

Australia: IYSSE members speak in support of the SEP's active boycott campaign of Labor's Voice referendum

Max Boddy**25 September 2023**

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is campaigning in working-class areas for an active boycott of Labor's October 14 referendum to enshrine an indigenous advisory Voice to parliament in the Constitution.

The SEP opposes the Yes campaign of the government, aimed at dividing workers along racial lines and revamping the image of Australian capitalism. It is also exposing the reactionary character of the official No campaign, led by the right-wing Liberal-National Coalition.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the youth wing of the SEP, has taken this campaign to numbers of university campuses. IYSSE members have been distributing the SEP statement "For an active boycott of Australian Labor's Voice referendum!"

The SEP is holding a public meeting on October 1 at 2 p.m. (AEDT) to discuss the campaign. It will be in Community Room 2, Bryan Brown Theatre, 80 Rickard Rd, Bankstown, Sydney. The meeting will also be livestreamed. Register now to attend in person or online!

Tomas, an 18-year-old unemployed school leaver in Brisbane, said young people should support and join the Socialist Equality Party's campaign for an active boycott of the Voice referendum.

"The boycott is a method for youth and workers to voice their widespread independent opposition, as it is being suppressed by the government," he said. "This boycott involves more than just casting informal ballots. It requires active participation in the campaign leading up to the referendum on the 14th of October."

Tomas agreed that the referendum itself is a political sham, as explained by the SEP's statement calling for the active boycott. He commented, "The working class is

given a binary 'option' that reflects the interests of the ruling class, without a way to oppose the anti-democratic referendum within the confines of bourgeois parliamentarism. The parliament will always have a final say on all matters relating to the Voice."

Tomas also saw the Voice proposal as a political cover for war. "The Labor government is pushing for a Yes vote in the referendum while escalating the war drive against Russia and China, in alliance with the US. The referendum is a distraction from the increasing preparations for a world war against Russia in the NATO proxy war in Ukraine and against China in the Pacific."

Coming from a working-class background, Tomas said the growing popular opposition to the Voice vote was related to the reality of the social conditions facing most people.

"There is a rapidly deteriorating cost-of-living crisis, with housing prices skyrocketing and social tensions deepening, while the government spends billions on war. The entire working class is facing an attack on its social conditions, placing the burden of military spending on the shoulders of the workers."

He added, "Albanese has described the Voice as a scheme to 'save money,' acting in the interests of the corporate elite, which the Labor government is closely connected to. The Voice would provide an institutional vehicle for corporate projects, with support from the trade union apparatuses, as well as further incorporating a wealthy layer of indigenous elites into the state."

Tomas said decades of similar promises—from the 1967 referendum, to land rights, black deaths in custody royal commissions, 'reconciliation' programs and Stolen Generations apologies—had failed to improve the conditions of most indigenous people.

"Former Australian governments have attempted to

soothe working class opposition by painting a progressive veneer without improving the lives of the indigenous people. Long-term, the working class, as a whole, has not benefitted from these previous schemes and the indigenous community still suffers tremendously under capitalism.”

Tomas was scathing toward the pseudo-left groups, such as Socialist Alternative, that have swung behind Labor’s Yes campaign. “These parties are headed by a privileged stratum of the upper-middle class who seek to disorientate and divert the working class away from true socialist revolutionism into supporting the parliamentary system,” he said. “They have connections with the entrenched trade union bureaucracy and wish to defend capitalism, as their careers depend on it.”

Tomas said the active boycott campaign is related to the fight for socialism. “It is closely connected to the issue of establishing an independent movement of the working class, providing the foundation for further operations in the class struggle. Undivided, the working class has the potential to take power for itself and provide a way out of the worsening conditions with a socialist reconstruction of society.”

The SEP also spoke to Miranda, a psychology student at the University of Melbourne. “The Voice referendum is coming at a time when the Labor government is trying to posture as progressive and construct a united national front,” she said. “It’s being held when they’re making decisions, without any real democratic process, regarding the conflicts with China and the AUKUS deal.

“I think the Voice is a ploy, to give the government a progressive veneer by claiming it is supposedly righting the wrongs. It serves to expand the Constitution, which defends capitalism. The Constitution already harms the Australian working class, as a whole, but especially indigenous Australians, who the government says they’re trying to help.”

Miranda pointed to the circumstances in which Labor was making this phony pitch. “With the cost of living, the government is saying ordinary people have to make sacrifices now, but they’re putting \$368 billion towards the AUKUS submarines. That just reflects where their priorities are right now.”

On the SEP’s call for an active boycott, Miranda said: “I think it’s a good move, because there is a push from the Yes campaign, and especially Socialist Alternative, to promote that a ‘no’ vote is inherently racist. I think it’s important to recognise that not all differences with the referendum are due to racism. To label people who are

skeptical of the Voice as racist is wrong and inaccurate.”

At the University of Newcastle, the SEP spoke to Shantay, a first year Education student. “It’s an illusion” she said, “the idea that ticking a ‘yes’ box will help indigenous people. It is also not democratic, because you get fined if you choose not to vote between a binary choice.”

Shantay said that all the previous so-called progressive reforms, such as the “closing the gap” campaign, had only “made thing worse.” “It is because of the capitalist system that indigenous people are in the disadvantaged situation that they are in,” she said.

Shantay added, “the social crisis is not exclusively an indigenous question but working-class people in general. Most people in these remote areas don’t have access to high quality healthcare, even things like decent food. No attention is being given to the growing homelessness crisis.”

Shantay supports the SEP campaign for an active boycott saying, “they are using the referendum to separate people. You are being told that if you vote anything other than yes then you are blatantly racist. This is not right.

“The only option we have is for non-indigenous and indigenous workers to unify. What we have in common is that we are working class. In order to make a change, we have to do something, we have to fight to make conditions better for ourselves.”

Note: Under conditions of compulsory voting, which makes it a crime to urge a boycott of the vote itself, the SEP calls on workers and youth to register their opposition by casting informal ballots and join our active boycott campaign in the lead-up to October 14, that goes well beyond the individual act of voting.

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