

SEP candidate outlines socialist perspective at residents' forum

By our reporters
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Patrick O'Connor, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) candidate in the July 21 Melbourne by-election, was one of 14 candidates who addressed a forum organised by the Carlton Residents Association in the inner Melbourne suburb on Monday evening. The forum attracted about 150 people, many of them older residents, as well as students and tenants from the nearby public housing towers.

Each candidate was given four minutes to speak, followed by questions, and a minute to sum up at the end. O'Connor elaborated a socialist perspective for the working class, in stark distinction to all the other candidates. "The SEP's campaign raises the critical issues confronting workers and young people in Melbourne, Australia and internationally," he explained. "These are the worldwide promotion of militarism and war, the imposition of sweeping austerity measures aimed at public spending programs, such as health, welfare and education, and the systematic destruction of democratic rights that these assaults entail.

"The capitalist system has failed ... The situation in Greece, Spain, Portugal and other European countries, is only the sharpest expression of an international process."

O'Connor said that the officially-presented "choice" between Labor and the Greens was no choice at all. "All these parties, Labor, Liberal and Greens are united behind an austerity consensus," he explained.

O'Connor exposed the posturing of both the Labor and Greens' candidates as opponents of Premier Ted Baillieu's spending cuts. "The Liberal government's gutting of the TAFE system, for example, is merely following on from the measures introduced by the previous Brumby [Labor] government," he explained, before reviewing the Gillard government's austerity measures that have been backed by the Greens. "Then at the state level, one only needs to look at Tasmania, where a coalition Labor-Greens government there has imposed

some of the most severe spending cuts anywhere in Australia, with the Greens education minister Nick McKim, attempting to shut down 20 public schools."

O'Connor concluded his opening remarks by saying: "We stand for an independent movement of the working class to fight for a socialist program, to take into public ownership the banks, the mining giants and the major corporations, and place social need above the accumulation of profit and private wealth as the basic principle of social and economic life."

Jennifer Kanis, the Labor Party's candidate, spent most of her allotted time explaining her personal biography and avoiding any discussion of policy issues. She concluded by appealing to hostility towards the state Liberal government, insisting that "only the [Liberal-National] coalition or Labor can form a government and if you want a progressive government, if you want a government other than Ted Baillieu, you must vote Labor."

The Greens' Cathy Oke focussed her remarks on specific local issues in the Melbourne electorate, including bike paths, public housing and transport.

Following the candidates' remarks there was an hour-long question-and-answer session. Many people directed pointed questions to Jennifer Kanis on different issues, reflecting the widespread hostility towards the Labor Party that has been evident throughout the by-election campaign.

A number of questions concerned public transport, a proposed privately-operated road tunnel under central Melbourne, and urban planning issues.

"These are very important questions on public transport and urban planning," O'Connor said in reply to one question. "The central issue, as with all local issues, is on what basis are decisions made? Within the existing political framework investment and infrastructure decisions are all subordinated to the dictates of the profit system ... There are vast resources in existing society to

build, for example, a vastly expanded public transport network that is freely provided to all, this is an environmental necessity and a social necessity. But within the existing setup, where everything is geared towards the interests of big business and finance capital, this is simply off the agenda.”

A public housing resident originally from Eritrea asked candidates to explain their positions on refugees and asylum seekers. The meeting chairman attempted to block any answers, on the grounds that this was not a “state issue”, but he backed down after O’Connor and people in the audience protested.

The SEP’s answer, which drew loud applause, provided the only principled defence of the unfettered right of refugees to enter Australia and be granted asylum with full rights.

“Working class people need to come to the defence of asylum seekers—this is a class issue,” O’Connor explained. “Just recently the Labor government passed laws so that if you have \$5 million and you want to get into Australia you will now be fast tracked for a migration visa.” He also exposed the Greens’ positions: “The Greens support the border protection regime, only differing on details. They argue that we should work with the Indonesian police to stop them from coming here. No—we need open borders—people have the right to travel and work in every country where they wish, with full democratic rights.”

The Greens candidate briefly responded to this by insisting that there was a “real difference between regional processing and offshore processing” of refugees. The Labor candidate did not make any comment on the issue.

In his closing remarks, O’Connor said: “Last year, 2011, was one marked by revolutionary upheavals internationally. It began with the overthrow of the US backed dictatorships in Tunisia and Egypt, a movement within the US itself in Madison, Wisconsin against public sector job cuts and wage cuts, followed by the Occupy Wall Street movement, general strikes and mass protests in Greece, Portugal, Spain, France, Britain and elsewhere ... This is what’s coming down the road here. We have already a growing social and political crisis in Australia ... What’s necessary is for workers to strike out on a new road. This is what the Socialist Equality Party stands for, the mobilisation of the working class on the basis of a socialist and international perspective.”

After the forum, one Carlton resident, Julie, told the *World Socialist Web Site*: “I thought she [Jennifer Kanis]

was interchangeable with ALP politicians, fairly predictable. I think she was fairly well tutored, a good professional politician. But that isn’t getting us far. It is similar to the personnel of the federal Labor government ... What I felt in many ways was that your guy, Patrick O’Connor, was like how the Labor Party started out. He had the value system of the past. The Labor Party when I was young was for the working man, it helped the disadvantaged and gave them a better deal than the one they actually had. Now it is a matter of simply staying in power.”

Kevin, a TAFE teacher who is supporting the SEP campaign, said he had been frustrated by the forum. “I have no real idea of the Labor candidate’s policy platform, other than the fact that she dislikes the Baillieu government. It was a really clear example of ‘dumbing down’ the crowd, and presenting an emotional stance, which had no substance whatsoever ... Wild claims by the Greens candidate to make Melbourne more liveable and affordable, made me want to ask, how? As rents are at an all-time high, utility costs continue to sky-rocket, housing values plummet, manufacturing sheds tens of thousands of jobs, and public services shed thousands of jobs, how can Cathy Oke make the ridiculous claim that she or the Greens will make Melbourne affordable?”

Max, a student involved in the International Students for Social Equality, commented: “Patrick got to the core of the issues. When speaking about infrastructure, public housing or refugees, he made clear that decisions on all these issues are not made in the interests of the working class, but for a tiny elite who are driven by the profit motive. His speech contained a reality check—a unique perspective on unique problems.”

See the SEP web site for further information on our election campaign.

Authorised by Nick Beams, 113/55 Flemington Rd, North Melbourne VIC 3051

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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