Australian pseudo-left Victorian Socialists in state election campaign—a pro-imperialist group sets sights on parliament

Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
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In the state election campaign for Victoria on November 26, the Victorian Socialists organisation is standing 38 candidates in both upper and lower house electorates, representing the largest election campaign ever mounted by the Australian pseudo-left. The obvious question is why?

Victorian Socialists was established in 2018 as an alliance of pseudo-left groups, but now functions as an electoral front for Socialist Alternative. For decades, the elements that today comprise Socialist Alternative abstained from electoral activity. Now however, abstentionism has given way to its opportunist mirror-image, parliamentary cretinism, i.e., the desperate attempt to secure seats in parliament on a reformist, non-socialist program.

The avowed purpose of the campaign is to get at least one Socialist Alternative member into the upper house of Victoria's parliament, aided by second or third preference votes from other parties, all of which are horse-trading preferences with bourgeois parties to secure seats.

This shift is a revealing response to the deepening crisis of the entire Australian political establishment. Support for the two capitalist ruling parties—Labor and the Liberal-Nationals—has fallen to historic lows.

In May's federal election, Anthony Albanese's Labor government scraped into office with a primary vote of less than 33 percent, Labor's lowest vote since 1934, only because the Liberal-National vote fell more. Labor's vote continued to drop in working-class areas—the result of decades of imposing the dictates of the corporate elite at the expense of the jobs and conditions of workers and their families.

There could be a similar or worse result on November 26, possibly producing a hung parliament, with neither Labor nor the Liberals able to form a majority government. Six months on from the Albanese government taking office, the conditions of life for millions of working-class people have worsened dramatically.

In Victoria and across the country, Labor and the unions are imposing continuing real wage cuts, as well as cuts to public hospital and health spending. Inflation is skyrocketing, mortgage interest rates are soaring, and the COVID-19 pandemic is resurging, fuelled by new variants resulting from Labor's "let it rip" policy of axing all safety measures.

For eight years, Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews has headed a pro-business government. Over the past year he has spearheaded the profit-driven nationwide junking of all COVID measures, causing thousands of preventable deaths, widespread infections among health workers, teachers, school students and aged care residents, and the further buckling of over-stretched and under-funded public hospitals.

From last December, Andrews used his previous popularly supported association with the 2020 lockdown in Melbourne, which eliminated local virus transmission, in order to work with then Liberal-National Prime Minister Scott Morrison and New South Wales Premier Dominic Perrottet to scrap nearly all pandemic safety measures.

Victoria has now registered nearly 6,000 deaths during the pandemic, the highest of any state, with the vast majority of these occurring this year, as a direct result of this "live with the virus" policy.

Moreover, the Labor Party is putrefied in Victoria. Labor's national executive seized control of the Victorian branch in 2020 for three years. That followed exposures of rampant "branch stacking," i.e., the fake inflation of membership figures by rival factional powerbrokers.

This corruption underscores the true character of the Labor Party as a state-financed and trade union-backed bureaucratic shell, operating on behalf of big business against the working class.

Growing working-class hostility toward Labor threatens an historic crisis of capitalist rule. The trade unions are having increasing difficulty in suppressing breakouts of struggles by workers against crushing inflation and a corporate offensive, which has included lockouts of workers.

The seething discontent saw a 40 percent vote by government school teachers in May against a deal struck by the government with the Australian Education Union that cut real wages and did nothing to alleviate intolerable workloads. The Committee for Public Education (CFPE), a rank-and-file teachers, parents and students group supported by the Socialist Equality Party, politically led the opposition to the sell-out.

Under these conditions, the Victorian Socialists is hoping to join the political establishment as its "left" flank, trying to prop up lingering illusions among workers and youth in the Labor Party and Greens, including by directing ballot preferences to these parties and promoting them as "lesser evil" alternatives to the Liberal Party.

In a 2021 article, the organisation's secretary Corey Oakley declared: "Imagine if we had had a socialist in the Victorian parliament this last year." Victorian Socialists would have had a "voice in the mainstream debate defending Dan Andrews from all the lunatic attacks" from right-wing elements, while claiming to challenge him "from the left."

In other words, Victorian Socialists would function as a loyal opposition to the state Labor government.

Another article—"What would a socialist do in parliament?"—written last month by Victorian Socialists candidate Colleen Bolger, likewise insisted that being elected would see a "socialist standpoint injected into contemporary debates" and would thereby "help shift politics to the left."

