SEP forum rallies opposition against racist "African gangs" campaign in Australia

Our reporters
26 January 2018

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) held a successful public forum, titled "Oppose the racist government-media campaign against so-called 'African gangs'!", last Sunday.

More than 30 people attended the event in Footscray, a western suburb in Melbourne. Most were workers and young people of African origin, outraged by an ongoing government-media "law and order" campaign purportedly over criminal activity by "African gangs."

They came to the SEP forum—the only public event held by any political party or organisation to oppose the racist frenzy—determined to speak out and share their personal experiences of police harassment, unemployment and poverty, and other hardships caused by the absence of basic social support services.

The lively meeting followed campaigns by SEP members and supporters in working-class suburbs include Tarneit, Footscray, and Flemington (see: "Australian workers, youth speak out against witch-hunt over African gangs").

Numerous shops that are popular with African immigrants and their families—including cafes, restaurants, clothing shops, butchers, and travel agents—agreed to put up posters in their windows advertising the SEP forum. Some took extra leaflets to distribute to customers. Many people thanked SEP campaigners for fighting against the witch-hunt being stoked by the government and media, and several donated money and left their contact details.

Delivering the opening report to the forum, SEP national committee member Patrick O'Connor reviewed the *World Socialist Web Site*'s analysis of the political and media establishment's campaign against youth of African origin.

The "African gangs," he explained, are a media fabrication, with a few petty crime incidents carried out by small numbers of teenagers conflated into a virtual national security threat. O'Connor pointed to the role of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull in stoking the campaign with a provocative claim on January 1 that there was "growing lawlessness" in Victoria. The Labor Party effectively backed the campaign by criticising Turnbull for not giving more money to the Australian Federal Police.

The speaker reviewed the openly racist media coverage in recent weeks. He showed a January 14 Channel 7 television news broadcast that promoted neo-Nazis as "patriots" who intended to deal with an "immigrant crime crisis" by creating a "kind of neighbourhood watch." This endorsement of fascist vigilantism has caused alarm among immigrant communities in Melbourne.

O'Connor continued: "What is happening now is not a peculiarly Australian phenomenon. We see this racial targeting, scapegoating, in many other countries around the world. In the United States, President Donald Trump targets Mexicans, Muslims, and has now issued a tirade against people from, excuse my language, 'shithole countries,' as he calls them.

"The promotion of racism is a global phenomenon. The underlying strategy is based on the ruling class seeking to maintain its position by dividing the working class, by inciting divisions and fears. What we're seeing is a symptom of a political and social order that is plunging deeper and deeper into crisis. Social inequality has reached unprecedented levels and the ruling elite is preparing to further slash wages, working conditions, healthcare, education, and other basic social and welfare support services."

The speaker also reviewed the US military's preparations for nuclear war, backed by the Australian government. He cited parts of the new National Defense Strategy released by the Trump administration's defense secretary, James Mattis, just hours before the forum. The document bluntly stated that "great power competition—not terrorism—is now the primary focus of US national security." In other words, a third world war was being prepared.

O'Connor concluded by outlining the SEP's revolutionary program, in opposition to militarism and war, exploitation, racism and state repression. "The International Committee of the Fourth International is a world party," he said. "There's no national solution to any of the problems confronting the working class around the world, whether you are in Australia, Sudan, Somalia, the United States, or anywhere else. There needs to be an internationally unified movement of the working class, based on a socialist perspective."

An important discussion immediately emerged after the report.

Khadija, originally from Somalia, attended the meeting together with several other women she had telephoned beforehand to tell them about the event. "Whether we are single mothers—whether there are fathers or not—we came as refugees to this country and we thought the government will welcome us," she explained. "We think we are going to have opportunities, we think we are going to have a good life. But to be honest, we have a miserable life. Coming to Australia, it is a miserable life.

"This media, what they are doing, it is unacceptable. The media—I don't know how to say it—is making up everything. Our youth are always in prison… The police are coming to us, they drag our children in front of us, they have no respect. The police stop you and ask your name. They are taking photos of us. I am 17 years in Australia—why are they taking photos of me? The police can do whatever they want…

"We want our children to have a good life here, to learn more, to forget what happened in the past. But opportunities are not here. Our children they can't get a job here in Australia, no way—because we're all criminals. We came here to be safe, we are not safe. They say it is

© World Socialist Web Site

better to be here in Australia. But for me, as a mum, if my son is going to jail for ten years, I'd rather take him to Somalia even if he'll die."

