Werriwa by-election

Socialist Alliance promotes Australian Greens as “a progressive alternative”

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The Socialist Alliance in Australia—an unstable coalition of various middle class protest parties—has taken a further step in its uncritical embrace of the Greens. After deciding not to field a candidate in the by-election for the seat of Werriwa, the Socialist Alliance national executive wrote to the Greens last month declaring their full political support for its candidate and their willingness to “offer practical support to your Werriwa campaign, in particular on polling day.”

The letter is a further sign of deep demoralisation in the ranks of Socialist Alliance, especially after the failure of its perspective at the federal election last October. At the time, Socialist Alliance, which fielded its own candidates, expected a Labor win and urged voters to support the party as the “lesser evil” to the Liberal/National Party coalition of Prime Minister John Howard. Labor lost to Howard precisely because the party offered no alternative to the coalition on any significant issue—including the war on Iraq. In the aftermath of the election, Labor leader Mark Latham left politics altogether—resigning as Labor leader and from parliament—necessitating the by-election.

The Socialist Alliance argues that what is needed is “the largest possible vote to the left of Labor”. Obviously mesmerised by the media-generated “omnipotence” of Howard, it stresses the need for “progressive alternatives to Labor, which will be critical if real opposition is to be built to the social and political agenda of the Howard government.”

Two issues arise here. First of all, for all its radical tub-thumping about the need for “progressive alternatives to Labor”, all roads for the Socialist Alliance lead eventually back to the ALP. This was demonstrated in an article by prominent Socialist Alliance spokesman Dick Nichols published in the *Green Left Weekly* of January 26, 2005. According to Nichols “the vital lesson to be drawn from Labor’s dark shambles is that any possibility of its revival as a parliamentary opposition depends most of all on the strength of the extra-parliamentary opposition that all of us who hate Howard can build out in the ‘real world.’”

Secondly, the chief political problem is not the lack of opposition to the Howard government and its reactionary social and political agenda but that this opposition is unable to find any way forward.

A genuine alternative to the present official political set-up will not be created through electoral tactics and manoeuvres, but only through an understanding of the political experiences through which the Australian and international working class has passed in the course of the past century, and the vital questions of perspective which they raise. Only then will it be possible for the working class to find a way out of the present impasse. This is why the Socialist Equality Party has emphasised that the central political issue—in the Werriwa by-election and elsewhere—is not the battle for votes, but the clarification of ideas.

Far from contributing to the clarification of the working class, Socialist Alliance does precisely the opposite. Its letter openly promotes the illusion that the Greens are “a progressive alternative” to “Howard’s neo-liberal, pro-war and anti-environment agenda”. Any examination of the policies and record of the Greens, however, demonstrates these assertions to be false.

While the Greens capitalised on widespread opposition to the invasion of Iraq, the party had no principled opposition to the war or to the predatory motives behind it. Reflecting concerns in sections of the ruling class about the wisdom of supporting the US military adventure, Greens leader Bob Brown insisted that Australian troops would be better employed defending Australian interests closer to home. Just months after the March 2003 invasion, the Greens fully supported Canberra’s military intervention in the Solomon Islands to further the financial and strategic interests of Australian imperialism in the region.

The Greens’ opposition to “neo-liberal policies”—that is, free market restructuring and reforms—is not “progressive” but retrograde. Its response to the globalisation of production has been to defend the old policies based on national economic regulation. Globalisation is not, however, a “policy” that can be turned on and off. At the most fundamental level, the internationalisation of every aspect of the production process, including telecommunications and transportation, across borders and continents, constitutes a historic development of mankind’s productive forces. Under the present social and economic order, however, where everything is subordinated to the requirements of private profit, transnational corporations utilise the latest technologies, not to lift the standard of living of the world’s people, but to shift their operations to the cheapest locations—creating a never-ending competitive struggle between the various national governments to attract investment by offering tax corporate concessions, lower wages, and by slashing social expenditure. The socially destructive consequences that have resulted arise neither from globalisation as such nor from technology. They are the outcome of the subordination of world economy to the capitalist order, and to the outmoded system of rival capitalist nation-states.

Globalisation poses to mankind the necessity of liberating the productive forces from the grip of capitalist economic and social relations and replacing these with a rationally-planned world socialist economy, i.e., one whose operating principle is the fulfilment of the

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needs and aspirations of the majority, not the selfish interests of the privileged few. This perspective is anathema to the Greens.

