

For an active boycott of Australian Labor's Voice referendum!

Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
7 September 2023

The Australian Labor government's October 14 referendum to entrench an indigenous institution, to be called the Voice, in the country's anti-democratic 1901 Constitution is a political sham.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) urges workers and youth to reject both the Yes and No cases presented by the ruling political establishment and calls for an active boycott campaign to oppose the referendum itself.

The entire referendum is anti-democratic. Neither camp represents the interests of the working class. Far from providing the population with a "say," as the government and the corporate media proclaim, the referendum seeks to box people into making a binary "choice" between the perspective of two rival camps of the ruling capitalist class, both of which are committed to the underlying program of war and austerity.

The same Labor government that is pushing the well-funded referendum for the Voice has stepped up its commitment to the US war against Russia in Ukraine and the accelerating US war drive against China that threatens nuclear war. No referendum was held on the AUKUS military pact with the US and Britain. No vote has been taken on the allocation of up to \$368 billion for nuclear-powered attack submarines and billions more for other military hardware. Any decision to go to war against China will be made in Washington and rubber stamped in Canberra behind the backs of people in both countries.

Moreover, neither the Yes nor the No campaigns in the Voice referendum has anything to do with improving the squalid conditions suffered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people stemming from the capitalist system brutally implanted by British imperialism beginning in 1788.

Instead, the referendum, backed by big business, seeks to revamp and bolster the capitalist state apparatus, which includes the Constitution, parliament itself and the armed forces. The state is the central mechanism of class rule by which the Australian capitalist class defends its private ownership of the means of production, prosecutes its imperialist interests abroad and suppresses the working class.

Although described as an advisory body, the Voice would have a central role in the government. It will potentially be involved in all the machinations of parliament and the government through its power to make "representations" on any issue, as proposed in the referendum question.

As such, the Voice would sit at the heart of the very apparatus of rule that has its roots in the British colonial administrations that cleared the land of indigenous tribes through massacres, poisonings, disease and the herding of survivors into squalid reserves. Today, the vast majority of indigenous workers and youth constitute one of the most oppressed sections of the working class.

Neither the Yes nor the No camp can explain why—despite all the promises of "reconciliation" and "consultation" made by successive Labor and Liberal-National governments over the past five decades—indigenous people, except for the privileged few, continue to suffer terrible health, housing, education and employment conditions and high incarceration rates.

The Voice will no more address the social disaster facing indigenous workers and youth than the previous supposedly "progressive" measures spearheaded by Labor governments, from the creation of land rights to the parliamentary apologies for the "Stolen Generations" and the "Close the Gap" program.

The ideological basis for the Voice is racial identity politics promoted by a tiny privileged layer of indigenous business operators, academics and media personalities fostered by Labor and the Coalition over decades. They blame "whites" for the dispossession and oppression of the black population, and shamelessly trade on the misery of the people they claim to represent to leverage their own influence and wealth.

The SEP insists that the fundamental division in society, including in the indigenous population, is class, not race. Capitalism, not "whites," was responsible for the destruction of tribal society, a form of primitive communism that was incompatible with private ownership of land. The appalling poverty facing many Aboriginal workers and youth is one of the sharpest expressions of the worsening conditions facing the working class as a whole.

The Albanese government confronts a deepening political crisis amid rising anger and discontent over the deepening cost-of-living, a housing and social crisis, huge Stage Three income tax cuts for the rich, and massive spending on war preparations. The Voice project is to weaken and divide the working class along racial lines while elevating the wealthy indigenous elite within the capitalist corridors of power.

The Voice campaign, and in this the Yes and the No camps are united, is to conceal the reactionary agenda of this government and the ruling class for war abroad and class war at home. As the Albanese government integrates Australia ever more closely into the US war machine, it is imposing the burden of this militarism and the worsening global economic crisis on working people through deepening attacks on living and working conditions.

The Socialist Equality Party's advocacy of an active boycott is to expose and oppose the whole referendum throughout the working class. This is not passive abstention but a form of collective action to advance the independent interests of the working class. That is essential to prepare for the momentous class struggles ahead—regardless of whether the referendum passes or fails—against the agenda of war and austerity.

Under conditions of compulsory voting, which makes it a crime to urge a boycott of the vote itself, we call on workers and youth to register their opposition by casting informal ballots and join our active boycott campaign in the lead-up to October 14, that goes well beyond the individual act of voting.

Media polls show support disintegrating for the Voice project, alongside rising disaffection with the Labor government and the whole political establishment. This indicates growing distrust in the Voice plan, not a lack of support for genuine measures to address the plight of indigenous people, nor support for right-wing racists. But this working-class opposition is, as yet, inchoate. It must be transformed into a politically

conscious movement against the capitalist order itself.

