

Australia: Socialist Alternative conference promotes racial politics and the unions

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The Australian pseudo-left organisation, Socialist Alternative (SAIt), held a national conference late last month billed as a “gathering of left-wing young people, activists, unionists and academics.” The event, which featured a series of concurrent panels, was aggressively promoted among university students and youth.

Amid widespread hostility to the parliamentary establishment and a growing interest in socialism, the unstated purpose of the conference was to divert those looking for a political alternative behind a nationalist and pro-capitalist program, centred on racial identity politics and the promotion of the thoroughly corporatised trade unions.

Strikingly, the event featured no panels or discussions on the deepening political and economic crisis of Australian capitalism. And this, in the wake of the July federal election, which underscored the gulf between the sentiments of millions of workers and the agenda of the official political establishment. Some 26 percent of the electorate cast a ballot in the Senate for parties or candidates other than Labor, the Liberals or the Greens.

The election outcome is an unstable Liberal-National government with a threadbare one-seat majority. A string of commentaries has bemoaned the “ungovernable” character of the electorate, with retail billionaire Gerry Harvey declaring that a “dictatorship” is needed to impose the kind of austerity measures being demanded by the corporate elite.

Even more significantly, no mention was made at the SAIt conference of Australia’s central role in US war preparations against China. While the nature and extent of these preparations have been suppressed for years by the major parties, the corporate press and all the pseudo-left groups, including SAIt, they have erupted to the surface of political life in the wake of the election.

Prominent figures, including the now-departed Labor Senator Stephen Conroy, have called for Australian warships to provocatively intrude into waters around Chinese-claimed islets in the South China Sea, and goad Beijing into taking military action. Immediately after the election, US Vice-President Joseph Biden visited Australia, in a bid to pressure the Coalition government to act against China. This was simply ignored by the conference.

Nor did SAIt make any assessment of its own election perspective, which consisted of implicitly calling for a vote for Labor and the Greens. It declared that the key task was to “put the Liberals last.” It promoted Labor leader Bill Shorten and his fraudulent populist rhetoric, and covered up Labor’s record as Australian imperialism’s chief warmonger, responsible for committing troops to predatory wars abroad and attacking the social rights and conditions of workers and youth at home.

In other words, the conference, like SAIt’s intervention in the election, was aimed at preventing any understanding of the fundamental tasks facing the working class that stem from the systemic breakdown of world capitalism. Instead, it promotes various forms of identity politics, associated with race, gender and sexual orientation, to cut across and suppress growing opposition to social inequality, the escalating assault on democratic rights, and war.

According to the opening panel of the conference—the most widely advertised and attended—racism is the most urgent issue facing society today. The session’s chairperson, Sarah Garnham, declared that it was “prevalent throughout society” and that there were “daily news reports” of racist incidents. She introduced the panelists as “activists who dedicate a huge portion of their lives to fighting racism.”

Among the speakers was Khury Petersen-Smith, a representative of the US-based Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, which promotes the racistist nostrums of black nationalism in a bid to divert mass opposition within the working class to police killings back behind the Democratic Party.

The aim of BLM and similar groups in the US is precisely to suppress the class issues that drove millions of workers and especially young people into supporting the misnamed “socialist” Bernie Sanders in the Democratic primaries, because of his populist denunciations of the “billionaire class” and social inequality. Sanders’ inevitable capitulation to Hillary Clinton, the candidate representing the military-intelligence apparatus, has been accompanied by intense efforts, on the part of the Democratic Party apparatus itself, to promote race and gender as the pre-eminent divide in American society, not the unprecedented gap between rich and poor.

Petersen-Smith’s comments dovetailed with this reactionary campaign, depicting the daily police violence in working class neighbourhoods as a racial attack on “black America.” He cited the staggering number of police killings in the US, but was silent on the fact that the bulk of the victims are impoverished *white* workers and youth. BLM denies that police violence results from the massive growth of poverty and inequality and the build-up of the repressive apparatus of the capitalist state. He repeated BLM’s call for reparations to “black America” and a “massive investment in the economy to help black people,” which, as has already been demonstrated by decades of “affirmative action,” would serve only to enrich a thin layer of the black upper middle-class.

Another featured speaker was Rahaf Ahmed, a representative of the charity organisation, Islamic Relief Australia. Ahmed boasted that she had organised a “halal snack pack” event earlier in the month with Labor Party powerbroker Sam Dastyari, supposedly to counter the anti-Muslim rhetoric of the far right One Nation party, led by Pauline Hanson.

Dastyari and the Laborites have latched onto Hanson’s bigoted statements against Muslims in a cynical attempt to present themselves as champions of “inclusion” and “multiculturalism.” In reality, Labor has backed the 15-year “war on terror,” and the government/media-sponsored anti-Muslim campaign that has accompanied it, in order to justify Australian participation in the predatory US-led wars in the Middle East and to eviscerate the democratic rights of the entire working class.

The promotion of Ahmed underscores the class purpose of SAIt’s preoccupation with race—to develop relations with sections of the upper middle-class, including various ethnic community leaders, academics, and media-personalities, and through them, ingratiate itself with the political

establishment. Ahmed made no pretence of being socialist or even “left-wing.”

