

Australia: The DSP split and Socialist Alliance—another opportunist debacle

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Just six months after a devastating split in the Democratic Socialist Perspective (DSP), the 6th national conference of Socialist Alliance is being held December 5-7 in Geelong, in regional Victoria. Billed as an "invaluable opportunity to boost our socialist cause", the conference will provide further proof of the crisis gripping the DSP and the entire Socialist Alliance project.

A pre-conference statement issued by Socialist Alliance national convener Dick Nichols—a long time DSP functionary—is pervaded by demoralisation. "The challenges, opportunities and responsibilities that we socialists face today are pretty huge," he writes in a statement posted on the Socialist Alliance web site.

"The capitalist economic crisis may be opening many minds to the socialist analysis, but what about our counter-proposals? How convincing are they? Can we be confident that as working people are driven to look for alternatives many won't be seduced by right-wing populism? What about our capacity to lead and influence the struggles of the day in an anti-capitalist direction?"

With good reason, the DSP and Socialist Alliance exhibit little confidence that their organisations can provide any answers to the most far-reaching crisis of global capitalism since the Great Depression. Six years after Socialist Alliance was launched amid considerable fanfare, its opportunist character has produced a shipwreck, while the DSP, torn apart by unprincipled factionalism, is lurching even further to the right.

Split in the DSP

On May 10, 2008 the DSP National Executive expelled 39 members of the self-named Leninist Party Faction (LPF). The split removed one-third of the DSP's active membership, a majority of its old-guard, and a significant number of the organisation's fulltime staff, including founding members John Percy and Doug Lorimer.

"The Democratic Socialist Perspective (DSP) in Australia has suffered a destructive split organised by the Leninist Party Faction," the DSP's National Executive declared in a statement issued on May 13. The statement revealed an organisation mired in crisis and despair: "The LPF split has been a waste of years of hard work and sacrifice... the DSP has already been operating for most of this year with most LPF members boycotting or even sabotaging its work."

The DSP National Executive accused the LPF of "retreating from left regroupment" and of failing to engage "with broader forces in struggle". For its part, the LPF (now renamed the Revolutionary Socialist Party—RSP) described the DSP's preoccupation with Socialist Alliance as "liquidating the DSP's revolutionary socialist politics". Yet for all the vitriolic denunciations on both sides, there are no principled differences dividing the two organisations. Indeed, in its statement announcing the expulsion of LPF members, the DSP National Executive concludes: "we are confident that in the course of future struggles we will find opportunities to reunite with comrades who have split from the DSP." The divisions are merely tactical and concern the best means of pursuing an opportunist regroupment in a climate of growing disaffection with the Australian Labor Party (ALP) and the year-old Rudd Labor government.

At the heart of the DSP split is the dismal failure of Socialist Alliance. Formed in 2001, in the aftermath of a series of anti-globalisation protests in Seattle, Washington, Prague and Melbourne, Socialist Alliance (SA) was forged on an explicitly opportunist basis, part of "left" regroupment efforts by petty-bourgeois radical tendencies around the world. The eight so-called "socialist" parties that formed SA—all of them virulent opponents of Trotskyism—claimed that by ending political disputes between the member groups and by adopting a minimal "anti-capitalist" program, SA could attract the maximum number of people who were opposed to "neoliberalism".

The DSP played the central role in these efforts. A joint discussion paper issued by the DSP and the International Socialist Organisation (ISO) in February 2001 declared that Socialist Alliance would advance "no agreed upon policies", but simply a "platform of common action" and "campaigning slogans". The diffuseness of its program served a definite political purpose, facilitating an orientation to openly bourgeois forces. To the politically naïve, SA's all-inclusive charter appeared eminently democratic, but its real aim was a bid for closer relations with sections of the Labor and trade union bureaucracy. "[T]he primary thrust of the campaign must be anti-Liberal," declared the ISO-DSP in 2001 (i.e., opposition to the Howard Liberal-National Coalition was to be SA's central focus). Over the ensuing seven years, SA functioned shamelessly in support of Labor, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and the Greens. (See also: "The SEP's attitude to the Socialist Alliance in Australia" and "Socialist Alliance promotes Australian Greens as 'a progressive alternative'")

In 2003 SA affiliates hoped that mass opposition to the US-led invasion of Iraq would lift their alliance to prominence, establishing SA as a "player" within official political circles. SA seized upon the mass antiwar demonstrations of February-March 2003 to prove its utility to Labor. SA leaders—including the DSP's Pip Hinman in Sydney—invited Labor leaders

onto antiwar platforms, furnished them with antiwar credentials and promoted illusions that Labor was opposed to the invasion of Iraq.

