

Australia: State provocations, security and Socialist Alternative

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The failure of the protest organisation Socialist Alternative (SA) to issue any serious response to revelations that a police agent provocateur spent a considerable period of time working within their ranks provides a revealing insight into the class character of the organisation and the opportunist nature of its politics.

Last month the *Age* reported that a police agent targeted a number of political and protest groups. According to the newspaper, Socialist Alternative was the first organisation to be infiltrated, at some point in 2006. In September 2007 the cop travelled to Sydney with a SA contingent for antiwar protests held as US President George Bush attended the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit.

The provocateur's unit, the Victorian Security Intelligence Group (SIG), is primarily responsible for counter-terrorism activities. Another SIG covert agent—Security Intelligence Operative 39—befriended Muslim cleric Abdul Nacer Benbrika, offered him ammonium nitrate, and demonstrated how to detonate a small quantity of the explosive. This exercise in entrapment helped ensure the recent convictions of Benbrika and six other men on terror charges.

In an article on November 15, the *World Socialist Web Site* noted: "While details of the SIG agent's activities in Socialist Alternative and the other protest organisations remain scant, there is no reason to believe that the modus operandi was any different to that of Security Intelligence Operative 39—infiltrate and gain influence in pursuit of a prosecution and conviction based on provocation and entrapment." ("Police provocateur infiltrates political and protest groups in Australia")

We explained: "The two-year operation represents an extraordinary abrogation by the state of the right of citizens to participate in public activities and join political organisations without fear of police harassment. It underscores the extent to which basic democratic rights and established legal norms have been torn up under the banner of the so-called war on terror. Political dissent—any form of disagreement with the existing social and political order—is now being effectively criminalised."

SA's response to the *Age*'s revelations came in an article titled "Nothing new about cops spying on the left", posted on its web site on November 10 and also published in its printed magazine. The headline of this extraordinary article points to its central purpose. Rather than denouncing the police operation, explaining its political significance, and providing details on the agent's identity, activities, and modus operandi, the SA leadership's priority is to pre-empt any concerns about the incident among its membership, and within Melbourne's wider radical protest milieu.

Some episodes of state repression in the twentieth century

"Nothing new about cops spying on the left" provides a potted history of state repression of Australian left-wing organisations—from police disruption of the activities of the Australian Socialist League, founded in 1889 and the surveillance and infiltration of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) in the 1940s and 50s, to revelations in 1997 that Victorian police had kept files on more than 1,200 individuals including students, trade unionists, politicians, ethnic community leaders, and environmentalists.

The flippant tone of the passages of the SA's article that deal with the Communist Party are typical: "These sherlocks [i.e., police with the Commonwealth Investigations Branch] believed that the party was controlled by a secret clique they called 'The Secret Seven', who identified themselves with the password 'kismet' and who were behind every strike and demonstration in the country. Such fantastic tales obviously helped to keep the funding flowing for spying: the CPA was a major target for surveillance and infiltration for the next half-century or more."

The Communist Party of Australia was a target from its inception not because police cleverly concocted self-serving conspiracy theories to justify their funding, but because the political establishment identified it as a major threat to the bourgeois order. Despite the CPA's rapid degeneration in the 1920s into a counter-revolutionary agency within the workers' movement—under the influence of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union—the party continued to be identified as an enemy to the extent that broad layers of working people and intellectuals continued, albeit mistakenly, to associate it with the Russian Revolution and a socialist alternative to capitalism.

A ferocious wave of repression was launched against the Communist Party in the aftermath of World War II and the onset of the Cold War. The conservative government of Prime Minister Robert Menzies drew up secret plans—to be enacted in the event of a war between the Soviet Union and the US—to have Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), military intelligence, and state police raid CPA members' homes simultaneously around Australia and detain them in concentration camps.

