

Build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees!

Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
17 October 2022

From September 24 to 27, the Socialist Equality Party in Australia held its Sixth National Congress. After extensive discussion, the following resolution and three others were unanimously adopted. The resolutions “Build an international movement of the working class against imperialist war!” and “The COVID disaster and the political crisis of Australian capitalism” were published on October 9 and 13 respectively. The final resolution will be published this week.

1. The Socialist Equality Party (Australia) resolves to build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) as the new mass organisation of international working-class struggle.

2. The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) launched the IWA-RFC at its 2021 May Day International Online Rally. A statement, announcing the initiative, explained that the IWA-RFC would create a path for the working class to “coordinate its struggles in different factories, industries and countries in opposition to the ruling class and the corporatist unions.” The IWA-RFC would strive to unite the different contingents of the working class on a world scale, as the basis for a powerful counter-offensive against the capitalist program of austerity, war and dictatorship.

3. As part of this global struggle, the SEP commits to doing all that it can to assist workers in the development of rank-and-file committees in every factory, workplace and neighbourhood, independent of the capitalist political establishment and the unions. Such committees are democratic organisations of, by and for the working class, based upon a perspective of unyielding social struggle. They are the antithesis of the corrupt, bureaucratic apparatuses of suppression and betrayal that describe themselves as trade unions.

4. The establishment of the IWA-RFC is based upon, and aims to take forward, the resurgence of the international working class. On a world scale, workers are entering into struggle against inequality, an onslaught against jobs, wages and conditions, and the homicidal pandemic policies of the ruling elite. This movement found initial expression in a powerful series of global protests in 2018–2019. The onset of the pandemic in early 2020 brought this movement to a temporary halt. In the first half of 2022, it has re-emerged at a higher level, with major strikes by key sections of the working class in the US, Europe and throughout the world.

5. This renewed upsurge is being driven by global processes. Surging inflation, fuelled by massive government handouts to big business, the US-NATO proxy war against Ukraine, and the supply-chain disruptions caused by the “let it rip” COVID policies, threatens millions with starvation and is making life intolerable for billions more. The emerging strikes triggered by the surging cost of living and the suppression of wages are directed against four decades of deteriorating living and working conditions, a vast growth of social inequality and an unprecedented transfer of wealth from the working class to a parasitic financial and corporate elite.

6. The developing movement of the working class has an historic character. It is taking shape under conditions of the deepest crisis of world

capitalism in 80 years, which objectively poses the need for a revolutionary, socialist alternative.

7. These struggles, moreover, are beginning to give expression to the vast strengthening of the social and political power of the working class, associated with the globalisation of production. For the first time in history, the working class constitutes the majority of the world’s population, concentrated in increasingly large metropolises and megacities. Those billions of workers participate in a production process that is more internationally integrated than ever before. Moreover, the international connections and communication of the working class, stemming from the development of the internet and associated computer technologies, are more advanced than could have been imagined just decades ago.

8. The increasingly convulsive struggles of the working class, taking place amid an unprecedented pandemic, the outbreak of war in Europe and political and economic crisis everywhere, confirm the assessment made by the International Committee of the Fourth International that the 2020s is the decade of socialist revolution.

The re-emergence of the class struggle in Australia

9. The past two years have refuted all the nostrums of Australian exceptionalism, the ideology pioneered by the Labor Party and the trade unions to block the development of a socialist movement of the working class. The lies about a “lucky country,” always a fraud, have given way to the reality of mass COVID illness and death inflicted by the entire political establishment, a soaring cost of living and unbearable working conditions across a range of industries.

10. The class struggle has increasingly broken through the mechanisms of suppression maintained by the unions for the past 40 years and intensified during the pandemic. As is the case internationally, the most significant feature of these emerging movements is their development as an incipient rebellion of the working class against the trade unions, directly posing the need for new organisations of struggle and a new political perspective.

11. Around the world, the pandemic has dramatically intensified the social tensions underlying the resurgence of the class struggle. In Australia, when the COVID crisis began, a class chasm very rapidly opened up in the response to the virus. While the ruling elite and all its political representatives, including Labor and the unions, sought to delay and undermine the necessary health measures, because of the impact they would have on business activities, the working class moved into struggle to demand the protection of health and lives.

12. In the early stages of the pandemic, as former Prime Minister Scott Morrison, with the support of the Labor leaders, was proclaiming the need to “live alongside the virus,” teachers demanded the closure of the schools and a turn to online learning, health workers warned angrily against the danger of a collapse of the healthcare system, and principled epidemiologists insisted on the need for immediate safety measures. This incipient movement, which included spontaneous walkouts of warehouse

workers and rank-and-file meetings, emerged outside the framework of the unions and in opposition to them.