This is diametrically opposed to a genuine socialist, that is Marxist, perspective on the role of elected socialist representatives within bourgeois parliaments. Their function is not to promote illusions that these institutions can be pressured to the left but on the contrary to expose their function as a vehicle of the ruling class, develop socialist consciousness, and promote the understanding that the working class has to build new organisations to take political power.

The 1920 second congress of the Communist International, in a resolution drafted by Leon Trotsky, explained: "Activity in parliament

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consists primarily of revolutionary agitation from the parliamentary rostrum, unmasking opponents, and ideological unification of the masses, who, particularly in areas that lag behind, are still prejudiced by democratic illusions and look to the parliamentary rostrum. This work must be completely subordinate to the goals and tasks of the mass struggle outside parliament."

A political prop

Above all, Victorian Socialists work to divert the rising opposition within the working class from developing into a politically conscious movement against Labor and the unions, and the capitalist order they defend.

In this, the outfit is seeking to emulate other pseudo-left organisations internationally that it has previously promoted, including Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, the Democratic Socialists of America, and the Corbynite wing of the British Labour Party. These groups have all either taken office or propped up the discredited existing establishment parties, in order to suppress working-class resistance to the austerity dictates of the global financial markets.

Victorian Socialists, in particular, are the most zealous supporters of the trade union bureaucracy. In return they have received some union financing, including, when the organisation was founded, $50,000 from the Labor Party-affiliated Electrical Trades Union.

Victorian Socialists constantly defend the union apparatus against workers—actively collaborating to impose and cover up its betrayals. Most recently this was on display after the transnational giant Knauf locked out workers at its plasterboard plant in Port Melbourne. When the Construction Forestry, Mining, Maritime and Energy Union organised a return to work, accepting the company's below-inflation wage offer that the workers had previously voted down, Socialist Alternative trumpeted this as a "victory."

Victorian Socialists' election platform is utterly parochial, barely mentioning a single issue outside the state capital, Melbourne. Its policy proposals on various issues—housing, healthcare, education, public transport, etc.—amount to reformist thin gruel.

For example, Victorian Socialists propose not the expropriation of the banks but rather "a state-based Bank Super-Profits Tax on the biggest five banks operating in Victoria at 20 percent of annual profits" and the creation of a "State Bank of Victoria" that would supposedly "lend according to criteria encompassing the interests of society as a whole."

On every issue, the maintenance of the bourgeois state and capitalist property relations is taken as a given, regardless of the global economic crisis. Every significant issue confronting the working class demands an international solution—the danger of US imperialism triggering a third world war, the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, attacks on democratic rights and the danger of fascism. But Victorian Socialists do not even pretend to advance a program for workers globally.

A pro-imperialist record

It is especially revealing that the group says nothing about the nuclear war danger. The ruling elite in Washington is seeking to shore up its global hegemony through military force. In Ukraine, the US is fuelling a proxy war against Russia that threatens to escalate into nuclear conflict. At the same time, American forces are being prepared for war against China. Albanese's Labor government is committed to both offensives, placing the population on the frontline of a potential World War III.

Neither Ukraine nor China are mentioned in the Victorian Socialists policy platform. The only criticism of the US military alliance is framed in nationalist terms, with a section on "Militarism and Solidarity" beginning, "Australia faces no threat to its sovereignty."

Socialist Alternative has a long pro-imperialist record. It falsely labels both Russia and China as "imperialist," and through this designation lines up with Washington's aggression against both countries.

In 2012, Corey Oakley declared backing for US imperialist interventions, writing: "The time for 'knee-jerk anti-imperialism' has passed." In Ukraine, Socialist Alternative openly supports the pouring of US weaponry into the hands of the right-wing Zelensky government in the war against Russia, just as it agitated for the US assault on Syria.

Socialist Alternative's *Red Flag* declared in July: "Imperialist [i.e., Russia's] invasion cannot be defeated by pacifist methods. Western military supplies went some way to preventing a rapid Russian military victory and the imposition of a puppet government in the early stages of the war."

This pro-imperialist record underscores the role of Victorian Socialists. It represents not a left-wing opposition to the capitalist political establishment, but rather a vehicle for a privileged layer of the middle class, especially within sections of academia and the union apparatuses, to join it.

Workers and young people seeking a genuine alternative need to consider the history and program of the only party advancing an internationalist and socialist perspective, the Australian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the Socialist Equality Party.

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