

Socialist Equality Party (Australia) challenges Labor at Sydney candidates forum

Our reporters

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A forum for candidates in the electorate of Sydney last Wednesday night provided a revealing glimpse of the line-up of the Greens and the pseudo-left Socialist Alliance behind Labor, as it wages its most right-wing and openly pro-business federal election campaign in history.

The forum, hosted by local community groups, was addressed by Socialist Alliance candidate Andrew Chuter, Greens candidate Chetan Sahai, Wen Zhou of the right-wing Citizens Party Australia and sitting Labor member Tanya Plibersek.

The event was billed as a debate. In reality, it had the character of a love-in between Socialist Alliance, the Greens and Labor. Sahai and Chuter warmly greeted Plibersek and deferred to her repeatedly when it came to answering questions.

Both refrained from any direct criticism of Plibersek, and did not recall her record as a senior member of the last federal Labor governments, between 2007 and 2013. Those governments carried out sweeping attacks on welfare recipients, intensified the market-based restructuring of public health and education, did nothing to address climate change and aligned Australia with a vast US military build-up in preparation for war with China.

The broader issues confronting the working class, of war, the disastrous consequences of “let it rip” COVID policies and an assault on democratic rights, only emerged when Socialist Equality Party (SEP) Senate candidate for New South Wales Oscar Grenfell and other SEP members challenged Plibersek from the floor.

The opening remarks of Sahai and Chuter were virtually indistinguishable.

Socialist Alliance has dispensed with any pretence of advancing a socialist perspective opposed to the major parties and to capitalism.

In his campaign, Chuter has produced videos extolling Australia’s preferential voting system on the grounds that people can vote for Socialist Alliance, while continuing to support the big business Labor Party and the Greens. In fact, the preferential system is profoundly anti-democratic because it compels all voters, including those hostile to the major parties, to cast a preferential vote for Labor, the Liberal-National Coalition or the Greens.

Speaking on climate change, Chuter declared that the “elephant in the room” was “car dependency.” He favourably cited remarks by Gough Whitlam, the Labor prime minister of the 1970s, on the need for reduced car use, in a signal of Socialist Alliance’s orientation to Labor.

Claims that climate change is the result of “overconsumption”

on the part of ordinary people are aimed at covering up the responsibility of the major corporations and capitalism for the environmental crisis, and blaming the working class. Chuter’s comments expressed the class character of Socialist Alliance as a party of the affluent, inner-city middle class, indifferent to the social hardships confronting the working class and hostile to it. The program of Socialist Alliance is tinkering at the edges of capitalism, in a unity with the Greens and Labor.

Chuter supported proposals for a federal corruption commission, advanced by Labor to try to restore confidence in the widely-loathed parliamentary set-up. He suggested that public housing could be expanded through a “Green new deal” and by “cutting defence spending by half.” Socialist Alliance, which had previously presented itself as anti-war, would maintain the other half of funding for Australia’s war machine, which sits at over \$600 billion for this decade.

The Greens’ Sahai focussed his remarks on climate change. He hailed the turn by major corporations to the lucrative market in renewable energies. This would continue, he said, whether through the Greens’ transition plan, or “the private market.” In other words, Sahai was promoting the fraud that climate change, a product of the capitalist system itself, can be resolved under the dominance of the banks and big business.

The Greens candidate bemoaned a “failure of imagination from Labor and the Liberals.” But all could be resolved if the Greens held the balance of power in federal parliament, where they would “hold Labor to account.” The Greens are appealing to Labor for a de facto coalition government, under conditions where Labor is presenting itself to the ruling elite as the best vehicle to impose sweeping pro-business restructuring and to escalate Australia’s frontline role in the US-led confrontations with Russia and China.

Plibersek’s remarks showcased the diversionary character of the official election campaign. Her comments centred on denunciations of Liberal-National Prime Minister Scott Morrison and assertions that a Labor government would be more competent. Plibersek took off from the support extended by Socialist Alliance and the Greens, speaking at length on Labor’s proposal for an anti-corruption commission.

When the forum was opened to questions, SEP Senate candidate Grenfell intervened, stating: “For the past 30 years, the US has waged one war after another, murdering millions, displacing millions more and laying waste to entire countries.” Each of these neo-colonial operations had been supported by Labor.

