Strong support for SEP's socialist program in Australian rural city of Shepparton

Our reporters
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is continuing its election campaign in the three east-coast Australian states—New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland—where it is running Senate candidates. Last weekend Peter Byrne, the SEP candidate for the Senate in Victoria, and a campaign team visited the rural city of Shepparton on the Goulburn River 180 kilometres north of Melbourne, the Victorian state capital.

Shepparton has a multicultural predominantly working-class population of nearly 70,000 and is a centre for fruit growing and dairy. The SPC cannery, now with a much-reduced workforce, is one of the major industries. The SEP campaign team met workers from Vanuatu who are in Shepparton on nine-month contracts to pick fruit on below minimum wages.

In 2016, according to the national census, the median weekly household income was 82 percent of the Victorian state average, resulting in a 13 percent higher rate of homelessness.

Last week, the *Shepparton News* published an article reporting that 90 percent of Shepparton homes would be uninsurable by 2030 because of the risk of catastrophic riverine flooding due to climate change. Shepparton and its sister city, Mooroopna, sit on a flood plain formed by the junction of the Goulburn River with the Broken River and Seven Creeks.

Many recent residents are refugees from war-torn countries devastated by 30 years of US-led imperialist wars in the Middle East. In 2017, 34.4 percent of the adults in the Greater Shepparton area were diagnosed by a doctor with anxiety or depression, compared with the state average of 27.4 percent.

SEP campaign team members focussed on opposing and explaining the war in Ukraine and the growing danger of war with China. The team also spoke to residents about the worsening COVID-19 pandemic and declining living standards of workers across the country.

Ricky, a teenager, voiced his opposition to war. "The Ukraine war is terrible. They should have learnt from the first two world wars," he said. Asked about what was behind the war, he replied, "Land and money. 'We have more money than you, we should take this land.' No! Everyone should be equal."

Luke, 17, had just finished his shift as a casual retail worker. He approached the SEP campaign table. Asked if he followed the political situation, replied, "I try to be as involved as I can for my age. I try to read as much as I can. I haven't read any big socialist work, but I'd prefer socialism over capitalism because you know capitalism is not working.

"Just look around here. There are so many homeless people and there's a huge drug problem and obviously nothing's being done about it. The root cause is capitalism. It all goes back to capitalism and how it just forces the proletariat down."

Maree is a carer for her two intellectually disabled children and works part time in a fast-food restaurant. "My [welfare] payments are being slashed but I only work 25 hours a week. I'm working trying to make sure that my kids have a better stance in this area," she said.

Maree was unable to work during the COVID-19 pandemic because of her own health risks but unable to get the necessary medical treatment.

"I can't access a rheumatologist in this town. They won't even take me on and there's not even a waiting list. I'm lucky to be triple dosed but obviously can't afford private insurance," she said.

"I pay $275 per week in private rent. I was not in social housing because there weren't enough places for me to get what I needed. I was also put on welfare quarantining [which blocks cash access to the majority of an individual's welfare payments, requiring their purchases be made with an "Indue" card at participating stores].

"I came off it because Centrelink [government welfare

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agency] weren't paying my rent properly and I almost faced eviction. They mismanaged it. How is that fair?" she said.

"Don't get me started on schooling," she continued, referring to public education facilities in Shepparton.

SEP campaigners explained that the so-called Greater Shepparton Secondary College was an education department business-oriented experiment (see: "Australian state Labor government's disastrous Shepparton super-school plan"). The new facility, which was established through the closure and amalgamation of four existing schools into one with over 2,000 students, is now beset with chronic staff shortages and student issues.

"I'm not even worried about the secondary college," Maree said. "My son doesn't even qualify for Verney Road, the specialist school. He can barely structure a sentence and yet he's shoved into a mainstream school where he's not coping. The only assistance he has is NDIS [National Disability Insurance Scheme] and that is shocking. I've almost gone through a mental breakdown because of it, fighting for my daughter and now my son."

Referring to the US Supreme Court attack on abortion rights, Maree stated, "I'm scared. You see what's going on in the US. I've experienced that. What you've seen around the world, I've been through that. I'm one of the strongest people in Shepparton. Putting it out there, people that are strong also fight the hardest battles every single day."

Cherrill, a long-time Shepparton resident, denounced the anti-democratic electoral laws passed last year by Australian parliament, with Labor Party support. The measures led to the deregistration of the SEP and 13 previously registered parties.

"The pushing through of these undemocratic laws by both parties joining together and ramming them through overnight is so undemocratic it's ridiculous. The fact is they have stopped many parties being able to participate in the election by forcing them to get more members than they could possibly get during a COVID pandemic," she said.

"Things are being forced on us that shouldn't be forced on us, particularly the Indue card [cashless welfare quarantining card]. There's no way in the world I'll accept that."

Referring to the ongoing COVID pandemic Cherrill said, "I have vulnerable family members and I'm terrified for them. Nobody talks about COVID but there were 153 cases in Shepparton yesterday and yet they closed us down when we had 60 at the beginning of the pandemic. The virus is still as deadly as ever. The SEP is the only party saying, 'We will mitigate and help protect, and try to eliminate the virus' and so I'm going for the Socialist Equality Party.

"The Greens have actually come out with some good policies but they're still a capitalist party and there's no way I'm voting for another capitalist government in my life. There's no one you can vote for that's going to be compassionate, caring for the electorate. It's all designed for money and there's absolutely no care for people," she said.

On Monday morning SEP candidate Peter Byrne was interviewed by Peter Dunbain on One FM 98.5, the city's community radio station.

The eight-minute interview reviewed the party's program of action for the working class and its four main socialist and internationalist planks. The SEP candidate explained the party's anti-war opposition to the US-NATO led war against Russia in Ukraine, the fight to eliminate COVID-19, and the necessity for a socialist and internationalist program to deal with climate change and in defence of living standards, jobs and basic democratic rights.

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