

Workers and young people support SEP campaign for active boycott of Australia's Voice referendum

Our reporters
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On Sunday, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) held a public meeting advancing its fight for an active boycott of the October 14 referendum on enshrining an indigenous Voice to parliament in the Australian Constitution.

Leading members of the SEP and of the Socialist Equality Group (SEG) in New Zealand exposed the reactionary politics of the official Yes and No camps. They explained that both were promoting racialism and nationalism to divide the working class and to further the preparations for Australian participation in a US-led war against China.

The speakers explained that the active boycott was a means of advancing an independent perspective for the working class, directed towards the development of a socialist movement against war and austerity.

Alexis, an IT worker in his late 30s originally from central Russia, attended the meeting online.

He said: “The Yes campaign say that by voting yes you are making a statement supporting equality and agreement with Aboriginal people and if you vote no, you’re a racist and stupid. But voting either way won’t change anything for the working class or Aboriginal people.

“In my experience any such campaigns by governments mean some way of extracting more from the working class to fund the needs of the government that will not in any way benefit the Aboriginal people.

Alexis expressed appreciation for the remarks of SEP National Secretary Cheryl Crisp. She had placed the referendum in the context of a broader promotion of nationalism, linked to the US-led proxy war against Russia in Ukraine and the preparations for a war against China. Crisp had drawn particular attention to the significance of the Canadian parliament recently giving a standing ovation to a Ukrainian Nazi, as part of its promotion of the current war effort.

Alexis said: “I liked Cheryl’s remarks that explained the US policy of war against Russia and how the Canadian parliament applauded the Ukrainian fascist. I wish more people had attended the meeting but I understand that the SEP does not have anything like the resources of the Yes and No campaigns.”

Daniel, a student at the University of Melbourne, logged into the meeting via the livestream. He said there was an “interesting collision of perspectives” between the campaign for the Voice to parliament and the experiences in New Zealand with the Treaty of Waitangi. Leading SEG member Tom Peters had explained that the Treaty of Waitangi had done nothing to improve the social position of working-class Māori, instead helping to cultivate a privileged indigenous elite.

Daniel said that he learned a lot in the course of the discussion about the “whole progression and timeline” around the Treaty.

It showed to him “the possibilities, setup, and intention around Voice.” Daniel added: “The elite levels of the indigenous people in terms of the organisation around what the Voice is—the narrative of creating equality is muddled in that structure.”

The student also recalled the discussion in the meeting about Australian multi-millionaire Tim Gurner. The property developer had called for a 40–50 percent increase to unemployment, as part of an offensive against workers’ wages, in comments that led to an explosion of anger internationally on social media.

“I remember hearing about that, and just being like, ‘wow, he just says it all in 30 seconds.’” Daniel noted that the SEP was drawing a link between the ruling elite’s contempt for the working class encapsulated in Gurner’s comments and the essentially anti-working-class Voice. “The SEP’s linking that to the conversation around the Voice as well—I see that connection with further discussion.”

Daniel also appreciated the connection drawn by speakers in the meeting with Australia’s role in the US-led preparations for war against China.

He commented: “My understanding of the Voice and the bigger picture of the movement toward war is that it’s a kind of political distraction similar to the apology [speech delivered by former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in 2008]. It distracts from other things as far as Australia’s military alignment.

“As soon as [Labor Prime Minister] Albanese came into government, he had all his overseas trips around the Pacific

region. It was just so fast and deliberate. It was painted as 'fixing our image,' but it was actually about building military alliances."

Daniel expressed his agreement with the SEP's call for an active boycott of the October 14 referendum. He was aware of the campaign of independent Senator Lidia Thorpe, who is calling for a supposed "progressive No" vote. Thorpe accepts the racist premise of the referendum. Her objection is that the Voice will not funnel sufficient privileges and resources to the indigenous elite.

Daniel said: "I was kind of in this space where I wasn't sure how to vote. The 'progressive No' is about identity politics, black nationalism. I now understand it's not the working class they're really aligned with. So, what do you do? I guess the boycott fills that space. I feel like there is agreement in me with the campaign for a boycott but it has to be a collective choice. It has to feel like there's a campaign for not just doing it because you're not sure."

Donna from Melbourne watched the livestream. She said: "I'm a supporter of the Active Boycott. I think it is a very good position because I do not see eye to eye with either side of the official Voice campaign. I can see the people from both the Yes case and the No case are coming from their positions of self-interest. They are not supportive of the working class and they are very racist, and that includes the progressive No as well as the mainstream Liberal party No argument. It is unfortunate that the SEP position of the Boycott to lodge an informal vote isn't as well-known as it ought to be. People are quite uncomfortable voting on a racist platform.

"Both sides are for their own investments and their own interests, where they are getting their funds and their lifestyle from. I feel like their positions either side are to the detriment of others sometimes.

"When you look at it from a class basis, people ultimately need access to the same resources and they yearn for the same sort of human dignity across racial or religious or whatever kinds of lines, but what deprives them of those sort of human rights is the class divide, not the colour of their skin. I think that workers need to universally join forces, not do it country by country."

Donna drew a connection with growing Australian militarism, including the AUKUS pact with the US and Britain. She said: "I think in regard to these types of wars Australia is involved in it is very obvious what is happening. It is clear to me that war is what they are gearing up for. That goes back to AUKUS, because they had the arrangement with France for submarines. France was dropped like a hot potato a couple of years back to get on board with the US and the UK in a very sly manner.

Donna noted that some yes-aligned publications were promoting the record of Aboriginal servicemen who were deployed to past Australian wars. She countered: "Aborigines who were in the military came back and they were treated like rubbish. They put their bodies, their minds, their whole soul on

the line. They didn't respect them in the first place, and they didn't respect them when they came home and now they're trying to make people have patriotic pride about it.

"Cheryl said that there are two Australias, not one, and that it is divided by class. I know when I was younger I believed, and you were told, Australia has no class. And if you worked hard you'd be right, it was like the Australian dream, the American dream, whatever.

"But we're all wage slaves, we have very high levels of personal debt to buy a house or buy a car, which you need to get to work to pay your mortgage, that's another loan often for some people. We could really grind, my husband and I, and probably still be paying it off till I'm 70."

An international student from Nepal, who watched the meeting online in Sydney, said:

"I came to the meeting because international politicians [from the SEP] spoke, and they talked about socialism. I'm interested in socialism, so that's why I attended. Because I'm from Nepal, everyone was kind of an international politician to me. It's a new perspective for me.

"Mostly the meeting discussed the referendum on October 14. The referendum, I think, covers over the issue of war. The US' strategy has turned to the Pacific Ocean. It's kind of manipulation. The government is trying to make out as if they're doing good, but on a different level, they're supporting war. If there is a war, hundreds of thousands, even millions of people will be killed. The economy will be affected. The lives of common people will be affected.

"International students bring lots of dollars to Australia. We are bringing dollars, and those dollars are being used to support war. And international students in Australia have a very hard life.

"I think socialism is one of the ideologies that should be spread around the world. There is a lot of division in the world right now. There shouldn't be any division."

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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