

Australia: Socialist Alternative conference seeks new political trap for rising discontent

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Amid mounting social tensions, there are intense concerns within Australian ruling circles over the discredited character of the political establishment. With the corporate elite demanding ever-deeper austerity measures, and all the major parties signalling unwavering support for US-led wars around the globe, polls have shown a collapse of support for the entire parliamentary set-up.

In this context, a conference held by Socialist Alternative in Sydney last month signalled the pseudo-left organisation's preparations to try to channel popular opposition behind the thoroughly corporatised trade unions and the political establishment, especially Labor and the Greens.

There was no discussion at the conference about the unprecedented crisis afflicting the parliamentary system or the agenda of war, austerity and erosion of fundamental democratic rights supported by all the official parties.

Two conference sessions, however, underscored Socialist Alternative's efforts to spearhead a "left" regroupment, aimed at blocking the development of an independent movement of the working class based on a genuinely socialist and revolutionary perspective.

The organisation's attitude to Labor and the unions in Australia was made crystal clear by its enthusiastic support for British Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn.

Presenting a panel on Corbyn, Socialist Alternative student leader Sarah Garnham declared that Labour's result in the June 2017 British election, where it increased its share of the vote by almost 10 percent, represented a "rise of mass support for left politics."

Garnham hailed Labour's electoral program as the most "left-wing in decades" and declared that Corbyn had taken on the "whole establishment." In reality, since being elected Labour leader in 2015, Corbyn has continuously capitulated to the right-wing of his party.

Corbyn has provided tacit support for Britain's predatory bombing of Syria, backed austerity cuts by councils across the country, including those led by the Labour Party, and guaranteed his party's commitment to Britain's nuclear weapons program and its participation in NATO, the US-led militarist alliance.

All these regressive policies were carried over into Labour's election manifesto. His record demonstrates that Corbyn's claim to be a socialist is pure window-dressing, aimed at channeling growing anger behind the political establishment. Any British Labour government would dispense with his tepid reformist pledges and impose the dictates of the corporate elite.

Garnham nevertheless stated that "revolutionary socialists have to support Corbyn." She said one's attitude to his leadership of the Labour Party was the dividing line in British politics. In other words,

socialist opposition to Labour, a major party of British big business, is illegitimate.

Garnham's entire presentation was a whitewash of the record of a party that, over the course of more than a century, has played the central role in defending British capitalism, including by putting forward "left"-talking leaders in periods of deep crisis—leaders who have invariably betrayed their limited election promises. Yet Garnham insisted Labour could be forced to enact a social-reformist agenda, if sufficient pressure were applied "from below."

Mick Armstrong, Socialist Alternative's longstanding leader, identified the crucial role that the pseudo-left had to play in promoting this political fraud. He warned that workers who had experienced decades of betrayals by Labour would not be convinced by "a few slogans" from Corbyn. It was the task of "the left," he said, to "galvanise" workers behind Corbyn. In other words, "the left" must prop up this key mechanism of capitalism, against the widespread opposition that already exists within the working class.

Socialist Alternative's support for Syriza, the Greek Coalition of the Radical Left, makes clear that its promotion of Corbyn is not a product of naïveté or misunderstanding. Syriza won office in 2015 by pledging to end the crippling austerity measures enacted by previous governments. Within months, it had betrayed its election promises and has since imposed the deepest cuts to social spending in Europe.

Throughout 2015, Socialist Alternative promoted all the lies of the Syriza leadership. Even after Syriza began enforcing the austerity agenda demanded by the European financial elite, Socialist Alternative insisted there was no prospect of the party betraying.

At the conference, Garnham and other Socialist Alternative leaders shamelessly blamed the working class for Syriza's right-wing program, declaring workers had not placed sufficient pressure on the party's leadership. In reality, when the working class overwhelmingly rejected the austerity agenda at a referendum, the Syriza leadership ignored the result.

Like Syriza, Socialist Alternative is utterly hostile to the working class and speaks for layers of the affluent upper middle class. Its adulation of Corbyn and Syriza is a warning that it will play a similarly treacherous role in the political crisis unfolding in Australia.

Australian Labor leader Bill Shorten has already begun a campaign to falsely present Labor as a party of the "working class," including by demagogically denouncing big business and invoking widespread opposition to social inequality.

The working-class hostility to the British Labour Party, of which Armstrong warned, is replicated in Australia, where the Labor governments of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating implemented a sweeping pro-business agenda in the 1980s and early 1990s,

comparable to that imposed by Margaret Thatcher's Tory government in Britain.