The McCarthyite offensive aimed at eliminating the CPA in order to intimidate all left-wing movements and to purge the influence of Marxism within the workers' movement. Police and ASIO activity was not merely a question of covert surveillance, as Socialist Alternative presents it; agents provocateur were deployed to disrupt the CPA's political activities and victimise its members. Throughout the 1950s it was a common occurrence

for party members to be suddenly sacked after police or ASIO agents secretly revealed their political allegiance to their employers. Finding other work was often impossible, with secret blacklists of known party members and sympathisers widely circulated within different industries. People in the public service, schools and universities, the arts, and the media were among those targeted. Many identified as communists were refused passports, making it impossible to travel. Police harassment had devastating consequences for countless families—couples broke up under the strain, while some families felt compelled to emigrate to find work in other countries.

Many of these techniques were revived and refined amid the radicalisation of layers of the working class and student youth in Australia and around the world from the mid-1960s to the late 70s.

Some of the most determined and ruthless efforts to destroy left-wing organisations from within, through the use of agents provocateur, took place in the United States. The Federal Bureau of Investigation's Cointelpro program saw thousands of police agents flood into various oppositional and radical groups. Attempting to poison relations within these groups, as well as provoking antagonisms between them, agents distributed faked leaflets and sent anonymous, slanderous letters to members. Provocateurs also incited and were responsible for violence and illegal activity, hastening the disintegration of groups such as the Black Panthers.

Hundreds of informants and agents worked in and around the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in the 1960s and '70s, with every aspect of the party's activities monitored and then controlled. The SWP's political degeneration in the late 50s and early 60s—bound up with its abandonment of Trotskyist principles and embrace of the Pabloite United Secretariat—was accompanied by an increasingly irresponsible attitude towards security. This facilitated the enormous state infiltration operation which, in turn, accelerated the party's demise. An investigation carried out by the International Committee of the Fourth International later uncovered overwhelming evidence indicating that by the 1970s, a group of covert FBI agents had moved up the ranks of the party into all the key leadership positions.

Left-wing organisations in Australia were also targeted. The Australian Pabloite Socialist Workers League was heavily infiltrated by ASIO, with two agents—Max Wechsler and Lisa Walter—publicly exposing themselves in the 1970s. Like Socialist Alternative today, the Pabloites at the time effectively dismissed these cases as a joke.

Wechsler publicly revealed his role in infiltrating first the CPA and then the Socialist Workers League (SWL), the predecessor organisation to the Democratic Socialist Perspective (publisher of *Green Left Weekly*) in 1975. On ASIO's instructions, Wechsler quit the CPA and joined the SWL in February 1974. Within just eight months, by October of that year, he had been brought onto the party's Melbourne executive and became the area's minutes secretary. From this position he was able to provide a steady flow of information on SWL members, the organisation's financial situation, and on meetings and other activities.

Wechsler's reports helped identify SWL members conducting political work inside the Labor Party and the Young Labor Association, leading to the SWL becoming a proscribed organisation and several of its members being expelled from Labor. The agent also stole and duplicated a set of keys to the SWL's offices in Adelaide, allowing ASIO to conduct a "black bag" break-in operation. In another incident, Wechsler anonymously informed a real estate agent that the SWL was using a property leased by

one of its members; the lease was then cancelled, despite the organisation renovating the property. The provocateur later boasted that this "was a major set-back for their finances".

Despite resigning from ASIO in early 1975 (Wechsler denounced the Whitlam Labor government for being insufficiently anti-communist) and going public with his story, Wechsler was protected by the authorities and ferreted out of Australia to Thailand, where he was kept on the Australian Federal Police payroll.

According to Victoria University historian Phillip Deery, in 1978 the agent was involved in another provocation connected to the Hilton Hotel bombing—Australia's only recorded case of terrorism. There is substantial circumstantial evidence indicating that the police and intelligence agencies were responsible for this act, which killed two workers and a police officer. (See: "30 years since Sydney's Hilton Hotel bombing—the unanswered questions")

An ASIO officer informed Deery that a month after the Hilton bombing, Wechsler established relations with the Ananda Marga sect in Thailand and assisted in the arrest of three of its members (two Australians and one American) on explosives charges and conspiracy to blow up the Indian embassy.* While Wechsler testified he had sold the sect members explosives, they insisted they were innocent and that the material had been planted on them. The real purpose of the charges, however, was to provide leverage for the Australian police to extract testimony implicating other Ananda Marga members—Tim Anderson, Paul Alister, and Ross Dunn—who were being set up for the Hilton bombing. The arrested men in Thailand were told their charges would be dropped if they implicated Anderson, Alister, and Dunn. They refused.

