

Australian pseudo-left backs imperialist intervention in Syria

Patrick O'Connor, Nick Beams

14 December 2012

The various pseudo-left organisations in Australia have joined the clamour by their international counterparts for US-led regime change in Syria.

The leading role in this pro-imperialist operation is being played by Socialist Alternative (SAlt), aligned with the state capitalist International Socialist Organisation in the US. In the past, SAlt has maintained, at least in words, an anti-imperialist stance. No longer. Last August, leading SAlt member Corey Oakley published an article entitled “The left, imperialism and the Syrian revolution” in which he declared that “knee-jerk anti-imperialism” was a thing of the past. Any emphasis on the “imperialist threat” to Syria, Oakley insisted, was “profoundly mistaken.”

“Imperialism, in the sense of Western neo-colonialism, is not the main threat facing the masses of Syria, or of the Arab world as a whole,” he declared. While this might have seemed a “sacrilegious statement to anyone who got their political education on the left in the post-9/11 world” it was no longer the case. “In those years,” he continued, “anti-imperialism was a crucial starting point because US imperialism was the decisive element in world politics. The time for ‘knee-jerk anti-imperialism’ has now passed. Not because US imperialism has disappeared from the Middle East, or shed its malevolent intent, but because the world has changed. The Arab revolution has transformed everything. We now live not in a ‘post-9/11 world’ but in a ‘post-Tahrir world’.”

He continued: “Only a fool would deny that the imperialist powers are intervening in Syria, or that there are deeply reactionary elements present among the rebel forces.” But this was no barrier to demanding imperialist intervention: “[T]he negative aspects of the Syrian revolt have been vastly overstated... is it wrong for the Syrian revolutionaries to demand, and where possible accept, weapons from the imperialists, the imperialists’ allies, or anyone else? Of course not.”

The so-called “Syrian revolutionaries” are dominated by Islamist and reactionary Al Qaeda-linked forces, emanating both from within Syria and other countries in the region. It is these forces that Oakley insists should be armed by the US and other major powers. Unsurprisingly, the article was subsequently published on several web sites devoted to lobbying the Obama administration to begin bombing Syria.

In his article of nearly 3,000 words, Oakley never once mentioned Libya or the criminal US-NATO operation there, which removed Gaddafi and installed right-wing Islamist and jihadist elements aligned to Al Qaeda.

The overt shift by Socialist Alternative into the imperialist camp is bound up with the new political requirements of the Labor government as it steps up its predatory foreign policy operations in league with the Obama administration. Prime Minister Julia Gillard has lined up behind Washington’s preparations for a military confrontation with China in East Asia and the Pacific, while at the same time providing unstinting support for its operations in the Middle East. In 2011, then foreign minister Kevin Rudd actively campaigned for the US-NATO bombardment of Libya, echoing the bogus “humanitarian” pretext about the supposed threat to the

population of Benghazi. Rudd’s successor, Bob Carr, is likewise promoting the regime change drive against Syria and recently suggested that Bashir al-Assad and other government figures be assassinated. This week Rudd delivered a speech urging that more arms be funnelled to the Syrian “rebels” and for a Libyan-style military intervention to be readied. Rudd anticipated that the Syrian government would soon fall and suggested that Australia could participate in a UN “peacekeeping” ground force.

These manoeuvres are driven by Canberra’s own imperialist interests, in the Middle East as well as in Asia and the South Pacific. Operations in its self-declared “strategic patch” remain dependent on Washington’s support.

The Australian ruling class is very conscious of the key role that the pseudo-lefts have played in providing a “humanitarian” and “left” cover for its neo-colonial operations. In 1999, the forces that now comprise Socialist Alliance and the Revolutionary Socialist Party organised “troops in” demonstrations as the former conservative Howard government was preparing to deploy military forces into East Timor to secure control over the territory’s oil and gas resources. As with Syria today, the bogus pretext was a purported humanitarian crisis confronting the Timorese people. An *Australian Financial Review* editorial hailed the protests at the time, declaring “This call to arms has, for the first time in decades, given broad legitimacy to the proposition that Australia should be able to intervene militarily outside its territory.”

Now the entire pseudo-left milieu is stepping forward to provide “left” credentials to the US-led campaign for regime change in Syria and the agenda of Australian imperialism. Oakley’s article was followed by the opening of “regroupment” unity discussions involving SAlt, Socialist Alliance and the Revolutionary Socialist Party, underscoring their unanimity on the promotion of imperialist war.

The reference in Oakley’s article to a “post-Tahrir world” points to Socialist Alternative’s response to the emergence of the Egyptian working class.

Like every great social struggle, the Egyptian revolution saw the intervention of different social classes, each with very different agendas. For key sections of the bourgeoisie—together with the petty-bourgeois elements that politically dominated the protests in Tahrir Square—the aim of the revolution was to secure for themselves an expanded role in the Egyptian state and to break the grip of the military and Mubarak family cronies over the economy.

But the intervention of the Egyptian working class—the largest and most powerful in the Arab world, with traditions of struggle going back more than a century—had a very different logic. The workers’ demands for an end to the neo-liberal capitalist agenda, which has seen the devastation of jobs and living standards could only be realised through the overthrow of the capitalist profit system—and the Egyptian state, including the military, that defends it—as part of the socialist revolution in the Middle East and internationally.

