

SEP election campaign team visits lead-affected suburb

Our reporters
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A Socialist Equality Party election campaign team last week visited Boolaroo, a southwestern suburb of Newcastle, where the closure of Pasminco's Cockle Creek lead and zinc smelter has left a legacy of soil contaminated with lead, cadmium and other heavy metals, and where children's blood tests have revealed high levels of lead.

The team, led by John Davis, a SEP Senate candidate for New South Wales in the July 2 federal election, spoke to residents about the issues facing the working class in the election, including the corporate and government contempt for the health and safety of workers and their families.

This contempt is typified by what has happened in Boolaroo, where a new housing development was opened up on the smelter site in order to recover money for Pasminco's creditors, who were owed \$2.6 billion. According to long-time residents, slag from the smelter was also used or dumped in other parts of the Newcastle-Lake Macquarie region.

Pasminco closed the smelter in 2003, after it became "unprofitable" and declared bankruptcy, throwing 350 workers out of a job. In supposedly remediating the site, the bankruptcy administrator, Ferrier Hodgson, sought to avoid liability for environmental damage.

This was only possible because the state Labor government accepted Ferrier Hodgson's arguments that Pasminco's legal obligation to remediate homes lapsed when the smelter closed.

In 2008, the government's Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) secretly agreed to a "cap and cover" policy. Contaminants were to be placed in a 45-metre high, 1.9 million cubic metre block, which was capped and upon which sporting fields would be built. Labor then adopted a "Lead Abatement Strategy" that meant homes received token treatment on voluntary basis,

while public spaces were not treated at all.

In November 2014, after the EPA and Ferrier Hodgson claimed the clean-up was complete, research led by Macquarie University environmental science professor Mark Taylor found soil samples containing lead up to 14 times the national soil guidelines of 300 milligrams per kilogram. The Boolaroo Public School playground was 300 percent above the safe limit.

Davis and the SEP team spoke to **John**, a retired worker who has lived in Boolaroo all his life. He oversaw the distribution of the smelter's granulated slag, which can contain toxic compounds, including high levels of lead. John told Davis that both the Lake Macquarie and Newcastle city councils used the slag in water pipe trenches or dumped it straight into lakes. He said the slag could still be found in "places like Elebana where it washes up onto the shore."

During the smelter's "heyday," the "sulfuric acid fumes would choke you and make your eyes water," John said. The top of the hill, which is now the site of a new housing development, used to be completely brown from the pollution in the soil. At one point, soil tests "found that cadmium had leached into the ground there."

Asked whether Pasminco or the authorities were concerned about the environmental impact of the smelter's operation, John commented: "They were not even interested, all they are concerned with is the almighty dollar."

Michael, who worked for nine and a half years as a fitter at the site, said residential areas were not remediated to the original specifications, which required the removal and replacement of soil down to 100 millimetres. His neighbour's yard was dug by hoes from the contracted company down to just below grass level. Soil samples were only taken down to 50 mm.

In their discussions with residents, Davis and the SEP team explained that both the Liberal-National Coalition government and the opposition Labor Party were conducting campaigns based on lies and evasions. Because of the rapidly worsening economic situation globally and in Australia, all their promises would be ditched after the election.

Except for the SEP, all the other parties were hiding any reference to the fact that the Australian ruling elite's commitment to Washington's war preparations against China posed immense dangers to workers in the Asia-Pacific area and throughout the world.

One female worker said she had always voted Labor, as a family tradition, but her experience in recent years meant she would never do so again and that an alternative was necessary.

A Coles supermarket worker said there was no difference between the Coalition and Labor and the election would change nothing. She depended on Sunday wage penalty rates to survive and was enraged by the push to cut the rates and the fact that the trade unions did nothing for workers.

Another worker agreed that the refugee crisis was caused by the wars in which Australia had participated, destroying entire cities in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria, but disagreed that Australia could shelter them.

The team explained the SEP defended the right of workers to live and work in any country with full citizenship rights. The SEP and its sister parties internationally fought to create a world without borders and one in which no one would be forced to leave their home because of war, economic exploitation or political oppression. This required the unification of the international working class to abolish capitalism and its outmoded nation-state system.

To contact the SEP and get involved, visit our web site or Facebook page.

Authorised by James Cogan, Shop 6, 212 South Terrace, Bankstown Plaza, Bankstown, NSW 2200.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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