

The pseudo-left Victorian Socialists in the Australian elections: Parochialism and parliamentary cretinism

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Significant layers of workers and young people are looking for a political alternative to the right-wing, pro-business campaigns of all the official parties in the Australian federal election. Growing numbers are hostile to capitalism and interested in the fight for socialism.

They will find no way forward in the campaign of the Victorian Socialists. A front of the pseudo-left Socialist Alternative organisation, the Victorian Socialists are characterised by narrow parochialism. Their campaign, despite populist condemnations of the political establishment, is based on the same grubby parliamentary calculations that animate Labor, the Liberal-Nationals and the Greens.

The Socialist Equality Party is standing candidates to provide the working class with a genuine socialist alternative to capitalism and all of the political parties that defend it. The SEP has called for the largest possible vote for its candidates, as a demonstration of support for a revolutionary, socialist perspective.

At the same time, we have explained that the elections will resolve nothing for the working class. The overriding purpose of the SEP's campaign is to educate and mobilise workers and youth in the revolutionary struggle to abolish the profit system, in Australia and internationally, under conditions of a fundamental breakdown of world capitalism that poses the stark alternatives: socialism or barbarism.

The Victorian Socialists' campaign has nothing to do with the fight against capitalism and its political defenders. Instead, the Victorian Socialists are seeking to consolidate a position on the "left" flank of that very political establishment.

As the name implies, the Victorian Socialists are limited to the state of Victoria. In this election, they are standing 11 candidates for the House of Representatives, all in Melbourne, the state capital, along with a Victorian ticket for the Senate, the federal parliament's upper house.

Despite claiming branches in most major cities across the country, Socialist Alternative is not standing candidates anywhere outside Victoria. Under conditions where every significant issue—the looming danger of world war, the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and social inequality—demands an international solution, the Victorian Socialists do not even pretend to advance a program for workers throughout Australia, let alone the world.

To the extent that Socialist Alternative puts forward a

perspective, it is the same "lesser-evilmism" that it has advanced in every prior election. Like other pseudo-left organisations such as Socialist Alliance, Socialist Alternative insists on the need to "kick the Liberals out," effectively calling for a vote for Labor and the Greens—parties rooted in the defense of capitalism.

Moreover, this is under conditions where there is not a shred of difference between Labor and the Liberal-Nationals on any substantive question, from support for the US-led drive to war against China, to the need for sweeping austerity and pro-business restructuring. And the central thrust of the Greens campaign is to form a government with Labor.

In Victoria, the electoral activities of the Victorian Socialists represent a deepening of Socialist Alternative's orientation to the official parliamentary set-up. The party openly declares that its intervention in the federal election is to lay the basis for a campaign in the Victorian state election later this year.

In a statement, Socialist Alternative leader and Victorian Socialists candidate Jerome Small declared that previous ballots "show we're a real chance to achieve a significant breakthrough for the socialist left by getting a socialist elected to Victoria's upper house in the state election at the end of this year. The higher our vote in this federal election, the better placed we'll be to achieve this."

Having a candidate elected to the Victorian parliament is the holy grail and the sole *raison d'être* for the Victorian Socialists.

In another article, Small explained that Socialist Alternative had abstained from every election, prior to its establishment of the Victorian Socialists in early 2018. "When our forces were smaller, there was really no option but abstention from electoral campaigning (or hailing under-one-per-cent results as 'very credible')," he wrote.

With the prospect of a parliamentary seat, Small declares: "In Victoria, there is now another option—a vigorous, people-powered, explicitly socialist campaign on electoral terrain." He used the term "credible" no less than four times.

For Socialist Alternative and its front group, no less than Labor and the Greens, everything starts and ends with votes and the prospect of a comfortable seat in parliament. This is what Vladimir Lenin, the leader of the Russian Revolution, described as "parliamentary cretinism"—on steroids.

From its origins more than 150 years ago, the socialist

movement has insisted on the need to stand candidates in elections, to provide the working class with a revolutionary alternative and to raise its political consciousness.

