

SEP (Australia) meeting outlines political issues behind coup against Malcolm Turnbull

Our reporters
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The Socialist Equality Party (Australia) held a successful meeting in Sydney on Sunday, which reviewed the political issues underlying the party-room coup against former Liberal-National Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull last month.

The Sydney event was attended by a cross-section of workers, including warehouse and factory employees, along with students, retirees and professionals. It was broadcast to gatherings in Brisbane and Melbourne and streamed live on Facebook, where it has been viewed several thousand times by an international audience.

Linda Tenenbaum, a longstanding SEP leader who chaired the event, began by reviewing the series of political coups that have wracked Australian politics over the past decade. Scott Morrison, installed following the removal of Turnbull, was the seventh prime minister since 2007.

The extent of the political upheaval, Tenenbaum stated, could not be explained by reference to personality conflicts or electoral considerations. Such claims, advanced by the mainstream media, were aimed at covering up the real causes of the instability, and blinding workers and young people to the dangers they confront.

The first speaker, Nick Beams, a prominent writer for the *World Socialist Web Site* and SEP national committee member, outlined the deepening economic crisis, a decade after the financial crash of 2008.

Ten years later, none of the representatives of the ruling elite had been able to provide any explanation of the causes of the crisis, much less a solution.

Beams contrasted the perplexity of bourgeois economists with the record of the WWSW and the ICFI, which had predicted and anticipated the crash “in the midst of the hosannas to the wonders of the free market.” This was, he said, a product of the scientific method of Marxism.

Beams noted that shortly after the crisis began, the ICFI had termed it a “breakdown.” The implication of this term was that a new period of wars and social upheavals had begun, analogous to that which spanned the years from 1914–1945. Events over the past ten years, including the rapid growth of social inequality, the breakdown of international relations, the eruption of trade war and advanced preparations for military conflict, had vindicated this assessment.

James Cogan, the SEP’s national-secretary, delivered the main address. He began by noting that his report was a continuation of the analysis presented at an SEP meeting in June, on the passage of

deeply anti-democratic foreign interference laws by the Turnbull government and the Labor Party.

Over the past months, the SEP has held a series of events opposing the government’s escalating assault on democratic rights, including meetings and a rally protesting the persecution of Julian Assange, and the June meeting, which characterised the new foreign interference laws as the deepest attack on civil liberties in the post-World War Two period. Their purpose is to criminalise any opposition to Australia’s central role in the US-led plans for war with China.

Cogan stated that the coup against Turnbull flowed from the preparations of the Australian ruling class “for 1) immense economic shocks 2) the development of mass struggles by the working class against social inequality, and 3) mass opposition among workers and youth in Australia to militarism and war.”

The speaker presented a series of graphs, which made clear that the Australian economy stands on the precipice of a major crisis, triggered by unprecedented household debt, mortgage stress and declining or stagnant wages.

These processes meant that whichever party/parties formed government after the next federal election, which must be held by May 2019, would “preside over what will most likely be the worst economic conditions since the 1930s Depression.”

Under these conditions, the ruling elite was turning ever-more sharply to authoritarian forms of rule. Cogan reviewed indications that media moguls Rupert Murdoch and Kerry Stokes backed the ousting of Turnbull, with the former allegedly stating, “We have got to get rid of Malcolm.”

Cogan explained that the right-wing Tony Abbott and Peter Dutton faction of the Liberal-Party, which spearheaded the coup, was seeking to create an extreme-right movement to be mobilised against the working class. This paralleled the promotion of the “alt-right” in the United States, the elevation of Alternative for Germany to the position of “official opposition” in the Bundestag (German parliament) and the rise of far-right parties across Europe.

Cogan also detailed evidence of US involvement in the series of Australian political coups over the past eight years. The previous month, former Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, ousted in 2010, publicly acknowledged that US embassy cables, published by WikiLeaks, had made clear that Washington was hostile to his calls for the American ruling elite to make some accommodation to China’s rise to prevent all-out conflict. Rudd had been removed

by factional power-brokers in his own Labor party, later revealed to be “protected sources” of the US embassy.