Anderson and the others were then targeted by another agent provocateur who had infiltrated Ananda Marga in Australia. Four months after the bombing, covert police agent Richard Seary invited the men to supposedly graffiti the home of a National Front leader in Sydney's western suburbs. Seary had planted explosives in his car; when the car was pulled over by police the four men were arrested and later prosecuted on attempted murder charges. After Seary accused the other three of confessing to the Hilton bombing, they were sentenced to 16 years' imprisonment. The setup finally collapsed after seven years; the three men were pardoned after a judicial inquiry concluded the police agent was a liar. NSW police later mounted another frame-up of Anderson, and he was sent back to jail in 1989 on the basis of hearsay evidence. Anderson's second conviction was overturned within eight months by an appeals court.

This record underscores the gross irresponsibility of Socialist Alternative's dismissal of the police agent who worked within its ranks for at least a year as a "wannabe James Bond".

SA is yet to provide even a basic outline of its knowledge of the provocateur's activities. The WSWS has previously raised the following questions, which remain unanswered:

* What is the agent's name? Are photographs of him available?

* When and how did he first approach Socialist Alternative? How did he become a member? Did he hold any elected or leading positions within the organisation?

* Did he engage in any provocative behaviour? How did he conduct himself at the APEC demonstrations?

* Are there any grounds for believing that the agent's activities assisted the series of raids by anti-terror police on students' homes in the lead up to APEC? Or that his activities during the demonstration contributed to the police targeting and arresting of protestors that day?

* When and why did the agent cease his membership with Socialist Alternative? Did anyone have any suspicions about him? If so, were these raised with any of the other organisations subsequently infiltrated?

The origins of Socialist Alternative

Socialist Alternative's criminally negligent response is an expression of its thoroughly opportunist origins and political orientation.

The organisation was formed in 1995 following a split in the International Socialist Organisation (ISO), the Australian affiliate of the International Socialist tendency, led by the British Socialist Workers Party. This tendency broke from Trotskyism and the Fourth International in the late 1940s after its founder Tony Cliff rejected both Leon Trotsky's characterisation of the Soviet Union as a degenerated workers' state and his call for the international working class to unconditionally defend the gains of the 1917 revolution—the nationalised property relations and the state monopoly of foreign trade—in the event of an imperialist attack. Cliff instead described the USSR as "state capitalist" and adopted a posture of neutrality between the US and what he termed "Russian imperialism". Cliff's positions—which falsely endowed the parasitic Stalinist bureaucracy that had emerged out of the isolation of the economically devastated workers' state with a historically necessary and enduring role—amounted to an adaptation to the stabilisation of capitalism and the apparent strength of Stalinism in the aftermath of World War II.

Socialist Alternative continues to uphold Cliff's "state capitalism" theory and the political traditions of the International Socialist tendency. Its members left the ISO because of an unprincipled faction fight, which culminated in the expulsion of Mick Armstrong and several others (mostly based in Melbourne). The former ISO members later complained: "in principle, there was no reason why the split should have happened: the differences that led to the expulsions should have been able to be handled within the one organisation."

Seven years later, in 2002, the SA and the ISO held a series of discussions aimed at unification. This discussion provided a revealing insight into the opportunist politics of both organisations.

