

# Australia: Ex-lefts develop new political “regroupment” in Victorian election campaign

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The state election campaign in Victoria is being utilised by the various middle class protest organisations to deepen their ties with sections of the trade union bureaucracy and the Greens, and prepare a new “regroupment”, modelled on the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) in France and Left Party in Germany. With the global economic crisis rapidly deepening, the Australian government is preparing to implement austerity measures, like its counterparts in the US, Europe and around the world, that directly target the jobs, wages and living standards of the working class. The ex-left tendencies are making advance preparations in order to trap workers and youth within the political establishment and preempt the emergence of an independent and revolutionary movement of the working class.

The campaign of the Socialist Party’s Stephen Jolly in the inner Melbourne electorate of Richmond is the focus of these manoeuvres. The Socialist Party (SP) is the Australian affiliate of the British-based Committee for a Workers International (CWI), established by the former Militant Tendency.

In numerous countries, affiliates of the CWI have provided valuable services to their ruling elites by attempting to prop up the old, discredited organisations of the working class and actively promote new opportunist formations. In Brazil they were active in President “Lula” da Silva’s Workers Party (PT), which is now the chief instrument of the banks and the IMF in Latin America. In Germany, leading CWI members have recently been welcomed into the Left Party in order to provide additional “left” cover, while the Left Party’s leadership of trade union bureaucrats and ex-East German Stalinists imposes savage cuts in Berlin and works towards a federal coalition government with the social democrats and Greens.

There has been no shortage of wretched efforts by the Australian ex-left to establish a viable equivalent of the German Left Party, Brazilian Workers Party, Italian Rifondazione Comunista, and French NPA. In January this year, the ex-Pabloite Democratic Socialist Perspective dissolved itself into Socialist Alliance. It hoped this would bring electoral gains and support from the trade unions, which have failed to materialise, and the organisation appears to be in terminal crisis. Now the Socialist Party is

promoting its credentials as the proponent of a so-called “new workers’ party”.

The SP’s Jolly is regarded as something of a celebrity in ex-left circles. Frequently promoted in the media, Jolly has been a member of the Yarra Council since 2004 and has developed a certain base of support among local residents. The state electorate of Richmond includes the inner Melbourne suburbs of Clifton Hill, Collingwood, Fitzroy, and Richmond, formerly working class centres that have been largely gentrified in the past two decades. Jolly won 5.6 percent of the vote there in 2006, and, according to some reports, is likely to receive more than 10 percent this time.

Powerful sections of the trade union bureaucracy have bankrolled his campaign. The Electrical Trades Union (ETU) has provided \$25,000, and the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) and United Firefighters Union are believed to have donated a total of about another \$25,000. The ETU’s state secretary Dean Mighell was a featured guest at the SP campaign launch. Mighell told the media that his union “had always supported Steve Jolly in Richmond just due to the work he’s done in the local community”.

According to the *Melbourne Times*, Jolly “stressed the unions were backing him as an independent candidate, rather than backing the Socialist Party”. Due to grossly antidemocratic electoral laws designed to prop up the two-party system, it is difficult and expensive for smaller parties to gain official registration and thus have their candidates appear on the ballot with their party affiliation. It appears, however, that the SP has utilised this situation to promote Jolly to the unions as an “independent” candidate, cultivating even closer relations with the bureaucracy as it continues its work with the Labor government of Premier John Brumby.

Jolly has claimed that the unions’ support for his campaign reflects their dissatisfaction with the Labor Party. This is an outright lie—the unions have worked hand in hand with the Victorian government in implementing its pro-business policies and are enthusiastically promoting Brumby’s campaign. Unlike in the August federal election, when the CFMEU and ETU

financially backed Green candidates against the Labor Party in several important seats, the trade unions have fallen in behind Brumby in the state election, with none of their funds going to the Greens. The Trades Hall building (the unions' headquarters, also home to the Socialist Party's national office) is currently draped with a banner declaring "The ALP—Making Victoria a Better Place for All Victorians".

The trade unions have backed Jolly's campaign because they recognise the role he can play as a critical safety valve in the coming period. Figures such as Dean Mighell are very conscious of the enormous hostility felt towards Labor by working people. This is why he moved to have the ETU disaffiliate from the federal Labor Party earlier this year. Such sentiment will only escalate after the election, as the next government moves to impose severe public spending cuts, including to public sector jobs, health, and education.

For the ruling elite as a whole, the critical issue is to prevent a socialist and revolutionary leadership from coming to the head of the inevitable social struggles which will erupt in the period ahead. The orientation of the SP—and that of the entire array of ex-left outfits, which are all actively assisting Jolly's campaign—is deeply hostile towards, and contemptuous of, any independent political movement of the working class. Their primary concern is to maintain the authority of the bourgeois parliament, the moribund Labor Party and its trade union accomplices.

Jolly's campaign in Richmond is marked by its utterly parochial and reformist character, and is barely distinguishable from that of the Greens. For example, when the *Green Left Weekly* asked him what his election platform was, Jolly replied: "We are contesting the election on the issues of inappropriate planning and development in the electorate, expansion of public transport and tackling climate change through measures like shutting down Hazelwood power station."

Jolly and the Greens candidate in Richmond (a fellow member of Yarra Council) have arranged a preferences exchange deal, reflecting the cosy relations between the SP and Greens in the area. This was also apparent during a recent candidates' debate convened by the Fitzroy tenants association, in which Jolly's "differences" with the Greens took the form of friendly advice. Warning about the Green party's position that it would consider joining a coalition government with either Labor or Liberal in the event of a hung parliament, Jolly declared: "From a Green point of view it is crazy. If they go into parliament as a junior partner with the Liberal or Labor Party they will get the blame for all the cuts that are coming... By tagging along as some little left-wing hook for one of the major parties—you will destroy yourselves, you will not have any influence on these people. We have to create a third force, not jump into bed with them."

Jolly is explicit about the political function of this "third force" which his campaign seeks to establish. At the SP campaign launch he declared: "I think that the message it would send to the trade

union movement [and] community organisations, if an openly socialist organisation in an area that's been gentrified—notwithstanding the fact that we've got three public housing estates, but by and large gentrified inner city area—can win [the seat of Richmond], can you imagine if we had a new workers' party, supported by the unions, the left unions, the militant unions, community organisations. We could do what we're doing here all over, in more working class areas, and really become a real force in Australian politics, like the new Left Party in Germany is at the moment."

This statement ought to serve as a serious warning. In the next period, as the working class re-enters the political arena—inevitably in rebellion against the trade unions and the Labor Party—it will find no more determined opponent than the fake lefts now rallying behind the SP. The Socialist Equality Party, the Australian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, is alone fighting for the development of a mass revolutionary movement of the working class, independent of the entire political establishment, including Labor, the Greens, the trade unions and all their apologists, based on a genuine Marxist—that is, socialist and internationalist—program, to prepare for the explosive struggles and political tasks ahead.

*The author recommends:*

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[11 November 2010]

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[12 November 2009]

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