13. As a result of the demands of workers, and fearful of a social explosion, governments implemented limited safety measures. While these contained innumerable pro-business exemptions and were never directed toward the systematic elimination of the virus, the success of these measures proved that the pandemic can be ended. In December 2021, the National Cabinet, composed of all the Labor and Liberal-National government leaders, openly adopted a “let it rip” program, which has resulted in at least ten million infections, 11,000 deaths and hundreds of thousands or millions of cases of Long COVID.

14. The consequences of this program in rendering already difficult conditions impossible, as well as the soaring growth of inflation amid ongoing wage suppression, have triggered a new stage in the class struggle.

15. In December 2021, teachers in New South Wales (NSW), the most populous state in the country, carried out their first 24-hour strike, followed by two more in 2022. Nurses in the state have also walked off the job four times this year. Their actions have been carried out in defiance of bans by the NSW Industrial Relations Commission, and threats of major fines by the state Liberal-National government. Limited action has been taken by education and health workers in several other states. Both the education and health sectors are in meltdown as a consequence of the “let it rip” pandemic policies, following decades of cutbacks enforced by Labor and the unions. Stoppages also have been held by rail and bus workers, logistics staff, aged care workers and other sections of the working class.

16. To the extent that the unions have called strikes, it has been for fear of an eruption of the class struggle that would rapidly escape their control. The attitude of the union officialdom to the growing industrial movement was summed up by Health Services Union secretary Gerard Hayes, who said in April that he had been compelled to let health workers “off the leash.” The unions have sought to limit stoppages in duration, while dividing workers and promoting bankrupt appeals to the state and federal governments.

17. The Socialist Equality Party has been the sole political tendency that has waged a struggle against the trade union bureaucracy and its collaboration with the employers, the capitalist courts and governments, Labor and Liberal, to provide workers with a path forward.

18. The SEP is also the only party that has consistently fought against the undermining of public health and for a scientifically-grounded elimination policy. From the earliest stages of the pandemic, the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), a rank-and-file educators organisation initiated by the SEP, played a central role in the fight for closure of the schools, the turn to online learning, and the formation of independent rank-and-file safety and action committees. The CFPE has repeatedly broken a conspiracy of silence by governments, education departments and the unions, and exposed, with the assistance of teachers, parents and students, the vast spread of COVID in the reopened schools.

19. The Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee, formed under the guidance of the SEP, has fought for the unity of workers throughout the sector and more broadly, under conditions in which the hospitals have been repeatedly overwhelmed and the unions have done everything possible to isolate and defuse the emerging struggles. The committee has also played a key role in the defence of Dr David Berger, a principled zero-COVID advocate, who has been censured by the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Authority for opposing the criminal COVID policies of governments and the ruling elite.

20. The SEP has intervened aggressively in a series of significant industrial disputes. These included the lockout of Coles Smeaton Grange warehouse workers, from December 2020 to March 2021, where the party exposed a sell-out operation by company management and the United

Workers Union (UWU). Workers repeatedly voted down an UWU-endorsed enterprise agreement, aimed at shutting the facility and destroying all the 350 jobs. In the midst of the struggle, Coles Chief Operations Officer Matt Swindell denounced the SEP as “extremist anti-union socialists,” who were influencing workers to reject the sell-out. He condemned the SEP for “suggesting this wider agenda of taking on big business and the banks,” while praising the “responsible” bureaucrats of the UWU.

21. The Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee, established with the assistance of the SEP, actively fought against the Alternative Delivery Model, a sweeping restructure at Australia Post, introduced with the support of the trade unions. The committee held regular meetings and discussions with workers, warning that the union was paving the way for the full privatisation of the postal service, explaining the necessity for a unified struggle across the logistics sector and popularising rank-and-file committees.

22. The CFPE led the opposition to a regressive enterprise agreement, pushed by the Victorian branch of the Australian Education Union and the Victorian state Labor government. The CFPE’s statements, calling for a repudiation of the deal and the establishment of rank-and-file committees at all schools, were read by thousands of teachers. More than 800 joined a Facebook page created by the CFPE. It became a hub of opposition to the deal, which slashed wages and entrenched intolerable conditions. Despite the union’s concerted campaign of misinformation, almost 40 percent of teachers voted against the agreement.

23. The struggles that have emerged thus far are an anticipation of greater upheavals to come. The federal Labor government, with the full support of the unions, is embarking on a sweeping austerity offensive, aimed at forcing the working class to pay for the hundreds of billions of dollars provided to big business during the pandemic and unprecedented military spending for war.