A September 2002 document, issued by the SA National Executive and titled "Socialist Alternative and the ISO: perspectives for socialists", criticised various aspects of the ISO's work after 1995. It accused the ISO of accommodating to anti-globalisation "autonomist" ideas: "One element of it was the downplaying of politics [with] an exaggerated stress on activity, rather than arguing Marxist ideas." And on refugee campaign work: "[I]n Melbourne the ISO even started to promote figures like Malcolm Fraser, the former union-bashing Liberal PM." On the campuses: "The ISO recruited full time student union officials and NUS [National Union of Students] bureaucrats on an opportunist basis. Some of these student bureaucrats did little to identify publicly as ISO members and were allowed to simply function as bureaucrats... To win full time NUS

positions the ISO resorted to the number-crunching antics of the reformist bureaucrats. They got involved in dubious deals with the Labor Right to obtain positions in the NUS bureaucracy when they had little support amongst students."

A damning portrait! But the SA was concerned, not with exposing an inveterate national-opportunist formation, but to issue friendly suggestions to its would-be future comrades.

It is unclear why the proposed merger did not proceed; there are still no substantive political differences separating the ISO (since renamed Solidarity) from the SA. Both organisations actively campaigned for the Greens at last year's federal election and called on workers and youth to direct their preferences to the Labor Party, promoting the illusion that a Rudd government would represent a "lesser evil" to Prime Minister John Howard.

Like the entire "left" radical milieu, SA is deeply hostile to the struggle for the political independence of the working class from the Labor Party and the trade union apparatuses, the key props of the profit system itself. That is why, under conditions of growing popular hostility to and alienation from the official political establishment, it worked to boost the Greens vote, arguing this would help pressure the Labor Party to defend workers' interests and oppose militarism. An October 2007 article, "Kick out Howard—but we'll have to fight whoever wins", in Socialist Alternative's magazine, stated: "Socialist Alternative is arguing strongly for a Greens vote in both the Senate and the House of Reps... [I]f the Green vote holds up, it will send a signal that there is an opposition to the left of Labor, and that Labor cannot totally ignore its support base, which is well to its left. It will put pressure on Rudd to deliver more on work laws, and on issues like the withdrawal of troops from Iraq, which he would like to defer to the distant future."

SA's "insignificance" and its attitude to security

One of the criticisms levelled by SA at the ISO targeted the latter's tentative steps towards political activity in working class areas. The SA, on the contrary, said it would continue to focus on recruiting university students. The reason? The SA regarded itself as nothing more than a propaganda group, which was incapable of challenging the Labor Party and the trade unions for the leadership of the working class.

In a recent pamphlet entitled "From Little Things Big Things Grow", SA leader Mick Armstrong expanded on this theme. "[P]ropaganda groups do not have the capacity to lead workers in major struggles," he declared. "Socialist Alternative is in the business of arguing general socialist ideas around a broad range of questions ... not *organising* mass action, taking over the leadership of the ACTU [Australian Council of Trade Unions] or offering an electoral alternative to the ALP and Greens" (Emphasis in original).

Armstrong presents his positions as "politically realistic", given the small size of the so-called radical left, but underlying them is an abject prostration before the Labor and trade union bureaucracies. Nothing can be allowed that would in any way upset or challenge their domination over the working class. And this position, in turn, informs the SA's conception of its own political irrelevance. Reviewing the growth of Tony

Cliff's group in Britain in the early 1970s, then called the International Socialists (IS), Armstrong approvingly cites its assertion that one of the key factors in its success "was a sense of proportion, of the relative insignificance of IS as an organisation. When IS had two hundred members the question at stake was not the 'crisis of leadership'... It was the much more modest task of educating those who were around to listen and of striking roots in the class in a small way where this was possible."

The phrase "crisis of leadership" comes from the *Transitional Program*, drafted by Trotsky in 1938 as the founding document of the Fourth International. Trotsky explained that the objective conditions for the establishment of a world socialist economy had fully ripened. The obstacle was not the level of development of the global productive forces, nor any inherent incapacity of the international working class to overthrow capitalism, but rather the counter-revolutionary role of the social-democratic and Stalinist leaderships, which were betraying the working class. The *Transitional Program* concluded: "Without a socialist revolution, in the next historical period at that, a catastrophe threatens the whole culture of mankind. The turn is now to the proletariat, i.e., chiefly to its revolutionary vanguard. The historical crisis of mankind is reduced to the crisis of the revolutionary leadership."

