

Australia: Socialist Party lashes out at the SEP's election intervention

The Socialist Equality Party
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A significant feature of the recent Australian federal election was the unwavering promotion of Labor and the Greens by the so-called radical “left”. In one way or another, the various protest organisations claimed that these two parties represented a “lesser evil” to the Howard government. They either openly called for a Labor victory and increased Greens representation in the Senate, or, in somewhat more muted tones, proposed “putting the Liberals last”—calling on supporters to direct their preferences accordingly. In the final analysis, given the nature of the anti-democratic preferential voting system, where virtually all votes cast for candidates in the lower house of parliament end up with either Labor or Liberal—both positions amounted to exactly the same thing—namely, a vote for Labor.

The Socialist Equality Party, on the contrary, made clear that neither Labor nor the Greens was a “lesser evil”. We insisted that the major issue was not the defeat of the Howard government, but the need for the working class to make a decisive political break from the entire parliamentary framework and establish its political independence through the building of the SEP as the new mass party of the working class, grounded on a genuine socialist and internationalist perspective. Only in this way, we said, could the struggle against militarism and war, growing social inequality and the escalating assault on democratic rights be taken forward.

The SEP warned that all those who promoted illusions in Labor and the Greens would be politically responsible for the pro-war, anti-working class program and policies that an incoming Labor government, with the backing of the Greens, would inevitably carry out in the aftermath of the election. Our position was anathema to the radical “left”, which denounced the SEP as “sectarian” and accused us of undermining the struggle against the Howard government.

Among those lashing out at the SEP was the Socialist Party (SP), which fielded a candidate in the electorate of Melbourne. The inner-city seat, with its large concentration of students, professionals and public housing residents, was also contested by the SEP’s Will Marshall.

On October 9, shortly after the election was called, SP national organiser Anthony Main contacted the SEP requesting a discussion about the election campaign. When asked about the purpose of such a meeting, Main replied: “The purpose would be to discuss the pros and cons of having two socialist candidates. We would like to discuss how our two parties will interact with each other and also the question of preferences.”

The SP, it seems, wanted the SEP to either desist from fielding its own candidate in Melbourne or, at the very least, to establish some kind of deal with the SP, whereby the two parties would “support” each other and swap preferences. This would mean shelving the fundamental political differences that existed between the two organisations, in the interests of getting more votes. The SEP replied: “On these matters, we have nothing to discuss. Our two parties have opposed programs, policies and perspectives. Moreover, we will not be making preference deals with any other party, or proposing any preferences to voters.”

The SEP heard no more from the Socialist Party until after the November 24 vote when the SP published its assessment of the election result. The SP hailed the defeat of the Howard government. It then went on to angrily denounce the SEP for taking votes away from its candidate, Kylie McGregor. Apparently, the SP was deeply disappointed by its Melbourne vote, which totalled 389. It clearly believed that, since its leader Stephen Jolly was a local Yarra City councillor, regularly promoted in the media as a “socialist” and even a “Trotskyist”, and since the bulk of the SP’s activities were concentrated in the Melbourne electorate, McGregor should have received more.

“The socialist vote was squeezed in this election,” the SP declared. “In Melbourne our candidate, Unite President Kylie McGregor, was up against the best Green candidate in Australia and, scandalously, also faced competition from another socialist group, the Socialist Equality Party.”

The SEP campaign, it continued, was an outrage because the SEP “simply exists on the Internet.” “Yet, with a name almost identical to ours they took some of our vote. In the Victorian Senate they got twice the vote of the Socialist Alliance (SA), despite the fact that SA actually participate in the real world!”

(In fact, the SP got this wrong. The SEP’s vote was actually somewhat less than “twice” that of the Socialist Alliance. The Australian Electoral Commission made an error during the vote count and, in one electorate, attributed to the SEP votes that had been cast for another party. It turns out that, in this case, however, the error had one advantage: it helped highlight the obsession with votes—also known as parliamentary cretinism—that characterises the SP!)

The SP’s opposition to the SEP’s election campaign is preceded by a long history. As far back as 1850, the founder of scientific socialism, Karl Marx, noted the hostility of the petty bourgeoisie to the articulation of the independent demands of the working class.

Marx insisted that the revolutionary party of the working class must stand candidates in elections, “and their election should be pursued by all possible means. Even where there is no prospect of achieving their election, the workers must put up their own candidates to preserve their independence, to gauge their own strength and to bring their revolutionary position and party standpoint to public attention.”

