

# Hunter “Meet the Candidates” Forum exposes major parties

By our reporters  
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) attended a “Meet the Candidates” forum held last Wednesday for the Hunter electorate in New South Wales (NSW). The forum revealed the importance of the principled campaign waged by the SEP in defence of Julian Assange and democratic rights.

The event was held in the “Church under the Trees” Uniting Church in the suburb of Morisset. All House of Representative candidates were invited to introduce their program and policies, followed by a Q&A session with members of the public. The audience of more than 100, was comprised of young people, students and the elderly.

The candidates present included the incumbent Labor Party MP Joel Fitzgibbon, whose family has held the seat since 1984, as well as Greens candidate Janet Murray, and Nationals candidate Josh Angus. The SEP representative was Max Boddy, a member of the SEP National Committee and secretary of the party’s Newcastle branch.

In his opening remarks, Boddy stated the SEP is “fighting to build a revolutionary movement of the working class based on a socialist program,” adding that “the elephant in this election campaign is the deafening silence on the persecution of Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning.”

“They have committed no crimes,” Boddy continued, “Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks, is a true journalist, exposing the criminal wars and interventions by the United States and its allies. Manning is a courageous whistle blower who helped expose many of those crimes.

“The current litmus test of any political party’s defense of democratic rights is their support for Assange and Manning.”

None of the other candidates raised the question of

Assange or Manning in their opening speeches. Even when directly questioned from the audience, Fitzgibbon refused to answer and remained completely silent on the issue.

Green’s candidate Murray said, “Assange should be returned to Australia, however if the rape charges in Sweden do resurface, he will have to face the music.”

Boddy said in reply: “I note the silence from the Labor Party on Assange and lies from the Greens. Assange was never charged with rape, and the allegations against him were dropped”. He reiterated that Assange was a litmus test on democratic rights and these “parties have been very clear on where they stand on this issue”.

Another member of the audience asked why the Greens continued to support the 2011-2013 Labor government of Julia Gillard after it reintroduced the ‘Pacific solution,’ a criminal policy whereby asylum seekers attempting to reach Australia by boat are forcibly sent to prison camps on the tiny island nation of Nauru, and Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island.

Kept in squalid conditions for indefinite periods, the policy is aimed at brutally deterring asylum seekers, and is regarded as a model by governments all over the globe. The claim to defend immigrants has been one of the core stances historically associated with the Greens.

Murray responded by saying “With the benefit of hindsight I think it was a hideous mistake. I don’t think there was an anticipation that these camps would end up the way that they did. And I don’t think any thinking person would have expected that outcome.”

She concluded by saying: “I would like to think we have seen the error of our ways...We’ve made an apology to stolen generations and other groups, we’ll have to apologise for these refugees as well... let’s just bring them here and help them get over it.”

Boddy pointed out that the Greens were avoiding the answer, noting that the detention camps were “reopened” by the Gillard Labor government. “The evidence was there,” he continued, “under the Liberal/National coalition of the horrors that refugees and asylum seekers faced.”

Boddy explained that the unending US-led wars, backed by successive Australian governments, had created the greatest refugee crisis since the Second World War. He continued: “The treatment of refugees is shameful and barbarous, but it is above all linked to the nation-state system that lies at the root of capitalism.

“The issue here is that the Greens fundamentally agree with the nation-state system. The idea is that people are locked off by borders so that individuals are assessed before entering. Capital has no borders and goes all over the world exploiting the labour of the working class.”

Fitzgibbon, speaking last, repeated the lie of the Greens candidate, stating: “No-one could have envisaged at that time, that what should have been transitional facilities, have now turned into long term places of incarceration.”

An audience member asked if Labor’s fraudulent promise of a 20 percent wage increase for childcare workers could be prevented from spreading to other workers. Fitzgibbon enthusiastically replied: “Can we quarantine it to childcare? Yes, I think we can.” He then added: “Across the economy more broadly we need to get wages going again, everything is going up except wages.”

Boddy pointed out “Fitzgibbon made the promise tonight that any increase in pay for childcare workers will be quarantined, in other words, it will not spread”. The Labor party made an open pledge to “isolate” this limited pay increase.

The mechanism that the Labor party will use to enforce this quarantine is the anti-working class Fair Work legislation, introduced by the Rudd Labor government, with the complete support of the unions. These laws effectively ban all strike activity and are designed to directly target militant workers.

The forum was a confirmation of what the SEP warned in its election statement: “This election will be characterised by lies and diversions, as the parties of the political establishment, together with the corporate

media, work to cover over the real situation facing working people.”

The responses of their candidates are an indictment of all the major parties and their policies. It indicates, above all, the necessity for workers to break from the Labor party, the trade unions and the Greens, and to build an independent movement of the working class to fight for socialism.

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