For Socialist Alternative and the Cliff group, as indeed for every petty bourgeois radical tendency, the central preoccupation is not with program and perspective but with "numbers". Every aspect of their activity, from their protests and campaigns to their splits and mergers, is guided by a frenetic pursuit of immediate organisational "success".

The task of resolving of the crisis of leadership, however, flows from a scientific understanding of the objective nature of the crisis of the capitalist system—which will inevitably thrust masses of working people into social and political upheavals, in direct opposition to the old leaderships—and its intersection with the "subjective factor", that is, the protracted struggle waged by the revolutionary party to win the most advanced layers of the working class to a scientific socialist perspective and cultivate, among them, a genuine socialist culture.

Trotsky founded the Fourth International in defiance of the opportunist "radicals" of his day, who protested that this was a premature move, that there were too few adherents, and that it would lack mass support. The great Russian revolutionary insisted that outside the ranks of the Fourth International there was not a revolutionary tendency worthy of the name, and that despite the relatively small number of cadre at the time of its founding, objective developments would inevitably cut a path to the masses.

Socialist Alternative's disregard for basic issues of political security is directly bound up with its self-described "insignificance as an organisation". Not taking their own activity seriously, the leadership is somewhat bemused to find that the bourgeois state takes a different position. Moreover, it follows that if SA has no significance then its leadership has no real political responsibilities, either to the organisation's members or to the working class.

There is little doubt that the agent provocateur would have found it rather easy to join the SA and work within its ranks. Largely composed of politically inexperienced students, the organisation reportedly has a large and rapid membership turnover. In addition, the SA leadership explicitly rejects the Bolshevik organisational principle of democratic centralism, explaining: "Small socialist groups, precisely because they are more dependent on ideas for recruiting people than a party, have to have a relaxed attitude to disciplinary measures and put a premium on political

argument to convince members about what needs to be done to build the group."

This utterly false counter-position of discipline and political argument is indicative of Socialist Alternative's organisational and political dilettantism, which leaves it vulnerable to state infiltration and provocation.

Lenin explained in *What is to be Done?*: "In its struggle for power the proletariat has no other weapon but organisation." The security of the party is, above all, a political question. It places upon the party leadership the responsibility for educating advanced workers and youth about the ruthless class character of the bourgeois state and about the methods it has used, throughout the past century, to undermine the development of a genuine socialist and internationalist proletarian party.

After the 1917 revolution, the world's first workers' state devoted considerable resources to investigating the available records of the Tsarist regime's secret police, the Okhrana, and exposing its methods before the international workers' movement. The Bolsheviks discovered that the vast network of police targeting revolutionary and oppositional parties included more than 35,000 provocateurs, who reached the highest levels of these organisations. One agent, Roman Malinovsky, assisted in the arrest of several leading Bolshevik members after managing to be elected to the party's Central Committee and then to the Tsarist Duma as a Bolshevik deputy. Studying the vast archives of the Okhrana, Belgian revolutionary Victor Serge outlined the Tsarist police's methods and operations and advised revolutionists how to detect and evade police provocateurs in his popular pamphlet "What Everyone Should Know About State Repression", first published in 1926.

Today, as the world economy slides into the worst downturn since the 1930s, all the unresolved historical and political problems of the twentieth century are now re-emerging with redoubled force. That the fundamental contradictions of capitalism are once again erupting to the surface of economic and political life—posing the alternatives, socialism or barbarism—both vindicates the scientific Marxist perspective developed by the International Committee of the Fourth International, the Socialist Equality Party and the International Students for Social Equality, and, at the same time, fatally undermines the reformist illusions peddled by Socialist Alternative in the old trade union and Labor bureaucracies—the orbit around which this opportunist outfit has always revolved.

* See Phillip Deery, "A Double Agent Down Under: Australian Security and the Infiltration of the Left", *Intelligence and National Security*, vol. 22 no. 3, June 2007, pp. 346-366.



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