

Oppose the anti-mosque campaign in Penrith!

By Carolyn Kennett—SEP candidate for Penrith
18 March 2015

The electorate of Penrith in the western suburbs of Sydney has become the focus of a xenophobic anti-mosque campaign begun last year by a right-wing grouping of Liberal Party members, neo-fascist organisations and Christian fundamentalists, assisted by the local Murdoch-owned media. Three candidates for the seat of Penrith—former Liberal Party federal minister Jackie Kelly, May Spencer of the Christian Democratic Party and Victor Waterson of the Australia First Party—are closely identified with these efforts to vilify Muslims.

The Socialist Equality Party unequivocally defends the basic democratic right of freedom of religion and opposes the attempt to ban two Muslim facilities. We warn that the anti-mosque campaign is part and parcel of the climate of fear and suspicion deliberately whipped up by the entire media and political establishment under the banner of the “war on terror” to justify the new military intervention in the Middle East and attacks on democratic rights, and to scapegoat Muslims for the lack of jobs and essential services.

The anti-mosque agitation has been manufactured from the outset. Two development applications were made to the Penrith City Council in late 2013—the first to convert an existing large shed into a prayer hall and another to build a community centre. Only two objections were lodged, relating to traffic issues. The council formally approved the prayer hall in October 2014.

It was only after this vote that the Murdoch-owned *Penrith Press* began to feature the anti-Muslim ranting of Liberal Party member and independent Penrith City councillor Marcus Cornish. He bitterly opposed the applications, declaring the development would bring “irreversible change to the fabric of life in Penrith.”

Cornish attracted the support of right-wing and neo-fascist groups, including the Australia First Party, the Australian Defence League, the Party for Freedom

and Squadron 88, which staged protests at the council meetings late last year that approved the community centre. Their placards included “Islam is not a religion but a cult!” and “Mosques = crime.”

At a public meeting of the “Protect Penrith Action Group” last month, Christian Democrats leader Fred Nile joined Cornish and Kelly in giving vent to their prejudice. “It’s bad enough to have a mosque but once it comes, they [Muslims] decide whether you belong in the area,” Nile declared.

This vilification of Muslims is not simply the raving of a handful of local bigots and racists. It takes place as the federal Liberal-National Coalition government is sending more Australian troops to the US-led war in the Middle East and ramping up the “war on terror” through a series of high-profile police raids and “terrorist” scares.

Last December, Prime Minister Tony Abbott, with the full support of the opposition Labor Party, the Greens, the NSW state government and the media, elevated hostage-taking by one, deranged individual in the Lindt cafe into a major national crisis. Thousands of police flooded central Sydney and other suburbs and cities. Lurid headlines portrayed Australia as a nation under siege by Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). No serious attempt was made to negotiate the hostage-taker, ensuring the standoff ended tragically in the deaths of two individuals.

The Abbott government has continued to exploit the Sydney siege to justify the ramming through of a battery of anti-democratic “counter-terrorism” laws—the latest being data retention legislation to enable the police and intelligence apparatus to spy on the Internet activities of the entire population. This bill is about to be pushed through parliament with the Labor Party’s support.

The “anti-terror” propaganda has only encouraged the mosque opponents to launch their campaign of

anti-Muslim bigotry and prejudice. Together with the bipartisan agitation against refugees, and brutal measures to stop them reaching Australia, the political purpose of this witch hunt is to divert attention from the savage assault on living standards by big business and governments, state and federal, and to drive a wedge into the working class to prevent a unified struggle to defend its democratic and social rights.

The threat to the “fabric of life” in Penrith and other working class suburbs does not come from Muslim workers and youth, or any other of the many immigrants who live in the district. The destruction of living standards is already underway at the hands of the corporate and financial elite and their representatives across the political establishment—Liberal, National, Labor and the Greens and the whole gamut of right-wing populists, single-issue parties and so-called independents.

Rampant speculation and profiteering by the banks, finance houses and property developers has driven housing prices to astronomical levels, making Sydney one of the most expensive cities in the world in which to live. Many workers have been forced to rent or try to buy a house or flat in outer suburban areas such as Penrith where prices are lower, only to face long travel times, inadequate roads and public transport, and a lack of essential services such as health care, schools and other facilities.

Housing prices have continued to soar, however, even in cheaper outer suburban areas. Median houses prices have jumped 21 percent over the past year and unit prices by 16 percent. Mortgage and rent stress affect substantial sections of working people—11 percent and 28 percent respectively in the Penrith local government area.

Among the worst hit are young people, the unemployed and those reliant on welfare benefits. Official jobless figures, which are grossly understated, put youth unemployment at 14.8 percent and over 20 percent in local areas such as Kingswood. Those seeking public housing are frequently forced, given the lengthy waiting lists, to take whatever is on offer, including in outer suburban areas.

Workers and youth confront the same social crisis, regardless of their religion, ethnicity, language or skin colour. The only way to resolve the worsening social crisis facing the working class as a whole—in NSW,

Australia and around the world—is through a unified struggle against the capitalist system and the fight for a workers’ government to implement socialist policies. The acute problems of jobs, housing, transport and access to decent social services can only be resolved through the reorganisation of society from top to bottom to meet the needs of the majority, not the profits of the wealthy few.

I appeal to workers and youth to actively support and participate in the SEP’s election campaign, to attend our final public meeting this Sunday March 22 and to apply to join the SEP.

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