

# SEP Senate candidate Peter Byrne calls for anti-war movement at election forum

Our reporters  
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One of the Socialist Equality Party's candidates for the Senate in the state of Victoria, Peter Byrne, participated in a candidates' forum in the northern Melbourne suburb of Fawkner last Sunday, where he urged workers and young people to take up the fight against war and militarism.

The forum was organised for candidates in the electorate of Wills, which the SEP's Will Fulgenzi is contesting. Standing in for Fulgenzi, who was speaking at an SEP public meeting, Byrne challenged the Labor, Greens and pseudo-left Socialist Alliance candidates, and those from the Sex and Animal Justice parties.

The forum was organised by Fawkner Community House, which provides a meeting centre and range of services. Fawkner has a majority immigrant, working class population. Of the 30 or so people attending, most were workers originally from the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent.

The meeting chair gave each candidate five minutes to make an opening address, which was followed by a question-and-answer session. While answers were limited to two minutes, then one minute, the format allowed questions to be put to all candidates across a number of local, environmental and broader political issues.

Byrne used his five minutes to focus on the central issue of the SEP's campaign: breaking the conspiracy of silence surrounding the growing drive to war and raising the necessity to build an international anti-war movement of the working class.

"We're standing in this election, in opposition to every other party, to warn of the danger of war," Byrne said. "It's the great unmentionable in this campaign. For 25 years, the major political parties—Liberal, Labor and the Greens—have supported US imperialist wars, in the Middle East and now in the preparations for war

against China."

Byrne pointed out that the Labor candidate on the platform, Peter Khalil, was in Iraq during 2004 as an adviser to the illegal US-led occupation and that the previous Labor government enthusiastically supported the US "pivot to Asia" and military build-up against China.

The SEP candidate drew the connection between the drive to war and the deepening assault on the living standards of the working class. He warned that whichever parties formed government after the elections would deepen the austerity policy of budget cuts. "We'll all be told as soon as the election is over, there is no money. That's the agenda that's been hidden during this election."

Byrne, whose father was an immigrant car worker, also spoke on the pending destruction of the entire car industry in Australia. Just to the north of the Wills electorate, the Ford assembly plant in Broadmeadows is to be shut later this year. "The SEP is the only party opposing the closure of the car industry," he said. "Tens of thousands of car workers in Australia will be thrown on the scrapheap."

The socialist candidate's remarks were in sharp contrast to those of every other candidate, who raised nothing about rising global geo-strategic tensions, the deepening US drive to war against China and Australia's integration into it.

Labor's Khalil made no attempt to defend his role in Iraq or address the issue of war. He repeated the same banal lies as every other Labor candidate. Khalil promised to defend public health and education, while posturing as an opponent of the Liberal-National Coalition government's tax cuts for the wealthy. He was hoping the audience would not remember the regressive policies of previous Labor governments.

The Greens' Samantha Ratnam also dodged the danger of war. She urged people to "return the country to a compassionate and caring one," promoting her party's policies on refugees and climate change. She falsely claimed the Greens opposed the anti-terror laws pushed through by the Coalition and Labor. In fact, the party voted for the central features of these far-reaching, anti-democratic measures.

During the question-and-answer session, the issue of the car industry again emerged.

The SEP candidate challenged Khalil's declaration that a Labor government would provide "retraining" programs for retrenched car workers. "Everything that's been raised by all the candidates here is aimed at throwing dust in the eyes of young people," Byrne explained. "None of these problems can be resolved within the framework of the capitalist profit system. The Labor Party candidate talks about retraining for car workers—but these jobs don't exist—this is nothing but a fraud."

Elaborating on the SEP's program, Byrne added: "We are fighting for a workers' government, that is, a democratically organised government in which the majority of people in society, that is the working class, would determine the running of organisations like the Ford motor company, with committees of workers making the decisions on what's going to be produced, how many cars are going to be produced, what technology will be used. That's the only way society can progress, on the lines of the needs of humanity."

Speaking from the audience, local municipal councillor Sue Bolton, a member of the pseudo-left Socialist Alliance, insisted that the trade unions were the "most important elementary organisations in our community." She asked each candidate to pledge to repeal the vestiges of the former Howard government's WorkChoices industrial legislation.

The question was intended to provide an opportunity for the Labor and Greens' candidates, as well as Socialist Alliance candidate Zane Alcorn, to pose as defenders of workers' rights, which they duly did.

Byrne punctured this posturing. "We support the repeal of all anti-union legislation—but let's just be clear here, the unions are no longer organisations that defend the working class," he said. "The Royal Commission into the unions was an anti-working class operation carried out by the Liberal government, but it

did highlight the enormous corruption of the union bureaucracy, and the real role of the unions in smashing up workers' wages and conditions...

"The upper middle class layers in the bureaucracy have feathered their own nests at the expense of the most impoverished layers of workers. At Ford, General Motors Holden and Toyota, the unions have enforced an 'orderly shutdown' of the entire car industry."

The discussion finished on a question from an SEP supporter who asked the candidates where they stood on the war danger raised by Byrne. He particularly asked Khalil where he stood on the calls made by Labor's defence spokesman Stephen Conroy for the government to follow the US in conducting a provocative "freedom of navigation" challenge to Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea.

Determined to stymie any discussion about the implications of such reckless military operations, Khalil repeatedly dodged the question and refused to answer.

*To contact the SEP and get involved, visit our website or Facebook page.*

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