Decades of false and broken promises have proven that ending the atrocious situation facing the vast majority of indigenous people requires a unified fight by the working class, across racial and ethnic lines, to abolish the socio-economic order that has produced it. That means overturning the capitalist profit system as a whole, and replacing it with a socialist society, based on genuine social equality and democracy.

The Socialist Equality Party will use its campaign for an active boycott of the referendum not only to champion measures to address the social plight of indigenous people, but to fight for a socialist solution to the pressing issues that confront the working class as a whole—a catastrophic war, climate change and the relentless attack on social and democratic rights.

Labor's big business-backed Yes campaign

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's Labor government, joined by the Greens and other sections of the capitalist political establishment, including leading figures within the Liberal-National Coalition, is cynically trying to appeal to the widespread popular concern over the plight of indigenous people. It misleadingly claims that the Voice will lead to "better outcomes."

Bankrolled by the corporate elite to the tune of tens of millions of dollars, the Yes campaign has nothing to do with addressing the past crimes of Australian capitalism or the appalling conditions of indigenous people. These conditions will continue to deteriorate, along with those of the working class as a whole.

In fact, Albanese has repeatedly declared that the Voice project is about "saving money," not spending any extra money on much-needed programs for indigenous people.

Why has the Labor government, which barely scraped into office in May 2022, been so intent on proceeding with the Voice scheme? Why has Albanese, in particular, who heads Labor's so-called "Left" faction, been so central to promoting this proposal?

First, the Labor government is anxious to use the Voice referendum to put a progressive veneer on its pro-business and militarist agenda. It is seeking to exploit the wide public support for redressing the crimes of capitalism against indigenous people, while preparing for war and imposing austerity and real wage cuts on the working class.

The Albanese government is transforming Australia into a platform for war against China, with bases being upgraded and opened to US access from Cape York to Darwin, the Pilbara and the Cocos Islands in the Indian Ocean. That includes many indigenous lands, such as the Tiwi Islands, where large-scale war games were recently held.

Second, the Voice is intended to portray a fake supra-class "national unity" as it seeks to subordinate the working class to its war agenda and portray a more humane face for Australian capitalism. The Yes pamphlet claims a vote for the Voice will be "an act of unity that will bring Australians together," "celebrating and sharing 65,000 years of history" and "sending a powerful message to the world about Australia's unity."

Yet—and it shares this silence with the official No case—it says nothing about the past two centuries of state violence against the Aboriginal people since British colonisation and the establishment of Australian capitalism! The crimes of the Australian capitalist class against the indigenous population were matched by its predatory imperialist operations in the South Pacific, including the "blackbirding" or dragooning of South Sea islanders into forced labour in Australian plantations. Little wonder that the Albanese government wants to refashion the tarnished image of Australian imperialism as it tours the

region, cajoling and bullying governments into lining up with the US confrontation against China.

Third, Labor is brazenly acting on behalf of the corporate elite, most of which is heavily backing the Voice as a more institutional and reliable vehicle for pursuing mining and other corporate projects, which have often become embroiled in legal disputes with indigenous land claimants.

In the words of the Business Council of Australia, the Voice would "provide a formal and authoritative avenue for corporate Australia" to work with indigenous communities on business "programs and initiatives." Most of big business also has supported the Voice plan for similar political and ideological reasons to that of the Labor government.

The corporate giants endorsing the Yes campaign include Qantas, the big banks, Transurban and mining companies BHP, Rio Tinto and Newcrest. Retail conglomerate Wesfarmers, Rio Tinto and BHP have funded the campaign to the tune of \$2 million each. They have been joined by the trade union apparatuses—on which they depend to suppress workers' struggles—church leaders and the heads of other corporate interests, including the commercial sporting codes.

Fourth, the Voice is a means of further incorporating into the capitalist class and the state apparatus a wealthy indigenous layer.

According to the blueprint drawn up by indigenous Professors Marcia Langton and Tom Calma—all mention of which the government has buried—the Voice would be a thoroughly anti-democratic institution. It would be an unelected body chosen by acknowledged leaders and subject to character tests and vetting by an equally unelected ethics council.

Plus, the referendum proposal states explicitly that parliament—that is, the existing capitalist establishment—would have the final say on the "composition, functions, powers and procedures," as well as the funding, of the Voice.

By its very design, the Voice would substantially exclude the voices of the majority of indigenous people who live in the increasingly impoverished working-class suburbs of major cities and regional towns and squalid remote communities.

