New Zealand: Socialist Equality Group holds Lower Hutt election meeting

Our reporters
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The Socialist Equality Group (SEG) held an election meeting in Lower Hutt on November 1, addressed by Socialist Equality Party (Australia) assistant national secretary Max Boddy and SEG Hutt South candidate Tom Petterson.

The campaign marks the first time in New Zealand's history that a Trotskyist party has stood a candidate in a general election. In opening the meeting, Boddy said: "We are standing because the questions that will decide the future of workers and young people—the drive to war, the degradation of the planet, the attack on living standards, on democratic rights—are being kept out of the election."

The SEG was "not standing because we believe the crisis facing workers can be resolved through parliament," Boddy said. Rather, its campaign was "part of the fight to build a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International in New Zealand."

He situated the campaign in the continuity of the Fourth International, founded by Leon Trotsky in 1938 to defend the internationalist principles of the Russian Revolution: that workers must unite across borders, based on their common class interests, to overthrow the capitalist system and build a socialist society.

The election is unfolding as a crisis for the political establishment. The National Party, which leads the right-wing coalition government, and the opposition Labour Party are both deeply unpopular, and workers and young people are moving to the left.

Petterson explained that "Whichever party leads the next government, it will accelerate the militarisation of society and fully integrate New Zealand into the global imperialist war that is now erupting. This will be paid for by deepening the brutal austerity measures that are already being imposed."

New Zealand is an imperialist ally of the US and, along with Australia, is playing a key role in militarising the Pacific region in preparation for war against China.

Petterson emphasised that whatever their tactical differences, the opposition parties—Labour, the Greens, Te P?ti M?ori and the Opportunity Party—"all agree on the fundamental issue: for New Zealand capitalism to prosper, workers must pay for the war, through soaring living costs and cuts to social programs."

This same agenda, Petterson explained, had produced mass strikes and protests in France and across Europe, terrifying the ruling class. He explained the role being played by middle class, pseudo-left groups, particularly the "left populist" Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader of the La France Insoumise, who is "downplaying the situation, denying that it has any revolutionary potential."

Mélenchon and the trade unions were seeking to save capitalism by channelling "workers' anger into the elections coming up in April," in the same way that the French Stalinists and union leaders shut down the May-June 1968 mass strike movement that had great revolutionary potential.

As in France, Petterson said, major working-class struggles will erupt in New Zealand. The task facing the SEG was to prepare by building the necessary revolutionary leadership, in opposition to all the pseudo-left organisations that promote illusions that the capitalist class can be pressured for reforms.

Petterson focused on the International Socialist Organisation (ISO) and Socialist Aotearoa, which are campaigning for another Labour-led government. "The fact that these organisations use the word 'socialist' in their names does not mean that their political program is remotely socialist," he said.

The ISO declared in an election statement that "the capitalist state is not currently facing any meaningful crisis of political legitimacy," and called for a "centrist" Labour-led government, which it claims will "appease" workers.

"We have heard this before," Petterson said. The ISO hailed the Labour Party's coalition deal with the Greens and the right-wing NZ First in 2017 as offering "real reforms" that were "better than [we] dared hope possible." Only the SEG warned that Jacinda Ardern's government would attack immigrants, intensify exploitation, starve public services and strengthen ties with US imperialism.

The Ardern government reneged on its promises to solve the social crisis, and oversaw an increase in child poverty and homelessness. It also sent NZ troops to Britain to provide training for Ukrainian conscripts in the US-NATO war against Russia.

Petterson explained that the right-wing record of the 2017–2023 Ardern government "is the key to understanding how the current coalition government came to power. National and its far-right allies, ACT and NZ First, never had significant

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popular support; but in the absence of a socialist alternative to Labour, these parties benefited from the widespread disillusionment and anger."

The pseudo-left organisations, Petterson said, "are not just mistaken. Theirs is the politics of the upper-middle class in the universities, the public service and the union bureaucracy—a layer which has no interest in overthrowing capitalism but that wants to improve its own position within the system. They seek to tie workers to imperialist parties because they themselves are pro-imperialist. The ISO openly backs the NATO war against Russia, just as it supported the war for regime change in Syria."

Against these forces, the SEG advances the independent organisation of the working class. Petterson explained that rank-and-file committees must be built to unite workers across industries and national borders, independently of the trade union bureaucracies, which isolated the October 2025 strike by more than 100,000 healthcare workers and teachers and imposed below-inflation pay rises.

A lively discussion followed the reports. A number of questions focused on the re-emergence of the Alliance Party, which presents itself as a "democratic socialist" alternative.

Petterson explained the Alliance's origins in the 1989 breakaway from Labour. The NewLabour Party (as it was initially called) was essentially "Labour Party Mark II." It was founded by Jim Anderton and backed by several pseudo-left groups to channel opposition to Labour's right-wing policies back into the dead-end of the parliamentary system.

The Alliance entered a Labour-led government in 1999 and, in 2001, all but one of its MPs supported the dispatch of New Zealand troops to Afghanistan. Its subsequent collapse exposed the role it had played in diverting opposition into the same political framework it claimed to challenge.

SEG member John Braddock spoke about the conditions leading up to the founding of the Alliance. He recalled the factory closures that swept through Lower Hutt and the Hutt Valley under the Labour government of the 1980s, led by David Lange and Roger Douglas.

"Thousands of manufacturing jobs just disappeared," he said. The role of the unions "was to tell workers: you can't do anything about this." The unions, with Stalinist leaders playing a key role, insisted that "regardless of how many jobs they were getting rid of, no matter how they were driving down wages, the profits and the existence of the New Zealand employers had to be defended."

Some 86,000 jobs disappeared in a few years and Labour was deeply discredited. The role of the Alliance was to capture workers who were moving leftward and bolster illusions that it would pressure Labour to return to "reformist" policies that it had completely discarded.

Audience members also asked how workers could prevent the political betrayals of the past from being repeated, and about the causes of the splits in the Trotskyist movement. Boddy said the question of betrayals is "not a moral question. It's a class question."

The divisions in the Trotskyist movement had not been over personalities, but over the political struggle against opportunism. The layers that betrayed—the forerunners of the pseudo-left—represented a privileged section of the upper-middle class, whose wealth is today bound up in the stock market, and which therefore has a material interest in imperialism operating without interruption.

Replying to a question on how to oppose the demonisation of socialism, Petterson noted that Trump rails against communism and Marxism in almost every speech, a line echoed in New Zealand by NZ First's Winston Peters and ACT's David Seymour. The real target was not the Democrats or the Green Party in NZ, he said, but "young people and workers who increasingly want socialism."

He added that the discrediting of socialism was also being performed by the fake socialists, such as Zohran Mamdani and the Democratic Socialists of America, who redefine socialism as something that can coexist with the fascistic Trump administration and with imperialist war.

Boddy explained that the demonisation rests on the Big Lie of identifying socialism with Stalinism and presenting the Stalinist bureaucracy as the continuation of the Russian Revolution. "It wasn't. Trotskyism and the ICFI was the continuation of Marxism." The anti-communist falsifications of history had to be answered, but argument alone was not enough, Boddy said. What is required is the building of a genuine socialist and internationalist movement of the working class, which meant the building the SEG in New Zealand.

The meeting concluded with an appeal to those present to join the SEG, participate in the Hutt South campaign, vote for Petterson on November 7 and contribute to the election fund.

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