

Australian pseudo-left forum promotes nationalism

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7 March 2017

A recent forum in Melbourne, featuring speakers from the pseudo-left parties Socialist Alternative and Socialist Alliance, provided an insight into their ongoing shift to the right in the wake of US President Donald Trump's election.

The event, entitled "The populist right and the anti-globalisation backlash: how should the left respond?" was organised by the New International Bookshop in February. While it was billed as a "debate among the left," any impartial observer could have been excused for mistaking it as a gathering of the economic nationalist right.

The New International Bookshop was established in 1994 following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the subsequent closure of the Stalinist Communist Party of Australia's International Bookshop in 1990. The shop is now run by various pseudo-left, anarchist and Stalinist groups that function as satellites orbiting the Labor Party, the Greens and the trade union bureaucracy.

The panel featured Louise O'Shea, a leading staff member of Socialist Alternative; Sue Bolton, a member of Socialist Alliance and a councillor in the Melbourne electorate of Moreland; Graham Dunkley, a retired former economist at Victoria University, and Aaron Gare, a professor of philosophy at Swinburne University.

The two academics Gare and Dunkley are overt nationalists. Dunkley has worked on policy development with the Australian Labor Party and trade unions for many years. His economic theory is based on opposition to globalisation from the standpoint of nationalist protectionism.

In the course of the meeting, Dunkley declared that opposition to globalisation and "neo-liberalism" had obliterated the distinction between the traditional right and left, and claimed that Marine Le Pen, the leader of France's neo-fascistic National Front, "is almost left of centre now." He denounced those who were "afraid to come out and say you have to have protection..." and insisted that, "immigration is a complicated thing because there is some case for border control." He called for a moratorium on trade agreements, and for curbing the flow of people and capital across national borders.

Gare, a longstanding post-modernist philosopher, opposes the scientific world outlook of Marxism and its political orientation to the working class. Drawing on the reactionary traditions of 20th century irrationalist philosophy, he wrote in his 1993 book, *Beyond European Civilisation: Marxism, Process, Philosophy and the Environment*, that his perspective of developing an environmentalist movement necessitated a new nationalist ideology, "which is required to recreate the sense of community and personal identity required for effective action, to overcome the rootlessness of people which is depriving them of the will to struggle for anything." In the course of his opening remarks at the forum, Gare complained that, "For some reason the left regard it as politically incorrect to invoke any kind of nationalism. That's one of the reasons why they're failing."

Neither Bolton of Socialist Alliance nor O'Shea of Socialist Alternative disagreed with or differentiated themselves in any way from these

positions—which are the provenance of the extreme right—despite having ample opportunity to do so. And this was no accident. Within this milieu, Gare's and Dunkley's positions are accepted as a legitimate contribution to "left" discourse. The aim of Bolton, O'Shea and their respective organisations is to subordinate the working class to one or another political wing of the Australian ruling elite under conditions of the deepening crisis of Australian and world capitalism and the growing drive toward world war.

Moreover, the Australian pseudo-left organisations have promoted the very political forces that have created the conditions for right-wing demagogues such as Trump to posture as an ally of the working class.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has explained, the election of Donald Trump in the United States, and the emergence of other far-right political tendencies including in Europe and Australia, have not been produced by a rightward shift in the working class. Trump's ability to win support by presenting himself as an anti-establishment outsider was most directly the result of the big business policies of the Obama administration over the previous eight years, continuing and accelerating those of successive Republican and Democratic governments during the past several decades. These have included presiding over an unprecedented transfer of wealth from the working class to the financial elite, expanding US imperialism's wars across the Middle East, and attacking the democratic rights of the American population.

Claims that the working class has shifted to the right are belied by the fact that millions of people, particularly the youth, supported the Democratic primary campaign of self-described "democratic socialist" Bernie Sanders, because of his calls for a "political revolution" against the "billionaire class." Sanders' role, however, was to direct the mass discontent in the working class behind the political dead-end of the Democratic Party and Hillary Clinton. Sanders played a significant role in ensuring that opposition to the Obama administration's policies and the status quo could be channelled behind Trump and his populist demagogic promises to "make America great again."

Sanders has since pledged to "work with" Trump and has promoted the latter's fraudulent claim that his "America First" nationalism, with which Sanders fundamentally agrees, can defend the interests of the American working class.

At the forum, Bolton and O'Shea unsurprisingly made no mention of Sanders, whom their parties have repeatedly supported. On February 29, 2016, for example, Socialist Alternative's *Redflag* website published an article by Daniel Lopez entitled, "Why I am feeling the Bern." Lopez gushed: "If Australia were the 51st state in the Union, I'd vote for Bernie Sanders in the primaries and for president."

Socialist Alternative is oriented to the trade union bureaucracy and to establishing positions of privilege inside the leaderships of the union apparatuses. The unions, which have functioned for the last three decades as an industrial police force for imposing cuts to workers' wages and conditions, are directly responsible for the conditions that have allowed

Trump and far-right demagogues in Australia, including Pauline Hanson's One Nation party, to win support among socially distressed and alienated layers of the working class. The unions are the most virulent promoters of economic nationalism, including calls for tariffs and bans on visas for immigrant workers, to cover up their own collusion with major corporations and businesses and to divide workers in Australia from their counterparts across Asia and internationally.

