

The Occupy protests in Australia, the unions and the pseudo-left

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Inspired by the Occupy Wall Street movement in the US, students and young workers in Australia have participated in similar actions over the past month, expressing their hostility toward the existing social and political setup. The various pseudo-left organisations—Socialist Alliance, Socialist Alternative and the Socialist Party—have responded by insisting that the key task of the movement is to secure the support of senior trade union bureaucrats.

Whatever their tactical differences on other issues, these groups are actively striving to divert the Occupy protests behind the trade unions, thereby keeping the movement within safe political channels and blocking any challenge to the Greens-backed minority Labor government.

The unions in Australia have advanced a ruthless nationalist and corporatist agenda over the past three decades, offering their services to big business and finance capital in policing mass layoffs, the dismantling of entire sections of industry, productivity speedup measures and wage cuts. These hollowed out apparatuses—no longer workers' organisations in any sense—are manned by an upper-middle class layer whose privileges are bound up with multi-billion dollar superannuation and property investments, and with the political deals struck with state and federal governments.

Within the Occupy protests in Australia, the middle-class "left" groups have worked tenaciously to try to break down the healthy scepticism and mistrust of the unions felt by many of the young people involved. In line with developments internationally, union membership rates in Australia have plummeted, especially among young people. Just 10 percent of all workers aged between 15 and 24 are union members, compared with 36 percent in 1986.

Socialist Alternative representative Mick Armstrong last month insisted: "The Occupy movement needs the industrial and social power of organised workers on our side if we are

to have any hope of winning. Union support has been vital in building and maintaining the Wall Street occupation."

This is entirely false. The trade unions in the US are attempting to corral the Occupy movement behind the Democratic Party and President Barack Obama's 2012 re-election campaign. Like their Australian counterparts, the American unions operate as business organisations, enforcing the sweeping offensive against workers' jobs and living standards.

The very form that the Occupy protests against social inequality has now taken in the US is the product of the union bureaucracy's suppression of the class struggle. The unions' betrayal of the movement led by public sector workers in Wisconsin in February and March, and their shutdown of a strike of 45,000 Verizon telecommunications workers in August, created the conditions in which a small encampment in a New York park became the political outlet for the bitter anger that pervades US society.

The opportunist tendencies in Australia regard the wretched manoeuvres of the American trade unions and the Democratic Party with Occupy Wall Street as a model to be emulated.

Socialist Alliance's Susan Price, in an article for *Green Left Weekly* earlier this month, declared: "Union links to the Occupy movement in Australia are still in their early days. However, the US example shows that there is much common cause to be found." Price promoted various union leaders, including AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka, Service Employees International Union (SEIU) International President Mary Kay Henry, and Stuart Appelbaum, president of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union. (See: "From Tunisia to 'Occupy Wall Street': Who is the AFL-CIO's Stuart Appelbaum?")

Price, herself the vice president of the New South Wales

branch of the National Tertiary Education Union, concluded by wishing for an alliance between the unions and the Occupy movement that is “founded on mutual respect and an emphasis on practical struggle and solidarity.”

Both Socialist Alliance and Socialist Alternative (a state-capitalist formation with close ties to the American International Socialist Organization) have promoted a letter written last month by Len Cooper, the Communication Workers Union (CWU) Victorian secretary, endorsing the Occupy protests. Over the past three decades, the CWU has played a critical role in enforcing the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs in the telecommunications sector.

Cooper presents himself as a champion of “real democracy.” His letter demagogically complained about laws against industrial action: “If they had the right to strike Australian unionists, organised in solidarity with each other and their communities, would never have allowed the mass privatisations, the introduction of casualisation and the off-shoring of our wealth-creating jobs to have occurred. We would by now have insisted upon a renewables industry, insisted that our union superannuation be used for the common good, and that our country withdraw from wars of aggression overseas.”

Whom do Cooper and his “radical” supporters think they are kidding? During the Hawke and Keating Labor governments of 1983 to 1996, the unions drafted the Accords through which the mass privatisations, workforce casualisation, destruction of industry and many other pro-business restructuring measures were implemented. Any section of workers who attempted to take industrial action in defence of jobs, wages and conditions was ruthlessly targeted by the union bureaucracy. Moreover, the sweeping anti-strike laws within the present Labor government’s draconian Fair Work Act were unanimously endorsed by every union official assembled at the 2007 Labor Party conference.

The pseudo-lefts’ unbridled enthusiasm for the trade unions reflects definite material interests. They are tied to the unions by a thousand strings, with a sizeable proportion of their members and sympathisers employed at different levels of the union bureaucracy. Moreover, these organisations’ activities are dependent, to a significant extent, on union patronage. The main ex-left tendencies that are based in Melbourne—including Socialist Alternative and the Socialist Party, affiliated with the British-based Committee for a Workers’ International—have their national offices in Trades Hall, the unions’ state headquarters.

During the Victorian state election campaign 12 months ago, sections of the union bureaucracy donated about \$50,000 to the Socialist Party at the same time as they were campaigning for a Labor Party victory.

In promoting the unions, the “radical” groups are consciously seeking a means of propping up the pro-business government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard. The Labor Party is reviled among the youth involved in the Occupy demonstrations. Precisely for this reason, the pseudo-left are among those who strive to prevent any discussion on the need for a break with the Labor Party and a struggle against the Gillard government. In general assemblies and other forums at Occupy events in Sydney, Melbourne and other cities, a general silence has reigned on these critical issues, while strenuous efforts are made to bolster the credentials of the government’s key backers—the trade unions and the Greens.

The key issue confronting the Occupy movement is to turn out to the working class. This can be achieved only independently of, and in opposition to, the trade unions, with workers developing rank-and-file committees and other new forms of organisation to advance their struggles. Above all, what is required is a new socialist and internationalist strategy that aims at ending the corporate-political domination of the “one percent” by abolishing the profit system internationally. This is the revolutionary perspective advanced by the Socialist Equality Party and *World Socialist Web Site*.



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