

SEP (Australia) holds Sydney meeting against new “foreign interference” laws

Our reporters
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On Sunday, the Socialist Equality Party held a successful meeting against Australia’s new “foreign interference” laws in Bankstown, a working-class suburb in south-west Sydney. The event was part of a national series, with meetings to be held in Melbourne and Newcastle next Sunday, and in Brisbane on July 28.

The Sydney meeting was the first public event held by an Australian political party against the anti-democratic legislation since it was rushed through parliament late last month. It was attended by a cross-sections of students, young people, retirees, and workers, including teachers, construction employees and clerical staff.

The meeting was streamed live on Facebook, attracting viewers throughout the country, and internationally, including in the United States, Canada, Sri Lanka, India, Kenya and elsewhere.

In opening the meeting, Linda Tenenbaum, a longstanding SEP leader, reviewed the significance of the June SEP rally in Sydney, which demanded freedom for Julian Assange. She noted that the speakers at the demonstration had warned that the persecution of the WikiLeaks editor was a preparation for the suppression of mass opposition to war, austerity and authoritarianism.

The passage of the foreign interference laws, “confirms our warning,” Tenenbaum said. “In what represents nothing less than a move towards authoritarianism and the state repression of dissent, the Coalition Liberal-National government and the Labor opposition rammed the 150-page legislation through both houses of parliament, in just three days.”

Tenenbaum reviewed the contents of the laws. She stated that they could be deployed to criminalise anti-war activities and organisations, to persecute political organisations with international affiliations and to suppress whistleblowers and journalists who expose government crimes.

Tenenbaum noted that many of the key terms in the laws were not defined, giving the government and the courts broad scope for politically-motivated prosecutions.

SEP national-secretary and leading WSWs writer James Cogan was the main speaker. He delivered an extensive report, placing the laws in the context of Australia’s integration into the US-led war drive in the Asia-Pacific region and internationally.

Cogan warned that the legislation was, “intended to create the legal means for the mass repression of opposition in Australia to the country’s involvement in a military conflict with China.” He reviewed the role of Washington in agitating for the passage of the laws, and stated that they were intended to be a “model for similar legislation in the US, New Zealand,” and elsewhere.

Cogan said that successive US administrations had made clear they would brook no opposition to Australian involvement in US-led conflicts, including the plans for war with China. He displayed a map of US military installations across the country, and commented: “Australia is so integrated with the US war machine that the American military takes it for granted that the Australian military will fight alongside them in any conflict.”

Cogan warned that the anti-China campaign waged by the Australian political and media establishment, and the legislation, recalled repressive measures taken during World War I and II.

The speaker reviewed the growth of social inequality, and stated that “in desperation and fear,” the ruling class was using xenophobic and anti-Chinese rhetoric in an attempt to “divert the working class from linking its social struggles with the fight to build an international anti-war movement.”

The reports were followed by a lively question and answer period.

One attendee asked if there was a relationship between

the ongoing purge of federal parliamentarians eligible for dual citizenship, and the passage of the “foreign interference” laws.

Cogan explained that the ouster of MPs with dual citizenship was being conducted on the basis of reactionary constitutional provisions, which prohibit parliamentarians from holding an “allegiance to a foreign power.” He noted that, like the anti-China witch-hunt, this was aimed at cultivating a “nationalist mood,” amid the preparations for war, in which “loyalty to the Australian state,” was demanded of all.

Two audience members asked what could be done to oppose the laws.

In response, Cogan stated that it was necessary to “break the conspiracy of silence surrounding the legislation,” that had been maintained by the official parliamentary parties and the media. The anti-democratic content of the laws had to be “exposed, critiqued” and made known to workers and young people across the country, he stated.

Cogan stated that the working class could not allow the gains of “centuries of struggle against despotism, and decades of struggle to build-up democratic rights” to be “swept aside by a cabal of Labor and Coalition hacks in the parliament.”

“The most serious answer that anyone can make to the assault on democratic rights,” Cogan said, “is to understand that it is the product of decaying capitalism, and to join our party and take up the fight to build the international socialist movement, against war, austerity and authoritarianism.

WSWS reporters interviewed members of the audience at the conclusion of the meeting. Ehab, a worker originally from Egypt, said, “What has happened in Egypt looks like it is happening in Australia. The foreign interference laws and other anti-freedom laws are similar to what the Egyptian government has imposed for years. Anti-freedom laws are being put in place by governments all over the world.”

Ehab drew a parallel with the raft of anti-terror laws passed in Australia, and the state persecution of Muslim workers. “As a Muslim, when I return to the country, I am always subjected to a search. I thought it would end after a couple of times and they realised that I was a good guy.

“They were not doing it to me just because I was Muslim. They are using that as a catalyst to take away the rights of the entire population. They always come up with an excuse, whether it is to stop Muslim terrorism, or to prevent foreign interference, but what they are really

doing is stripping us of our freedoms.”

Mick, a crane operator from western Sydney, said: “I knew very little about the foreign influence laws until I met you guys and definitely want to find out more. What I do know is that they are no good for people in Australia because they undermine freedom of speech.

“The main thing I learnt from today’s meeting is that the Australian government is in bed with the American government on every political issue. They just follow along, but we don’t have any say. I don’t believe we should blindly follow another nation, especially the US, which has made war on false pretences in Iraq and Afghanistan and produced a disaster for those people.

“The new laws are very dangerous for someone like Julian Assange and would be used against him if he came back to Australia. Assange has tried to open people’s eyes, not just in this country but all around the world. The fact that the media is not writing anything about the dangers that he faces is wrong.

“Assange has committed his life to telling people the truth about world politics and what’s really going on. He has to be supported. And it isn’t just about him. What’s going to happen to people like John Pilger and other honest journalists if the persecution of Assange isn’t stopped?

“Once these foreign influence laws are implemented they will be used to silence people like John Pilger and others. And from what I understand it isn’t just journalists that will be affected, but will be used to stop people protesting against war and other government policies. This is heading towards dictatorship.”



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