

Reply to a reader

The SEP's attitude to the Socialist Alliance in Australia

Linda Tenenbaum
24 May 2001

Dear WSW,

Thank you for a very important web site, I make sure to check it every day. David Walsh's arts reviews are always a highlight.

I am writing to ask what your position is concerning the formation of left-radical electoral "alliances".

In Australia, the "Socialist Alliance" has just been formed to try to unite the various Marxist parties and groups under a single electoral ticket. The idea is to present a united socialist alternative to working people, while still allowing the affiliated groups complete freedom with regard to their own campaigns, propaganda etc.

While you no doubt have principled differences with the Democratic Socialist Party, the International Socialist Organisation and the other groups that form the Socialist Alliance, I think that these alliances are the way for the Left to build upon its strengths after Seattle, Prague and S11 in Melbourne.

Tragically the extreme right has recently gathered support as a result of the popular feeling against neo-liberalism. A tactically united Left could show people the way forward with real solutions to the evils of capitalist globalisation.

I would be interested to know your thoughts on this matter, and whether the Australian Socialist Equality Party will be joining the Socialist Alliance.

Yours sincerely,
PO

Perth, Australia.

Dear PO,

Thank you for your email and your support for the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The Socialist Equality Party (Australia) will not be joining the Socialist Alliance. This new electoral bloc represents no way forward for anyone seeking a genuine socialist alternative to the present social order.

You write that the Socialist Alliance wants to unite the "various Marxist parties and groups under a single electoral ticket." But an examination of their history and program reveals that none of the nine groups that comprise the Socialist Alliance has ever been based upon a Marxist program. Each of them advances a perspective that is fundamentally nationalist in character. While all sorts of unclarified and unprincipled conflicts have divided them in the past, the various radical groups have decided to join forces now on the basis of a common opposition to globalisation and a united endeavour to breathe life back into the moribund nation state system.

Their realignment in Australia is part of an international tendency.

As you point out, the impetus for this was provided by the demonstrations that began in Seattle in November 1999, and has continued in Washington, Melbourne, Prague and other cities since then. The protests themselves pointed to a growing hostility, particularly among young people, to accelerating social inequality. But the program and perspective of the protest leaderships has been oriented to strengthening the nation state against the forces of globalisation and returning to some kind of idealised past—a regulated national economy in which pressure could be applied to governments by the trade unions and other national-based organisations to grant limited reforms, within the framework of the profit system.

In Australia, the organisers of the S11 demonstrations outside the World Economic Forum meeting in Melbourne last year, and the more recent nation-wide May Day protests, openly advanced the slogan of the trade unions—"fair trade not free trade", specifically voicing the interests of the less competitive sections of Australian capital against their international rivals. They regard globalisation as a "conspiracy" that can be overturned if sufficient numbers are mobilised to disrupt the meetings of various global capitalist bodies.

Their outlook dovetails with that of the extreme right wing. At the time of the S11 protests in Australia last year, Scott Balson, former webmaster for Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party, wrote "the Seattle experience over the WTO meeting last year is just a foretaste of what it is to come" with the radical right wing and "left" organisations agreeing on "common issues like globalisation and foreign ownership."

As if to underscore this point, a recent editorial in the *Green Left Weekly*, newspaper of the DSP, the main instigator of the Socialist Alliance, felt compelled to identify differences between "Hanson's 'anti-globalism' and ours." But in essence their perspective is the same. By failing to make the crucial distinction between the globalisation of production on the one hand, and global capitalism on the other the radicals give voice to their organic attachment to the nation state.

For genuine socialists, the globalisation of production per se is a profoundly progressive development that has arisen from revolutionary advances in technology and technique over the past two decades. It creates the material pre-conditions for the development of an international socialist economy and the elimination of poverty and want on a global scale. For that to take place, however, economic life has to be freed from the socially destructive and anarchic operations of the capitalist market and the outmoded system of rival nation states. The only social force capable of carrying this out is the international

working class.

As you will be aware, while last year's S11 protests were violently attacked by the police, they were also heavily promoted in the mainstream media. The only parallel in recent times was the coverage afforded to demonstrations organised by the DSP, among others, in 1999 calling for the Australian government to send troops to East Timor. Just as the "Troops In" slogan was particularly useful in providing a "left" face for imperialist intervention into that impoverished and oppressed half island, so the recent anti-globalisation protests have served to divert growing popular disaffection with the operations of global capital into politically reactionary channels.