24. Over the past 12 months, wages have grown by just 2.1 percent, compared with official inflation of 6.1 percent. The real cost of living is rising far more rapidly, while most union-brokered enterprise agreements are mandating pay increases of less than 3.5 percent per annum. Interest rate rises are threatening to tip millions of workers over the edge. Labor and the unions have held a tripartite conference with big business in September to plan a new stage of pro-business restructuring, aimed at destroying full-time jobs and the few working conditions that remain.

The bankruptcy of the unions and the need for rank-and-file committees

25. The Labor government and the unions are embarking on this program under conditions where their grip over the working class is breaking down. The 2022 federal election confirmed that Labor’s mass base in the working class no longer exists, with its vote at a record low. Union membership has plummeted to just 10 percent of the private sector workforce. Almost 95 percent of young workers are not and never have been in a union.

26. Over the past two years, the unions have taken their role as the industrial police force for governments and corporations to a new level, functioning as the linchpin of capitalist rule and the suppression of the class struggle. The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and its secretary, Sally McManus, responded to the outbreak of the pandemic by entering into a partnership with the federal Liberal-National Coalition government. She boasted that employers could get “whatever you want” by working with the unions, as the ACTU agreed to suspend stipulated conditions for millions of workers overnight. The ACTU helped to draw up JobKeeper, which transferred billions of dollars to the largest corporations.

27. Above all, the ACTU and its affiliates sought to prevent any independent working-class response to the pandemic, keeping strike activity in the first two quarters of 2020 to the lowest level in history. In

doing so, the unions facilitated the turn by governments to autocratic methods, including the creation of the National Cabinet and former Prime Minister Scott Morrison's secret assumption of five key ministerial portfolios. These powers, and the arrangements entered into by the unions with governments, had nothing to do with protecting the population. Instead, they were aimed at ensuring corporate profits, including through the continuous undermining of essential public health measures.

28. The unions kept workers on the job, amid the COVID dangers, and enforced the full return to work that was a key component of the lifting of all coronavirus safety measures. The unions have thus not only signed sell-out enterprise agreements but also signed death warrants for the workers they falsely claim to represent.

29. The role of the unions during the pandemic is not an aberration nor simply the result of the base motives of individual leaders. It is not possible, as is claimed by pseudo-left organisations, such as Socialist Alliance and Socialist Alternative, to "revive" the unions or compel them to adopt a "class struggle" perspective. Such assertions are directed against the development of a genuine rank-and-file movement and express the role of the upper middle class pseudo-left as the last line of defence for the union bureaucracy.

30. The unions, based upon the wage-labour relationship and rooted in the nation state, have always defended the capitalist profit system and opposed the fight for the socialist transformation of society. The globalisation of production marked a key turning point in the transformation of the unions into the open enforcers of corporate profit. The internationalisation of the labour process rendered all national strategies for the working class unviable. The unions responded by dispensing with their earlier program of seeking reforms within the national capitalist framework. Instead, they became the chief proponents of ensuring that national industries remained globally competitive through the continuous reduction of labour costs.

31. In Australia, this process was spearheaded by the accords struck between the ACTU and the Labor governments of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating in the 1980s and 1990s. These enabled the deregulation of the economy, privatisation and the destruction of whole sections of industry deemed insufficiently profitable. Labor and the unions fashioned a series of mechanisms for a continuous assault on wages and conditions, and laws that illegalised virtually all industrial action.

32. The emerging struggles of the working class pose the need for a frontal offensive on this whole framework for the suppression of the class struggle. As the ICFI anticipated in its 1988 world perspectives resolution, the movement of the working class must take the form of a rebellion against the old nationally-based organisations—in this country, Labor and the unions.

33. What is directly posed to the working class is the need for rank-and-file committees. They are not simply more militant trade unions, nor are they a substitute for the revolutionary party. The role of rank-and-file committees is to give organisational form and direction to the insurrectionary struggle of workers against the ACTU and the trade union officialdom, aimed at establishing the independent power and self-determination of the working class. As Leon Trotsky wrote, in *The Trade Unions in the Epoch of Imperialist Decay*, the party must "mobilise the masses, not only against the bourgeoisie, but also against the totalitarian regime within the trade unions themselves and against the leaders enforcing this regime."

34. Rank-and-file committees serve a number of critical functions in taking forward the fight for the independent interests of the working class. As democratic organs of working-class struggle, they are the vehicle for the dissemination of information, against the bureaucratic methods, lies, censorship and misinformation of the union bureaucracy. They strive to unite the various sections of workers, in opposition to the isolation imposed by the unions. As the foundation of a mass movement of the

working class, rank-and-file committees encompass workers with varying political views. However, the development of this movement will inevitably raise major theoretical and political issues. The SEP must strive to introduce the lessons of the historical experiences of the international working class into these struggles in order to raise the political and cultural level of the class as a whole and create conditions for the development of socialist consciousness.