The dismantling of education, healthcare and welfare, and a broader austerity agenda, were deepened dramatically by the Labor governments of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard, from 2007 to 2013. Shorten has adopted his present posture precisely in an attempt to overcome the deep hostility to Labor as a party of the corporate elite.

Socialist Alternative has already lined up behind this fraud. The organisation has hailed Sally McManus, the new secretary of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), and a prominent Labor Party member, who is waging a bogus campaign against inequality and corporate tax evasion, in conjunction with Shorten.

At a panel titled, "How to rebuild the union movement," Socialist Alternative signalled it would serve as a willing foot soldier for McManus and the ACTU. Speaker after speaker bemoaned the collapse in trade union membership, which fell to the lowest level in history this year, and declared they would seek to overcome it.

Kath Larkin, the panel's featured speaker, is a member of Socialist Alternative and the "women's officer" of the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU). She said the unions' crisis was a result of the mistakes of individual leaders, which would be reversed if officials adopted "militant" and "class struggle" politics.

This is a lie. McManus and Socialist Alternative are seeking to cover up the fact that the unions bear primary responsibility for the deepening social crisis afflicting the working class. For the past three decades, they have collaborated with successive governments and the corporate elite in the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs, and the gutting of wages and conditions.

The record of the RTBU is a glaring example. It has played a central role in the privatisation of public transport, aiding major corporations in their drive to reap a profit bonanza through the sell-off of state assets.

Last year, for instance, the RTBU "welcomed" a decision by the New South Wales (NSW) state government to provide a private company with a contract for all rail, bus and ferry services in Newcastle, a major regional centre. And the union pledged to assist a pro-business "restructure" of the NSW State Transit Authority, slated to eliminate 200 jobs.

Larkin denounced any suggestion that "structural changes" were responsible for the role played by the unions, insisting that the issue was merely the "incorrect politics" of their leaders.

In fact, underlying all the wretched pro-company deals and betrayals of the unions is their transformation into corporatised entities, hostile to the workers they falsely claim to represent.

The unions have always defended the profit system. But in an earlier period, when capitalism was regulated within the framework of the nation-state, they performed this function by placing pressure on employers and governments to grant limited social concessions to the working class.

The globalisation of production, beginning in the 1980s, shattered the objective basis for this national-reformist program. Now, the unions, taking their pro-capitalist and nationalist program to its logical conclusion, have become the chief proponents of ensuring the "international competitiveness" of their "own" national industries by imposing continuous cuts to jobs, wages and working conditions.

Hand-in-hand with this process has been the ever-greater enrichment of the union officialdom. Union leaders, earning six-figure salaries, sit on joint union-company management boards, overseeing superannuation funds that have billions of dollars in corporate

investments. In other words, union officials have a direct material interest in suppressing the struggles of the working class.

Socialist Alternative and the rest of the pseudo-left are increasingly integrating themselves into these organisations. Like the union leaders with whom it collaborates, Socialist Alternative is above all seeking to prevent the emergence of a revolutionary upsurge of the working class that would challenge the profit system, upon which their own privileges depend.

Amid escalating class tensions, there is a growing recognition in ruling circles that the political establishment requires new "left" safety valves to head off the working class struggles that are on the agenda. This was unmistakably indicated by an extraordinary article that appeared in the *Sydney Daily Telegraph* the day before Socialist Alternative's conference began.

The Murdoch-owned tabloid is synonymous with the gutter press. It specialises in vicious demonisations of refugees, welfare recipients and the unemployed, and the promotion of xenophobia and racism. Earlier this year, for instance, it spearheaded a filthy campaign, based on lies, to slander Muslim primary school children, under 12 years old, as "Islamic extremists."

The publication is the promoter of far-right and fascistic tendencies associated with the "Reclaim Australia" movement and has been prominent in McCarthyite-style witch-hunts of ostensibly left-wing academics and public figures, often deriding them as representatives of the "lunatic left."

But on August 18, the *Daily Telegraph* adopted a very different tone, publishing a fawning profile of Haley Pessin, the featured speaker at Socialist Alternative's conference.

It provided Pessin, a prominent member of the US organisation Black Lives Matter, with column space to expound a racist interpretation of American politics that aims to sow divisions in the working class, and legitimise the Democratic Party's attempts to ascribe Donald Trump's election victory to the "racism" of the white working class.

The article politely advised its readers that Pessin was "in Sydney to talk at the Socialism Conference at Sydney University this weekend," favourably advertising the conference among its readers. This unprecedented promotion of Socialist Alternative is not a sign that the *Daily Telegraph* is changing its political spots, but rather, that such fake left organisations perform an essential function in helping to preserve the capitalist order.



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