Among the many other lies in the Yes case, one of its biggest, is that "this idea came directly from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people." From the start, the Voice plan came from right-wing lawyer and anti-welfare advocate Noel Pearson and other hand-picked indigenous elite figures in 2015, working in partnership with the then Liberal-National government of Tony Abbott.

Together with Labor Party leader Bill Shorten at a gathering in Kirribilli House, the prime minister's official Sydney residence, they sought to put a new face on the pro-capitalist "national reconciliation" agenda launched in 1991 by the Keating Labor government.

Pearson and other Voice advocates openly present it as a vehicle for pushing indigenous people off welfare—which they deride as "sit-down money"—and into business ventures in the name of "economic empowerment." They represent a layer of emerging indigenous millionaires, profiting off government and corporate deals and contracts at the expense of indigenous workers and youth.

Far from being a movement from below, the Uluru "Statement from the Heart" process that subsequently adopted the Voice proposal in 2017 involved a series of unelected dialogues with handpicked members who chose delegates to the Uluru event. Just as it started, the Voice plan remains a bid to divert the ongoing anger and disaffection among ordinary indigenous people, and the rest of the working class, amid the greatest cuts to real wages and living conditions since World War II.

The official and "progressive" No campaigns

The Socialist Equality Party opposes both the official and the supposed “progressive” No campaigns.

The official No case, supported by the Liberal-National leadership and various business interests and right-wing factions, claims that the Voice “presents a real risk to our system of government.” It would permanently alter the Constitution—which has served the ruling class well since 1901—with “unknown consequences.”

The No pamphlet declares that the Voice would cause official decision-making delays, trigger legal challenges and lead to government “dysfunction.” This expresses fears that the operations of the Voice, despite strict parliamentary supervision, could cause or complicate constitutional conflicts under conditions of intensifying working-class alienation from, and opposition to, the whole official political setup.

The No document also raises concerns that the Voice would cut across the position of established indigenous bodies in regional and remote areas. That primarily reflects the interests of sections of the corporate elite, including Aboriginal business people, such as No campaign spokesperson Warren Mundine, who rest on existing lucrative mining, pastoral and other local deals with native title landholders.

A prominent No argument is that the Voice “will not unite us, it will divide us by race.” This is cynically couched in terms of “unity.” Coming from Coalition leader Peter Dutton and other forces pitching to a right-wing constituency, this is a clear dog whistle to racist elements. It goes along with false claims that the Voice would create special privileges for all indigenous people. In fact, the only beneficiaries would be the narrow elite indigenous layer.

Some elements, such as Senator Pauline Hanson’s One Nation party and similar elements, are running rabid scare campaigns, raising the spectre of indigenous secession or domination. Far-right and racist forces are a small minority in the population but they could gain traction on the Voice only because the proposal itself is based on reactionary identity politics that seeks to define people along racial lines.

The Socialist Equality Party, the Australian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), opposes the Voice from a socialist, working-class and internationalist standpoint.

On this basis we stand in complete opposition to the so-called Black sovereignty or “progressive No” campaign headed by Senator Lidia Thorpe and others. There is nothing progressive about their agitation. It is exploiting the widespread discontent among ordinary indigenous people with the elitist Voice scheme, which it denounces as “toothless,” only to channel the alienation in the direction of reactionary black nationalism, which seeks greater political and economic power within the framework of Australian capitalism, via a so-called treaty.

This represents the interests of an even more grasping layer of the indigenous elite that aspires to acquire the kind of wealth accumulated by the Māori business empires in New Zealand. There, the Treaty of Waitangi process had led in recent decades to the creation of multi-billion dollar corporations, while Māori and Pacific Islander households remain the most oppressed layer of that country’s working class.

No support for “recognition” in the anti-democratic Australian Constitution

The Socialist Equality Party equally opposes all proposals, such as that of Dutton and other establishment figures, past and present, for “symbolic recognition” of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the 1901 Australian Constitution.

The very conception of “recognising” indigenous people in the constitution, touted by every administration since the Howard Liberal-

National government in 2007, is a reactionary fraud, based on “reconciliation” with Australian capitalism and its entire anti-democratic state structure.

The Australian Constitution upholds capitalist property rights and contains no bill of rights or any other protection of basic social or democratic rights, not even the right to vote. Moreover, it contains potentially dictatorial powers. In 1901, the so-called Founding Fathers of Federation deliberately preserved the prerogative and “reserve” powers of the Crown, represented by the governor-general, including to dismiss governments, declare war, mobilise the armed forces and take control of the country in periods of political crisis.

