

Australia: Pseudo-lefts line up behind Greens-backed Labor government

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Pseudo-socialist protest outfit Socialist Alliance has enthusiastically welcomed the recent installation of the Greens-backed Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard.

The response points to the petty-bourgeois class character of Socialist Alliance and fellow ex-left organisations: whatever their tactical differences, they all rest on a privileged middle class layer and are bitterly hostile to the emergence of any independent movement of the working class in opposition to Labor, the Greens, and the trade unions. Having long ago abandoned any pretence of advancing Marxist politics, the layers within Socialist Alliance are now being ever-more closely integrated into the official parliamentary set-up. Their function is to serve as the “left” defenders of the new minority government, seeking to channel widespread hostility to the entire two-party system back behind the Labor-Green alliance as it moves to impose savage public spending cuts and economic restructuring measures on behalf of the ruling elite.

In an article published on September 11, “Movements must press advantage on the minority ALP [Australian Labor Party] government”, Socialist Alliance national executive member Paul Benedek issued the organisation’s official response to the formation of the minority Labor government four days earlier.

Benedek declared that the election results “present a challenge and opportunity for the progressive social movements to mobilise to demand a just, equitable and sustainable response to the big challenges facing society”. Referring to protests held in defence of refugees, gay marriage, and against the Northern Territory intervention, Benedek continued: “Now we need those same movements to exert even stronger pressure on the minority Labor government.” The article made clear that the ex-lefts would be more closely oriented to the junior partner in the de facto coalition government, the Greens. “We [the Socialist Alliance national council] agreed we needed to work with the Greens in as many campaigns as possible and continue our principled policy of preferencing from the most progressive candidates to the least,” Benedek concluded.

After the August 21 election delivered a hung parliament, the Socialist Alliance had urgently pressed the Greens to support a minority Labor government. On August 24, the group’s national convener Peter Boyle advised that the Greens “should make an offer to support a minority ALP government ... because clearly a Liberal-National government would be a greater evil”.

This position was consistent with the central axis of Socialist Alliance’s election campaign. The organisation denied that there was any significance to the Labor Party coup that ousted Kevin Rudd last June, and even held out the prospect that Gillard would prove more amenable to implementing left-wing policies (see “Australia’s political coup and the role of the ex-left”). It subsequently urged a vote for the Greens as a “progressive” alternative and the direction of preferences to Labor Party candidates as a means of keeping the Gillard government in office.

The Greens-backed minority Labor government, in other words, is precisely what Socialist Alliance campaigned for. The pseudo-lefts will now be among the most ruthless opponents of any challenge by the working class to the government’s program.

Socialist Alliance traces its origins to the formation in 1970 of an Australian affiliate of the opportunist Pabloite United Secretariat, which broke from the Trotskyist movement, the Fourth International, after World War II in order to integrate itself into the Stalinist, social democratic and trade union bureaucracies. The Australian Socialist Workers Party, which later became the Democratic Socialist Party, then the Democratic Socialist Perspective, initially posed as a revolutionary and even Trotskyist organisation, but in the past two and a half decades has lurched rightwards in line with its international counterparts. Throughout the globe these forces, which were always based on a privileged “radical” layer within the middle class, are now integral components of the bourgeois political establishment. Brazil’s Workers Party, Italy’s Rifondazione Comunista, Greece’s SYRIZA, and France’s New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) are among those that have entered, or are preparing to enter, right-wing governments.

In Australia, the Democratic Socialist Perspective liquidated itself into Socialist Alliance at the beginning of 2010, emulating the Pabloites in France, whose dissolution into the NPA was accompanied by the explicit repudiation of any connection to Marxism.

Socialist Alliance has been busy developing close working relationships with Labor and the Greens, and many of its leading members have been integrated into the privileged upper echelons of the trade union bureaucracy. At least one union (the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union, CFMEU) helped fund the outfit’s federal election campaign this year. For the ex-left, keeping the Labor Party in office is an essential means of advancing its own material interests, while bolstering the Greens helps promote the self-interested, lifestyle, identity politics—based on gender, sexuality, and

race—with which its milieu is preoccupied.

