

Socialist Equality Party wins support from Newcastle workers and youth in Australian election

Robert Creech, SEP candidate for the seat of Newcastle
2 May 2025

The Socialist Equality Party's campaign in Newcastle in the 2025 federal elections has been welcomed by important layers of workers and youth from this key working-class area. The SEP is the only organisation advancing a genuine socialist and internationalist alternative to the deepening crisis of global capitalism, trade war measures, militarism and authoritarian rule.

Located about 170 kilometres north of Sydney, Newcastle is the second largest and second oldest city in New South Wales. The electorate, which encompasses the city and surrounding suburbs, including Merewether, Adamstown, Hamilton, Lambton, Wallsend and Waratah, as well as Stockton and Kooragang Island, has been hit hard by the decades-long destruction of key manufacturing industries and tens of thousands of jobs.

As a long-time resident of Newcastle, I am intimately familiar with the key issues confronting workers, students and youth in this area, which has a long history of working-class struggle and betrayal by the Labor and trade union apparatus. Newcastle was once known as the "steel city," because it was the location of BHP's steelworks. Established in 1915, the facility grew to become the largest steel plant in Australia, employing about 16,000.

Between 1983 and 1989, the Hawke-Keating Labor government, together with the trade union bureaucrats, collaborated with BHP and other industrial corporations, in a wholesale offensive on industrial jobs. This destroyed 25,000 steel jobs nationally, including 10,000 in Newcastle.

Conducted under the slogan of making Australian industry "internationally competitive," this brutal assault resulted in the closure of the Newcastle plant in 1999. This destruction—part of a sustained attack on the manufacturing industry and every other section of the working class—was continued by subsequent Australian governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike.

The elimination of these jobs, and thousands more in associated industries, was followed by public sector closures or privatisations—including of the state-owned Newcastle State Dockyard, the Cardiff railway maintenance workshops and power provider Energy Australia. Over the next two decades Newcastle was transformed from an industrial heartland into an area of high unemployment and other social problems. None of this could have occurred without the active collaboration of the union bureaucracy.

This was demonstrated yet again in September 2023, when

Molycop steel announced that it was axing 250 of its 540-strong work force. The Australian Workers Union and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union responded by telling workers nothing could be done and assuring the company that it would collaborate in the downsizing.

During a distribution of SEP election manifestos outside Molycop last month, several workers voiced their anger and contempt for the unions while one worker congratulated me, shaking my hand for being an SEP candidate.

The SEP has campaigned for the formation of rank-and-file committees, controlled by workers, and completely independent of the union apparatuses, as the only means of developing a unified industrial and political fight against the ongoing onslaught on jobs, wages and working conditions.

Last week, I spoke with a Keolis Downer bus driver at a pre-poll voting station. He is one of 250 drivers in the Lake Macquarie and Newcastle areas in dispute with the company because it refuses to grant their demand for annual 8 percent pay rises in the next agreement and 72 hours' notice for shift changes. Supporting the SEP's election intervention, he said the major parties were covering up the main issues facing workers in their election campaigns and immediately donated about \$50.

Below-inflation wage levels, attacks on working conditions, housing stress, poverty and under-resourcing of vital public services—health and education—have been uppermost in the mind of workers and youth during our election campaign. Over 21 percent of households in Newcastle are now classed as low-income and below the poverty line.

Housing stress is now at unprecedented levels with workers' average purchasing power having declined by 9 percent since 2019 and 13 interest rate hikes have driven up mortgages. In November 2024, it was reported that homes in Newcastle were more out of reach for residents than in any other major city, apart from Sydney.

For a median-priced dwelling, a new mortgage in Newcastle would take up 58.3 percent of an average household's income in the region, according to the ANZ-CoreLogic Housing Affordability report. That is based on a 20 percent deposit and the current average variable discounted mortgage rate.

