

IYSSE holds meeting on Socialist Equality Group's New Zealand election campaign

Our reporter
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The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at Victoria University of Wellington held a public meeting on October 15 to launch the Socialist Equality Group's campaign in the New Zealand election on November 7. Tom Petterson is standing for the SEG in the Hutt South electorate—the first time a member of the Trotskyist movement has stood in a New Zealand election. The meeting was attended by students and workers.

The SEG is holding a further public meeting on Sunday November 1, at 1:30 p.m. in the Dowse Art Museum, 45 Laings Road, Lower Hutt. Register here to attend in person or online.

John Braddock, a longstanding *World Socialist Web Site* writer and member of the SEG, chaired the meeting. He said the election was “a crisis for the entire New Zealand ruling establishment, which faces an intractable global situation and an increasingly hostile working class at home.”

A breakdown of capitalism is underway, “marked by an eruption of imperialist militarism, a turn to dictatorship and an assault on the social and democratic rights of the working class unprecedented since the 1930s. A new world war is not a future danger but a present-day reality,” Braddock said.

He highlighted New Zealand's role as a minor imperialist power in the Pacific, allied with the US, saying the government was “hectoring countries to align with the escalating anti-China aggression.”

The same crisis of capitalism that gives rise to war, he said, “is driving a dramatic intensification of the class struggle and broad political radicalisation of young people and workers. The Socialist Equality Group, along with its co-thinkers internationally, is seeking to intervene into this developing movement, and arm it with a socialist and revolutionary perspective.”

Petterson began by stating that the purpose of the SEG's campaign was “to tell workers the truth: that the dire and worsening crisis they confront will not be solved by the election.” The National Party, the Labour Party and all their political allies “speak for different layers of big business, the financial elite and the affluent upper middle class. They are

all complicit in brutal attacks on workers' living standards. And they are all parties of imperialist war.”

In the official election campaigns and media coverage, Petterson said, “the question of war is hardly ever mentioned, despite its enormous impact on working people's lives.” In a recent televised leaders' debate, “Prime Minister Christopher Luxon brazenly lied when he stated that he had not supported the US attack on Iran.” In fact, Luxon immediately echoed the US propaganda justifying the war.

Petterson noted that “Labour and National both support a major increase in military spending, from 1 to 2 percent of GDP or even higher, and a similar expansion of recruitment.”

Labour, he said, had a long record of actively supporting criminal imperialist wars, including in Iraq and Afghanistan during the 2000s. Jacinda Ardern's Labour-led government, which included the Greens, “sent NZ soldiers to Britain in 2022 to train Ukrainian conscripts to fight Russia. In August 2023, Labour's Defence Minister Andrew Little said the country must be ‘equipped and prepared’ for a possible war against China.”

There is also bipartisan agreement that the working class must pay for war “through sky-rocketing prices, and through the destruction of healthcare, welfare and education programs to fund the military.”

This follows years of plummeting living standards, including a 6.4 percent drop in real wages from 2021 to 2026. Petterson noted New Zealand's “appalling levels of hunger and deprivation: one in five children lives in poverty. About 18 percent of people have experienced severe food insecurity in the past year and more than 500,000, one in ten, depend on foodbanks to survive.”

The last Labour-led government, which included the right-wing NZ First from 2017 to 2020, paved the way for the current right-wing government, Petterson said. It exploited the COVID-19 pandemic to hand out billions of dollars to big business, while imposing austerity on schools and hospitals. Labour oversaw an increase in homelessness and

the number of children living in material hardship.

“Workers must draw sharp political lessons from Labour’s record. All the claims by the media, unions and pseudo-lefts that Ardern’s government would improve workers’ lives were lies,” Petterson said.

The pseudo-left groups, Socialist Aotearoa and the International Socialist Organisation, are once again promoting illusions that a Labour-led government, including the Greens and Te Pahi Māori, will oppose war and improve workers’ lives.

Petterson said: “We are not talking about mistaken ideas, but about material, class interests. The pseudo-lefts represent a definite social layer: the well-heeled middle class, which operates in and around the capitalist parties, in the universities, the public service, and the trade union bureaucracy. The privileged status of this layer depends on upholding capitalism and New Zealand’s place in the imperialist system.

“The Socialist Equality Group’s campaign is directed against all these groups—including the trade union apparatus, which has prevented any struggle against the right-wing attacks of both Labour and National-led governments.”

The report was followed by an hour of questions and discussion. One student said “Labour and the Greens have tricked a lot of workers into supporting them” and asked how the SEG could dispel these illusions.

A rail worker, who joined the meeting via Zoom, added that “one of my workmates said today that they will be voting for the Green Party,” despite describing themselves as a “communist.”

In response, Petterson emphasised the collapse in support for the major parties, which are both polling around 28 percent, mirroring what is happening internationally. “Labour is in a serious crisis. If it wins the election it will be in a coalition with three other parties, probably. All of them will be rapidly exposed” as the cost-of-living crisis worsens, including the Greens, which would seek to provide a “progressive” cover for Labour.

“What we must do is follow the advice of Lenin and the Bolsheviks during the preparation for the Russian Revolution, which is to patiently explain to workers the reality of what these parties represent.... The Greens have a long record in government supporting militarism and war, and spending cuts and austerity.

“We base ourselves on the fact that workers are going to be driven into struggle, objectively, they can’t go on living under this current system, and they will come into conflict with all the parties of the ruling class.”

Another audience member asked for more specific detail about the SEG’s “vision” for “a society that has caring as its basis” and serves the interests of the majority.

Braddock explained that “what we aim for is in our title: social equality. Fundamentally it means the control of the economy and society by the working class.” The Russian Revolution, he said, resulted in a workers’ government based on Soviets, which developed in the revolution. Today, the SEG calls on workers to establish rank-and-file committees in workplaces and neighbourhoods to take their struggles into their own hands, in opposition to the union bureaucracy and all capitalist parties.

Another student, Josh, asked Petterson to expand on what he meant by the need for leadership. Petterson replied that workers need their own revolutionary party. “That’s the only weapon that workers have to counter the bourgeois ideology they are bombarded with every day from the media, all the illusions that are whipped up in all the capitalist parties.”

He added that socialist consciousness “doesn’t spontaneously occur in workers’ minds... Hence the need for a party, and it has to be international, because the working class is international. One of the illusions that we have to destroy is that there is a national solution, a New Zealand solution” to the crisis the working class confronts.

The mass protests now erupting in France and Spain, Petterson said, are driven by hostility towards the status quo and the government over war and austerity, but without a conscious socialist perspective and leadership. “So, leadership is the crucial question of this discussion. We have to build it... and I appeal to all of you to be involved in that, make this your own struggle and see yourselves as future socialist leaders.”

He urged those in attendance to join the SEG’s campaign and fight to build its public meeting on November 1.

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