It was the powerful eruption within the factories and workplaces of Cairo, Alexandria, and other urban centres in January and February 2011, as well as in the strategically significant port regions that brought the country to standstill. In other words, the intervention of the working class was the most decisive factor in the overthrow of Mubarak.

US imperialism recognised the strikes and working class struggles as a deadly threat to its economic and strategic interests across the Middle East. Having supported Mubarak against the initial upsurge, the Obama administration began to seek new allies among the Egyptian ruling elites once it understood that the dictator would have to go. At the same time, Washington redoubled its efforts to prop up its dictatorial allies in the region, such as Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, while promoting so-called “democracy” movements in countries targeted for regime change, all in the name of spurring on the “Arab Spring.”

The US-NATO intervention in Libya formed a central component of the imperialist counteroffensive. Washington regarded Gaddafi’s removal and brutal murder as the means of installing a client government and of using the oil-rich state as a strategic beachhead for covert operations in neighbouring states, aimed above all against the working class.

Syria is the next target. The CIA is operating a command-and-control centre in Adana, Turkey, near Syria’s northern border, from where it is coordinating the influx of weapons, supplies, foreign fighters and money. US satellites, German warships and British facilities in Cyprus are relaying intelligence to the “rebels” to prepare their attacks on the Assad regime’s forces. At the same time, the Saudi and Qatari monarchies have funnelled hundreds of millions of dollars to the anti-Assad forces. The US, Britain, and France are now taking the next step of formally recognising the “rebel” leadership as the legitimate government of Syria and of directly arming the anti-Assad militias themselves.

The response of the pseudo-lefts is likewise driven by their deep-seated fear of and hostility to the intervention of the working class, and their determination to channel it back behind the political mechanisms of the bourgeois state. Their “leftism” is aimed, not at the overthrow of capitalism, but at carving out a niche for themselves in the political establishment, above all in the trade union and Labor apparatus.

Socialist Alternative’s class position is graphically revealed in its uncritical support for the Revolutionary Socialists (RS) in Egypt. This misnamed organisation has spent the past two and a half years lurching from one opportunist manoeuvre to the next, variously allying themselves with the military command, with the Muslim Brotherhood and with pro-US “liberals” such as Mohamed ElBaradei.

Socialist Alternative has promoted the RS through every twist and turn. On November 29 it published on its website an article on the push by Egyptian President Mohamed Mursi (who was enthusiastically backed by the Revolutionary Socialists in the elections earlier this year) for a new anti-democratic constitution. The article by Reham Maklad, Australian representative of the Egyptian Revolutionary Coalition Abroad and the International Tahrir Square Movement, complains that the proposed constitution “has created a rift in the nation.” She continues: “It [the constitution] is meant to create harmony between different segments of society, not be the cause and source of strife and division or the collapse of institutions that promote law and order. Thus by his decree Dr Morsi fails the nation and risks a loss of legitimacy on a more fundamental level than any legal or unconstitutional decision.”

Thus speaks the terrified petty-bourgeois intellectual, sounding the alarm that the resort by the Egyptian ruling class and its president to far-reaching anti-democratic measures threatens to provoke “strife”—i.e., a revolutionary upsurge by the working class and, horror of horrors, bring about the “collapse of institutions that promote law and order.”

Their fears have been compounded by the re-emergence of the working class not only in Egypt and North Africa, but across Europe, particularly in Greece. There, the SA’s counterparts have joined with SYRIZA to

block the development of a revolutionary struggle by the working class against the brutal austerity measures being imposed by the “troika”—the IMF, the European Union and the European Central Bank. On the one hand, SYRIZA seeks to win the support of workers by claiming to oppose the cuts, while on the other, insisting that Greece remain in the EU, the very body dictating austerity. SA’s leader Mick Armstrong has justified SYRIZA’s treacherous and duplicitous role on the basis that before any “revolutionary action” can be considered, the population must first go “through the process of testing out the option of radical change through parliamentary means.”

On Syria, Socialist Alternative has remained largely silent since the publication of Oakley’s article. Its web site has only republished two pieces, an interview with Gilbert Achcar, a member of the international Pabloite United Secretariat affiliated to the New Anticapitalist Party (NPA) and unofficial adviser to the anti-Assad militias, and an article by Yusef Khalil, first published by the US International Socialist Organization, that promoted the idea that the economic crisis in the US, and the strategic challenge posed by China, meant that Washington could no longer engage in militarist aggression. (See: “Syria and the pro-imperialist ‘leftists’ of the ISO”)

Nothing that has happened since August has caused SA to review the positions advanced in Oakley’s article. In fact, viewed against the background of events since then, its pro-imperialist outlook has become more deeply entrenched. The so-called “rebels” in Syria have carried out a spate of massacres and war crimes, the domination of Al Qaeda-connected sectarian militias among the anti-Assad forces has become uncontested, the CIA has stepped up its operations along the Syrian-Turkish border, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has handpicked a new, pro-US leadership for the “Syrian revolution”, and preparations for a military assault have continued apace. SA’s enthusiasm for the “revolutionaries” and the intrigues of imperialism remains unbounded.

This organisation and the rest of the pseudo-left represent nothing more than the “left” flank of the imperialist bourgeoisie and its political allies in the Gillard government. Class conscious workers should treat them accordingly.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact