

SEP candidate discusses war and the Russian Revolution at Melbourne high schools

Our reporter
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The Socialist Equality Party's candidate for the seat of Wills in the 2016 federal elections, Will Fulgenzi, participated in a lively discussion with a class at Footscray City College on June 16.

Footscray, in Melbourne's west, is a working-class suburb with a large proportion of immigrant workers from South East Asia and East Africa. Fulgenzi was invited to address a class of about 25 Year 11 politics students. The class had previously invited candidates to speak from the Labor Party and the Greens.

The SEP candidate's opening slide-show presentation began by pointing to the devastating consequences of American militarism over the past 25 years and the successive Australian-backed wars in the Middle East and Africa, which killed over one million people and contributed to the greatest refugee disaster since World War II. "The American ruling class has sought to overcome its historic economic decline," he said, "through the use of the one area in which it still retains its dominance: military force."

"Now the major powers are preparing for a war of even more catastrophic proportions, a war with nuclear weapons." Noting the US military build-up against both Russia and China, Fulgenzi quoted a recent Union of Concerned Scientists report, which warned that the US and Chinese governments "are a few poor decisions away from starting a war that could escalate rapidly and end in a nuclear exchange."

The SEP candidate's presentation pointed to the resurgence of open class struggle by workers, and a growing political radicalisation on an international scale. Fulgenzi showed images of the massive strike wave in France in opposition to the right-wing Socialist Party government's reactionary *El Khomri* labour law, and large campaign rallies by self-described "democratic socialist" Senator Bernie Sanders in the United States.

Fulgenzi explained that "Sanders is no socialist. He defends American capitalism and supports American militarism in the Middle East," and was now seeking to channel those who supported him into voting for Hilary

Clinton. But the support he had won "demonstrates the growing interests in socialism, particularly among the youth, and explodes the myth that the American working class is wedded to capitalism."

Fulgenzi condemned the Australian elections as a political fraud in which none of the issues confronting the working class are being discussed. "Besides my party's campaign," he noted, "there is a conspiracy of silence by all the major parties on Australia's integration into the advanced US war plans against China."

Fulgenzi explained that the SEP's campaign was aimed at providing workers and young people with a worked-out political strategy based on the lessons of history. "The 'Big Lie' of the 20th century, repeated endlessly over our entire lives since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, is that this event signified the failure of socialism," he said. This lie "has always depended on the suppression of any discussion of the political alternative to Stalinism within the Soviet Union," represented in the struggle carried out by the Left Opposition, and later the Fourth International, led by Leon Trotsky.

All of the students listened attentively throughout the presentation and participated in a lively question and answer session that lasted over 45 minutes, stopped only by the end of the class. Many had prepared questions in advance, keen to hear a socialist perspective on major historical questions and on wide-ranging contemporary political issues. Others asked questions from the presentation or in response to the discussion itself.

A student noted that Marx and Engels had explained that the state would "wither away" but that this had not happened in the Soviet Union. "What makes you confident this will happen?" he asked.

Fulgenzi noted that Marxists characterised the state as a "body of armed men" for the protection of the social interests of one class over another. In his great work *Revolution Betrayed*, "Trotsky had explained that it was impossible for the state, which he characterised as the 'guardian of inequality,' to wither away so long as vast

levels of poverty and inequality existed.”

“The material pre-conditions for socialism could not be created within Russia for two reasons. Firstly, the immense economic and historical backwardness of the country, with a majority peasant population, compounded by the devastating impact of the first World War, the civil war, the invasion by 14 imperialist armies. To speak about socialism under such conditions was impossible. But above all, this pointed to the necessity of the extension of the revolution internationally.”

Fulgenzi pointed to Trotsky’s analysis that socialism must be based upon the further development of the productive forces built-up under capitalism. Because capitalism itself had created a world economy, “socialism must be based on an international revolution and the organisation of production by the working class on an international scale. Both the working class and the Bolshevik Party had always conceived of the Russian Revolution as the opening shot in an international socialist revolution,” he said. This was the perspective continued by Trotsky, against Stalin’s reactionary program of “Socialism in One Country.”

Taking up from this question, another student asked whether the success of capitalism was not due to “human nature.” Fulgenzi explained that “my party bases itself on a materialist philosophical outlook. This means that human consciousness is a reflection of the external world, rather than the reverse.” He noted that attempts to explain the source of “human nature” must always originate, in one form or another, to the role of a deity in introducing this nature into mankind.

“The problem with this analysis is that it cannot explain a historically changing phenomenon—the changes in the different forms of social organisation of humanity, from slavery, to feudalism, to capitalism—through an unchanging quantity such as ‘human nature.’ Capitalism is a relatively modern phenomenon. Feudalism may have been said to express ‘human nature’ at one point, but those social relations were abolished in revolutionary struggle. And the reason is that the very development of society’s productive forces at that time made it necessary to establish capitalist property relations. Now capitalism has become a barrier on society’s development, and must be replaced by the necessary next stage in mankind’s development: socialism.”

Later, another student asked whether Fulgenzi was concerned that his party’s international perspective may mean “a loss of Australian identity.” Fulgenzi explained that “nationalism, and the promotion of a ‘national identity,’ is a political tool of the ruling class to insist that the divisions in society are not between classes—they’re between nations.”

He noted: “In this country there has now begun a four-year celebration of Australian participation in WWI, of the Anzacs, and the fostering of the supposed ‘digger spirit’

and Australian ‘national identity’ based on militarism. The purpose is to create the conditions where our generation can once again be sent to fight and die in wars for ‘our’ own ruling classes.” He pointed to the campaign of censorship underway against any critical voices, including the sacking of SBS journalist Scott McIntyre, and the ban by the University of Sydney on the Socialist Equality Party’s 2015 public meeting on Anzac Day opposing the glorification of militarism.

“Our youth organisation, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality,” he added, “has faced ongoing censorship from the student union at my university preventing us from affiliating and being able to hold events on the campus opposing the drive to war.”

He concluded: “The essential division in society is class. We have absolutely no interest in going and slaughtering our counterparts among young workers in Asia or the Middle East for the profits of the rich. Against nationalism and chauvinism, we fight to unite working people internationally in a common struggle in defence of our interests, against war and capitalism.”

Among the many other questions, students asked where revolution would emerge first; whether the events in France signified that it was heading towards revolution; what would trigger revolution in Australia; and what role globalisation had played in politics today.

Yesterday, Fulgenzi was invited to give a similar presentation to around 25 students in politics and history at Princess Hill Secondary College, a high school in the inner-city suburb of Carlton. Many of those present did not have class on but had decided to stay behind at school in order to have the opportunity to hear from and speak with a socialist. As at Footscray, the students were animated and engaged throughout the discussion. The questions included why the SEP believed the working class is the revolutionary force in society, whether Stalin’s usurpation of political power in the Soviet Union was inevitable. Another student noted that the repeated terror attacks internationally had been carried out by individuals with close ties to governments, but that anyone who said this was labelled by the media as a “conspiracy theorist.”

At the end of both meetings, students took copies of the SEP’s election statement and other WSWS articles with details of the SEP’s final election public rally this Sunday.



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