As Karl Marx, the founder of scientific socialism, explained: “Even where there is no prospect of achieving their election, the workers must put up their own candidates to preserve their independence, to gauge their own strength and to bring their revolutionary position and party standpoint to public attention.”

Clearly, Marx underestimated the need for a “credible” campaign, with a “real chance” of landing a seat in a Victorian upper house electoral district in Melbourne, before standing in elections.

To further this aim, the Victorian Socialists are campaigning in a number of Melbourne areas, including its working-class northern and western suburbs. For years, Socialist Alternative did not conduct political work in these areas and exclusively oriented to layers of the inner-city upper middle-class and to students.

Now that it needs votes to secure that coveted seat in the Victorian upper house, Socialist Alternative has discovered the importance of campaigning in suburbs such as the devastated former manufacturing hub of Broadmeadows where the Ford factory was closed in 2016.

The opportunist orientation to these areas epitomizes the cynicism and opportunism of the Victorian Socialists’ entire election campaign. Their program includes a grab-bag of populist denunciations of inequality, the billionaires and the banks, and references to aspects of the social crisis, including in housing, education and healthcare.

But the Victorian Socialists do not explain that these issues cannot be solved under capitalism and that they pose the need for a revolutionary movement of the international working-class. Instead, the implication of their entire campaign is that the primary task is the election of “left-wing” candidates to parliament.

In keeping with this parochial and electoralist orientation, they say virtually nothing about the global crisis of capitalism, the emerging struggles of the international working class, or the mounting threat of world war.

Socialist Alternative is part of the pro-imperialist pseudo-left. Having backed the CIA-led regime-change operations in Libya and Syria for years, Socialist Alternative has this year sided with Washington’s far right proxy government in Ukraine against Russia in a conflict that threatens to escalate into a nuclear war.

A genuine socialist if elected to office, at the state or federal level, would use the position to lay bare the fraud of parliament as a fig-leaf for the rule of big business and the billionaires and all capitalist parties—the Liberal-National Coalition, Labor and the Greens—as their political servants.

The Victorian Socialists would do none of this. In a 2021 article, Socialist Alternative leader Corey Oakley wrote, “Imagine if we had had a socialist in the Victorian parliament this last year.”

Socialist Alternative would have had a “voice in the mainstream debate defending [Victorian state Labor Premier] Dan Andrews from all the lunatic attacks” from the right-wing. But it also would have “challeng[ed] him from the left.” In other words, the

Victorian Socialists would function as a loyal opposition to the state Labor government, promoting the dangerous illusion that it could be pressured to enact progressive policies.

The opposite has been the case. Since Oakley’s article was written, Andrews has spearheaded the national ‘let it rip’ COVID policies and has initiated sweeping attacks on teachers and other public sector workers, to pay for the state debt incurred largely by bailouts of big business over the past two years.

Socialist Alternative has already used its electoral front to deepen its relations with Labor and its affiliated trade unions. In 2018, for instance, the Labor-aligned Electrical Trades Union gave the Victorian Socialists \$50,000. Like the rest of the pseudo-left, Socialist Alternative functions as apologists for the trade unions, justifying their treacherous sell-outs on jobs, wages and conditions and insisting that workers have no option but to remain within them.

The Victorian Socialists serve a definite function, in seeking to channel workers and young people who are attracted to a socialist perspective, back behind the political establishment. When they were founded, the Victorian Socialists hailed as inspirations Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders, who used occasional socialist rhetoric to try and shore-up the British Labor Party and the US Democratic Party.

Workers and young people who want to fight for a genuine socialist perspective should reject the Victorian Socialists as a political trap. Instead, support the campaign of the Socialist Equality Party, which is urging workers to form rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade unions and all capitalist parties and has elaborated policies around which workers can fight for their social and democratic rights. The SEP, in conjunction with its sister parties internationally, is the only party that is building a revolutionary, socialist movement of the working class in Australia and around the world.

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