Khadija later explained that she is a trained midwife and nurse, but because her qualifications are not accepted in Australia she has to work as a cleaner. Another elderly man told the forum he was an experienced electrical engineer but because his degrees were not accepted he has had to survive on welfare payments since arriving in Australia.

Several people welcomed the SEP's analysis of racism as a class issue. **Michael** said: "Discrimination is about equality. Discrimination is when you are denied opportunities… Another thing I also realised—it's not [just] Sudanese, not Somalian, not Italian or whatever the case—there are a lot of people out of a job today, they cannot easily get a job nowadays, regardless of colour. So, with the Socialist Equality Party, let's fight for the better people of Australia, regardless of colour, for all those who are socially disadvantaged."

Michael spoke about the impact of recruitment agencies and labour hire firms that increasingly are used to staff factories and warehouses in working-class areas. Comparing the system to "when the slave-master recruited people for the farm and they got paid food," he explained: "It is very difficult for a young man like me to go to a company, knock on the door and get a job. It is very difficult because they created recruitment agencies, which are the problem. They are destroying everything in Australia, they are destroying families, they are destroying everyone. They are removing everyone away from work… If you are an Australian citizen and you work as a casual, maybe 20 hours a week like an international student, how can you make a better life?"

Amazon, which opened its first Australian warehouse in Melbourne last month, recruits its entire warehouse staff through a labour hire firm. Forum participants listened with interest to explanations of the SEP's global campaign, through the International Amazon Workers Voice, to defend the rights of Amazon workers, independently of and in opposition to the trade unions.

Majok told the forum: "I used to work for Toll [a warehouse company], but within ten years we lost all our jobs because they introduced new machines, like what they are doing with Amazon.

"I am from South Sudan, I'm the father of two children. I was born in a refugee camp in Kenya but most of my life has now been spent in Australia. All I ever saw was getting food from the UN. Until I came to Australia, I never had a criminal record, I never had a violent history. How the Australian government allows us to integrate is pretty poor… There's no preparation program that tackles the gap, especially for a youth at 16, 17, 18, 19."

The forum included discussion on the SEP's defence of the international working class's freedom of movement. "We oppose the whole framework of border protection and border security," O'Connor said. "We insist that ordinary people should have the right to live and work where ever they wish without restrictions and full rights. Right now the ultra-wealthy elite are meeting in Davos, Switzerland. These layers face no border restrictions, they are free to travel and live wherever they wish. It's only the working class that faces walls and borders."

Sue Phillips, who chaired the meeting, added: "There are now 60 million refugees in the world—because of the policies of US imperialism and its allies, including Australia. A nightmare has been created for hundreds of millions of people. The WSWS has written on the amount of money spent by the Australian government to stop asylum seekers from entering the country—$4 billion a year. Imagine what could be done with that money instead—it could have been spent on schools, health services, psychology services. Here the state Labor government is spending $2 billion to build up the police, instead of creating jobs of young people. These problems are international, the working class is international. Your stories are those of millions around the world."

Majok was one of several people who denounced the police for their brutality. "In Melbourne, it's almost to a point where there's a state of emergency because of the title they're giving to the 'African gangs.' The campaign that Melbourne's been terrorised by youth—this is just an excuse to uplift the police and give them greater powers. $2 billion is going to extra police funding, not to community development to try to help us deal with our issues, the problems with our kids. There are a lot of facilities missing around here, schools are getting shut down."

One man, who came to Australia from Sudan in 2002, brought his 14- and 20-year-old sons to the forum. He said police recently assaulted his eldest son, for no good reason, as he returned from playing basketball. "Now we are worried," he continued, "if it is night and our children are not home we are worried they will not be safe. We have seen on TV, boys like my 14-year-old boy, being attacked by adult persons because they are African youth. They are 'criminals,' even when they are just children who have nothing to do with crime. We need safety for our children."

One woman asked why the government allowed the police to victimise young people.

"The official story that we're given is that the police are there to serve the community, the police are here for us," O'Connor replied. "That's not the reality. We need to look at this historically—when did the police force actually emerge as an organisation? It was in 19th century England, when the working class emerged after peasants were cleared off the land. That's when you had the first concentration of urban workers, and controlling that workforce then became a problem. That's when the police were invented, in order to keep the industrial working class in its place. The police function as the security apparatus for the capitalist class—they're here to maintain the existing social relations, the existing distribution of wealth."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site