

Socialist Equality Party meeting discusses its campaign for an active boycott of Australia's Voice referendum

Our reporters
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On Sunday the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Australia held a successful public meeting as part of its campaign to educate and mobilise workers and youth on a socialist perspective in opposition to both the Yes and No camps in the October 14 referendum.

Titled “For an active boycott of Australian Labor’s Voice referendum,” the event was held in the western Sydney suburb of Bankstown and livestreamed. More than 80 participants logged in from across Australia as well as New Zealand, Sri Lanka, Thailand and the US.

The Albanese Labor government is urging electors to vote Yes for an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Voice to parliament, claiming that this unelected body will overcome the poverty and social oppression confronting the majority of Aboriginal people.

The Yes and the No camps represent two different sections of Australia’s ruling class. Both are fully committed to the profit system, imperialist war and social austerity. Irrespective of the vote’s outcome, Aboriginal workers and their families will confront the worsening social crisis that is gripping the working class as a whole.

Sunday’s meeting was chaired by SEP Assistant National Secretary Max Boddy with reports by *World Social Web Site* journalist Oscar Grenfell, Tom Peters, a leading member of the Socialist Equality Group in New Zealand, and SEP National Secretary Cheryl Crisp.

These extensive and compelling reports, which included photographs, graphics and video footage, were followed by a question-and-answer session in which attendees sought further clarification on a range of issues.

Grenfell told the event that the SEP’s response to the referendum was based on the independent interests of the working class. “Our active boycott provides the only genuine political alternative to the Yes and No camps and goes beyond the issue of voting,” he said. “It charts a path for the development of a movement of the working class against the entire political establishment and the profit system itself.”

He outlined the reactionary political calculations underpinning the Voice proposal. These included diverting

attention from Labor’s escalating involvement in US-led plans for war against China and the imposition of major social attacks, expansion of the state apparatus and a further bolstering of a wealthy pro-big business Aboriginal elite.

Grenfell reviewed the origins and economic driving forces behind the colonisation of Australia and its consequences for Aboriginal people. He also detailed the horrendous contemporary social conditions facing indigenous working-class communities, and refuted government lies that it needed a special advisory body—the Voice—to find out how to overcome these conditions.

The speaker drew attention to the pernicious role played by an economically privileged group of self-proclaimed Aboriginal leaders, such as businessman Noel Pearson and academic Marcia Langton, championing the Voice. This milieu and the Voice are being actively promoted by pseudo-left groups, Grenfell explained.

Speaking online from New Zealand, Peters pointed to the close parallels between the Voice campaign and the Treaty of Waitangi. He provided a concise overview of the historic origins of the 1840 treaty and its purpose.

Like similar agreements with indigenous tribes in Canada and the United States, the treaty, Peters explained, was used by the British to deceive the Māori tribes and prepare to take the land by force, while buying off a layer of leaders and drawing them into bourgeois politics. Close relations between Māori leaders and New Zealand governments were also used for military recruitment drives in the first and second world wars.

The political role of the treaty was further developed during the 1970s and 1980s to divert growing working-class militancy. New Zealanders were told to “rally around the Treaty of Waitangi, ‘as a symbol of unity, trust, understanding and good will’” during those years. Governments allocated significant resources to elevate an upper-middle class of Māori while implementing major attacks on the working class.

Peters pointed to the rising poverty and worsening social conditions of working-class Māori, who constitute about 15 percent of New Zealand’s population. The current wealth gap

between rich and poor M?ori is twice as wide as the general population, he said.

Peters reminded attendees that a New Zealand election was being held on the same day as the Voice referendum. “Here, as in Australia, the entire political establishment is campaigning on the basis of racial politics—with each side accusing the other of being racist—to distract from the fact that whoever gets in is going to carry out sweeping cuts to public services and other attacks on the working class,” he said.

Both governments, Peters said, were fully aligned with the military drive by the US and other imperialist powers to redivide the world and plunder the resources of Russia and China.

Crisp began her contribution by referring the standing ovations given to Nazi war criminal Yaroslav Hunka, a former member of SS Waffen Galacia Unit in Ukraine, on September 22 in the Canadian parliament.

“That this occurred in the seat of rule of one of the most preeminent democracies in world cannot be explained as an error,” Crisp said. She reviewed the dangerously escalating US-led NATO war against Russia in Ukraine and the preparations for war against China.

“The Ukraine war is not a regional conflict and cannot even be correctly termed a proxy war by NATO against Russia. It is for its subjugation, its dismemberment, and to deny China its only ally when imperialism launches war against that country, a task which would inevitably engulf large portions of the world and threaten the use of nuclear weapons,” she said.

The Voice was being pursued to advance these geo-strategic aims. It could only be assessed within this context—something that was never discussed in the 2022 election campaign.

Crisp reviewed the Albanese government’s immediate, and ever-expanding, involvement in the US-led provocations against China and the war against Russia in Ukraine. “War abroad requires an equally vicious war against the working class at home,” she said.

Crisp explained that the referendum was also an attempt to cover up the bloody history of Australian capitalism and promote bogus claims of national unity and Australia as the land of “the fair go, and rights for all.”

This was a mirage, Crisp said. “There is no national unity. There is not one country, there are two—the working class and the capitalist class—and their interests are irreconcilably opposed.

“The appeal to colour and race is a reactionary perspective designed to divide the working class... the unleashing of far-right-wing racism against indigenous and immigrant workers is the outcome of the very nature of the referendum itself.

“The SEP’s call for an active boycott is to provide an independent perspective for young people and workers. But casting an informal ballot is not enough. We call for an active boycott because it must be ongoing, not a one-off protest.”

The broad historical and political questions raised here must

be addressed, Crisp concluded. “Our intervention in this campaign is to explain these issues and develop a politically conscious movement of workers and youth against war and austerity.”

Before opening the question-and-answer session, Boddy screened video interviews with Northern Territory residents by a *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team on the social and political impact of the 2007 Northern Territory Emergency Response.

Launched by the Liberal-National Coalition government of John Howard, with bipartisan support from Labor, the “intervention” was necessary, the government claimed, to protect Aboriginal children from alleged sexual abuse and other criminal behaviour in Aboriginal communities.

The unprecedented territory-wide operation instituted a raft of anti-democratic measures and mobilised hundreds of military personnel, federal police and government bureaucrats into Aboriginal communities.

The intervention had nothing do with overcoming endemic poverty and social horrors. Its purpose was to slash welfare and shut down “uneconomic” remote communities.

The WSWs reportage in 2008 provided the only independent platform for Aboriginal people to speak about the social conditions and the decades of government lies and false promises.

The meeting provoked a range of questions from attendees asking for further clarification on SEP’s attitude to referendum and how to answer illusions that the Voice was a first step to improving the plight of indigenous communities and allegations that those not supporting the Yes camp were racist.

Other questions related to how the working class should deal with the police and the military, the US foreign debt and imperialist war, the wealth of the Aboriginal elites, the history of the Aboriginal working class and other issues. These questions were answered during the discussion, which is included in the linked video above.

We urge readers to watch the meeting video, widely share it on social media, and contact to the SEP to participate in its active boycott campaign.

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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