The Greens' approach to environmental and social issues flows from their political outlook. Opposed to any fundamental reorganisation of society on socialist lines, the party promotes, instead, the old perspective of the Labor Party: that the capitalist system can be ameliorated through a series of piecemeal reforms. The political problem for the Greens is that such a perspective has been totally undermined by globalisation, which has shattered any prospect for social reforms based on pressuring the national state.

Herein lies the basis for the symbiotic relationship between the Greens and Socialist Alliance. The Socialist Alliance, deeply sceptical and demoralised about the prospects for winning the working class to a genuine socialist perspective, regards the Greens as the best vehicle to advance their immediate organisational and political goals—bigger numbers, more votes and greater influence on the powers-that-be. The Greens, concerned to deflect criticism of their policies from the left, maintain a relationship, albeit at arms length, with the Socialist Alliance in order provide a left, "progressive" gloss to their openly capitalist program.

The Socialist Alliance's letter to the Greens is the logical outcome of the political program on which it was formed less than five years ago. Eight so-called "socialist" parties—all long-time proponents of opportunist politics—led by the Democratic Socialist Party (DSP) and International Socialist Organisation (ISO) joined forces in 2000, in the aftermath of a series of anti-globalisation demonstrations. Socialist Alliance claimed that, by ending political disputes between the member groups and adopting a minimal "anti-capitalist" program, it could attract people who were disgruntled with Labor's open embrace of free market policies.

According to its platform, Socialist Alliance would be built through mass protests aimed at winning former Labor supporters. "A sustained mass campaign of total opposition to the ruling class offensive can bring together the forces to replace capitalism with a socialist society, based on co-operation, democracy and ecological sustainability," it declared. But for all the talk of "socialism", the outlook of Socialist Alliance was not fundamentally different from that of the Greens: "anti-globalisation" signified a perspective aimed at strengthening the regulatory powers of the capitalist nation state, not the abolition of the profit system.

On this basis, Socialist Alliance, from the outset, sought out relations with openly pro-capitalist parties and organisations: the Greens, sections of the so-called Labor left, and the trade union bureaucracy. It functioned to prevent workers and students from drawing the necessary political lessons from the betrayals by Labor and the unions. Even after 13 years of attacks on the economic and social position of the working class under Hawke and Keating, Socialist Alliance, while at times posturing as a critic, claimed Labor could be pressured to the left.

During the October federal election, Socialist Alliance went to absurd lengths, particularly given Latham's right-wing "user-pays" program, to promote Labor as preferable to the coalition. Following its slogan "kick Howard out", it allocated its voting preferences to the Greens and then to Labor. The organisation hailed Latham's vague promise to bring Australian troops home before Christmas and continued to bolster his antiwar credentials even after the Labor leader had all but ditched his pledge.

In the course of the campaign, the Socialist Alliance promoted the Greens as a principled opponent of the war and an alternative to the two major parties. Typical was the September 29, 2004 *Green Left Weekly* editorial stating: "The Greens have taken a genuine stand against the war on Iraq and in defence of the rights of refugees." In fact, one of the most striking features of the election campaign was that the Greens, along with Labor, virtually dropped any mention of the war.

As for offering an alternative to the major parties, Greens leader Bob Brown made clear that his goal was to join Latham in a de facto coalition government and to assist in implementing Labor's pro-market agenda. In a direct appeal to the ruling elite, Brown bragged that the Greens had played a critical role in coalition with Labor in the state of Tasmania between 1989 and 1992, by "holding the line" when widespread protests erupted against cutbacks to public education, health and other services.

Socialist Alliance's candidates won a small percentage of the votes in the electorates where they stood, a result that was clearly depressing for an organisation preoccupied with numbers and votes. It could not boast any electoral "success" or explain, even to its own members, why Labor—the "lesser evil"—had failed to be victorious. Its letter to the Greens is the result. After all, since the Greens have been more "successful"—the party won more votes, has a bigger membership and greater financial resources—the obvious question for the members and supporters of Socialist Alliance is: why not join the Greens?

The Socialist Equality Party's interventions in the federal elections last October and the current Werriwa by-election have proceeded from an entirely opposed conception: that the central task is to establish the political independence of the working class from all the old parties and programs. That requires the education and clarification of workers and young people on the crucial historical, political and cultural issues of the past century—above all, on the principles and program of socialist internationalism.

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