Anticipating the argument that would be repeated time and time again over the next 150 years, that this would “split” the progressive vote and aid reaction, Marx said “all such talk means, in the final analysis, that the proletariat is to be swindled.” For Marx, the primary question was that the revolutionary party utilise elections to clarify the working class and thus strengthen its political independence from all the various bourgeois and petty bourgeois parties—whatever the impact on their votes.

That the SP regards the SEP’s intervention as “scandalous” speaks volumes about the shallowness of its commitment to democratic rights and its worship of the existing political order. Of course, the SP regards Labor and the Greens as perfectly legitimate, as it does the Socialist Alliance, which shares its political orientation based on manoeuvres with

these capitalist parties.

As for the SP's denunciation of "living on the Internet", this is the most revealing comment of all. The SP is referring to the *World Socialist Web Site*, the internet centre of the International Committee of the Fourth International, of which the SEP is the Australian section, and to the SEP's 2007 election website.

What the Socialist Party opposes is the daily development and publication on these sites of an independent revolutionary analysis for the working class—accessible to ordinary working people throughout the country and around the world—forged in opposition to all the nostrums promoted by the ruling class and, above all, by its apologists in the various "left" and radical organisations. The SEP "lives" on the internet in the same way that every genuine revolutionary tendency has "lived" through the elaboration of its analyses, ideas and perspective.

Lenin, the co-leader with Leon Trotsky of the Russian Revolution, "lived" in the pages of his initial publication, *Iskra*, which established his political tendency, and then in all the subsequent Bolshevik publications, leading up to the first successful socialist revolution of 1917. Like Lenin, Trotsky's major preoccupation in the years preceding the revolution was to edit and write articles and analyses, elaborating the fundamental political tasks of the Russian working class.

The Socialist Party, formerly known as Militant, was established in Australia during the late 1980s. It was an offshoot of the Militant tendency in Britain that was founded by Ted Grant. A lifelong opponent of the International Committee of the Fourth International, Grant was one of the first post-war revisionists, who, along with Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel, developed the conception that socialism could be introduced only as a result of mass pressure on the existing social-democratic, Stalinist and petty-bourgeois nationalist leaderships.

Rejecting the international struggle for the continuity of Trotskyism against all forms of national opportunism, and claiming that a mass socialist movement would emerge spontaneously from within the Labor Party, Militant operated as a faction of Labor and played a significant role in miseducating thousands of workers and young people in Britain. The end-product of its pressure-politics and nationalist perspective was Blair's New Labour and the eventual expulsion of Militant from the party.

Militant and its leader Stephen Jolly first rose to prominence in Australia following the 1993 occupation of Richmond Secondary College in Melbourne. The high school had been threatened with closure by the Kennett state Liberal government. During the lengthy occupation, Jolly worked to politically subordinate the struggle of students, teachers and parents—and the significant layers of workers who supported them—to the Labor and union bureaucracies, who played a key role in assisting the government in its public sector "restructuring", including the closure of hundreds of schools.

In December 1993, after more than 150 police baton-charged a picket outside the college, provoking widespread public opposition, Jolly responded by entering discussions with the Trades Hall Council, bringing the occupation to an abrupt end. The outcome of his negotiations was the state government agreeing to permit a tiny annexe of the college to continue—with just 17 students and three teachers!

While Militant presented this pitiful outcome as a victory, the shutting down of the occupation, right at the point where it was attracting wider support, served to block the development of a broader movement against school closures and attacks on other public jobs, conditions and services. The Labor and union bureaucracies, desperate to stifle the growing opposition and reach an accommodation with the Kennett government, were clearly grateful. They began to recognise Militant as a useful grouping with which they could work.

In the years that followed, Jolly became something of a favorite in media and bureaucratic circles, called upon for interviews or comment on occasions when a "left" voice was required. In November 2004, on the

back of growing distrust toward Labor and the Greens, Jolly was elected to Melbourne's nine-member Yarra City Council.

Rather than use its council post to mercilessly expose the role of the establishment parties and to campaign broadly on all the major issues confronting the working class, the SP has confined itself to the framework of the local council, promoting the illusion that the problems facing working people in the area can be solved on the basis of limited, local initiatives. The SP has clearly been pleased with its "success", boasting that it has the only elected socialist in Australia.

