

Workers speak to SEP Australian election candidates on the impact of social inequality

Our reporters

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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is continuing its Australian federal election campaign, which was launched last week with a strong and lively online public meeting.

Over the weekend the SEP campaigned across New South Wales (NSW), Victoria and Queensland, states where it is standing Senate candidates. The SEP candidates outlined a socialist program of action for the working class in this election, opposing the relentless drive to war, the “let it rip” pandemic policies and the austerity measures supported by all the parliamentary parties.

Below are interviews with some of the workers we spoke to.

SEP candidate for NSW Max Boddy spoke to **Jarome**, a young warehouse worker from New Zealand. He explained: “I came over from New Zealand because it was very hard to find work. In warehousing you do not earn as much in New Zealand as in Australia. There you are on \$25 an hour, over here it is like \$28, maybe hitting \$31.

“But I don’t get Medicare or any other support because I am from New Zealand. That is unfair... I do get homesick; I miss my family and all that. I am moving to the Gold Coast to start a new life.”

On inflation, which reached its highest level in twenty years last week, Jarome said: “Everything is going up in price. Rent is a struggle, food prices are unbelievable. There is gas, food, clothing. Petrol is a big problem because people need to travel to work. Whatever car you have, it is a gas guzzler.

“The war is no good. There should be peace. A lot of money, our petrol, our food, is going to war. It is not good. In war, you need a lot of supplies. It is taking innocent people’s money just for the war. Why couldn’t they discuss it, without going to war? Between COVID, the war and everything else, it is mind blowing how the world is turning.

“There used to be zero COVID cases. Then they started to reopen the borders. I think we should lock everything down, lock down the countries until we get rid of it. Zero cases, that is what we want.”

Liam, a young metalworker from Parramatta, told SEP campaigners: “I think the situation facing workers is abhorrent. As we have seen recently, wages have gone up by about 2 percent, but then inflation is more than 5 percent. I get the standard \$25 an hour. The company I work for has an incentive system, you come in on time, you don’t leave early, you don’t get sick, you get an extra \$100.

“That is great if I get to keep it, but it goes straight to tax, and I am still paying off a previous landlord. My girlfriend works casually in retail, and I work full time as a casual. We are haemorrhaging money.

“I am living off hand-me-down clothes from my mum’s boyfriend or wearing clothes that are a couple of years old. How am I supposed to get warmer clothes for winter or new boots for work that cost \$200? I get paid and then I think I can buy groceries for the next couple of days and pay rent, but I need new work boots. I have been wearing my firefighting boots or trainers to work.

“The major parties do not care how people live. We have to buy everything on special. We buy meat close to the expiry date and chuck it in the freezer. Why do I have to cut down the quality of the food I am eating just to live?

“That one week where we had public transport for free, I was actually able to save money. To get to work I catch a bus in the morning and a train in the afternoon. Those two things should not cost as much as they do. I get myself \$100 a week out of my pay to spend on groceries. After transport to work and groceries, I am already out of money, or I am in the negative.

Liam spoke about the pandemic: “Throughout the entire three years I thankfully haven’t caught it. There were close calls. My mum’s partner had COVID and so I had to get tested. I was working in a pipe factory, I was badgered and harassed. It took three days to get my results and my boss kept ringing me saying ‘where are your results?’

“I was very anxious because I couldn’t afford to get sick. My mum had lost both sources of income during the pandemic as she worked as a real estate photographer and in retail. My brother and I were still living at home and we

were giving parts of our pay to support her. I was a second-year apprentice at the time on \$15 an hour, a child's rate."

Liam spoke out against war: "The invasion of Afghanistan, Iraq, all these forever wars, we have no bar in that. It is for the oil. Not to mention the horrendous waste of life and displacement. Look at the war crimes such as in Afghanistan, where special forces were shooting unarmed people and brutalising them. It is a crime."

One of the two SEP Senate candidates in Victoria, Peter Byrne, spoke to **Zuhair** during a campaign in the working-class Melbourne suburb of Footscray. "We need to defend Julian Assange, he is a journalist and a writer. The government has left him without support. I wrote to the prime minister, but no one answered.

"Assange has published a lot of things to make the general public know about what is happening as far as war is concerned and what the United States has done. He is an Australian citizen and he did not commit any crime. People need to know a lot of the things that he was showing," Zuhair said.

Mike Head, a Socialist Equality Party candidate for the Senate in Queensland, discussed some of the key political issues with **Van**, a handyman originally from Vietnam, at Inala Plaza in a Brisbane working-class suburb.

Van said he had never seen such a gulf between the wealthy few and the rest of society. "A few big companies now control the whole of Australia," he commented. Small family businesses used to do well. "Now, you either go with the big guy or you die. They have the buying power and the money and eventually they kill you."

Discussing the silence of all the ruling political parties on the persecution of Julian Assange, Van said: "When you send him to America, you send him to death. It is freedom of speech. If you have nothing to hide you have nothing to worry about, but to put him up on espionage is wrong...."

"They have all gone quiet because they are afraid of America. We are under an American regime, pretty much. Even though a lot of people think we are independent, we are not really independent."

Asked about the class divide in society, Van said: "I'm a handyman and I can't retire. I've been doing this since 1993. That's a long time and I can't retire. I still have to find some work because you don't earn enough and everything, like with petrol prices, is so expensive... Everything has gone up so much."

Head explained that the SEP is campaigning for a workers' government, for socialism, not Labor, Liberal and big business.

"I will definitely vote for you this year," Van replied. "I used to be a Labor man. For the past 15 years or more, I don't see any government as a patriot for the country. They

are just creating a name for themselves, a legacy for themselves. They're not doing it for the country anymore."

Head interjected: "They're doing it for the wealthy." Van replied: "Oh yeah. Everything is for the wealthy."

Head continued: "The billionaires have doubled their fortunes in Australia during the pandemic, while we're being made to pay the price."

Van commented: "You'd be amazed, you know. Twenty years ago you'd hardly hear of billionaires, but now billionaires grow on trees. But still our average wage doesn't really go up at all. So how can we retire on that?"

Asked if he had a message for workers internationally, Van said: "We need to come together and fight for our rights." He said the class gap between the wealthy and the rest of the population had grown so wide that "we don't feel like a human anymore."

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