O'Shea made clear that Socialist Alternative's concern was to maintain the unions' straitjacket over the working class. National union membership rates have plummeted to somewhere between 15 and 17 percent, expressing the hostility and suspicion with which the vast majority of workers now view the trade unions. O'Shea blamed the decline in membership not on the corporatist program of the unions, but on the workers who have been so thoroughly betrayed by them. She declared the "main issue the left faces now is the extreme passivity of the working class," reflected in the "drop of working-class people out of their traditional organisations that give them some power over society."

O'Shea proceeded to underscore Socialist Alternative's role as the political defender of anti-working class organisations by raising the experience of Syriza in Greece, which came to power in January 2015 by exploiting mass anti-austerity sentiment in the working class. "In Greece, the left actually did win power," O'Shea asserted. "Because it didn't have a solid base in the grassroots of society, in the working class ... it wasn't able to mount, in terms of its political commitments, a challenge to Europe."

The claim that Syriza was "not able" to oppose the dictates of the European powers and the International Monetary Fund because it did not have a "solid base" in the working class is a lie aimed at whitewashing Syriza's historic betrayal and laying the blame for it on the working class.

Syriza was elected in January 2015 on the basis of its pledge to oppose the austerity dictates of the "troika"—the International Monetary Fund, European Union and European Central Bank—which had previously been imposed by both establishment parties, Pasok and New Democracy. At the time, Socialist Alternative hailed Syriza's election as a "direct challenge to the neoliberal agenda that has dominated western capitalism over the last 30 years."

Syriza rapidly junked its pre-election commitments and, within four weeks of being elected, imposed another austerity package on the working class. In an effort to blackmail the working class into accepting further devastating cuts to its conditions, Syriza leader Alexis Tsipiras called a referendum in June 2015 on whether to accept yet another austerity package, calculating that the threat of an economic catastrophe would ensure that the "yes" vote succeeded.

To Syriza's shock and horror, 61 percent of the Greek population voted against austerity. In other words, far from Syriza having no "solid base" in the working class for opposing austerity, millions of Greek workers delivered an unequivocal mandate to Syriza, demanding that it end the cuts.

Syriza responded by rejecting the "No" vote and imposing the troika's demands, regardless. Its response was determined, not by the failure of the working class to place enough pressure on Syriza's leader Tsipras, but by Syriza's commitment to its capitalist program and its constituency among affluent sections of the Greek middle class and capitalist elite, whose wealth was based upon Greece maintaining its membership in the European Union, by further impoverishing the Greek masses. Moreover, the "No" vote raised the spectre of a revolutionary mobilisation of the Greek working class, appealing to workers across Europe for support against austerity and war, which Syriza feared above all else.

Socialist Alternative's apologetics for the unions and for Syriza are aimed at preventing any understanding of the source of their betrayal, and any lessons being drawn, by the working class and youth in Australia. O'Shea declared that for the "left," getting elected "is not enough. You

should get elected at some point, but you've got to have basic organisations and networks built within the rank-and-file that can hold the leadership of any left representative to account." In other words, according to Socialist Alternative, workers in Australia must be confined to the bankrupt perspective of trying to pressure pro-capitalist parliamentary parties that fraudulently posture as "left-wing" or even socialist.

The discussion at the February forum took place under conditions of immense class antagonisms in Australia, and a growing geo-strategic and political crisis for the ruling elite which has only intensified since the US election. Trump's bellicose "America First" program has strengthened the efforts by the major European powers, notably Germany and France, to advance their own interests in opposition to Washington. Trump's dressing down of Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, during a 25-minute phone call on January 29, likewise prompted a series of appeals in the Australian corporate media for a more independent stance from the US in order to better prosecute the strategic and commercial interests of Australian capitalism.

Greens leader Richard Di Natale, representing these corporate interests, has called for a renegotiation of the US alliance, seeking to channel legitimate popular hostility to Trump's chauvinist and militarist agenda into Australian nationalism. Both Socialist Alternative and Socialist Alliance promoted the Greens at recent demonstrations against Trump's immigration ban. (See: "Greens and pseudo-lefts promote Australian nationalism at anti-Trump protests")

In an article published on Socialist Alternative's *Redflag* website, on the day that details of Trump's phone conversation with Turnbull were leaked, Tom Bramble put forward essentially the same position as the Greens, complaining that "while other world leaders have been doing their best to distance themselves from the right-wing lunatic now in charge of the White House, Australia's prime minister and his cabinet have been sucking up to Donald Trump..."

The character of the forum at the International Bookshop was yet another indication that the pseudo-left organisations will be more than prepared to support the Australian nationalist and economic protectionist agenda of the Greens, the trade unions and other right-wing tendencies, in order to block the development of a genuine socialist and internationalist movement in the working class.



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