

Australia: Socialist Alliance provides platform for supporters of Howard's police-state legislation

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The “Stop the War Coalition”, a protest umbrella group, called a rally on November 5 in central Sydney’s Belmore Park. The leading role in the coalition is played by the Socialist Alliance, an opportunist grouping made up of the middle class radical organisations, the Democratic Socialist Perspective (DSP) and the International Socialist Organisation (ISO), among others. The rally’s stated aim was to demonstrate against the police-state measures contained in the Anti-Terrorism Bill being rushed through the Australian parliament by the Howard government. What was revealed, however, was that its real purpose was to block any discussion on the complicity of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) and the Greens in facilitating this unprecedented assault on basic democratic rights.

The first speaker was Greens Senator Kerry Nettle. Less than 48 hours earlier, she, along with fellow Greens senator Bob Brown, had gone on record as voting *with* the government to introduce a draconian amendment into existing anti-terrorism laws.

Amid lurid government and media claims that a terrorist attack may be imminent, the bill that was tabled in the emergency session of parliament on November 3 substituted the word “a” for the word “the” in defining terrorist offenses. The government had made no secret of the fact that the purpose of the change was to enable security agencies to arrest and charge “suspects” without having to show any evidence they had any involvement in carrying out, or conspiring to carry out, a specific terrorist act.

Because of the amendment, someone can be detained on vague allegations of what he or she might be intending to do. The threat of frame-ups is implicit in

the legislation.

When asked by the *World Socialist Web Site* at a media conference on Saturday morning why she and the Greens did not oppose the Bill, Nettle repeatedly evaded the question, then denied that she had supported it. “Read the Hansard [the official proceedings of parliament],” she said.

When it was pointed out that the Hansard showed that no one had voted against the legislation, she said the Greens had received legal advice that the amendment “was not significant” and “made no difference”. When pressed to say whether she had voted against it, she finally admitted: “I didn’t say anything. I said nothing.”

Later, when asked again by the WSWs, Nettle admitted that no vote was recorded against the legislation by herself or any other Greens Senator. She also acknowledged that she had not called for a division vote on a token amendment she had moved to have the law reviewed in five year’s time. “I make decisions on what tactics the Green Senators employ in the Senate,” she said. “And I will continue to stand proudly for the decisions that I make.”

Given the threat posed by the Anti-Terrorism Bill, and the widespread public expressions of concern over its implications, how each parliamentarian voted on the amendment had considerable political significance. The vote compelled every party and every individual to decide whether they would go on record as taking a stand against the handing over of draconian new powers to the state apparatus.

The Greens, far more anxious about being attacked as “soft” on terrorism by the corporate media establishment than with upholding democratic rights,

chose to side with the Howard government.

Prior to the rally, members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) informed the organisers of what the Greens had done, and requested that they remove Kerry Nettle from the speakers' list. Providing her with a platform to posture as a resolute opponent of the major parties would serve only to throw dust in the eyes of ordinary people looking for a political perspective to defend their democratic rights.

Among the main "Stop the War Coalition" officials present was Socialist Alliance representative Pip Hinman—a member of the DSP. She, along with the rest of them, insisted that not only would Nettle speak, but so would Daryl Melham from the Labor Party, whose leader Kim Beazley had already pledged the party to supporting the entire new Anti-Terror Bill.

Melham himself had made very clear in an interview on October 31 that he would vote for the legislation. He told the ABC: "I won't be crossing the floor. I'll abide by any position the Labor Party takes in Caucus.... If the Labor Party decides to support these laws, then I'll support the laws."

The organisers also rejected a request by SEP members for time to speak after Nettle, so they could explain to the audience what had taken place in parliament. Most people at the rally had the impression that the Greens had opposed the government.

As far as the Socialist Alliance was concerned, nothing—not even the reality of how they had voted—was going to prevent it from presenting the Greens and Labor politicians as opponents of the government's assault on civil liberties. Nettle was introduced by the chairperson as "one of the few people in parliament that has spoken out, in part on the beefing up of terror laws, but also the war in Iraq", without any mention of the Greens' vote on Thursday night.

The Socialist Equality Party refused to allow this travesty to go unchallenged. SEP members repeatedly interjected while Nettle was speaking to demand she explain why the Greens had supported the legislation in parliament on November 3. The intervention created a major stir, and, against the Socialist Alliance's efforts to keep them under wraps, audience members began discussing and questioning the Greens' actions. Nettle's "left" credentials were severely tarnished.

In their introduction to Daryl Melham, the organisers were even more shameless. The chairperson presented

him as one of "those people within the party who are willing to speak out" against the Anti-Terrorism Bill, without informing the audience that he had publicly expressed his intention to vote for the legislation. Nor was any mention made of Beazley's unconditional support. Instead, the rally was told "it is really important that we continue to put pressure on the ALP to oppose these laws."

To clarify the real situation, SEP members interjected while Melham was speaking, calling on him to state for the benefit of those present whether he would defy Beazley and cross the floor. Melham refused, denouncing the SEP members at one point as "idiots". In yet another demonstration of their cynical political defence of Labor, the organisers and their supporters applauded.

The rally underscored the fact that the political orientation of the "Stop the War Coalition" and the Socialist Alliance is far to the right of millions of ordinary people, who have rightly drawn the conclusion, on the basis of years of bitter experience, that Labor is utterly indistinguishable from the governing conservatives.

At every point, Socialist Alliance seeks to channel popular disaffection and anger with the government's participation in the war on Iraq, and its ongoing assault on jobs, living standards and democratic rights, back into protest appeals to various capitalist politicians and parties. Their entire political existence is based on promoting illusions that this is the only means of opposing the ruling elite's agenda. Their thoroughly anti-socialist character was revealed in their hostility to the SEP and its perspective: that the defence of democratic rights depends on a complete political break from Labor, the Greens and the entire parliamentary framework and the development of an independent political movement of the working class that challenges the very foundations of the profit system itself.



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