

Australia: Pseudo-left “Victorian Socialists” seek to divert working-class discontent

Mike Head**6 December 2022**

The “Victorian Socialists” ran 38 candidates in the November 26 Victorian state election. It received sizeable votes in the working-class northern and western suburbs of Melbourne, the state capital.

This indicates that important sections of workers and youth are moving to the left, with a growing attraction to socialism and search for an alternative to Labor, Greens and the entire political establishment. The Victorian Socialists, however, do not represent such an alternative, but rather function as a crucial political safety valve for that very establishment.

In the 22 electorates in Melbourne’s north and west in which it stood candidates, VS’s “socialist” branding enabled it to pick up significant support. Overall, with all votes counted but yet to be finalised, electoral commission tallies show that VS received just over 47,600 primary votes or 5.4 percent of the total vote.

Across the 22 electorates, the VS vote ranged from 2.3 percent in Niddrie up to 9.3 percent or 3,770 votes in Footscray, which has large working class, immigrant communities. In Broadmeadows, in the heart of a now economically and socially devastated former hub of Australia’s car manufacturing industry, the VS obtained 8 percent.

In some individual booths, the figure was even higher. VS obtained 20 percent of votes cast at the Upfield booth in the Broadmeadows suburb of Dallas, and 23 percent of the votes at the Footscray Park booth.

By presenting itself as socialist, VS made a pitch to seething working-class discontent. At the same time, it promoted illusions that the Labor Party and its affiliated trade unions can be pressured into changing their decades-long record of imposing the requirements of the corporate elite at the expense of the jobs and conditions of workers and their families.

The results of the election shed further light on why VS, an electoral front for the Australian-based Socialist Alternative group, has devoted itself to such a task. Following on from the May 21 federal election, the Victorian outcome pointed to a deepening crisis of Australia’s political establishment produced by mounting working-class disillusionment and hostility.

While the state Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews retained office, it did so only because a precipitous decline in Labor’s vote in working-class electorates was offset by an even bigger implosion in middle-class support for the Liberal Party, the other main capitalist ruling party, whose primary vote plunged to 29 percent.

Labor’s primary vote fell by nearly 6 percentage points statewide, from around 43 percent in 2018 to 37 percent. But the swing against Labor was much greater in working-class areas—at least 9 percentage points in Melbourne’s northern and western suburbs.

For example, in Broadmeadows Labor received less than half of first

preference votes in what was once an electoral stronghold. That is a loss of around 20 percentage points since the last state election in 2018.

This marks an intensification of the breakup in support for Labor shown in May’s federal election. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese’s Labor government scraped into office with a primary vote of less than 33 percent, with its vote continuing to drop in working-class areas.

This discontent has grown over the past six months as the Albanese government, backed by all the union bureaucrats, has lifted virtually all remaining protective measures against the COVID-19 pandemic—causing widespread infections among workers—imposed wage “rises” far below the soaring cost of living, and stepped-up military spending as part of Canberra’s commitment to US war preparations against China.

Even more markedly than in the federal election, many workers sought to find left-wing alternatives to the main capitalist parties—Labor, Liberal and the Greens. The Greens, who volunteered to form a coalition government with Labor in Victoria if it lost its majority, barely increased their vote, mainly in gentrified inner-city seats and polled poorly in working-class areas, leaving their vote lower than a decade ago.

Far-right and libertarian outfits, like the Freedom Party, that opposed COVID-19 public health measures fared badly in working-class areas, despite extensive corporate media promotion. Moreover, the disintegration of the Liberal Party’s vote also reflected its alignment with these right-wing elements, against wide public concern over the Labor government’s dismantling of COVID measures.

VS focussed its campaign on winning a seat in the upper house, in the hope of being able to join the parliamentary establishment and collaborate with Labor government and its affiliated trade unions, while serving as loyal “left” critics.

In the weeks leading up to the election, Socialist Alternative urged its members and supporters to “help make history” by getting “a socialist into parliament.” It told voters its presence in parliament would encourage “left-wing activism.” But the VS secretary Corey Oakley blurted out its real orientation in a 2021 article.

“Imagine if we had had a socialist in the Victorian parliament this last year,” Oakley wrote. Victorian Socialists would have had a “voice in the mainstream debate defending Dan Andrews from all the lunatic attacks” from right-wing anti-lockdown elements, while claiming to challenge him “from the left.”

In fact, Andrews has since joined the “lunatic right” by spearheading the axing of all COVID-19 safety measures, in line with corporate demands, opening the way for a new wave of infection.

