Workers speak on unemployment, homelessness and war ahead of NZ election

Our reporters
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Members and supporters of the Socialist Equality Group in New Zealand are campaigning in the Hutt South electorate, where SEG member Tom Petterson is standing as a candidate in the country's election on November 7.

Workers, students and unemployed people have spoken with the SEG about soaring social inequality and the escalating world war. They have denounced the refusal of the National Party-led government and the opposition Labour Party to offer any solution to the cost-of-living crisis and rundown public services.

Ketia, a qualified chef who has been unemployed for several years, said, "It's hard getting a job out there," particularly as an older worker. "And this government isn't helping, they're not listening to us at all. What they should be doing is cutting their own wages, their bonuses and their top-ups, and giving to the people out here that are struggling."

She denounced the government's plan to cut welfare levels for long-term unemployed people, saying that already people were being driven to begging "because they don't get enough to live on the benefit."

Asked what she thought was the most urgent issue that had to be addressed, she said: "Homelessness, housing. It's terrible." She added that "nobody can buy a house these days, and Kainga Ora [Housing NZ] is selling off all these empty houses where the homeless people could be living."

Ketia did not think the Labour Party would make any positive difference if elected, calling its leader Chris Hipkins "weak" and saying that both major parties were "telling lies." She agreed with the SEG's demands for an end to military spending, an immediate increase in benefit levels and wages to address the cost-of-living crisis, and the cancellation of all student debt.

Eric, who works as a chef, said the parties in the election were all "centre-right to far-right, with even the parties that brand themselves as left-wing, Labour, the Greens, Te P?ti M?ori being more centrist than left-wing."

Commenting on Labour and National's plans for greater military spending, he said: "I couldn't disagree more with how we are doing that. I think that the money being used to go into the defence system, which isn't really needed if we don't get involved in needless affairs," should instead go towards children, workers' organisations and schools.

Eric, who is Jewish, said he was "completely anti-Zionism," and denounced the National Party-led government for refusing to condemn the Gaza genocide. He described Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and opposition leader Gadi Eisenkot as "despicable war criminals who need to be put on trial." He denounced the campaign by governments and the media to equate anti-Zionism with anti-semitism, saying that this was itself an anti-semitic smear because it identified all Jewish people with a state carrying out "mass murder."

Tala, who works in the insulation industry, said the cost of living was the major issue in the election, as well as the tax on middle income earners. "Prices are going up everywhere," even for dairy products made in New Zealand. "It should be cheaper, when we make it."

Tala said there should be more public housing built and this would create more jobs. He added that it was "crazy" that the average rent for a two-bedroom house in Lower Hutt is around $600. "That would have been [enough for] a four- or five-bedroom house a few years ago."

Regarding increased military spending and war preparations, he said: "I don't think we should get

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involved [in wars]. It's going to hurt our pockets."

Jamie, who recently left high school, said he was finding it very hard to find a job. "There's just so many people applying for one position, there's hundreds and hundreds. People with Bachelor's [degrees] and PhDs, people trying to support their families, and then people like myself just leaving school."

He said Prime Minister Christopher Luxon was "for the rich," adding, "the current government needs to get out. I don't think a lot of Kiwis can afford another three years of this." He knew many people who were "on the fence" about who to vote for and were leaning towards minor parties allied with Labour, like the Greens, or the Opportunity Party (which has said it could form a coalition with National or Labour).

SEG members noted that both Labour and National want to increase military spending while reducing overall spending. "I don't think military spending is what we should be focusing on," Jamie said, "especially since our healthcare is terrible right now. We need more nurses and doctors."

He denounced the government's tacit support for Israel's genocide, saying that what was happening in Gaza was "an atrocity. I think a lot more people need to be openly speaking out against what Israel is doing. They're killing tens of thousands of people."

Speaking about the bipartisan campaign to ban under-16-year-olds from using social media, Jamie said this was unworkable and would "cause a lot of issues." It could compel people to hand over personal information to private companies "and we can't control who looks at it."

Derek, who has been a community worker for 20 years, spoke with SEG campaigners at Queensgate Mall after receiving the SEG's election statement in his letter-box. "There's got to be something better than this system," he said.

Speaking about the challenges facing young people, he said too many people were left to struggle alone without any support. "If I want to make it, I've got to pay the university thousands of dollars," and some people are ending up with "$150,000 in debt." He added that middle class people were being squeezed by taxation, while "the wealthier people know how to pay less tax."

He also spoke against the demonisation of immigrants by politicians, including the Trump administration in the US, saying that migrants "bring value to countries."

Authorised by Tom Petterson, sep.wellington@gmail.com

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