According to a 2024 NSW Council of Social Service report, about 81 percent of Newcastle residents on low incomes or below the poverty line are in housing stress (defined as spending more

than 30 percent on housing). The study also revealed that 62 percent had no money set aside for emergencies, 60 percent could not afford to travel to work or school, 55 percent were compelled to go without meals and 53 percent without prescribed medication or healthcare.

A recent Salvation Army "Social Justice" survey said that 75 percent of those surveyed identified housing affordability and homelessness as major issues in the community. According to the last census, the current waiting time for social housing in Newcastle is between five and ten years, meaning those most vulnerable face dire prospects.

These concerns were reflected in comments from Elijah, a young student from the University of Newcastle, who has participated in the SEP's election campaign.

"My family is taking care of five kids, me included. A lot of the time we don't know whether we're going to be evicted from our housing or not. It's a very stressful environment. I was homeless for a couple of years during my childhood. The housing market is just ridiculous," he said.

Access to adequate health care is also a major concern in the electorate. Health workers talked about staff shortages and worsening conditions in public hospitals. Other voiced concerns about healthcare affordability.

Last month, about 250 public sector doctors and their supporters rallied outside John Hunter Hospital, the largest hospital in the region. The protest was part of a 5,000-strong three-day statewide doctors strike, their first in almost 30 years.

Doctors were demanding a 30 percent pay rise and protesting over understaffing, fatigue and burnout. Their union shut down the strike and agreed to impose a 90-day no strike order on the doctors while their dispute was adjudicated in the Industrial Relations Commission. The same role has been played by the unions in major disputes involving public sector psychiatrists and nurses.

Sara, who teaches nursing and attended one of our party forums, spoke about nurses' working conditions. She said: "We've lost something like 22,000 nurses during COVID. There is a worldwide shortage of nurses and that's going to increase with time unless we do something to improve their work-life balance.

"Recently, the government has given \$300 per week to student nurses for when they do their placement. But it's means-tested, so anyone who lives with their parents will not get it. It also doesn't apply to international students. I'm shocked by the current people in power who are saying that the housing shortage is due to international students. It absolutely is not," she said.

Despite attempts by Labor, the Liberals and other capitalist parties to promote parochialism in Newcastle, the major upheavals, globally and in Australia, are shifting political consciousness.

That was expressed in the comments of Monica, a retiree, who attended an SEP forum, and condemned the mass murder of Palestinians, which has been backed by the US and every other imperialist power, including Australia.

"Israel is not just going after Hamas; they are also terrorising the West Bank where there is no Hamas," she said. "Apparently, they have turfed out 40,000 people from their homes by now. They are doing the same thing there as in Gaza, destroying hospitals and

taking people from their homes. It is not about Hamas but claiming raw materials.

"We have reached this stage in world history where there is no rule of law. Governments can do what they want with impunity. I worry that a lot of people in the working class are not informed. Many don't realise that all the seemingly disparate stories in the media are connected and part of the same system of capitalism," Monica said.

Elijah told us that he had decided to campaign with the SEP because, "there are not a lot of alternative parties that are vocally against the Gaza genocide and dictatorship across the world.

"In fact, I'd say the Socialist Equality Party is probably the only one in this area. A lot of the other ones just tend to be Labor-lite. They just want to suck up to Labor and purport their views in a leftist-façade kind of way," he said.

Elijah was also critical of the Greens, "They just dress up politics, especially for young people, and try to make things simple, which is meant to stop you thinking about what you're voting for or what they actually support. They want to make it easily digestible, but politics shouldn't be easily digestible, it should make you think."

As the SEP campaign has stressed over the past four weeks, nothing will be resolved for workers and youth by the May 3 federal election, regardless of whether Labor or the Liberal-Nationals form government.

Our intervention is part of the struggle to build a class-conscious socialist and internationally unified movement of the working class, to put an end to the capitalist system, the source of militarism and war, job destruction and attacks on working conditions and democratic basic rights.

I appeal to workers and youth to vote for the SEP today, study our program, and above all, I urge you to join the SEP in building the revolutionary leadership required to fight for this perspective.

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