

Australia: Socialist Alternative conference endorses US-led Syrian war and Syriza's betrayal in Greece

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The Socialist Alternative's annual conference in Melbourne late last month revealed the increasingly open support being extended by the pseudo-left to the predatory operations of the imperialist powers and its aspirations to be integrated into the framework of capitalist politics.

Like their counterparts internationally, Socialist Alternative responded to the global financial crisis of 2008, and the initial signs of the re-emergence of the working class into major social struggles, by junking any even nominal opposition to imperialist war. In August 2012, in response to the US-backed proxy wars in Syria and Libya, the organisation declared that it was necessary to dispense with "knee-jerk anti-imperialism" and that "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."

One of the conference's prominent panels was titled "Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Syria." The two speakers, Mick Armstrong, Socialist Alternative's leader, and Farah Kobaissy, a feminist academic from Lebanon, did not even mention the bombing campaign being conducted in Syria by the United States and its allies, including Australia. Their silence was not accidental—it expressed the fact that their position on Syria is indistinguishable from those of a host of pro-imperialist think-tanks, NGOs and pro-western media outlets.

Kobaissy stated that the Syrian civil war was a "revolutionary process" based on a fight for "freedom, dignity and democracy." She denounced the "traditional left" which, she said, had presented the "Syrian revolution" as a "US conspiracy." Armstrong said that the "barbaric totalitarian regime of Assad" was responsible for half a million deaths—a claim in line with the war propaganda emanating from the most hawkish sections of the US military and intelligence establishment. He also repeated the allegation—discredited by well-known investigative journalist, Seymour Hersh—that the Syrian government had used chemical weapons against civilians in 2013.

Both of the speakers sought to deny that the Syrian opposition is primarily composed of reactionary Islamist militias directly backed by the US and its allies in the Gulf States and Turkey. Armstrong ridiculed the suggestion that "somehow the Americans were backing the Islamists."

In fact, the imperialist sponsorship of the Syrian opposition is well-documented. In October 2014, US Vice-President Joseph Biden acknowledged that US allies in the Gulf were the principal supporters of Islamist forces, including Al Qaeda affiliates, in Syria. In October 2015, the Obama administration publicly announced that it had air-dropped 50 tonnes of weapons to "opposition fighters." The previous month, the US government acknowledged that a "rebel" group it sponsored had passed on military equipment to the Al-Nusra Front, which is affiliated to Al Qaeda.

In other words, Washington's war in Syria has seen it align with the

very forces it has claimed to be combating during the 15 years of the fraudulent "war on terror." In February 2016, in a demonstration of the utterly mercenary character of the so-called Syrian rebels, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that skirmishes had broken out near Aleppo between groups armed by the CIA and those backed by the Pentagon.

The political significance of Socialist Alternative's position emerged clearly when Armstrong condemned Russian President Vladimir Putin as a "murderous dictator" who, along with Assad, was responsible for "reducing the cities of Syria to total oblivion." While there is nothing progressive about Russia's intervention into Syria, it is primarily a response to a five-year long campaign by the US and the other major powers to remove the Putin regime's sole ally in the region.

Armstrong denounced Russia for halting the advances of the "military forces of the revolution," while Kobaissy declared that had the international "solidarity been greater" there "probably would have been a different result in Syria." The logic of their arguments is to agitate for an expansion of the US intervention to topple the Assad regime and to support direct confrontation with Russia. Last year, the organisation published an article hailing the downing of a Russian jet by Turkish forces near the Syrian border—a provocation that could have sparked a far-broader conflict—as a "victory for humanity."

Along with its support for imperialist war, the conference featured two panels dedicated to covering up the gross betrayal of the working class carried out by the Syriza government in Greece. Syriza, or the so-called "Coalition of the Radical Left," took office in January 2015, after winning elections by appealing to mass anti-austerity sentiment. In February, it signed a memorandum with the European financial authorities agreeing to impose deeper cuts to social spending than those implemented by the previous Pasok government. In July, the government called a referendum on the question of austerity. While more than 60 percent of the population voted against, Syriza responded by striking a deal with the European banks for yet another round of crippling cuts.

A statement by the International Committee of the Fourth International, published by the WSW on November 13, 2015, explained that Syriza's betrayal constituted "an immense strategic experience for the working class."

It stated, "Masses of people are being brought face-to-face with the bankruptcy and treachery of political parties that have dominated protest movements and what passed for left politics over an entire historical period... For decades, these parties palmed off their politics as radical or anti-capitalist, when they were, in fact, no such thing. Their first experience in government has exposed these pretensions as a fraud, providing political cover for pro-capitalist policies designed to advance the interests of the top 10 percent of society at the expense of working people."

The conference panels at “Marxism 2016” were aimed at suppressing the lessons of Syriza’s betrayal. Addressed by Armstrong and Colleen Bolger, a Socialist Alternative member who wrote on-the-spot tributes to Syriza immediately preceding the referendum, they endorsed the role of Socialist Alternative’s Greek co-thinkers, the DEA (International Workers Left), who served as an essential left cover for Syriza’s leadership throughout 2015.

Armstrong claimed that Socialist Alternative and the DEA had been critical of Syriza’s “reformist” leadership for an extended period. In fact, the day after Syriza formed government, Armstrong wrote an adulatory article titled “A stunning victory for the left in Greece,” which declared, “In probably the most important parliamentary elections in Europe since World War II, Greek workers have defied an incredible media scare campaign and voted solidly for the left wing anti-austerity party SYRIZA.”

