

Australia's "Lockdown to Zero" campaign: A pseudo-left trap to boost Labor and the unions

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The Australian pseudo-left Socialist Alternative (SAIt) organisation last month initiated the "Lockdown to Zero" campaign, purportedly to fight for safety measures and policies to eliminate the coronavirus. In reality, the new organization is a political trap, aimed at channeling widespread popular anger over the growing health and social crisis behind the very forces responsible, above all the Labor Party and the trade unions.

For much of the past 18 months, SAIt has shown only limited interest in the pandemic, treating the unprecedented global catastrophe at most as one issue among many. This dovetailed with the bogus and nationalist claims of the political establishment that Australia had escaped the worst of the COVID crisis. When it commented on previous outbreaks, SAIt repeatedly heaped praise on state Labor premiers for instituting lockdowns, presenting these belated, temporary, inadequate and localised measures by big-business politicians as great progress.

SAIt's newfound focus on the pandemic coincides with the greatest surge of the virus in Australia to date. Well over a thousand people a day are contracting the disease in New South Wales, an outbreak in Victoria is growing at a faster rate than any before and the hospital systems in both states are on the brink of collapse.

There is mass anger over the failure of governments to implement the necessary safety measures, their endangerment of workers, subordination of health to profit, and police-state campaigns in the working-class suburbs most heavily-affected. With COVID already surging out of control, the political and media establishment is insisting that the population must "learn to live with the virus," accept mass illness and death and submit to the lifting of all lockdown and safety measures within months.

Labor and the unions, to whom SAIt has always oriented, are widely discredited. Both have used the pandemic to take their decades-long role as the chief enforcers of the dictates of the corporate and financial elite to even greater heights. They have developed or supported government handouts to the corporations amounting to hundreds of billions of dollars, while enforcing a sweeping assault on jobs, wages and conditions and

seeking to suppress all opposition from the working-class.

The state and territory Labor premiers have devised every aspect of the official COVID response, joining with the federal Liberal-National Coalition government in an extra-constitutional national cabinet. This body rejected a strategy of eliminating COVID as too costly, when it was proposed by epidemiologists early in the pandemic, and in July signed a plan to fully reopen the economy and allow the unfettered spread of the virus.

Under these conditions, SAIt has formed "Lockdown to Zero" as part of a desperate attempt to bolster Labor and the unions and to divert the emerging struggles of workers behind them. The new entity's statements and its Facebook page make no mention of capitalism, even though the homicidal policies being pursued by governments, in Australia and internationally, flow directly from the brutal logic of the market and the dominance over society by a corporate and financial oligarchy.

Instead, the rejection of the necessary public health measures is presented solely as the product of the right-wing proclivities of the Liberal-Nationals.

The founding statement of "Lockdown to Zero" complains: "The NSW and Federal [Liberal-National] governments have consistently been driven not by the health concerns of the population, but by concerns for the 'economy,' ie, by the profits of their business backers and party donors." But no mention is made of the fact that Labor has pursued an identical policy.

The statement presents the plan to "reopen the economy," based on vaccination targets of 70 to 80 percent of the adult population, as the program solely of Prime Minister Scott Morrison and NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian, without mentioning that all of the Labor premiers have signed it, and federal Labor has explicitly endorsed it.

The purpose of these lies and obfuscations was made clear at the launch of "Lockdown to Zero" on August 20.

The main political speaker was Shannon Potter, who was billed as a "rank and file" Labor Party "activist." In fact, Potter is the convenor of the NSW Labor Party's misnamed "socialist left" faction and has previously served as the vice-president of

NSW Young Labor. In other words, she is a committed representative of a party of big business and the banks.

Potter's speech was an extended denunciation of Berejiklian and Morrison, who she said were pursuing policies in the interests of the "bosses." She made no reference to Labor's record during the COVID crisis. When Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members asked about Labor in the chat, she simply ignored the questions.

Instead, Potter declared, towards the conclusion of her remarks, that while there were "elements within the ALP who are strongly advocating for the neo-liberal, 'let it rip' rule, but there are also a lot of people advocating for elimination and for better support measures." No one was named of course.

Consequently, Potter said, one of the central tasks, was to write to Labor Party MPs and to encourage them to adopt a policy of "zero COVID." In fact, Labor, with the full support of all of its factions, has spearheaded "neo-liberal" policies for the past four decades, including throughout the pandemic.

Significantly SAlt members made no criticism of Potter's promotion of Labor, but instead effusively thanked her. Their speeches were virtually identical to Potter's, all centering on condemning Berejiklian and Morrison, and remaining mum on Labor.

They also exhorted attendees to join and build the unions, as the only means of enforcing workplace shutdowns to prevent the spread of COVID. But nothing was said about the role of the unions, in suppressing the class struggle for the past 40 years, including by ensuring that there were fewer strikes in 2020 than any year in recorded history.

Far from organising workplace shutdowns for safety, the unions have joined with the major employers to demand exemptions for "their" industries from safety restrictions and closures.

SEP members exposed the role of the unions in the chat and called for the formation of independent rank-and-file committees, controlled by workers themselves. A SAlt leader admitted was that "the union bureaucracies' response has been generally terrible," but absurdly insisted that workers had to "join their unions and fight within them for a more combative, class struggle approach."

In other words, workers must subordinate their struggle to corporatised and bureaucratic organisations that are enforcing conditions that threaten illness and death. Far from turning to a "class struggle approach" as a result of pressure from below, the unions are responding to mounting anger by forcing their members into workplaces that are incubators of the virus; ramming through sell-out enterprise agreements, and collaborating with governments as they "reopen the economy" in the interests of the corporations.

The bankruptcy of SAlt's promotion of Labor is just as evident. Since the launch of "Lockdown to Zero," Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews, previously promoted by SAlt as a proponent of lockdowns and safety measures, has openly

dispensed with any pretense of eliminating transmission in the current outbreak. Instead, in statements identical to NSW Liberal Premier Berejiklian, he is declaring that the population must "live with" COVID, and is insisting that vaccination rates alone are of importance, because they will enable the lifting of restrictions.

SAlt responded by bemoaning Andrews' "capitulation," ignoring the fact that he, like all of the state and federal leaders, has rejected an elimination strategy throughout the pandemic. A follow-up in SAlt's *RedFlag* pathetically appealed to the Queensland and Western Australian Labor premiers to "hold the line" on their state's border closures, again ignoring the fact that they have already signed up to the national cabinet's roadmap to lifting restrictions.

Speaking for affluent layers of the upper-middle-class, ensconced in the union bureaucracy and tied by a thousand threads to Labor, SAlt is hostile to the only viable perspective for eradicating COVID: the independent political mobilisation of the working class. This requires a break with the unions, which function as industrial police for governments and corporations, and with Labor, a big-business party.

As a last line of defence for Labor and the unions, SAlt is bitterly opposed to the Socialist Equality Party's call for the formation of new organisations of struggle, including independent rank-and-file committees. Such organisations are the only means by which workers can share information hidden by management and the unions, including on workplace infections, develop democratic discussion about the issues they face and the way forward, and coordinate industrial and political action to shut down production where it is not safe.

The development of rank-and-file committees needs to be linked to a new political perspective. The pandemic has demonstrated the bankruptcy of the capitalist system, and its incompatibility with the most basic interests of the working class, including to life itself. What is required is a socialist and internationalist program, aimed at uniting the struggles of workers around the world, and reorganising society on a global scale to meet social need, not private profit.



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