

Labor and the unions responsible for social crisis in western Sydney

By Oscar Grenfell: SEP candidate for Parramatta
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The following is an edited version of the speech delivered by Oscar Grenfell, SEP candidate for the seat of Parramatta, to the party's election meeting in Sydney on May 15.

The social conditions confronting the working class in Parramatta and greater western Sydney underscore the need for the working class to fight for a socialist perspective to refashion society from top to bottom on the basis of social need, not private profit.

Poverty, homelessness, housing stress and unemployment are all permanent and expanding features of social life. The prospect of workers holding a full-time position, with wages decent enough to enjoy a comfortable standard of living, are a thing of the past.

Western Sydney has been at the centre of an onslaught against manufacturing and industrial jobs.

According to Australia Bureau of Statistics figures, in 1981, there were 20,231 manufacturing jobs in Parramatta. In 2011, there were just 9,189, a decline of more than half in 30 years.

Similarly, dramatic falls took place in other working class hubs. In Bankstown, for instance, there were more than 28,000 manufacturing jobs in 1981, in 2011, the figure stood at 12,000.

The sharpest falls in manufacturing occurred between 1981 and 1996. In that period, manufacturing jobs fell by over 43 percent in Parramatta, more than 36 percent in Bankstown, and 35 percent in Auburn.

Definite political forces were responsible: above all, Labor and the unions. Brought to office in 1983, the Labor government of Bob Hawke struck a series of accords with the trade unions and big business. These provided for the deregulation of the economy, the smashing of workers' organisations, and the destruction of whole sections of industry.

The program of the Labor government was part of a counter-offensive of the ruling elite internationally, in the aftermath of the mass working class struggles of 1968 to 1975 that were defeated as a result of the betrayals of Stalinism and Social Democracy. It was Hawke, Labor and the unions that imposed an agenda in Australia, similar to the program of the right-wing governments of Margaret Thatcher in Britain and Ronald Reagan in the US.

This program was deepened with the introduction of enterprise bargaining by the Labor government of Paul Keating and the unions in the 1990s. This divided workers up, company by company, tying them directly to the profit demands of their own employers. Since then, there has been an unending series of union-brokered, sell-out deals, providing for the gutting of jobs, wages and working conditions.

Factories that once employed thousands of workers were wound down or shut. Entire industries, including car and steel production and

textile manufacturing, have been decimated. This offensive has been deepened since the 2008-09 global financial crisis, with the number of remaining manufacturing jobs plunging by 24 percent in the five years to 2016.

Newspaper headlines this year have touted a reduction in unemployment, including in western Sydney, as proof of Australian capitalism's ongoing strength.

The reality for workers is very different.

A report by the Australia Institute's Centre for Future Work last year found that the proportion of the national workforce in full-time employment with paid leave entitlements had fallen to less than 50 percent, for the first time in history.

Almost 32 percent of workers are part-time. Twenty-five percent are casuals, and at least 10 percent of the workforce are underemployed, i.e., they do not receive as many hours a week as they need. Across the country, the number of casual jobs increased by approximately 40,000 in the two years to 2018.

Throughout working class areas, we have seen the rise and rise of labour hire operators, capitalising on the union-enforced destruction of full-time work and providing cheap casual labour to major corporations.

The practices of such firms expose the fraudulent character of claims that western Sydney is undergoing a new boom in manufacturing.

To much media fanfare, Amazon opened a distribution warehouse near Liverpool in Sydney and another in Melbourne in 2017. Most workers are not employed by the company, but by Adecco, a labour hire firm.

Workers at Amazon are often texted and told that they have a shift, or that they don't, less than 24 hours before it is due to begin.

They are given electronic scanners which direct them to aisles in the facility to collect products. The scanner has a black bar at the bottom of the screen, counting down how much time they have left to reach the next item. If a worker fails to reach the product quickly enough, their pick rate is marked down. Workers who do not meet their targets have reportedly had subsequent shifts cancelled.

A worker told the *Sydney Morning Herald* last year what the targets meant, "You end up not being able to function because you're so nervous and stressed out." Another said workers often did not drink water, or go to the bathroom during shifts, for fear of falling behind. They claimed some workers did not report injuries for fear of losing their job.

The conditions prevailing in the other supposed growth industry, construction, were tragically demonstrated on April 1, when Christopher Cassaniti, an 18-year-old apprentice, was killed on a

residential construction site in Macquarie Park. He was crushed to death by scaffolding which collapsed from a height of 15 metres.