Turnbull, like Rudd, had, in the months prior to his ouster “begun publicly expressing major concerns over the Trump administration’s escalation of nationalist trade war measures against China, which could substantially impact on Australian exports and corporate profits.” His replacement, Scott Morrison, had received a phone call from Trump days after the coup and then invited the US president to visit the country as soon as possible.

Cogan drew out that the actions of the Morrison government had made clear that its installation was aimed at shifting official politics even further to the right. These included intensified attacks on immigrants, and the promotion of the racist campaign over a supposed “African gangs” crisis in Melbourne.

The crucial question for the working class, Cogan insisted, was breaking with Labor and the unions, and building the SEP in the fight for “a workers’ government that will implement the most far-reaching and radical socialist policies.”

The reports were followed by a lively question and answer session. Questions were raised about various aspects of the financial crisis, the prospects of the SEP winning seats in forthcoming elections, and the deepening social crisis facing workers and young people.

One attendee asked whether there was a relationship between the coup against Turnbull and the recent turmoil at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, which had seen the removal of senior executives over revelations of direct government interference at the state-broadcaster.

Cogan noted that there had been a protracted campaign “to bring the entire media into complete subservience to the ruling elite and its agenda,” and that the ABC had been “dragged into ever greater subordination to government policy.” This was expressed in the fact that it had been “at the forefront of the campaign against Chinese interference” and of other efforts at promoting militarism, specifically aimed against China.

Under conditions of an ever-greater threat of war and widespread opposition to the political establishment, the government could not tolerate even the most tepid criticisms of its pro-business policies. Cogan noted that the open support for the persecution of Julian Assange by some senior ABC journalists and producers, and the silence of others on Assange’s plight, had cleared the way for attacks on other employees at the broadcaster.

Another worker asked about the prospects of the SEP winning seats in upcoming elections. In response, Cogan and Beams stressed that the SEP stands in elections to advance a socialist, internationalist and revolutionary perspective as broadly as possible. The speakers noted that nothing would be achieved through parliament, which functions as an open vehicle of the corporate elite, and that task facing the working class was to end the capitalist profit system, by establishing a workers’ government, based on socialist policies.

WSWS reporters spoke to attendees after the meeting.

Mark, a retired railway worker from Newcastle, said: “Big businesses have never made bigger profits and wages have not increased in a long time. When I worked, we were on strike a lot, but now they cannot go on strike.

“The unions are not doing their job. They are not much good if they are not improving things for the workers. If your union is no good, ditch the union. Spread this message around to different companies so that people can throw the unions out.

“What is the ratio of the workers to the rich? If everyone could vote for the SEP, you would have a landslide victory if people knew they were going to gain from this and get a better life.”

Michael, a 22-year-old warehouse worker attending his first SEP meeting, said: “I have heard a lot about socialism, but it has mostly been about the USSR and China. I wanted to hear about socialism from a socialist standpoint, not from the position of people who are opposed to such an economic system.

“I’m concerned about inequality. I always knew there was a gap between the rich and the poor, but I never realised that it was as severe as what the reports today showed it to be. The media has an interest in keeping these sorts of things quiet. I also hadn’t heard about the dangers of a US war against China, before coming to this meeting.”

Yehia, a 25-year-old university student, referred to the graphs presented by James Cogan on the suppression of wages and declining living standards.

“Things are getting harder for each generation,” he said. “We are prevented from achieving even the basic things in life by the one percent. All they do is profit from us.

“Both Liberal and Labor are capitalist parties. They’re just two sides of the same coin. They have been responsible for the increase in social inequality, for the rich getting richer at the expense of the poor. That’s one thing that really frustrates me, when you have individuals who are worth \$100 billion and then you have so many living on the streets.

“We need to build a new movement of the working class. I agree that we need an international socialist party to unite the workers of the world.”



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