claimed they would give us freedom and make Iraq a beautiful country with modern technology, but the opposite happened," she said. "We now have killings, kidnappings, assassinations."

Asked why this had happened, Anna commented: "America is trying to keep its power and that is becoming dangerous for all the world, not just for the Middle East."

Anna opposed any political censorship. "You have the right to campaign. This is democracy. It is the right to give your opinions and share them. What is happening around the world is full of problems and we have to solve these problems."

"Australia shared the Iraq invasion with America. They should support people in need instead, like us refugees who fled from terrorism and religious discrimination. Thank you for letting me give my opinion."



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