

Australia: SEP meeting discusses government-media campaign over “African gangs”

Our reporters
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) held a public meeting in Melbourne on March 3, under the title, “The class issues behind the racist ‘African gang’ campaign.”

Held in the inner suburb of North Melbourne, more than 20 people attended the meeting, which followed an SEP forum on the issue held in January. Those in attendance included university students and workers, some of whom came to Australia as refugees from Somalia and South Sudan.

The SEP has led a fight within the working class against the provocative government-media campaign demonising young people of African origin as violent, out-of-control criminals. Prior to the meeting, SEP campaigners received a warm response from workers and young people in Melbourne’s working class western suburbs, including Tarneit and Footscray. Shops frequented by African immigrants and their families agreed to display posters publicising the event.

Eric Ludlow, an International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) leader, delivered the meeting’s opening report. “The International Youth and Students for Social Equality condemns the racist campaign against young people of African origin,” he explained, “which has been promoted by the Liberal-National coalition government, supported by the Labor Party, and fuelled by the corporate media.”

Ludlow detailed the social crisis confronting working class youth, providing statistics on the depression-level unemployment rates for young people in many areas. “This is not a Melbourne or Australian phenomenon,” he said. “The clock is being wound back. This is the aim of the financial oligarchy around the world. Any victories won by the working class in previous periods of struggle are being stripped away. This is a social counterrevolution, and young people are bearing the brunt of its force.”

“We call for solidarity among young people internationally because police violence, social inequality, war, and attacks on democratic rights are all *class* issues. What is required is a revolutionary perspective against the outmoded capitalist state system.”

Patrick O’Connor, an SEP National Committee member, addressed the meeting.

After documenting chronologically how the “African gangs” provocation was developed by the media and political

establishment, O’Connor noted: “This is not simply just about selling a few more newspapers with some lurid headlines or some politicians trying to win a few more votes in the upcoming state and federal elections. We need a more thorough understanding of what’s happening. After all, when you’re seeking to cure a complex disease the first task is to get a proper diagnosis. Understanding what is underway requires assessing these developments in their historical and international context.”

The speaker reviewed the emergence of anti-immigrant political forces internationally, including in the US under President Donald Trump. He detailed the ruling class’s promotion of nationalism in Australia, including through the dual citizenship parliamentary furore and the campaign against alleged Chinese interference in Australian politics that is serving as the pretext for unprecedented anti-democratic legislation.

“In every period leading up to imperialist war,” O’Connor explained, “nationalism and racism is promoted. It is the mechanism to divide the working class and smother anti-war opposition. We have seen this in the 20th century, and now again as the imperialist powers are actively preparing for a third world war.”

O’Connor reviewed the Trump administration’s aggressive new National Defense Strategy, released in January, and the recent trade war measures adopted by the administration with steel and aluminium tariffs. He also detailed the depth of the social crisis confronting the working class in Australia and internationally.

After exposing the pseudo-left’s role in the “African gangs” campaign—the group Solidarity organised a demonstration last month that promoted the Greens, trade unions, and the police—the speaker concluded: “It is our movement alone, the International Committee of the Fourth International, that fights to unify the working class internationally. 2018 is the bicentenary year of the birth of Karl Marx who famously urged, ‘workers of the world unite.’ This of course has lost none of its significance today. We urge you to seriously consider our history and program and make the decision to join us.”

Following the reports there was a wide-ranging discussion. Nadifo, a childcare worker originally from Somalia who now

lives in Tarneit, had earlier told SEP campaigners that a sharp crisis affecting young people of African origin had emerged in the last five years. The situation was so dire, she explained, that many families were considering returning to their war-stricken home countries.

“We’re scared,” she told the meeting. “We go outside and worry that people will say, ‘oh, it’s Africans.’ We are suffering and we need solutions.”

Nadifo also spoke about the methamphetamine crisis affecting growing numbers of young people. “Lots of people have come from refugee camps, and now there’s no one helping them. The kids have a lot of issues with drugs. I have been here 22 years in Australia, I have never seen drug use like this before. Drugs are being sold to children.”

O’Connor replied: “The drug crisis is not just about Somali kids or Sudanese kids or another particular group—the problem is a social problem. Drugs go hand in hand with poverty, deprivation and inadequate social resources. We have discussed the teachers’ strike in West Virginia. That state is at the centre of the opioid crisis in the US. It’s not a coincidence that the state also has immense poverty, after suffering deindustrialisation and the virtual shutdown of the coal industry.”

Aluela, who is originally from South Sudan, also addressed the meeting. She had previously worked in childcare but is now unemployed due to injury.

“I just heard about this campaign in the last 10 days—I wanted so badly to come. I am wondering what’s going on in Australia. Why are our youth in crisis after they come to Australia? I have never seen any positive news about them. The small number of negative things, why do they have to be repeated day after day? I have four boys. One of them is 23, one is 19, one is 17. They never did anything wrong, but racism is just too much.

“So if this [opposing the “African gangs” campaign] is what you guys are doing, I support you very much. A lot of people in our community think, ‘ah this is how it is in Australia,’ but I believe it is not all Australians. We have beautiful Australians who are full of heart, who know that it is not right, what is happening. But the media and the government are working together.”

Aluela spoke with great emotion as she described the plight of her 19-year-old son, who had been unfairly expelled in his last year at a Catholic school and had then been refused entry to every other school in the area. His hopes of playing basketball at a US college had been dashed as a result. Now unemployed, he is being denied any welfare payments from Centrelink because he was unable to complete Year 12.

“See the heart of rich people in this country?” she said. “They’re heartless—they don’t care about anybody ... We are suffering so much.”

Sue Phillips, an SEP National Committee member who chaired the meeting, responded: “What you’ve described with

the case of your son is what is happening to many working-class kids across the country. Because of rising unemployment and other social problems families confront, there has been an increase in kids who are being suspended from school. Within New South Wales primary schools, suspensions have increased by 10 percent.”

Phillips continued: “The reason is that there are not enough resources in the schools to help kids who have difficulties, and who have faced trauma. One of the areas where there is a vast increase in these suspensions is southwest Sydney, an area that has a high number of immigrants, refugees, and other working-class kids. Schools there are starved of resources, teachers are being stretched to the limit, and the way that principals are dealing with problems is to suspend the kids. Yet at the same time there are seven elite private schools in Sydney that are now spending \$390 million just on new facilities such as swimming pools, ballet studios, and sports centres.”

At the conclusion of the meeting, everyone left their contact details and donated generously to the SEP’s monthly fund.

Hugh, an international student from Vietnam at the University of Melbourne, spoke with WSWs reporters. “It’s a very concerning situation,” he said, “and these meetings help you to get educated and find a way out of the whole situation. You get to listen to people’s actual stories, how they are affected in their own ways. I would see the ‘African youths’ campaign every time I turned on the TV. It’s a major issue, real people are being affected in the African community, they are being pushed down to the bottom of society.”

Hugh also spoke about the danger of war being triggered by US imperialism: “The threat is becoming more and more real. The politicians try to lie to the public to make the facts seem less real, but the threat is increasing. If we’re not informed, we will be the sufferers of our own ignorance. The meeting today was very eye-opening.”



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