Armstrong said that Syriza’s capitulation to the European banks in February was “one of the worst betrayals in history.” “That’s when the left had to break hard, and denounce Tsipras’ abject betrayal,” he declared. At the time, however, Armstrong published a thinly-veiled apologia for Syriza’s actions, entitled “Europe’s rulers trash democracy.” In it, he stated: “Unfortunately, rather than taking decisive measures to counter these threats [from the European financial authorities]... Syriza backtracked in the face of intimidation.”

Bolger declared that the DEA had been correct to participate in Syriza because it was an “organisation riven by debates.” “At each right-turn [by the Syriza leadership] it couldn’t just be imposed upon the membership without some resistance.” Armstrong likewise claimed that the DEA’s participation had been a “disciplined” and “independent” intervention into Syriza.

In reality, as a faction of Syriza’s “Left Platform,” the DEA served as a critical “left face” for the Syriza leadership, defending each of its cynical maneuvers. Prior to the Referendum, the Red Network, of which the DEA was a part, issued a statement which insisted that “Syriza is not (and will not easily be transformed into) an austerity party.” The statement was an unqualified defence of Syriza, right at the point that it was preparing its most monstrous betrayal, and was aimed at illegitimising any criticism of the government.

Both Armstrong and Bolger demonstrated the indifference of the pseudo-left to the implications of their political betrayals for the working class. Under conditions in which the Syriza government, which they supported, is now employing fascistic methods in the deportation of refugees and continuing to impose brutal austerity measures, Armstrong declared, “The scale of the demoralisation in Greece hasn’t been as bad as it might have been.” Both hailed the DEA’s role in the formation of a new opportunist outfit, “Popular Unity”—a party whose program and class character is indistinguishable from that of Syriza.

Above all, their speeches were directed against the WSW and the ICFI. Armstrong denounced those “sectarians” whom he characterised as saying, “we were saying it five years ago that they were going to betray, we were saying it four years ago, they ended up betraying, we’ve been proved right.” Armstrong made clear that the reason for his hostility to Marxist forewarnings of the role played by outfits such as Syriza is because Socialist Alternative and its co-thinkers are seeking to develop similar props internationally. “This is going to keep happening,” he declared, of Syriza type “broad left” formations.

Socialist Alternative’s aspiration, reflecting the interests of an affluent layer of the upper middle-class centred in academia, the public sector and the trade union bureaucracy, is to emulate the “Syriza model” by forging a new pro-capitalist organisation to fill the political vacuum opened up by the mass hostility to the Labor Party, the Greens, the Liberals and the entire political establishment.

That is why, in the wake of Syriza’s betrayal, the organisation has

hailed the recent rise of bourgeois politicians in the United States and Britain who are spouting “left” populist phraseology to head-off a developing radicalisation of the working class.

An article in Socialist Alternative’s publication last February openly promoted Bernie Sanders, who is contesting the Democratic Party primaries for the US presidential elections as a “democratic socialist,” in a bid to divert mounting anger back behind one of the two parties of American capitalism. The article baldly declared, “I’m feelin’ the Bern! If Australia were the 51st state in the Union, I’d vote for Bernie Sanders in the primaries and for president.” It went on to insist that the working class must chain itself to the sclerotic American political set-up, which is nakedly dominated by a criminal financial oligarchy, stating, “Sanders has shown that it *is* possible to mount a political challenge within and through the Democrats...”

Socialist Alternative has issued similar paeans to Jeremy Corbyn, the new leader of the Labour Party in Britain, who opened the way for the British government to launch a bombing campaign against Syria, and has demonstrated his obeisance to the British ruling elite at every opportunity over the past six months.

Socialist Alternative’s attempts to play a role in the establishment of a Syriza-type outfit have been hindered thus far by the absence of an Australian Corbyn or Sanders, and by the discredited character of the entire political set-up. The Labor Party, which Socialist Alternative has always proclaimed to be a “lesser evil” to the Liberals, is despised by millions of workers, while the Greens have made clear that they are willing to form a coalition government with either Labor or the Liberals, following this year’s federal elections.

Socialist Alternative, however, is playing a key role in covering up the implications of the unprecedented crisis of the Australian political establishment. Strikingly, the conference failed to feature any discussions on the deepening social and political crisis in the country. This was all the more extraordinary under conditions where Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has cleared the way for an early double dissolution election, in response to both mounting criticism from the financial elite for failing to carry through sufficiently sweeping austerity measures, and pressure from Washington to authorise incursions into Chinese-claimed territory in the South China Sea.

The conference maintained a complete silence on Australia’s integration into the US preparations for war against the China in the Asia-Pacific. Socialist Alternative has joined with the major parties and the corporate press in suppressing any discussion of the ongoing transformation of Australia into a virtual aircraft carrier for the US military, and of the catastrophic implications of the preparations of Washington and Canberra for a war between nuclear armed powers.

Likewise, the only reference to the social crisis facing the working class came in panels dedicated to promoting the very forces responsible for it—the thoroughly corporatised unions, which functioned as the industrial police force of the corporations and successive governments in implementing sweeping cuts to jobs, wages and working conditions over the past three decades.

The exposure of the pseudo-left, and its attempts to develop new political mechanisms to defend the moribund capitalist system, is a central component of the fight to build a new international anti-war movement of the Australian and international working class, based on a revolutionary socialist and internationalist program.



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