The Greens are highly conscious of the role played by the pseudo-socialists in providing them with “left” credentials. In an interview on ABC TV’s “Lateline” program during the election campaign, Greens’ leader Bob Brown pointedly identified Socialist Alliance among several parties to which Greens’ voters could direct their preferences.

On September 3, the Socialist Alliance newspaper *Green Left Weekly* featured a lengthy and adulatory interview with Adam Bandt, the newly-elected Greens’ member of the House of Representatives. It followed a similar feature interview with Bob Brown in the newspaper’s August 16 edition (published under a quote from Brown: “We’re Australia’s progressive party”). Like the Greens’ leader, Bandt was provided with a platform to posture on various issues, including the Afghanistan war, climate change, and refugees.

The new MP was asked to assure Green Left readers that “any future agreements made with the ALP [will] be made public immediately, as was done with your recent agreement” and to respond to “concerns in the left and labour movements about suggestions that the Greens may entertain supporting or even entering coalition state governments with the Liberal-National Party Coalition”. Bandt was keen to oblige—though he pointedly refused to rule out the prospect of the Greens joining the Liberals in future state coalition governments. A former student radical turned industrial relations lawyer, Bandt was no doubt grateful for the support of Socialist Alliance, including its decision not to stand one of its candidates against him in the inner-city electorate of Melbourne. This marked the first time since 1987 that none of the pseudo-lefts has run for the seat.

Socialist Alliance, of all the ex-left organisations, is perhaps the most craven supporter of the minority Labor government. All of them, however, have welcomed Gillard’s reinstallation as prime minister and have clearly signalled their determination to work with the trade unions in suppressing any independent movement of working people in defence of their class interests.

The origins of both Solidarity and Socialist Alternative lie with the late Tony Cliff, who broke from the Fourth International in the late 1940s after rejecting Leon Trotsky’s characterisation of the Soviet Union as a degenerated workers’ state, along with the position that the international working class had to unconditionally defend the gains of the 1917 Russian Revolution—the nationalised property relations and the state monopoly of foreign trade—in the event of an imperialist offensive. Cliff instead described the USSR as “state capitalist”, thereby falsely attributing a historically necessary and enduring role to the parasitic Stalinist bureaucracy that had emerged as a result of the isolation of the first workers’ state. In a similar manner to the liquidationist positions of the Pabloite United Secretariat, Cliff’s positions represented a petty-bourgeois adaptation to the stabilisation of capitalism and the apparent strength of Stalinism in the post-war period.

Solidarity responded to the election with an August 24 statement bemoaning Labor’s inability to win a parliamentary majority. It declared the increased Greens’ vote a “bright spot” on “an otherwise disastrous election”, and concluded that “the hope must be—despite the pathetic do-nothing (and worse) policies of Gillard—that Labor will

form a minority government with the support of the one Green member and other independents”. After this was duly accomplished, the group underlined its perspective in an editorial titled “Gillard holds on: Now Greens must shift Labor to the left”. An accompanying article on their website, “Unions can’t afford three more years of waiting for Labor”, added that “if the union leaders aren’t prepared to lead that fight [against ‘anti-union laws’], we will need to push them from below”.

In a similar declaration of abject subservience to the trade unions, Socialist Alternative leader Mick Armstrong wrote on August 22 that “we need to be out there ... putting pressure on the trade union leaders to make a determined stand”. Armstrong’s colleague Tom Bramble desperately sought to boost any lingering illusions in Labor, referring to “the almost complete exhaustion of the ALP as an avenue for progressive social change, short of a major shake-up inside the party”. And on the Greens, Socialist Alternative’s Ben Hillier cautioned that as in Germany and Ireland they may come to be seen as “just another mainstream pro-capitalist party”—but, he hastened to add, “if a section of the party stands resolutely against the current they may be able to play a role in rebuilding resistance and strengthening the left”.

The ex-lefts response to the election crisis underscores the historic significance of the decades-long struggle waged against Pabloism and all varieties of petty-bourgeois opportunism by the Socialist Equality Party and its predecessor the Socialist Labour League, the Australian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International. It alone advances the only independent socialist and internationalist perspective upon which the working class can defend its interests against the right-wing onslaught on its living conditions being prepared by the Labor government with the support of the Greens, trade unions, and ex-lefts.

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