It seems that the VS failed to gain its much-coveted parliamentary

seat. That was not for want of trying. In particular, the group sought to achieve its goal with the help of preference vote-swapping deals with various capitalist outfits that were also seeking to exploit the disillusionment with Labor. This included the Greens, Legalise Cannabis, the Animal Justice Party and Reason.

Like similar pseudo-left fronts internationally, such as Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain and the Democratic Socialists of America, which have joined capitalist governments, Socialist Alternative represents the interests and aspirations of upper middle-class layers. They participate in capitalist parliaments, governments and union bureaucracies to help contain and suppress workers' resistance to the austerity and militarist agenda of the ruling classes.

A reformist and pro-imperialist record

While calling itself socialist, the VS election campaign had nothing to do with socialism. It combined a platform of meagre reformist proposals that would leave capitalist rule intact, with promotion of the unions and support for the US-NATO pouring of weaponry into Ukraine to conduct a proxy war against Russia.

To demonstrate that its policies were feasible and affordable within the framework of capitalism, the VS platform had a section called: "But how are you going to pay for it?"

Among the answers were very modest imposts on the wealthy, such as: "Apply a luxury properties tax on the top 1 percent of most valuable residences in Victoria, charged at 5 percent of their last sale price per year... At a conservative estimate, if they are worth on average \$10 million, this would raise \$12.5 billion per year."

The VS platform urged a bolstering of the union-controlled, anti-strike enterprise bargaining laws that Labor and the unions imposed and have policed since the 1990s. If elected, a VS parliamentarian would "ensure there is a current, union negotiated enterprise agreement in place wherever the government provides or funds a service."

That was in line with Socialist Alternative's ardent promotion of union sellouts. Most recently, it hailed a "victory" when the Construction Forestry, Mining, Maritime and Energy Union (CFMMEU) organised a return to work at Knauf's plasterboard plant in Port Melbourne, accepting the company's below-inflation wage offer that workers had previously voted down.

Socialist Alternative is utterly opposed to the fight, initiated by the Socialist Equality Party and its international sister parties, for the formation of genuine working-class organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees independent of the trade unions, and the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to coordinate and lead workers' struggles on a global scale.

Knowing that many workers and young people recall, and are deeply opposed to, the long record of US imperialist violence, invasion and installation of puppet regimes, from Vietnam and Chile to Afghanistan and Iraq, the VS platform attempted to whitewash Socialist Alternative's pro-imperialist record, including its support for the US interventions in Syria and Libya.

"Victorian Socialists oppose imperialism and neo-colonialism, and extend our solidarity to nations and peoples who suffer and resist oppression," the VS platform stated. In reality, Socialist Alternative falsely labels both Russia and China as "imperialist aggressors"—even more aggressive than the US. It thus lines up behind Washington's war drive against both countries, which is backed to the hilt by the Australian ruling class, the Albanese Labor government and the union bosses.

Socialist Alternative openly supports, and denounces left-wing

critics of, the pouring of US and NATO munitions into Ukraine. The US, backed by its allies including Australia, is using Ukrainians as cannon fodder in a war against Russia that is the precursor to war against China as it seeks to reassert its global hegemony.

This pro-imperialist record flows from Socialist Alternative's history. It evolved out of "state capitalist" tendencies that split from the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement, during and after World War II. In branding the Soviet Union as "state capitalist," they refused to defend the gains of the 1917 Russian Revolution—the nationalised property relations—despite the Soviet Union's degeneration under the Stalinist bureaucracy. The "state capitalists" repeatedly lined up with US imperialism against the Soviet Union, as Socialist Alternative does today in the US war against Russia in Ukraine.

All of those tendencies that broke with the Fourth International abandoned the essential struggle for the political independence of the working class from the capitalist class and all its political agencies in the working class—in Australia, primarily the Labor Party and the trade unions. Today Socialist Alternative functions as an unabashed defender of Labor and the unions as they impose the dictates of big business for the slashing of wages, conditions and essential services such as health and education.

Above all, Socialist Alternative is fundamentally opposed to the fight of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) for the development of the rising disaffection of workers into a politically conscious socialist movement of the working class against capitalism and the Labor and union bureaucracies.

Workers need real socialism, not the pro-capitalist fake "socialism" of the VS and other pseudo-left groups. This means the independent mobilisation of the working class in the fight for a workers' government to reorganise society from top to bottom along socialist lines to meet the pressing needs of the majority, not the profits of the super-wealthy few.

Workers and young people seeking a genuine alternative need to consider the history, principles and program of the only party advancing this internationalist and socialist perspective. That is the SEP, the Australian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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