

New Zealand: SEG candidate advances socialist perspective at Hutt South forum

Our reporter
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Last Friday, Tom Petterson, the Socialist Equality Group (SEG) candidate for Hutt South in the November 7 New Zealand election, took part in a public meeting alongside the other candidates contesting the electorate.

The “meet the candidates” event, hosted by the Normandale Residents Association (NRA), was attended by about 50 people. It provided a stark contrast between the SEG’s socialist program to put an end to social inequality and war, and the refusal of the National Party, Labour and their allied parties to offer any solution to the soaring cost of living, war, and criminally underfunded essential public services.

Those taking part included the sitting National Party MP Chris Bishop, Labour’s Ginny Andersen, the Greens’ Courtney White, the Opportunity Party’s Ben Wylie-van Eerd, Alistair Boyce from the right-wing nationalist NZ First, independent candidate David Smith, and the far-right ACT Party candidate for the neighbouring Remutaka electorate, Nigel Elder.

The NRA’s Pete Matcham, who chaired the meeting, began by observing that opinion polls showed a significant lack of support for both National and Labour. “‘A pox on both their houses’ is the clear message coming through,” he said. Whichever party leads the next government will have to form a coalition with two or more minor parties.

This reflects widespread anger and disillusion with successive Labour and National-led governments, which have overseen brutal austerity measures and the diversion of more and more public funds into the military to prepare for war.

Each candidate was asked five questions set by the NRA, with two minutes to answer. Most centred on local issues, including the relationship between councils and the government. The first asked whether the candidates would support more “localism,” with the government staying out of local councils’ business and allowing councils to raise their own revenue.

Labour’s Andersen blandly answered that she supported council amalgamation and simplification. National’s Bishop said he largely agreed. White said the Greens wanted more decisions to be made locally and councils should have the ability to impose “things like bed levies and congestion charging” to raise revenue. ACT’s Elder demanded deeper spending cuts.

Opposing the entire framework of the discussion, the SEG’s Tom Petterson said: “The basic problem is not localism or centralisation, but the austerity agenda of the capitalist class and all the parties in parliament, as well as the councils.”

Petterson was the only candidate who referred to international context of the election: “As we meet today, workers and young people throughout the world are involved in mass protests and strikes—across France, Italy, Spain, Greece, Belgium and other countries—against crumbling infrastructure, soaring living costs and the militarisation of society, with endless money for war.” Social inequality in New Zealand was “just as sharp” as it is in Europe, he said.

Petterson noted that successive governments had failed to fund the most basic water infrastructure and sought to offload the responsibility onto councils, which were imposing huge costs on households. Across the Wellington region, ratepayers are facing a 13 percent increase in water bills from the new organisation Tiaki Wai, created by the local and regional councils. One in five households, 30,000, have failed to pay their recent bill on time.

“That’s an indication of the level of distress and anger among working class people who are facing impossibly high prices for everything, and whose wages have gone backwards by 6.4 percent in the past five years,” Petterson said. He added that Andrew Little, Wellington’s Labour Party mayor, has said people will face debt collectors if they do not pay.

Petterson said the wealth of the billionaires, including the \$129 billion shared by 150 people on the *National Business Review* Rich List, and the \$39.5 billion in bank profits accumulated between 2020 and 2025 “was created by the working class and should be taken back,” through the expropriation of the banks and major industries.

In response to a question about how they would ensure adequate funding and better management for the crisis-ridden Fire and Emergency New Zealand (FENZ), the Opportunity Party’s Wylie-van Eerd said there was “no easy answer” and called for an investigation. The Greens’ candidate similarly called for “a review” of how FENZ’s funding is managed and more support for firefighters who get cancer.

Bishop blamed FENZ’s mismanagement for the fact that no new fire station had been built in Hutt City since the old station

closed in 2021 due to black mould. “I will try and sort it out after the election,” he said. Andersen criticised the current government’s funding cuts and said homes were at risk due to the lack of a local fire station, but Labour has not promised any increase in funding, only an “independent review” into FENZ.

Petterson said he had spoken earlier in the day with firefighters who were on strike outside the Avalon Fire Station, their 71st one-hour strike. “They have received no pay rise since July 2023, and their most recent offer is 2.2 percent per annum—about half the rate of inflation—with no back-pay for the past two years.”

He called for the fire service’s funding to be “at least doubled. That will not be done by either a Labour or a National government. It requires an end to the subordination of society to the profit system.” The SEG’s message to firefighters was that “nothing can be gained by begging the state or pleading with the government to change its mind. What is required is a mass mobilisation of workers across the country against austerity. That also requires a rebellion against the union bureaucracy, which is acting to isolate the firefighters and to force through concessions from workers all across the country.”

None of the candidates offered any real solution to the cost-of-living crisis facing workers. On transport, National’s Bishop declared that “petrol tax needs to go up” in 2028 to pay for roads. He admitted this was “an unpopular position.” Petrol prices have risen more than 40 percent following the US-led war on Iran, driving up costs dramatically for working people.

Labour’s Andersen promoted Labour’s \$20-a-week cap on public transport fares. This would save only a small amount of money for some workers, which would be cancelled out by soaring living costs.

Asked how their parties would bring down the cost of basic items, the Labour and National candidates put forward their parties’ proposals to break up the supermarket duopoly. Bishop said that “you all pay more than you should at supermarkets” because of the “uncompetitive” duopoly—which has remained unchanged for decades under successive Labour and National governments.

In response, Petterson said “the cost-of-living crisis will not be solved by tinkering as is being suggested by the other candidates,” including the Greens’ “plan to have a state-owned supermarket and a state-owned power company. This would still leave the profits of the industry completely untouched and will do nothing to address the source of rising prices.”

Petterson said it was “criminal ... that up to one in three households in New Zealand is struggling to afford food, 17 percent suffer from severe insecurity, and one in 10 (500,000 to 600,000 people) are relying on food banks. The reason that food prices have risen so steeply is because the ruling class is transferring the cost of its own crisis onto working people.

“None of this is accidental. It is the product of the capitalist system, which every other candidate in this meeting defends.” The major imperialist powers, led by the US, were plunging the

world into war to “control the resources of the Middle East and the whole Eurasian landmass.”

In opposition to the other parties, Petterson said, “The claim that no one can do anything about oil prices is false. A workers’ government would immediately act to drastically bring down the cost of petrol and diesel through subsidies. Why should working people have to pay because of the criminal war against Iran?”

The SEG candidate pointed to the complicity of all parties in parliament in the developing world war, which was driving up prices. He noted that Prime Minister Christopher Luxon and his government supported the illegal US and Israeli attack on Iran.

“Moreover, both Labour and National support New Zealand’s role as a minor imperialist power in the Pacific, closely allied to Australia and the United States, and part of the Five Eyes intelligence sharing network.” This alliance, Petterson said, was “actively preparing for a war against China, which is now at a very advanced stage of preparation.” Labour and National agree that military spending and recruitment must be doubled.

“The Socialist Equality Group demands an end to all military spending. All that money should be used to solve the pressing problems facing working people” and New Zealand’s withdrawal from all imperialist alliances. Petterson called for the banks and major companies to be “placed in public ownership and under the democratic control of the working class,” in order for society’s wealth to be used to end poverty and inequality.

The SEG urges workers to attend our public meeting on Sunday November 1, at 1:30pm in the Dowse Art Museum, 45 Laings Road, Lower Hutt, to discuss the real issues facing the working class and the urgent need to build a socialist and internationalist party.

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