

The Australian pseudo-lefts and the betrayal of Victorian nurses

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A revealing incident outside a recent mass meeting of nurses in Melbourne served to highlight the class gulf that separates the Socialist Equality Party from Socialist Alternative and its fellow pseudo-left organisations in Australia.

A contingent of Socialist Alternative (SAlt) members attended the mass meeting on December 2, apparently with the central aim of launching a provocation against the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and blocking nurses from speaking with SEP members and supporters who were distributing leaflets to them. One individual, Eric Le Roy, who has written several articles on the nurses' dispute for the *Socialist Alternative* magazine and web site, became hysterical and grabbed 200 copies of a statement ("The Australian trade unions and the betrayal of the Victorian nurses' struggle") out of the hands of an SEP campaigner. He screamed that the SEP had "no right to be here", and started chanting "sectarians, sectarians."

This extraordinary behaviour reflects SAlt's bitter hostility towards any move by workers to defend their wages and conditions independently of the trade union apparatus. SAlt's attempt to block the distribution of the SEP statement was an attempt to bolster the authority of the Australian Nursing Federation—right at the moment when the union leadership was consciously strangling the nurses' struggle—and prevent any independent movement of nurses and other workers emerging in opposition to the state Liberal and federal Labor governments.

Public sector nurses in Victoria confront a determined offensive by the state Liberal government. Premier Ted Baillieu plans to cut hospital spending by emasculating mandatory staff to patient ratios and introducing other so-called flexibility and productivity measures, while also imposing a real wage cut. The savage austerity measures targeting public sector workers across Europe and the US are now beginning to be rolled out against their Australian counterparts, with state and federal governments determined to reduce debt by slashing jobs, wages, and conditions.

The federal Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard has played a key role in this dispute, with its draconian Fair Work Australia industrial laws used to prepare an unprecedented lockout of nurses. Fair Work Australia (FWA) also intervened to ban the nurses' industrial action, involving limited bed closures.

Only three weeks before edicts were issued against the nurses, Fair Work Australia had permanently banned all industrial action at Qantas, following the management's unprecedented grounding of the airline. The ban was aimed at stymieing the airline workers'

campaign to defend their jobs against the company's restructuring plans, which involve shifting to low-wage platforms in Asia. Enthusiastically welcomed by the trade unions, the Fair Work intervention was intended to serve as a warning to the entire working class, making clear that no resistance to the pro-business restructuring program would be permitted.

The nurses' decision to defy the Fair Work ban on their industrial campaign, risking massive fines and imprisonment, was highly significant. It represented a direct challenge to the regressive agenda being orchestrated by the corporate elite, the Labor government, and the trade unions. From the very outset, the Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) leadership responded by working to defuse and divert the nurses' struggle. At every step, it was assisted by Socialist Alternative, a state capitalist grouping aligned with the US International Socialist Organization.

The ANF initially decided to go along with the nurses' decision to defy Fair Work Australia and maintain their industrial action in the hospitals. As a result, SAlt breathlessly declared on November 17, the union had "delivered a slap in the face to a government intent on smashing the conditions of nurses, and a slap in the face to the unjust Fair Work laws." In another article, SAlt gushed that the ANF's actions had the potential to usher in a new era of "class struggle unionism." It explained: "The ANF has a real opportunity to lead the union movement in defying these anti-union laws, and show other unions that laws must be broken in order to win workers' rights."

In reality, far from challenging the framework of the Fair Work regime, the ANF insisted that a legal loophole within the first two edicts against industrial action meant that the industrial tribunal's orders only applied to union officials, and not to ordinary nurses.

This legal manoeuvre allowed the union leadership to buy some time to prepare its betrayal of the nurses. SAlt deliberately covered up the clear signs of what the ANF was preparing. The pseudo-left group simply excluded from their reports on the dispute any mention of the repeated "olive branch" offers made by ANF state secretary Lisa Fitzpatrick to the state government, including a proposal to immediately cease all industrial action in the hospitals. Likewise, SAlt's report on the November 24 nurses' rally in central Melbourne omitted any mention of politically inconvenient facts. It made no reference to the ANF's decision to give a platform to state Labor leader Daniel Andrews, who served as health minister in the previous state Labor government in 2007 and utilised the old WorkChoices legislation against the nurses in

Labor's attempt to abolish the nurse-patient ratios. The ANF's promotion of Andrews was part of their effort to divert the nurses' struggle into an electoral campaign for a Labor victory in the next election due in 2014.

