

The pseudo-lefts and the Australian election

Peter Symonds
6 September 2013

Just as the various pseudo-left organisations—Socialist Alternative, Socialist Alliance, the Socialist Party and Solidarity—have lined up behind the preparations of US imperialism for a criminal war on Syria, so they are again urging support in the Australia federal election for the mouthpieces of the corporate and financial elites—the Labor Party and the Greens.

The pseudo-lefts are recycling the worn-out lie that Labor and the Greens represent a “lesser evil” than the Liberal National Coalition. Their “socialist” criticisms of Labor and the Greens are designed to appeal to widespread anti-Labor sentiment among workers and young people, only to channel it back behind Labor and the official parliamentary set-up.

Socialist Alternative’s latest editorial, entitled “A choice beyond the no-choice election” and posted on its website on August 30, is a typical example. It begins with a stream of abuse against opposition leader Tony Abbott and his “filth-pot conservative mates” for covering up their plans to slash social spending—an echo of Labor’s own election campaign. The article acknowledges that Labor is “the party that made neoliberal economic policy ‘common sense’,” but nevertheless advocates a Labor vote, claiming that the Liberals will be “more receptive” than Labor to the demands of big business.

Another Socialist Alternative editorial “Labor paves the way for Abbott” on August 20, offers a variation on the theme. After bemoaning “Labor’s fawning over big business” it suggests that a vote for the Greens ahead of Labor “sends a message that a significant number reject Labor’s disgraceful shift to the right.”

The rest of the pseudo-left peddles the same fraud: vote Greens ahead of Labor in order to pressure the Labor Party to halt its rampage to the right, and preference both parties ahead of the Liberals.

Any mention, let alone review, of the record of the past six years of Labor government is taboo for these organisations, because it would demonstrate that the exact opposite has taken place. Amid the most severe crisis of global capitalism since the 1930s, the entire political establishment—including its pseudo-left wing—has lurched sharply to the right.

In the lead-up to the November 2007 election, these layers shamelessly promoted the Labor Party as a progressive alternative to the Coalition government of Prime Minister John Howard. They functioned as cheerleaders for the trade unions’ cynical campaign against Howard’s notorious WorkChoices industrial relations legislation, in order to convince workers that their working conditions would improve under a Kevin Rudd-led Labor government. At the same time, they promoted Labor’s phony anti-war credentials, along with its pledge to pull troops out of Iraq, as good coin.

In February 2007, Socialist Alternative leader Mick Armstrong enthused: “Indeed the differences between Labor and the Liberals are more substantial than they have been for over a decade.” By the time of the election Socialist Alternative was openly calling for a vote for Labor and the Greens to “Kick Howard out.”

As the Socialist Equality Party had consistently warned, Labor leader Kevin Rudd abandoned his “progressive” election rhetoric almost as soon as he took office. The Labor government pulled troops out of Iraq, only to

expand Australia’s military involvement in Afghanistan. It abolished Howard’s detested WorkChoices industrial legislation, only to implement, with the aid of the trade unions, the even more restrictive Fair Work Australia code that outlawed industrial action by workers. Rudd offered his much-publicised apology to the Stolen Generations, only to expand the Howard government’s military-police intervention against oppressed Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory. At the same time he maintained the essential features of Howard’s ruthless “border protection” regime, including the indefinite incarceration of refugees on Christmas Island.

In June 2010, Rudd was ousted in an inner-party coup, orchestrated by a handful of Labor and trade union powerbrokers with close connections to the US embassy, and replaced by Julia Gillard. While millions of ordinary working people were profoundly shocked by this anti-democratic act, the pseudo-lefts immediately sought to downplay its significance. The Socialist Alternative headlined its comment on the coup: “Meet the new boss, same as the old boss.”

The Socialist Alternative’s Armstrong welcomed Gillard as prime minister, declaring: “[A]t least in the short term, Gillard is likely to revive the confidence of disillusioned Labor supporters and be more capable of standing up to Abbott.” In its *Green Left Weekly*, Socialist Alliance expressed the same sentiment: “Many people will be breathing a sigh of relief that the worrying prospect of a Tony Abbott Liberal government seems less likely than it did before.”

In reality, the installation of Gillard signalled Labor’s further shift to the right, in response to new demands by Washington, and by the financial and corporate elite. Big business was insisting that the Rudd government end its stimulus measures; the major mining corporations were campaigning for a repeal of Rudd’s mining tax, while Washington regarded Rudd’s muted attempts to ease US-China tensions as an obstacle to the Obama administration’s increasingly aggressive and militarist policy towards China.

In the August 2010 election, just weeks after Rudd’s removal, the pseudo-lefts once again called for a vote for the Greens and Labor. So great, however, was the hostility in the working class to the coup, and to the Labor government’s reactionary record during the previous three years, that Gillard failed to secure a majority. The result was the first hung parliament in 70 years. After weeks of parliamentary manoeuvres and haggling, Gillard and the Greens closed a deal that enabled Labor to form a minority government, with ongoing support from the Greens.

During the next three years, Gillard and the Greens implemented every one of the demands of those responsible for installing her in office. Without any discussion or debate in the parliament, let alone a vote, and behind the backs of the Australian people, Gillard integrated Australia fully into the Obama administration’s war drive against China. The new Labor prime minister handed over the Australian parliament to Obama as a platform for his formal announcement of the US “pivot to Asia,” then signed an agreement to base US Marines in Darwin and open up other Australian military bases to US forces.