By the following year the opportunist perspective underpinning SA had created considerable internal crisis. The collapse of the antiwar protest movement and the re-election of the Howard government one year later, in November 2004, produced extreme demoralisation in petty-bourgeois radical circles. Lacking any principled political basis, devoid of any scientific and historical analysis of the factors driving the eruption of militarism and war and the emergence of an unprecedented global movement against it, the unstable coalition of radical groups began to break apart.

The forces gathered in SA concluded that antiwar and anti-capitalist sentiment had "disappeared". In reality, opposition among millions of ordinary working people to war and free-market policies was deepening but could find no outlet or expression through any section of the official political establishment. The political line of SA reinforced this crisis. Its promotion of Labor and its position that protest could force a retreat by the major capitalist powers from war and militarism constituted an additional block to the development of a politically independent movement of the working class. SA promoted illusions in Labor, while Labor stood shoulder-to-shoulder with the Howard government, supporting the illegal invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, backing "border protection" and tearing up basic democratic rights under the manufactured "war on terror". Howard's election victory was the result, but SA was in no position to clarify the real secret of his government's electoral success.

With SA partners leaving the organisation, or ceasing active work, the DSP sought to maintain the fiction that SA was a broad left party through increasingly frenetic activity. A report delivered by LPF faction leader John Percy to the DSP's 22nd Congress in January 2006 painted a dire picture. Socialist Alliance was being propped up by DSP members: "on a national scale there's not much there beyond ourselves. It's demoralising for comrades to have to go through the motions. And it's getting worse." As for the DSP: "Resistance branches have disappeared in many cities. We're now on the verge of losing DSP branches, and permanent emergency measures will do nothing to begin to turn this around."

Both organisations staggered on, with the DSP facing a severe financial crisis, compounded by falling sales of its newspaper *Green Left Weekly*, and SA shedding members and entire branches. In 2006 the DSP majority pinned renewed hopes for SA on the emergence of widespread opposition to the Howard government's Work Choices legislation. As with the mass protests against the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the movement against Work Choices provided an opportunity for SA (read the DSP) to ingratiate itself with sections of the Labor and trade union bureaucracy. SA tail-ended the ACTU's "fight" against Work Choices and became the left flank of its campaign for the election of a Labor government. In the lead-up to last November's federal election SA called for a Labor vote as the "lesser evil".

In the midst of this sordid mess, DSP minority leader John Percy offered what can only be described as a graphic indictment of the political perspective guiding his organisation. Admitting that SA's program was "left social democratic, bourgeois reformist", Percy called for an end to the DSP's focus on building SA, telling the DSP's 22nd Congress: "We have to be frank. This is nothing more than liquidation of the revolutionary party into a left social-democratic formation. Strangely, and sadly, we are liquidating into a party that consists of not much more than ourselves."

What Percy and the LPF faction feared was not "liquidationism" but that the DSP had become so discredited by its support for Labor (via the conduit of Socialist Alliance) that it would simply be bypassed under conditions of a revival of the class struggle: "If we continue on the majority's course, SA will be useless for any future expansion and regroupment efforts."

These fears intensified after the election of the Rudd Labor government. The first issue of the RSP's newspaper, *Direct Action*, published in June 2008, declared: "[W]e have to be prepared to join the struggles and present a revolutionary socialist perspective on the spectrum of issues that will emerge under the Rudd Labor government". A separate article by Kerry Vernon, entitled "Socialist Alliance: what went wrong", announced that: "The RSP will seek to build on the best traditions of the DSP before the process of political liquidation set in under the dream of the SA."

But the process of political liquidation had set in long before "the dream of the SA". The Socialist Workers League (which later became the Socialist Workers Party and subsequently the DSP) was established in 1970 as the Australian section of the Pabloite United Secretariat (USEC). The individuals who founded the SWL, led by Jim and John Percy, were attracted to the liquidationist and revisionist theories advanced by USEC's leaders Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel, above all by their glorification of Castroism and petty-bourgeois guerrillaism and by their theories that mass pressure from below could force the existing bureaucratic leaderships of the working class—including the ALP and the Stalinist communist parties—to project a revolutionary orientation.

These positions, based on a rejection of the revolutionary role of the working class and a denial of the necessity to construct independent revolutionary leadership, have formed the basis of the DSP's decades-long history of opportunist regroupment and alliances with an unseemly procession of Labor lefts, Stalinists, trade union bureaucrats, Greens, pacifists and out and out anti-communists. The organisation's links with the Croatian fascist Ustasha during the 1980s being only the most notorious example.

Both the DSP majority, led by its national secretary Peter Boyle, and the RSP under John Percy, are staunch defenders—and continuators—of this opportunist past.

In recent articles and speeches, Boyle and Percy have both laid claim to the legacy bequeathed by the late Jim Percy, the DSP's national secretary until 1992. They have especially celebrated Jim Percy's attack on Trotskyism and the Fourth International. In August 1985 the SWP National Committee voted to end its affiliation to the Pabloite United Secretariat of the Fourth International. It was Jim Percy who spelled out the political basis for the SWP's split from USEC, denouncing the Fourth International (FI) for making a "fetish of program". The FI's insistence on program was "a trap"—especially Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution—because it formed an obstacle between the SWP and "the real revolutions" taking place in Cuba, Vietnam and Nicaragua.

What Percy was objecting to was not program *per se*—not the program of the Stalinists or bourgeois national movements or reformist Labor parties, but the program of Trotskyism, which represents and champions the political independence of the working class from the bourgeoisie and all of its political agencies. The methodology offered by Percy in supporting his attack on program was as crude as it was bankrupt. It deserves to be quoted in full:

"Remember all the sayings we were brought up on: The program will

conquer the party [sic!!]; the program will conquer all these things. This hype built up even during the '30s. So, in the founding programmatic document of the Fourth International, the Transitional Program, Trotsky could state that 'there does not a single revolutionary current on this planet really meriting the name' [sic]... Think what it means to say that in 1938: the few thousands of people in the Trotskyist movement were the only revolutionaries in the world."

The actual quote from Trotsky reads as follows: "Outside these cadres [of the Fourth International] there does not exist a single revolutionary current on this planet really meriting the name. If our international be still weak in numbers, it is strong in doctrine, program, tradition, in the incomparable tempering of its cadres. Who does not perceive this today, let him in the meantime stand aside. Tomorrow it will become more evident."

Like all opportunists, Percy portrayed Marxist program as something entirely subjective and arbitrary (the actual metaphor he had in mind was that of straitjacket). But the program, as Trotsky explained, is "a common understanding" of events and the tasks of the party. It is on the basis of such a common understanding, making conscious the lessons abstracted by generations of Marxists from the strategic experiences of the international working class, that the revolutionary party derives its cohesion, authority and strength. It is only in this way—through the vehicle of the party—that the working class can develop the knowledge required to establish its political independence from the bourgeoisie and undertake the greatest social and political overturn in world history. The program doesn't "conquer the party" [?!], it *is* the party.

The absence of program—proclaimed as a guiding principle by SA seven years ago—is, in reality, the absence of Marxism, the absence of socialism and the subordination of the working class to the bourgeoisie. The subsequent evolution of SA and of the DSP itself is living proof of this conclusion. With the "anti-Liberal focus" of Socialist Alliance having been realised in the shape of Rudd Labor, the DSP is responding to growing anti-Labor sentiment by making a renewed orientation to the Greens. After the Greens won four seats in elections held recently in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), entering a parliamentary agreement with Labor to deliver "fiscal responsibility" and a "balanced budget", SA issued an open letter to the ACT Greens pledging its own co-operation and support for the new government. As for the RSP, its newspaper *Direct Action* presents a recrudescence of 60s-style petty-bourgeois radicalism, complete with Che Guevara poster inserts and panegyrics to the aging bourgeois nationalist Fidel Castro. The RSP's campaign against "liquidationism" boils down to a pathetic public relations effort on behalf of the bourgeois-nationalist regime of Hugo Chavez, which the RSP hails as "socialism of the 21st Century".

The disintegration of SA and the break-up of the DSP is the direct outcome of the opportunist history and class orientation upon which the DSP was founded 38 years ago. The crisis of both organisations is a sure sign that an entire period, in which the working class was dominated by national reformist parties and organisations—Labor, the trade unions, the Stalinists and bourgeois nationalists—has come to an end and a new period is emerging in which the critical task is the education of a new generation of workers and young people in the history and traditions of the Trotskyist movement, i.e., of genuine Marxism, embodied in the International Committee of the Fourth International and its Australian section, the Socialist Equality Party.



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