

The Australian pseudo-left and the NSW public sector union

Peter Symonds
19 January 2013

The election of the so-called Progressive PSA (PPSA) faction to the leadership of the Public Sector Association (PSA) in New South Wales provides an instructive example of the politically insidious role of the various ex-left organisations in subordinating the working class to the trade unions, as the latter collaborate with governments and employers to slash jobs, wages and conditions.

The PSA election took place in October, amid growing anger among NSW public sector workers over the state Liberal government's announcement that it was going to cut up to 15,000 jobs and destroy hard-won working conditions and social programs. This came on top of decades of attacks on public sector jobs and conditions throughout the country.

The incumbent Labor Party-aligned PSA leadership, under state general secretary John Cahill, was widely despised after cutting deals with the former state Labor governments to ram through similar attacks. On October 8, as balloting for the poll began, Cahill cynically called a half day strike. Its purpose was to allow the membership to let off steam, while enabling the union leadership to posture as opponents of the Liberal government's measures.

Most of the union's 42,000 members took part in the strike, in defiance of an industrial court ban, and some 15,000 attended stopwork meetings across the state. This was one of the largest turnouts in many years, far bigger than the union, the government and the media had anticipated.

The PSA leadership, however, turned the meeting into a platform for top union officials to channel the anger of workers behind the re-election of the federal Labor government in 2013. Unions NSW state secretary Mark Lennon, for instance, warned that if Liberal opposition leader Tony Abbott were elected, he would follow "the same slash-and-burn conservative agenda" as Premier Barry O'Farrell in NSW.

The official motion followed the same line. It condemned the O'Farrell government, demanded a reversal of the cutbacks and called for "an ongoing political and industrial campaign." But, like the union officials themselves, the

motion remained completely silent on the role of the Gillard Labor government in driving the public sector cuts nationally and in all the states, both Labor and Liberal. Cahill blurted out the real purpose of the "campaign" when he called on union members to get the message about the Liberal cutbacks out to the public, "especially in marginal seats."

None of the "progressives" of the PPSA, including members of the ex-left groups such as Socialist Alternative and Socialist Alliance, challenged the PSA leaders or opposed the official motion, which was passed virtually unanimously.

The Cahill leadership never had the slightest intention of waging a campaign to mobilise public sector workers against the O'Farrell and Gillard governments. Its aim was to dupe PSA members into believing that the union was preparing for a fight and thus buy time to stitch up a deal with the government to impose the cuts to jobs and conditions. The PPSA "progressives" functioned as Cahill's accomplices in perpetrating this charade.

When the union election was finalised in early November, however, the PPSA became beneficiaries of the membership's hostility to the Cahill leadership. Cahill was ousted by PPSA candidate Anne Gardiner, a longstanding member of the Greens. And in a winner-take-all contest, the PPSA took the 45 seats on the central council.

The ex-lefts featured prominently on the PPSA ticket. Leon Parissi, a Workers Liberty member, ran for president and Lindsay Hawkins, a member of Socialist Alliance, for assistant general secretary. Both were narrowly defeated, but gained positions on the central council, along with other pseudo-lefts, including Kate Doherty from Socialist Alternative.

Aside from the PPSA's Gardiner as state secretary, the old Labor-aligned faction narrowly retained all other executive positions, including president, three vice-presidents and two assistant general secretaries, while the PPSA controlled the central council—the body to which the union executive is supposed to answer.

Nevertheless, Socialist Alternative and Socialist Alliance both hailed the PSA election result as a great triumph. For union members, it signalled nothing of the sort. It represented a continuation of the same program and policy that has led to the betrayal and defeat of every struggle waged by public sector workers and to the thousands of job cuts that have already taken place. But for the pseudo-lefts, it represented a significant step forward in their ongoing campaign to integrate themselves into the trade union apparatus, with all the associated benefits and privileges.

Unsurprisingly, the new leadership has seamlessly followed in the footsteps of the old one. In her first statement as PSA general secretary, the Greens' Gardiner made clear that she was open to talks with the government, declaring she was "absolutely confident that if we can properly explain the importance of the work we do to the government and the community then we will change attitudes and outcomes."

For her part, in an article published on November 14, Socialist Alternative member and PSA councillor Doherty urged the new leadership to get on with implementing the union's previous agenda. "It is crucial that we start work immediately on implementing the resolution passed by members at the 8 October stop work meeting," she declared. "Only the industrial strength of the union membership, not court cases and polite negotiations, can force O'Farrell back from his agenda of cuts."

This was an attempt, once again to perpetrate the fraud that the ideologically-driven Liberals are alone responsible for the program of job cuts being dictated by finance capital and directed by the Gillard government in Canberra. And, like the Cahill leadership, the PPSA will lead no genuine "industrial and political campaign" against the state Liberal government, because that would rapidly bring the union membership into conflict with the Labor government, something the pseudo-lefts seek to avoid and suppress at costs.

Already the new leadership has wound back the union's so-called industrial campaign. On December 4, it called off bans against the cuts to government schools, without gaining any concessions and after agreeing to a hearing with the Education Department before the Industrial Relations Commission (IRC). The decision to take this action was done anti-democratically, behind the backs of the membership. None of the pseudo-lefts on the PPSA-controlled state council has issued a word of opposition.

Another betrayal—a deal to implement all the key provisions of the NSW government's cuts—is being prepared in the IRC. To the extent that the union calls any further industrial action, it will be in order to let off more steam, as well as to utilise the membership in the cynical campaign to

get Gillard re-elected.

There are no fundamental differences between the PPSA and the Labor-aligned faction. As a Greens member, Gardiner belongs to the party responsible for propping up the minority Gillard government and voting for every one of its budget cut-backs to the federal public service. As for the ex-lefts, all of them supported Labor as the "lesser evil" in the 2010 federal election and will do so again in this year's poll.

Socialist Alternative's role is especially significant, since it takes great pains to present itself as "revolutionary" and "socialist." In a recent polemic with Socialist Alliance, leading Socialist Alternative member Mick Armstrong declared: "We don't accept shoddy compromises, we don't bow down to the powers-that-be, we don't play by their rules, we don't go along with the ALP and the Greens." In reality, that is exactly what they do. What Doherty and her fellow ex-lefts have established in the PPSA is precisely a cosy alliance with the ALP and the Greens.

The sham of Socialist Alternative's "revolutionary" phrase-mongering was exposed in the course of the 2011 Victorian nurses' dispute. Nurses, who had defied court orders and threats of massive fines to fight for their jobs and conditions, had become increasingly critical of the Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) leaders and their moves to cut a deal. The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) was the only organisation that fought to mobilise the membership against the union's sell-out. As the SEP gained a wider hearing, Socialist Alternative members stepped in as the ANF's industrial police force to physically grab WSWS leaflets and break up discussions between SEP supporters and nurses.

Public sector workers, like workers throughout the country and around the world, can only defend their interests by challenging the entire framework of the profit system. This requires the development of an independent political movement of the working class against all the old nationalist organisations, including the trade unions, the Labor Party and their ex-left accomplices. The SEP fights for the establishment of rank-and-file committees in every public sector workplace, which will turn to other sections of workers facing similar attacks, on the basis of a political struggle for a workers' government and socialist policies.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact