

New Zealand SEG candidate presents socialist and anti-war perspective at election forum

Our reporter
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Last Sunday, Tom Petterson from the Socialist Equality Group (SEG) participated in a “meet the candidates” forum hosted by the non-profit organisation It’s in the Ballot, for the upcoming New Zealand general election on November 7. Petterson is standing as a candidate for the SEG in Hutt South and is the first member of the Trotskyist movement to stand in a New Zealand election.

The only other candidate standing in Hutt South present at the event was Ben Wylie-van Eerd of the Opportunity Party (TOP), a right-wing, pro-business party founded by millionaire Gareth Morgan that fraudulently poses as a “centrist” alternative to the major parties. Also present was Nigel Elder, the candidate for the far-right ACT Party in the adjacent Remutaka electorate. ACT has played in prominent role in pushing the austerity agenda of the current National-led coalition government.

The candidates of the two major parties, Labour and National, as well as the Greens, did not attend and gave no explanation for their absence.

The format was highly restrictive. After one-minute opening statements, the candidates answered questions prepared by the organisers and randomly assigned to each, in a manner similar to a TV game show. There were no questions from the floor nor open discussion and debate.

The answers provided by both Wylie-van Eerd and Elder to a question on how they would address inequality typified the reactionary response of ACT and TOP to the social crisis. Wylie-van Eerd pointed to the gap between homeowners and those who cannot afford a home and touted TOP’s land tax—which would be imposed on anyone with a house—and a poverty-level “Citizen’s Income,” saying these measures would “equalize a little bit that gap.”

Elder dismissively declared that wealth inequality “has always existed,” and proposed giving Year 11 high-school students a \$500 fund “to learn to invest with.” ACT is campaigning to freeze the minimum wage for

three years, cut disability and sickness benefits, and slash public services.

Neither of the right-wing candidates made any connection between the conditions facing workers in New Zealand and the global situation, nor made any reference to the war in Ukraine, the genocide in Gaza, the US-Israeli war on Iran, or the militarisation of the Pacific.

In stark contrast, Petterson’s opening statement explained that he was standing in the election “to bring workers and youth the real issues that are facing them. The election will resolve nothing for ordinary people. The other parties offer only a rearrangement of who rules on behalf of corporate interest.”

He continued: “My candidacy highlights that what workers face in New Zealand is identical to what they are facing internationally. The world is being driven towards catastrophe, a war in which New Zealand will participate.”

Petterson connected the issue of war to the conditions facing workers in New Zealand, stating that driving the cost-of-living pressures was “the eruption of the US-led war against Iran, which is part of an escalating world war.”

“None of the parties will do anything about this,” he said, “because any action to seriously ease the cost-of-living pressures would endanger the profits of New Zealand’s capitalists.”

Asked particularly about households in the Hutt South electorate struggling to pay for food, rent and mortgages, Petterson raised the SEG’s demands, set out in the party’s election statement, including an immediate 20 percent pay increase for all workers, wages and benefits indexed to the cost of living, a living income for those unable to work, the cancellation of student debt and the restoration of free tertiary education; and free, universal healthcare.

“All of these measures can be paid for by cancelling all

spending on the military and intelligence agencies and preparations for war, and by expropriating the banks and major corporations,” Petterson said. He noted that Labour and National are jointly committed to spending \$13 billion on the military between 2025 and 2029.

Throughout the forum, Petterson raised the necessity for workers of all ethnicities and nationalities to unite against capitalism. Responding to a question about whether the current immigration settings are “sustainable,” In opposition to every other party including ACT and TOP, Petterson called for full citizenship rights for all immigrants and opposed the anti-immigrant policies of both Labour and National-led governments.

In response to a question on the contemporary significance of the Treaty of Waitangi, he stressed that this was a colonial document that the British Empire used to deceive Māori tribes with false promises that they could keep their land. The Socialist Equality Group opposes the elevation of the 1840 Treaty and the use of Treaty settlements since the 1980s to elevate a narrow capitalist layer while Māori workers are living in poverty.

The working class faces a social crisis of historic dimensions. Real wages in New Zealand have fallen by 6.4 percent since 2021. One in five children lives in poverty, and half a million people—one in ten—now depend on food banks to survive.

Both Labour and National are pledged to deepen this crisis. The National-led government’s May budget foreshadowed 8,700 public sector job cuts while raising rents, slashing welfare and hiking university fees. Labour has refused to commit to reversing any of these attacks, and the party has ruled out any significant tax on the rich. Labour’s allies, the Greens, Opportunity and Te Pahi Māori, to the extent that they discuss the social crisis at all, propose only tinkering around the edges of the capitalist system that would do nothing to alleviate the pressures on working people.

Petterson pointed to the fundamental change required when asked what bill he would introduce to parliament if elected: “To place the commanding heights of the economy under public ownership, under the democratic control of the working class.” He referred to the staggering inequality of New Zealand capitalism—\$129 billion in the hands of just 150 families, and \$39.5 billion in bank profits over the past five years.

“All of this wealth was created by the working class, and it should be the working class, the vast majority of the population, which decides how it is used.”

Petterson directly raised that these necessary steps

would not be achieved by submitting a bill to parliament. “What is required is not the reform of capitalism, which is impossible. What is required is the overthrow of capitalism.”

In his closing statement Petterson explained: “I am standing in Hutt South not primarily to get into parliament but to raise that the working class must itself organise its own party,” he said. “Every demand for an increase in the living standards of workers collides with the profit system and all the parties that defend it. What is required is for workers to take their own political action.” That action, he explained, includes the building of rank-and-file committees in the workplaces, independent of the trade union bureaucracies that have functioned for decades to push through pay cuts for workers.

He concluded by raising the necessity of international unity. “Workers must unite across borders in the fight for world socialist revolution,” he said. “That is the only way forward, the only way to prevent a catastrophic world war, and dictatorship.”

The forum demonstrated that only the Socialist Equality Group is addressing the real issues confronting ordinary people in this election—war, the social crisis, and the need for the working class to take political power into its own hands. Workers and youth in the Hutt South electorate should vote for Tom Petterson on November 7.

The SEG urges all workers, students, and youth—whether they live in Hutt South or not—to attend our public meeting on Sunday, November 1, at 1:30 p.m. in the Dowse Art Museum, 45 Laings Road, Lower Hutt, and to take up the fight for socialism.

The full recording of It’s in the Ballot’s “Meet the candidates” forum for Hutt South can be viewed here.

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