The main speaker, Liz Walsh, a leading SALT member, introduced another theme—the suggestion that broad layers of working people are either open or closet racists.

In her address, Walsh implied that the working class was responsible for the persecution of asylum-seekers in offshore detention centres—a policy that has been implemented by the entire political establishment in the face of widespread opposition from ordinary people. “The reality is that it’s workers and our cooperation that makes the detention system run ... Without our cooperation this system could not operate.” Her comments effectively shift the blame for the deplorable and criminal treatment of asylum seekers away from the Liberal, Labor and Greens parties responsible, and onto individual workers and youth. She went on to promote the oft-tested fraud that such treatment could be ended through protests and stunts.

Turning to One Nation’s electoral success, Walsh proposed physical confrontations with Hanson’s right-wing party. According to her, in the 1990s, when Hanson first entered the political arena, “the left” had “isolated her hard core support base from the broader mass base of soft racists.” But, it would be “much harder this time round” because of the “much more openly racist climate in Australia.” Again she blamed the working class: “When workers feel powerless and atomized they’re more open to racist politics. It’s easier to kick down than to kick up.”

But who has been responsible for the “atomization” of the working class? Here, Walsh is, predictably, silent. The reason is that responsibility lies with her friends in the trade unions, the very organisations that have collaborated with Labor and Liberal governments during the past three and a half decades to destroy jobs, wages and conditions.

Continuing her speech, Walsh declared, “In resisting racism we need to provide a political alternative—that means we have to build a militant trade union movement.”

On the contrary, the working class needs to mount a rebellion *against* the trade unions and establish its political independence from them, and from the nationalism, protectionism, racism and xenophobia that they advance, on the basis of the internationalist and socialist program advanced by the Socialist Equality Party. It is the unions that, in presiding over the destruction of manufacturing industry and literally millions of jobs, have created the social crisis upon which right-wing demagogues like Hanson prey.

SALT itself backed the unions’ campaign against the China-Australia Free Trade Agreement, a campaign that harked back to the “White Australia” racism upon which the trade unions and the Labor Party were founded, and to which Hanson subscribes.

It is not accidental that a number of unions have direct ties to figures who have a political affinity with Hanson. In the federal elections, the Construction Forestry Mining Energy Union (CFMEU)—which SALT specifically promotes—directly funded right-wing populists such as Glenn Lazarus. Indeed, in another panel discussion, Steph Price, SALT’s industrial editor, held up the CFMEU as a “bright spot” and a “union that hasn’t given up on being a union.”

Price’s contribution underscored, yet again, SALT’s role as a political apologist for these anti-working class organisations. She claimed that the unions were reluctant to strike because of punitive industrial relations laws. In fact, the unions supported the Gillard Labor government’s Fair Work legislation precisely so that they would have a lever to suppress any independent industrial or political action on the part of their members.

All the speakers declared that the central issue was a revival of “rank-and-file militancy.” They hailed SALT’s involvement in the strike at a Coles distribution warehouse in Melbourne as a case in point. The facts of the matter are that the strike was ended within just three days by the National Union of Workers, which signed a sell-out agreement with the

company.

SALT’s own article on the dispute noted that it would take two years for the Coles workers to achieve their demand for \$30 per hour, which was still short of their previous wage levels prior to pay cuts enforced a decade ago. The article apologized for the union’s rotten deal, citing court injunctions and lamely stating, “Overcoming these legal threats is a challenge that remains to be seriously tackled, for Polar Fresh workers and for the rest of the union movement.”

Above all, the conference panel on the unions was aimed at preventing workers from drawing any political lessons from the experiences of the past three decades. One speaker insisted that there was “no objective reason why the unions can’t fight back.” Another declared that the “problems” with the unions were “political, not structural.”

In reality, as the International Committee of the Fourth International and the Socialist Equality Party have explained, the unions have been transformed into industrial police agencies for the major corporations. Their transformation has been part of a broader collapse, over the past three decades, of all organisations based on a national program. Under conditions of the globalisation of production, where globally mobile capital is able to scour the world for the cheapest possible wages and conditions, any perspective of pressuring employers for limited reforms within the nation state framework has completely collapsed.

In the past years, Labor and the unions have taken their nationalist program to its logical conclusion, becoming the chief proponents of “international competitiveness” for their “own” corporate and financial elites. In every country, this process has resulted in a massive class gulf between the union bureaucracies, with their wealth and privileges, and the workers, whom they directly suppress.

SALT, along with the rest of the pseudo-left, articulates the interests of a layer of the upper middle-class—union bureaucrats, academics, senior public servants, medium-size business owners, professionals, welfare, religious and NGO organisation executives—whose privileges depend on the stability of capitalism. That is why it promotes the unions and the Labor Party, the very mechanisms that, throughout the 20th century, suppressed the revolutionary strivings of the working class against the profit system.

The only solution for workers and young people who are deeply hostile to war, to attacks on jobs, wages and conditions and to the ever-deepening assault on democratic rights, is to make a thorough political break with Labor, the trade unions and the entire official political setup, join the Socialist Equality and fight for the development of a unified revolutionary movement of the working class against capitalism, based on the principles and program of socialist internationalism.



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