Grenfell warned: “Now American imperialism is waging a proxy war against Russia in Ukraine and is preparing war against China in this region.” He asked Plibersek: “By what right does Labor support dragging the Australian people into this drive for a catastrophic third world war, a war that would almost certainly involve the use of nuclear weapons and threaten the very future of humanity?”

Plibersek responded by falsifying Labor’s record, claiming that it had opposed the 2003 invasion of Iraq. In reality, Labor repeated the lies about Iraqi “weapons of mass destruction,” which served as the pretext for the US attack. It suggested only that there should be a figleaf of United Nations support for the aggressive war, and openly backed the war once it began.

Plibersek said she was “actually surprised to hear you criticising the US when it’s Russia that’s invading Ukraine.” The Russian intervention was an aggressive attack on sovereignty and “one of the greatest tragedies of this century.” Labor would “stand up” in support of Kiev.

Plibersek said nothing about the massive US-NATO intervention. Washington goaded Moscow into launching its reactionary invasion by transforming Ukraine into a garrison state on Russia’s border. The US and its allies, including Australia, have handed over tens of billions of dollars of weaponry to the Ukrainian military and its associated fascist militias.

Over recent weeks, top officials in the Biden administration and the American military have declared that their aim is to “win” what is clearly a proxy war directed against Russia, aimed at advancing longstanding preparations for direct conflict with Moscow.

Plibersek said nothing about the other front of this strategy, aimed at upholding American imperialist hegemony—the preparations for war with China. These were initiated under the last Labor government, in which she was a prominent minister. During the current election campaign, Labor has sought to outflank the Liberal-Nationals from the right on the issue of China, including by bullying and threatening the Solomon Islands over its signing of a security pact with Beijing.

The Greens and Socialist Alliance candidates said nothing in response to the question on war. Both parties have insisted that it is necessary to “support Ukraine,” by which they mean backing the US-NATO puppet regime in Kiev.

Later, another SEP member recalled that Plibersek had been a leader of the Greens-backed Gillard Labor government, which in 2010 joined in the US-led persecution of Julian Assange. In 2019, when British police unlawfully arrested Assange, Plibersek shared a tweet denouncing the Australian citizen and labelling his supporters as “cultists.”

The SEP member asked why Labor supported the attempts to destroy a journalist for exposing war crimes.

Plibersek said nothing about this record. Assange, she declared, had been “locked up long enough.” If it formed government, Labor would “ask the UK and US governments” to drop the current attempt to extradite Assange from Britain to America. Such a polite request, even if it eventuated, would fall far short of the government’s obligation to secure the immediate release of a persecuted Australian citizen through the use of its full diplomatic

and legal powers.

Labor has said nothing about Assange while in opposition, signalling it would do the same in office. Labor’s real attitude to the heroic journalist was summed up by Plibersek’s concluding remarks, in which she declared that “when Julian Assange was accused of rape in Sweden, he should have faced those charges.”

When Grenfell noted that Assange had never been charged with a crime in Sweden, Plibersek rolled her eyes and stated “accusations.” In reality, the Swedish case was a frame-up, aimed at railroading Assange to the US. During almost a decade, the Swedish investigation never progressed beyond the “preliminary stage” and was dropped on three occasions. Swedish prosecutors refused repeated requests by Assange that they interview him, and secretly collaborated with American and British government agencies.

Sahai and Chuter declared that Assange must be freed. But, again, they did not criticise Plibersek. Nor did they explain why their parties have not campaigned in defence of the WikiLeaks founder in the election.

In a third revealing exchange, an SEP supporter explained that she was a nurse who had witnessed the catastrophic impact of the “let it rip” COVID policies supported by all the official parties. They were still resulting in tens of thousands of infections a day and dozens of deaths, yet the pandemic was being presented as a thing of the past. “Why wasn’t a scientifically-grounded strategy aimed at eliminating the virus being implemented?” she asked.

Plibersek cynically thanked the nurse “for all that you do.” She then falsely claimed that Labor had not supported “let it rip” policies. It had criticised the slow vaccine rollout and the failure to develop purpose-built quarantine facilities. In reality, Labor, via the Labor-majority “National Cabinet,” backed and presided over the lifting of restrictions last December, as Omicron surged. This has resulted in almost six million infections in the past five months, and more than 4,000 deaths.

As for elimination of COVID-19, this would be “very hard” Plibersek stated. That is only because the measures required would cut across the corporate profit interests that Labor represents.

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