The day after the rally the ANF ordered the nurses to cease all industrial action in compliance with Fair Work Australia's orders, without any concessions from the government. The union's decision flouted the nurses' mass meeting resolution to continue their campaign until the government backed down.

SAlt responded to this betrayal by suspending its previously regular coverage of the dispute. The first mention of what had happened was contained in an article by Tom Bramble, "Why Fair Work Australia is a tool of the bosses", published on December 1. In a transparent attempt to provide an alibi for the ANF bureaucracy, the article noted in passing that the "Victorian nurses fell afoul" of Labor's anti-strike laws.

Only eleven days after the ANF's shut down of the industrial campaign, on December 6, did the SAlt devote an article to the subject, titled "Victorian nurses' campaign takes backward step." The author, Eric Le Roy, characterised the bureaucracy's actions as a mere "back down" that had "scaled back" the campaign. He declared that the nurses' campaign had been insufficiently militant—notwithstanding the unanimous vote of a November 21 mass meeting of more than 4,000 nurses to continue with illegal industrial action—and as a result: "By the time FWA issued its third order on 25 November, the door had been pushed open for union officials to scale back the campaign."

The article concluded: "To rebuild our power and confidence, we need to build a strong rank and file organisation that can stand up to the government and the bosses even when—especially when—the union doesn't want to."

In other words, no lessons should be drawn by nurses and other workers from this unabashed sell-out. If anyone is to blame, it is ordinary nurses themselves, who failed to exert sufficient pressure on the trade union bureaucrats and thereby "pushed open the door" for industrial action to be suppressed.

The ANF convened the December 2 mass meeting of nurses in an attempt to secure ratification for its decision to comply with the Fair Work Australia orders. The bureaucracy was no doubt fearful of opposition emerging within the rank and file. Considerable unease and opposition to what had happened had been expressed by nurses on social networking sites in the lead up to the meeting. In the end, the union rescheduled the mass meeting at short notice, ensuring that only half as many nurses attended as had been present at the previous mass meeting, where the decision was made to maintain "illegal" industrial action. Intimidating them with the prospect of a regressive outcome arbitrated by Fair Work Australia, the ANF managed to get a majority to approve its plan to stage sham "community rallies" outside the state's hospitals.

Socialist Alternative's contribution to the ANF's manoeuvres against the nurses was to launch the provocation against the Socialist Equality Party outside the meeting. The leaflets that SAlt wanted to stop nurses from reading explained that not a single step could be taken forward without a break from the ANF and the building of new forms of organisation, including rank and file committees in every hospital, linking up with other sections of the

working class and advancing a political and industrial struggle against the Baillieu and Gillard governments.

The transformation in the role of the trade unions over the past three decades is a product of the far-reaching implications of the globalisation of production, which has sounded the death knell for all national-based programs and organisations. No longer workers' organisations in any sense, the unions have worked hand in hand with employers and governments around the world to boost "international competitiveness" by suppressing the class struggle, driving down wages, tearing up working conditions, and destroying jobs and entire sections of industry.

As far as SAlt is concerned, acknowledgement of these facts constitutes "sectarianism." The group maintains that nothing of any significance concerning the trade unions or the global economy has occurred in recent decades—even insisting that globalisation is a "myth." Bitterly hostile to any movement of the working class emerging independently of the old worm-eaten trade union apparatus, SAlt and their fellow pseudo-lefts are adamant that the trade unions remain the legitimate and unchallengeable organisations of working people.

The ex-Pabloite Socialist Alliance was even more brazen in its defence of the ANF's every manoeuvre, hailing in the pages of *Green Left Weekly* the bureaucracy's shut down of the nurses' industrial action as a clever tactic and its subsequent announcement of the sham "community campaign".

The opportunists' unstinting promotion of the trade unions has a definite material basis. Like their counterparts internationally—the New Anti-capitalist Party in France, the German Left Party, SYRIZA in Greece, and the International Socialist Organization in the US—the middle class layers that comprise the pseudo-left are tied to the unions by a thousand strings, and in many instances employed by different sections of the bureaucracy. Moreover, their organisations receive significant financial patronage from the unions.

Nurses, together with the working class as a whole, are confronted with the urgent need to take up the fight for the building of a new party, based on a socialist and internationalist program, that will take forward the struggle for the reorganisation of society, establishing social need not profit as the central priority of economic life and recognising the basic social right of everyone to a free, high-quality healthcare system, fully resources and staffed by well-paid healthcare workers.



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