Senior officials from the Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU) declared after the fact that if scaffolding is installed properly, such accidents do not occur. It was a union site, however, and the CFMMEU has not said anything about what it did to ensure safety measures were followed.

We spoke to an 18-year-old worker in the construction industry after the tragic death, who said that he had been involved in an accident last year when an unsecured electrical board fell on him.

He noted that the CFMMEU, the construction firms and government authorities closely collaborate: “The union, SafeWork NSW and the companies don’t care about workers or their safety. They only come around after something goes wrong, to try to cover themselves.”

Cassaniti’s death was the 35th in the NSW construction industry in the past two years. Under the union’s watch, safety violations take place on an industrial scale. After Cassaneti’s death, the ABC reported that SafeWork NSW issued over 100 breach notices in 2018 over scaffolding faults on construction sites. In total, 1,258 safety breaches were identified. Companies were fined an average of just \$265 for each violation.

The assault on full-time work and the gutting of apprenticeships has created a jobs crisis among working class youth, who are deprived of any future. Youth unemployment rates in Parramatta are estimated at over 13 percent.

In Blacktown alone there are an estimated 1,600 teenagers who are not working or studying. Across western Sydney, an estimated 9,000 young adults, between the ages of 20 and 24, are not employed or undertaking any training.

Ariana Kenny, from the Marist180 charity group, told the *Daily Telegraph*: “Economic stresses are strongly linked with the development of mental health issues, as they can lead to social dislocation, anxiety and depression. That in turn puts pressure on local health services that themselves can’t cope.”

This is just one aspect of the health crisis in western Sydney, caused by the gutting of funding by successive Labor and Coalition governments.

Data released by the Bureau of Health Information last month found that nine of the 10 worst performing emergency departments in the state are in west and south-west Sydney. Each of the nine hospitals received 10 or more “red flags,” meaning their performance was far below the state average.

At Blacktown and Westmead hospitals, only 41 percent of patients who arrived with urgent, potentially fatal conditions were treated within 15 minutes.

More than half of emergency patients at Blacktown, Bankstown, Liverpool, Nepean, and Westmead hospitals, with less-urgent, but possibly life-threatening health issues, waited more than 30 minutes to receive assistance.

While services and infrastructure have been run down, and wage growth has been suppressed to the lowest level in post-World War Two history, the cost of living is soaring.

Workers have borne the brunt of a speculative property bubble that has been promoted by Labor and Liberal-National governments.

Across the country, over one million households are experiencing mortgage stress, meaning they are struggling to afford their repayments.

Suburbs in western Sydney are among the worst affected, according to figures published by Digital Finance Analytics late last year. In

Liverpool and the neighbouring suburb of Chipping Norton there are 7,732 households in stress and 116 at risk of default, and in Campbelltown, 6,781 households are in stress and 110 face the prospect of default.

In other words, broad sections of the working class are on the precipice of a catastrophe. Any unexpected expense, from a car accident to a health crisis or a sudden increase in utility prices, could tip them over the edge.

A report by Western Sydney University academics this year found that homelessness in western Sydney jumped 57 per cent between 2011 and 2016. The rate of growth is faster than in Sydney’s central business district.

Labor, the unions and the political establishment as a whole are well aware that the social crisis is generating explosive anger. At Labor’s national conference last year, Bill Shorten declared that Labor’s main opponent was “distrust and disengagement, scepticism and cynicism,” i.e., among workers and young people.

Australian Council of Trade Unions secretary Sally McManus warned of a looming “tsunami” of social discontent.

To head off the upheavals that are brewing, and to divert workers behind the political establishment, Labor is making a phony populist pitch. If one examines any of their spending promises, it is clear that they are just smoke and mirrors. Almost all of Labor’s health funding pledges, for instance, are over six years, meaning that it’s entirely possible not a cent of the money will ever go to a hospital.

The real agenda of a Labor government is demonstrated by Shorten’s repeated invocation of the “legacy of Hawke and Keating.” This is a legacy that has devastated the working class. Labor has pledged a four-year budget surplus \$17 billion higher than the Coalition, which can only mean sweeping cuts to social spending.

After the election, we can anticipate a period of social and political upheaval. Australia is not exceptional. The mass struggles of the working class that are emerging in Europe and the US will find their expression here, sooner rather than later.

The critical issue is to build a revolutionary leadership in the working class, to guide these struggles and take them forward to fight for a workers’ government and socialism. That is why we call on all workers and students who want to fight, to join the SEP and build it as that revolutionary leadership.

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