The SP's position on the local council has allowed it to cultivate even closer relations with Labor, the Greens and sections of the trade unions. While it formally labels Labor and the Greens as capitalist parties, its "criticisms" are tempered with polite appeals. As the SP declared in a recent comment: "Our firm but friendly political criticism of the Greens does not in any way stop us working with them. Hardly a week goes by when SP is not in the local paper criticising the ALP and Greens in this area and hardly a week goes by when we do not work with the Greens on real issues."

In an address entitled "Building Socialism in Australia" in June, SP national organiser Main justified these activities by declaring that although socialists had to "introduce a new generation to the ideas of socialism", the most important task was "to provide a lead in struggles" because "sometimes people can learn more in struggle than by reading a hundred books." He emphasised the importance of "serious and genuine campaigning work" with "the unions and the community".

Indeed, Main held up the SP's work in Yarra City Council as a template for building "organic links with the class" on issues including "the saving of Fitzroy swimming pool and the campaign against the widening of Alexandra Parade". "Most of the left in Australia," he observed, "would describe this work as 'neighbourhood watch' campaigns. Unless it is the sexy issue of the day, for example Iraq or the environment, they would not dirty their hands with such work."

This extraordinary belittling of the Iraq war, and its implications and consequences for the international working class, underscores the nationalist and opportunist politics of the SP. The SP is concerned with "real" issues—those which affect "local" people. In reality, any genuine campaign for decent "local" facilities is indissolubly bound up with a broader struggle against the program of pro-market reform responsible for the disasters facing working people and youth everywhere, including imperialist war and environmental disaster. To advance a genuine program for the working class would require explaining the common source of all these problems—militarism, climate change and the assault on local public services—in the anarchy and irrationality of the capitalist profit system and the need for a conscious struggle against it. That, however, would inevitably bring the SP into conflict with its Labor and Greens friends in the Yarra City Council chambers and beyond.

The SP's activities are part of the standard *modus operandi* of the so-called Committee for a Workers International (CWI), the international organisation with which it is affiliated. The role that the SP will play in seeking to subordinate the working class to the new Labor government is indicated by the actions of its sister parties in other parts of the world. In each case, the CWI has functioned as a crucial safety valve for the powers-that-be as sections of the working class have come into conflict with the old parties and organisations.

In Brazil, the section of the CWI worked inside Luiz Inacio "Lula" da Silva's Workers Party (PT), claiming that its coming to power would be a step towards socialism. Since Lula won the presidency, the PT has become the chief mechanism for imposing the dictates of the financial and corporate elites, implementing the IMF's demands for savage market reforms.

As opposition emerged, and Lula became increasingly discredited, the CWI section simply quit the PT to join a new amalgam of radical

tendencies—the Party of Socialism and Liberty—aimed, once again, at blocking the development of an independent political movement of the working class against capitalist rule.

The SP is actively positioning itself to play such a role in Australia. It is well aware that the Rudd Labor government will rapidly come into conflict with workers and young people over numerous issues. As that happens, the SP explains, “the idea for a new workers' party will gain in support... there will be militant action and a rise in support for socialist ideas.” But the type of “new workers party” that the SP has in mind has nothing to do with the revolutionary socialist parties pioneered by Lenin and Trotsky. Rather, along the lines of the CWI's outfit in Brazil, it is a broad opportunist swamp in which “lefts”, Greens, union bureaucrats and radicals can posture as opponents of the Rudd Labor government and divert the anger of working people into limited “struggles” and protests, aimed at pressuring it to change course. The watchword will be the relations of “live and let live” that govern the SP's activities on the Yarra City Council.

There is no question that mass opposition will emerge, sooner rather than later, to the Rudd Labor government's program of militarism and war and “economic conservatism”. But what this movement will need, above all, is a new political perspective and a new party, committed to unifying the Australian and international working class in the common struggle against the profit system and for a society based on the needs of the overwhelming majority, not the profits of the wealthy few. That party is the Socialist Equality Party. Our election campaign was aimed precisely at advancing this perspective as broadly as possible in preparation for the tumultuous struggles that lie ahead.

The hostility of the Socialist Party to the SEP's election campaign expresses, above all, its hostility to the increasing numbers of workers and youth who are beginning to move outside the control of the Labor and union apparatus. The SP's denunciations of the SEP are a signal that it will be a willing ally in the efforts of Labor and the trade unions to suppress this growing oppositional movement by seeking to divert it from the path of genuine revolutionary socialist politics.



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