

SEP (Australia) holds public meetings opposing “foreign interference” laws

Our reporters
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) concluded an important series of public meetings late last month against “foreign interference” legislation jointly rammed through parliament in July by the federal Liberal-National government and the Labor Party opposition.

Addressed by SEP national committee members, the meetings were the only political events called in opposition to the legislation, which constitutes the most far-reaching attack on democratic rights since World War II (see video of Sydney meeting).

SEP speakers explained that the laws were aimed at criminalising growing opposition to Australia’s central role in the US-led preparations for war with China, illegalising the activities of publishers and whistleblowers exposing war crimes and government wrongdoing, and cracking down on the emerging struggles of the working class.

The meeting in Newcastle was addressed by Nick Beams, a longstanding leader of the SEP and regular correspondent of the WSW. In Melbourne, Patrick O’Connor delivered the main report. WSW writer Mike Head addressed the gathering in Brisbane.

In Newcastle, Beams delivered an extensive report, placing the legislation in the context of the attempts by successive US administrations, beginning with that of President Barack Obama, to ensure that the Australian political establishment was committed to Washington’s confrontation with Beijing.

Beams outlined the relationship between the hysterical official campaign in Australia, alleging Chinese “interference” in domestic politics, business and social life, and the trade war measures being imposed by the Trump administration against China. He noted that both were expressions of the attempts by the US to ensure its continued hegemony in the Asia-

Pacific region, and globally, through military, economic and repressive measures directed against China.

Beams concluded that the “foreign interference” laws were aimed at suppressing the emerging social and political struggles of the working class. He insisted on the need to build a mass socialist movement, to prevent the drive to war and dictatorship.

Lively question and discussion periods followed the major reports at each of the meetings.

In Newcastle, an attendee asked Beams whether Australia could not avoid conflict with Beijing, based on its close trading ties with China.

In response, Beams said that while Australia had major trade links with China, this was trumped by “the great deal of investment and financial ties with the United States. Australia is interlocked with US imperialism through the stock market, the banks, the privileges into foreign markets ... The greatest investor in the Australian economy is the US.”

The speaker explained that there was no “national solution” to the turn toward a global military conflagration. He stated: “Vladimir Lenin said of World War I that the socialist revolution would unfold internationally out of necessity, because there was no national path out of the war. The world was too interconnected for that.

“All of the belligerent powers were like bodies thrown into a tangled, bloody heap, from which no nation could extricate itself on its own. Lenin wrote this 100 years ago, and the world has only become more connected since. The answer to the drive to war is the fight to unify the international working class on a socialist perspective.”

Other questions were raised about the dangers of political repression posed by the legislation and US

accusations against China of intellectual and trade property theft. In Melbourne, attendees asked about the response of legal experts to the laws, the dangers of fascism and the Turnbull government's prosecution of a whistleblower and his lawyer who exposed Australian spying against East Timor.

The meetings were attended by a diverse cross-section of students, young people, retirees, and workers in a variety of trades and occupations. WSWS reporters spoke to some of them.

In Melbourne, **Tessa**, a University of Melbourne student, stated: "I was really interested in the discussion on the background to the new laws. I was taken aback by the hypocrisy of those who denounce China, while defending all of the connections of Australian business and politicians to the US."

David, a young worker, said the Newcastle meeting, "brought everything together in an insightful way. It showed how issues such as WikiLeaks and Julian Assange, which are very sensitive, are one of the main motives for these anti-democratic foreign interference laws."

"The wording of the bills is vague so they can be used in a politically-motivated way. With Julian Assange, the major powers, including here, have complained they don't have enough laws to prosecute him for exposing their war crimes and wrongdoing. Now we see Australia is being used as a testing ground to set a precedent for the type of repressive measures the US intends to implement."

Robert, a 60-year-old worker, said: "I didn't know a great deal about the legislation to begin with, only heard a tiny bit on the news. I think the one good thing to take from this is that they are worried about people, especially the youth, entering into big struggles. They are worried about a mass, political awakening of what is going on behind the scenes.

"The ability to label someone or a group of people as influenced by an 'external power' is a tool to suppress internal dissent.

"For a long time the elite have been able to control the information in the media, and the narrative for the population. This is now breaking apart and all politicians appear as narrow, shallow frauds. Both parties, Labor and Liberal, can be placed onto a postage stamp of ideas, and it is good to see the Socialist Equality Party giving a different perspective on how

the world works."

Nicolas, an honours student at the University of Newcastle, said: "It sounds as though these laws can be manipulated to the whim of the political establishment. They're so unspecified. They're really quite dangerous in that regard.

"The purpose of these laws is to control political dissent. The government is making sure that they've got all the legislation and precedents in place so that they can execute them when they need to. They want to be able to send people to jail for expressing opposition to their policies."

Graham, a taxation department worker, commented: "The passing of the foreign interference laws has been very hush-hush in the press. There was only a scant mention of them and the main object was to suggest that the laws are to prevent China's interference in the Australian political system.

"The reality is extremely scary. Probably half the population in Australia or more, particularly the working class, and anyone else who wants to stand up and say no to war, to injustice, could be restricted by these laws. Most working-class people don't know that these laws have even been passed, but it is something that will affect all of us. People definitely need to know."

The authors also recommend:

Australia's new "foreign interference" laws: A threat to anti-war dissent

[12 July 2018]

Australian government unveils draconian "foreign interference" bills

[31 January 2018]



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