They drafted this constitution to legitimise and enforce the establishment of Australian capitalism, at the expense of the emergent working class and its most vulnerable members, the dispossessed and decimated Aboriginal population.

Lawyers, politicians and media pundits claim that “constitutional conventions” prevent the vice-regal powers from being used dictatorially. Yet in 1975, Governor-General Sir John Kerr ousted the Whitlam Labor government and placed the army on alert after that government failed to contain a movement of the working class amid a global period of immense upheaval and class struggles.

Such is the “birth certificate” of the nation so hailed by both the Yes and No camps in the Voice referendum.

The pseudo-left backers of Labor and Yes

The more the media polls have indicated that support is falling for both the Voice and the Labor government, the more the pseudo-left groups, such as Socialist Alternative, Socialist Alliance and Solidarity, have swung behind the government and its Yes campaign.

They have shelved their previous criticisms of the Voice proposals, which were along the racist lines of the black nationalist “progressive No” stance. They claim it is essential to align with the Labor government in order to defeat far-right elements.

Socialist Alternative’s *Red Flag*, for example, asserts that a defeat for the Yes campaign “would be a significant victory for the conservative right and its racist campaign against the Voice.”

This is political poison that turns reality on its head. It equates the legitimate working-class distrust in the Voice plan with racism, effectively blaming workers for opposing the Labor government’s thoroughly right-wing pro-corporate agenda. It is similar to the position that all the pseudo-left outfits put in elections. They peddle “lesser-evilism,” the assertion that workers and youth must support Labor and/or the Greens, to stop the Liberal-National Coalition from taking office.

Their Yes campaign seeks to divert workers and youth into the dead-end of parliamentary politics and block an independent political movement of the working class against the capitalist system that Labor and the Greens defend to the hilt. These fake “left” formations also insist that workers must support the trade unions that police the big-business program of the Labor government. It is precisely the suppression of workers’ struggles against Labor’s regressive social agenda that opens the way for far-right forces to exploit the intensifying discontent over the worsening social crisis.

The alignment of these groups behind the Voice and the Labor government underscores their defence of the capitalist state. They have nothing to do with socialism. Rather, they are based on affluent sections of the upper-middle class, promoting identity politics to suppress the working class, block the fight for socialism and advance their own privileged careers in the political establishment and the union apparatuses.

For an active boycott

The Socialist Equality Party calls on workers, students and youth to take up the fight for an active boycott, as the best means to advance the independent interests of the working class in a referendum that has been designed to suppress and bury those interests. An active boycott does not consist simply of an individual informal vote on October 14, but a campaign throughout the working class and among youth. Within the framework of the anti-democratic referendum, this tactic enables workers to differentiate from the divisive racist politics advanced by both the Yes and No campaigns.

Above all, the tactic of an active boycott raises the strategic issues confronting the working class. Chief among them is the burning need to develop an independent political movement of the working class against every faction of the political establishment, all of which are committed to the ruling elite's program of war, austerity and an escalating assault on democratic rights.

In relation to the concrete issues raised by the referendum, an independent line for the working class must begin with an understanding that the oppression of Aboriginal people is a product of capitalism—the private ownership of society's resources by a tiny financial elite. It cannot be resolved by augmenting, altering or reforming the existing state structures which are dedicated to defending that private ownership. This oppression, moreover, is a class question. For more than a century, the ruling class offensive against Aboriginal workers and youth has served as a spearhead for broader attacks on the working class as a whole.

The struggle to end the oppression of Aborigines, and the struggle for the social rights of the working class, are one and the same. They require a unified movement of the working class, regardless of race, gender and sexuality, against the capitalist profit system itself. This means the fight for socialism, placing society's resources under public ownership and democratic workers' control, thereby guaranteeing the right of all to free education, health care and all the fundamental necessities of modern life.

The referendum is unfolding amid a global breakdown of capitalism, which threatens climate catastrophe, vast social regression, dictatorship and a nuclear world war. But the other side of this process is a resurgence of the class struggle on an international scale after decades of its suppression. It is to this global movement that workers must turn, in the fight for an internationalist perspective directed against the outmoded capitalist nation-state system, which has become a barrier to the further development of humanity under conditions of a global economy and society.

What is posed most sharply is the development of a leadership in the working class, rooted in the lessons of history and advancing the revolutionary perspective that workers objectively require. That leadership is the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world party of socialist revolution, of which the SEP is the Australian section. We urge workers and young people looking for a way forward to study our program, discuss these fundamental issues and join the SEP to take up the fight for a socialist future.

Authorised by Cheryl Crisp for the Socialist Equality Party, Suite 906, 185 Elizabeth Street, Sydney, NSW, 2000.





To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact