

Mass unemployment, climate change and a toxic dump in Oxley

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The following is an edited version of the speech delivered by Michael Smith, who joined the Socialist Equality Party last year, to the party's election public meeting in the Brisbane electorate of Oxley on May 15.

In this election, the Socialist Equality Party is the only party telling the working class the truth: that there is no basis for reform of the capitalist system.

It is now a fact of life for working class families, young people, students and retirees that their living conditions are being destroyed. Many households are on the precipice of out-and-out poverty.

The Labor party and the trade unions are telling workers that a Labor government would give families a "fair go." In truth, the Labor party has worked in conjunction with the unions to oversee a vast transfer of wealth from the bottom to the top end of society.

Wages are stagnating or going backwards. Unemployment or underemployment is continually increasing across the country. While the official unemployment rate sits at 5 percent, a more reliable rate is provided by Roy Morgan research, which puts the rate at 9.6 percent.

Roy Morgan also reveals underemployment rates at 8.6 percent. This means that around 2.5 million Australian workers, or 18.2 percent of the workforce, are either jobless or under-employed.

These figures are even sharper across the western and southwestern suburbs of Brisbane. Official unemployment rates continue to hover around 20 percent in this region, which is up to four times the national average.

In Wacol, it is 21.5 percent; in Inala-Richlands 18.4, in Goodna 12.5 and in Redbank Plains 10.3. It is even worse in some nearby areas, such as Logan Central on 26.5, Riverview 22.5, Woodridge 21.2 and Rocklea-Acacia Ridge 19.3.

For younger people the jobless rate is much higher. When you take into account those classified as "not in the labour force," the proportion of people between 20-24 years of age who do not have a job is over 30 percent.

A huge impact on families has also been the increase in part-time or casual employment. This means people can easily be sacked and cannot plan for the future.

Nearly every worker we have met during the election campaign is casual, despite sometimes working for many years for their company. One forklift driver from South Africa, for example, said he was still casual after five years.

Another worker, an indigenous man, was sacked by Lindens, a construction supplier company, after six weeks as a casual.

A large factor has been the near-closure of what used to be one of the biggest employers in the region—the Redbank railway workshops. The Queensland Labor government of Premier Anna Bligh privatised the workshops and Queensland Rail freight services, handing them over to Aurizon, which has slashed thousands of jobs ever since.

The destruction of manufacturing jobs has been overseen by the trade unions. They have all backed the Labor governments, and prevented angry workers from launching industrial action to fight privatisations. This goes back as far as the Hawke government's privatisation of the Commonwealth Bank and Qantas in the 1980s.

In our election manifesto, we call for urgent action on climate change.

A recent UN scientific report documents the "unprecedented" decline in global biodiversity that has alarming implications for human health, prosperity and long-term survival.

More than one million species of plants and animals are at risk of extinction—many within just a few decades. This is because of decades of rampant destruction of the planet’s forests, oceans, soils, watersheds and air.

In this area, residents have been fighting Labor and Liberal National Party governments alike over a toxic waste dump.

According to documents obtained from the Department of Environment, thousands of tonnes of soil contaminated with toxic substances such as arsenic, cyanide, mercury, lead, asbestos, heavy metals and radionuclides have been dumped at Transpacific’s New Chum site.

Transpacific Waste Management has been operating one of the largest landfill waste dumps in Australia at New Chum since 2003. New Chum is between the suburbs of Riverview, Dinmore, Bundamba, Ebbw Vale and Collingwood Park.

According to Transpacific’s own documents, even after the dump has ceased operations, the site will produce dangerous gases, which could escape to the surrounding area for many years.

As our election manifesto explains, there is no possibility of halting dangerous pollution or arresting climate change under the capitalist system and its “free market” dominated by the drive for private profit. The growing threat to the future of the planet derives from the operation of this system. Real action to arrest global warming necessitates conscious economic planning, on a national and international scale.

This can be developed only in political struggle against all the parties of the political establishment—Labor, Liberal and the Greens—that defend the profit interests of the major corporations, financial institutions and their “own” national state.

To sum up, for the working class, there is no way out of this quagmire of social and environmental devastation through the election of either a Labor or Liberal government.

To combat these conditions, the SEP calls for a vast redistribution of wealth to secure the social rights of all, including the right to a stable and decent-paying job, a living retirement income, free and high-quality public education and health care, affordable housing, and access to culture and the arts.

These social rights cannot be achieved without

ending the domination of a financial and corporate oligarchy over economic life. The major banks, mining transnationals, retail conglomerates, pharmaceutical corporations and communications and energy giants must be expropriated and placed under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class.

It is this perspective that we take forward to the election. We call on all people; workers, young people, professionals and retirees to join our election campaign, take up the fight for socialism and join the Socialist Equality Party.

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