The majority of the pseudo-left responded with a deafening silence. For its part, Socialist Alternative openly dismissed any threat of a US war

against China, echoing the platitudes of the establishment media that the close economic integration of the two countries precluded the possibility of any conflict. In this it acted, not only as the mouthpiece of the Labor government, but of US imperialism itself. Two years later, in 2012, Socialist Alternative member Corey Oakley made absolutely explicit the class orientation of the pseudo-lefts when he denounced their former “knee-jerk anti-imperialism,” lining his organisation up behind the Obama administration’s preparations for war against Syria.

As soon as she was installed, Gillard personally assisted the mining giants to rewrite Rudd’s mining tax to ensure they would pay next to nothing. And in her first speech as prime minister she committed her government to budget cuts and further privatisations by completing the anti-working class, pro-market restructuring agenda initiated by the Hawke and Keating Labor governments from 1983 to 1996.

Backed by the Greens, the new minority Gillard government implemented a series of “reforms,” in education, health and disability, not to improve the living standards of the working class, but to open up profitable new avenues for business. Gillard accelerated the transformation of the most vulnerable sections of the population—including single parents and the unemployed—into a pool of cheap casual labour by reducing their already poverty-level benefits. Moreover, while the Greens publicly postured as defenders of the rights of refugees, they continued to back Gillard’s government as she personally presided over the revival and expansion of Howard’s brutal “Pacific Solution”, and the indefinite detention of asylum seekers on remote, impoverished, and disease-infested Pacific islands.

As resistance emerged in the working class to the escalating assault on jobs, wages, working conditions and social services, Gillard relied on the trade unions to confine and suppress it through the use of Labor’s Fair Work Australia (FWA) industrial legislation. In 2011, when Qantas took the unprecedented step of grounding the airline, Labor’s FWA banned all industrial action and, with the backing of the Labor government and the unions, imposed a regressive arbitrated settlement. The sell-out of Qantas workers by the unions set the stage for a series of lockouts and further attacks on jobs and conditions. When construction workers, Victorian nurses and NSW public sector workers defied the draconian laws, they were threatened with huge penalties. In every struggle, the pseudo-lefts acted as the political guard dogs for the trade unions, stifling criticism of the leadership and hailing their wretched betrayals as “victories.”

By the beginning of 2013, hostility within the working class towards both Gillard and her government had reached unprecedented proportions, threatening the Labor Party with electoral oblivion at the polls. Fearing the collapse of the Labor Party itself, and with it, the two party system, which has been the vital prop for bourgeois rule since Australian federation in 1901, the political and media establishment used the ongoing, seething internecine conflict within Labor’s ranks to orchestrate another leadership change. Rudd was chosen due to his status among millions of ordinary people as the victim of Gillard’s deeply unpopular, anti-democratic coup.

Yet again, acting as the faithful lapdogs of the powers-that-be, the pseudo-lefts welcomed Rudd’s return—just as they had welcomed his removal—as a means of reviving Labor’s fortunes. Socialist Alliance leader Peter Boyle described, in the *Green Left Weekly* on June 29, the collective “sigh of relief... it offered hope that Tony Abbott and his Liberal National coalition would not have the victory in the next election predicted in all opinion polls for many months.”

As always, Socialist Alternative was on hand to cover up the political implications for the working class and to justify its own accommodation to the latest leadership upheaval, by advising in its editorial of July 10 against “getting caught up in the maelstrom of electoral politics”.

Rudd’s return marked another rightward shift, expressed in his blatantly illegal policy of permanently deporting refugees to Papua New Guinea

and his declaration of a new “national competitiveness agenda” aimed at driving up productivity by slashing jobs and working conditions, and laying out the post-election agenda for whichever party wins government. Most significantly, having drawn the lesson from his removal, Rudd immediately aligned unconditionally with the Obama administration’s preparations for a criminal military assault on Syria.

In tomorrow’s election, Socialist Alternative continues to advocate a vote for the Greens and Labor. In its editorial last week, it declares it “a tragedy” that the Coalition looks “on track to win convincingly”, and offers the following explanation: “For so long our side has hesitated and wavered... [Labor] Left and union quiescence has allowed the ALP to shift unopposed to the right. The more it has shifted and the more passive the union movement has become, the more the conservatives have been able to get a hearing.”

For Socialist Alternative, “our side” means the union bureaucrats and Labor politicians, who, far from being passive and quiescent, have been actively implementing the Labor government’s pro-war, anti-working class, anti-democratic agenda, and suppressing any resistance to it within the working class.

The pseudo-left organisations speak for an affluent and complacent layer of the upper middle class, centred on the privileged union apparatuses, sections of academia, the welfare bureaucracy, “green” entrepreneurs, “radical” journalists and lawyers, and advocates of various forms of identity politics based on gender, sexual preference and race, that look to the Labor Party and the Greens to improve their life opportunities. For this social stratum, the “tragedy” of an incoming Coalition government lies in the possible downgrading of their business and career prospects.

In the 2013 election, the Socialist Equality Party is the only party that represents the interests of the working class. We have consistently fought for workers and young people to make a conscious political break from the Labor Party, the trade unions and their nationalist program and to begin to mobilise independently, in defence of their own class interests, on the basis of an internationalist and socialist perspective. It is precisely to prevent such a political development that all the efforts of the pseudo-lefts have been oriented.

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