The tasks of the SEP in the emerging struggles of the working class

35. The tasks of the SEP flow from the unprecedented crisis of world capitalism, the re-entry of the working class onto the historical stage and the new period of socialist revolution that has begun. This is a period in which the subjective factor, the active intervention of the party, assumes a decisive significance in the outcome of events.

36. Any conception that Australia is isolated from the global shocks and upheavals has been refuted over the past two years. The extremely rapid turn to extra-parliamentary forms of rule during the pandemic showed that the bourgeoisie is acutely aware that mass social upheavals are in the offing, in Australia no less than anywhere else. Its program of social counter-revolution, war and authoritarianism, and the ever-greater global crisis, guarantee that major social struggles will develop.

37. The SEP must actively intervene in these struggles, from the standpoint of building the party's political authority and fighting to lead them. The SEP must deepen its presence in the key sections of the working class, prior to the outbreak of mass struggles, and fight to provide the working class with the political and organisational tools needed to go forward.

38. In this struggle, the development of rank-and-file committees is crucial. As the SEP (US) explained at its 2022 Congress: "The SEP must forge a path for this movement, by popularising rank-and-file committees and concretely assisting workers in their establishment. The party as a whole, its branches and every member, must systematically, consciously and creatively fight to build rank-and-file committees as leadership bodies for democratic discussion and common action, as well as schools for making the experiences of different struggles the common property of the class as a whole. The party must strive to unite workers of all races, national backgrounds, ages and skill sets, ruthlessly opposing all efforts to divide workers through racism, identity politics and anti-immigrant chauvinism."

39. The SEP has identified and established a presence in key sections of the working class, including health, education, logistics and transport, which have been at the centre of the resurgent class struggle. This work must be developed, with the perspective of assisting workers to form rank-and-file committees in all hospitals, schools, major warehouses and transport depots. The SEP must also expand its work among manufacturing and other industrial workers.

40. A particular orientation must be made to the millions of workers in casual labour and the gig economy, as a consequence of the decades of destruction of full-time work by governments, the corporations and the unions. The International Youth and Students for Social Equality, the youth wing of the SEP, must play a key role in this work, as well as intervening among working-class youth, who have been denied any prospect of a decent future under capitalism.

41. The formulation of transitional demands is a crucial lever in the development of the independent movement of the working class. Such demands, relating to wages, conditions, workplace safety, education, healthcare, culture and all the issues confronting the working class, will assist the party in forging a connection with the developing struggles of the working class and providing them with a revolutionary political focus and direction.

42. In all its activities in the working class, the SEP must draw out the wider political implications of the struggles that workers are undertaking. The fight against the onslaught on jobs, wages and conditions, as well as

the broader social crisis, is not simply an industrial question that can be limited to a single workplace or industry. It poses the need for a broader political movement of the working class, directed against all the mechanisms of capitalism domination. The SEP will continuously raise the necessity for a political struggle against Labor, the trade unions and the Fair Work Australia industrial relations regime, all of which seek to suppress the class struggle and impose the dictates of finance capital.

43. In raising the level of discussion in the emerging rank-and-file movement, political exposures, detailing the role of the different political forces and elaborating an independent perspective for the working class, will be critical. These, together with transitional demands, will develop a bridge between the immediate issues confronting workers, and the objective necessity for a fight for workers' political power and socialism. In a period of revolutionary upheaval, a mass network of interconnected rank-and-file committees can and must serve as the foundation for the fight for the abolition of capitalism and the establishment of a workers' government based on a socialist program.

44. The IWA-RFC is the concrete form for the unification of the international working class. The SEP will fight to develop this unity, in a struggle for socialist internationalism against the nationalism and chauvinism promoted by Labor, the trade unions and the entire political establishment.

45. The SEP will promote critical initiatives associated with the IWA-RFC, such as the candidacy of Will Lehman for the presidency of the United Auto Workers union in the United States. Lehman's campaign is based on the perspective of mobilising workers independently and transferring power to the rank-and-file in a frontal offensive against the union bureaucracy. The SEP will also bring to workers the significance of the revolutionary struggles that are already beginning to develop internationally, such as the mass movement of the Sri Lankan working class. The SEP in Sri Lanka and its affiliated rank-and-file committees have called for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses, composed of rank-and-file representatives, as the basis for a fight for a workers' and peasants' government that would end the profit system.

46. The SEP must boldly fight to recruit among key sections of the working class. As Leon Trotsky explained in the founding document of the Fourth International, "the crisis of mankind is reduced to the crisis of the revolutionary leadership." The development of that leadership in the working class requires the recruitment and political education of workers as political fighters for a socialist and revolutionary alternative within the class as a whole. Such workers will play a decisive role in the formation of rank-and-file committees and the broader fight to build a mass socialist movement of the working class.



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