In launching the Socialist Alliance, the radicals are attempting to seize upon a shift in mass sentiment to try to revive the type of mass middle class protest movement that emerged in the 1960s—and ignominiously collapsed in the early 1970s—as a vehicle for incorporating themselves into official political circles as the "left" advisers to an incoming Labor government.

A joint discussion paper on the Socialist Alliance, put out by the ISO and DSP in February, declared that the "primary thrust of the campaign must be anti-Liberal." It went on to make clear that Socialist Alliance electoral preferences would go to Labor Party candidates. "The Socialist Alliance... will call for supporters to 'vote Labor' where there is not a socialist, Greens or progressive candidate. Where the Socialist Alliance calls for a first preference for Greens or a progressive candidate it should urge that second preferences go to the ALP."

While the radicals hurl epithets at Labor from time to time, castigating the Hawke and Keating governments for implementing pro-market policies, introducing the mandatory detention of asylum seekers and other anti-working class measures, the Socialist Alliance will nevertheless devote itself to promoting the time-worn illusion that a Labor government would constitute a "lesser evil" as compared with a third term Howard government. Its leaders hope that, if they can win a sizeable primary vote and at the same time help hoist Labor into office, they will have earned the right to wield a certain degree of influence in the affairs of state.

One of the chief characteristics of the radical milieu is its obsessive preoccupation with "numbers" and militant activity. This flows organically from their opportunist politics. The Socialist Alliance scorns programmatic clarity in favour of politically expedient organisational maneuvers. You write that: "The idea is to present a united socialist alternative to working people, while still allowing the affiliated groups complete freedom with regard to their own campaigns, propaganda." On the contrary, the Socialist Alliance discussion paper declares that there will be "no agreed upon policies", simply a "platform of common action" or "campaigning slogans." In other words the Alliance is appealing to the lowest common denominator, advocating, not a socialist program but one that virtually anyone opposing any aspect of the Howard Liberal-National government's policies can support. An article in the DSP's newspaper underscores this point, stating that: "The Socialist Alliance has adopted policies Labor might have put forward before it was taken over by the economic rationalists."

No attempt is made to analyse why Labor has abandoned its former reformist nostrums and embraced free market policies or how its evolution is rooted in its nationalist and pro-capitalist program. Likewise, the Socialist Alliance is aggressively pursuing the unions, seeking to co-opt them as partners in its election campaign despite the

fact that the unions have been transformed, over the past two decades, into nothing but appendages of big business, responsible for monumental betrayals of the working class.

Your email asserts: "Tragically the extreme right has recently gathered support as a result of the popular feeling against neo-liberalism." The real story is somewhat different. The extreme right has only been able to gain any sort of foothold because of the absence of an alternative perspective based on the independent interests of the working class. And responsibility for this state of affairs lies squarely with the old leaderships of the working class—the Labor Party, the Stalinist Communist Party of Australia and the trade unions—aided and abetted by their left attorneys in the middle class radical milieu.

You continue: "A tactically united Left could show people the way forward with real solutions to the evils of capitalist globalisation." But it is precisely this "Left" that fights to subordinate the working class to the Labor Party and the unions, and, through them, to the dictates of the capitalist market.

Developing a genuine socialist movement is a complex and difficult task. To imagine it can be accomplished through militant fist-raising, slogan shouting or electoral horsetrading within the confines of Australia flies in the face of the bitter experiences of the past 100 years. First and foremost, the struggle for socialism is an international one. It involves nothing less than the political, intellectual and cultural re-awakening of the international working class, achievable only through the building of a world party, based on a world scientific perspective.

The Socialist Equality Party is convinced that those workers and young people who are serious in their opposition to global capital and all its political apologists will increasingly feel the need to study the genuine history of Marxism and revolutionary politics, and begin to draw critical lessons from the bitter experiences of the 20th century—most importantly the struggle of socialist internationalism against Stalinism and all forms of national opportunism. This struggle is embodied in the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement, of which the SEP is the Australian section.

To the extent that the SEP participates in elections, it does so in order to encourage, among the widest possible audience, critical discussion and debate about the vital political, historical and cultural issues facing the working class as it enters the 21st century. That is the orientation of the *World Socialist Web Site*, and the only basis upon which a new, genuinely international and socialist movement of the working class will be built.

In conclusion, I would encourage you to read the analyses of the Seattle, Washington and Melbourne "anti-globalisation" protests presented on the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Sincerely,
Linda Tenenbaum,
Socialist Equality Party (Australia)



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact