

Pseudo-left Socialist Alternative promotes Australian Labor government's Voice referendum

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The pseudo-left Socialist Alternative organisation is functioning as one of the most aggressive promoters of the Australian Labor government's racist and pro-business proposal to create an indigenous Voice to parliament.

In the lead up to a referendum on October 14 to enshrine the Voice in the Constitution, Socialist Alternative's parochial, state-based electoral front, the Victorian Socialists, have formally endorsed the initiative. Simultaneously with that statement, Socialist Alternative's *Red Flag* website published a lengthy article last week insisting that the "left" must do everything it can to ensure a "yes" vote in the referendum.

This is the culmination of a protracted evolution of Socialist Alternative's line.

A month after the installation of the Labor government in May, 2022, and Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's election-night pledge to hold a referendum on the Voice, *Red Flag* published an article headlined: "A voice to parliament will do little for Indigenous justice."

The article rejected claims that the Voice would "do much to combat Indigenous oppression—let alone begin a process of ending it." It noted "numerous examples of Indigenous-controlled bodies doing nothing to mitigate inequality, or even reinforcing it."

These institutions, such as land councils and Aboriginal representative bodies, had done nothing to alleviate the horrific social conditions of Aboriginal workers and youth, while feathering the nests of a small indigenous elite.

Red Flag warned: "The problem with the Voice, though, isn't just that it is inadequate: its establishment can become a barrier to future fights for Indigenous justice. While the Voice to Parliament won't do much for working-class Indigenous people, there is a very real danger that it will help cohere a growing Indigenous elite into a conservatising force in Indigenous politics."

As recently as last January, *Red Flag* branded the Voice as a creation of "mainstream neoliberalism" and wrote that it was "part of the Labor Party's broader strategy to cement itself at the heart of government through an alliance with big business, the mainstream media and socially progressive but wealthy Australians."

This was true, as far as it went. Even when issuing these criticisms, however, *Red Flag's* positions dovetailed with the racialism of the Labor government and of the political establishment as a whole.

Socialist Alternative has consistently presented the plight of Aboriginal workers and youth as a racial issue. In fact, it is a class question and a product of capitalism. The assault on Aboriginal workers has served for decades as a spearhead of broader attacks on the social rights of the working class. And the Aboriginal population itself, as Socialist Alternative felt compelled to acknowledge less than a year ago, is rent by class divisions between a grasping and parasitic wealthy layer and the

broad mass of ordinary people.

It is nevertheless striking that, having denounced the Voice as a "token" measure that could actually deepen the oppression of indigenous people, Socialist Alternative is now among its most enthusiastic proponents.

Red Flag has given no explanation for this shift. Nor is it the case that the character of the Voice has altered in the slightest. In fact, its character as a top-down initiative with virtually no grassroots support and as an initiative backed by the most powerful sections of the corporate elite is clearer than ever. This is intensifying a crisis of the Labor government and the political set-up as a whole.

The Voice, which Labor had intended to use as a progressive gloss for its pro-business and militarist policies, is now on track to be defeated in the referendum, potentially even posing a question mark over Albanese's future. It is under those conditions that Socialist Alternative, a fake-left party tied to Labor, the unions and the Greens, has leapt to Albanese's defence.

In doing so, Socialist Alternative has resorted to the crudest forms of racialism.

The headline of the latest *Red Flag* article is emblematic: "Racism and the referendum." Its author, Jordan Humphreys, notes that according to virtually all polling, less than 50 percent of the population is indicating that it will register a "yes" vote in the referendum. That number has dropped substantially as the campaign has progressed, after some earlier polling indicated majority support.

Humphreys' explanation is simply that people are racist. He asserts that "Part of the explanation" for the crisis of the Voice "must be the existence of a bedrock of racist attitudes towards Indigenous people within a section of the Australian population." Actually, that is not part of *Red Flag's* explanation, but essentially its entirety.

The implications of this assertion are far-reaching. *Red Flag* is basically suggesting that the majority of the population is inherently and incurably racist and hostile to indigenous people. But it provides no evidence whatsoever to back up this conclusion.

Moreover, as *Red Flag* previously noted, the Voice is being pushed by a "neoliberal" Labor government. It is backed by the most powerful corporations and businesses, and its primary beneficiaries will be what Socialist Alternative referred to not so long ago as an "indigenous elite."

Even proponents of the Voice have been forced to acknowledge that support for it is particularly low in the outer suburbs of the major cities, i.e., the key working class areas. By contrast, it appears that the strongest backing for the Voice is in the more affluent inner-city areas.

So what is one left with when it comes to *Red Flag's* argument? Essentially, the Labor government, together with the corporations and other capitalist institutions are the "anti-racist" forces in society. They are

valiantly, if imperfectly, waging a campaign against the backwardness of the vast mass of the population.

To justify this line, *Red Flag* is compelled to make a series of contortions bordering on the absurd. It notes that some respondents to a poll on the Voice had said they opposed it because they think it “won’t make a real difference for ordinary Indigenous people.” *Red Flag* brands this as “an ambiguous talking point that right-wingers have taken up at any rate.” But it is the same “ambiguous talking point” that *Red Flag* itself was advancing at the beginning of the year!

Humphreys acknowledges that “old-school open hostility towards Indigenous people is relatively marginal,” but “racist attitudes endure in various forms.” His proof is polling about attitudes to changing the date of Australia Day, which currently falls on the anniversary of colonisation. But this is very thin gruel indeed.

Many people, no doubt correctly, view the issue of Australia Day as a diversion and an issue that has nothing to do with the difficulties confronting working people, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike. Even if the date were changed, Australia Day would remain what it is: a celebration of nationalism and militarism, with no democratic content or even mass popular engagement.

Humphreys’ preoccupation with the right-wing holiday and revamping its image is desperate, but also telling of Socialist Alternative’s acceptance of the whole framework of Australian nationalism.

Humphreys goes on: “Not everyone supporting a No vote is a hardcore racist. There is also a significant section of the population that just doesn’t care very much about Indigenous people.” But again, this has the character more of an assertion of social prejudice against ordinary people, than an actual argument.

All Humphreys can put forward is that this “significant section of the population... don’t have any defence against the more coded arguments presented by the No campaign.” Among those arguments, he listed “Isn’t this proposal really confusing? Aren’t there some Indigenous people opposing it?” How these sentiments would indicate a hostility or an indifference to Aboriginal people, Humphreys doesn’t even attempt to explain.

To call these arguments “left-wing,” let alone socialist, would be a travesty. Socialist Alternative’s position is a crude defence of the Labor government and of its right-wing Voice initiative.

Socialist Alternative’s position is not aimed at combatting “racism,” but the opposite. It is nothing less than an incitement to racial division and one that plays entirely into the hands of the right. To the extent that the right-wing have been able to gain any traction out of the referendum, is a consequence of the reactionary character of the Voice proposal itself. Fortifying and promoting the Voice thus only strengthens the hand of the far-right.

Socialist Alternative’s tortured explanations for the crisis of the Voice are aimed at covering up the real reason this initiative is in a shambles.

First of all, there is widespread and correct skepticism, including among many ordinary indigenous people, that the creation of a new body controlled by the indigenous elite will do anything for working people.

Secondly, this healthy sentiment feeds into a massive alienation from the entire political establishment. After decades in which governments, above all those headed by Labor, have presided over cuts to jobs, wages and conditions, and the gutting of social services, millions of people do not think that any of the issues they confront will be resolved through parliament. Labor, together with the corporatised trade unions, has lost any active mass base in the working class.

Thirdly, the Voice referendum is being held under conditions of the deepest cost of living crisis in decades. The very same government pushing the Voice has declared that working people “must sacrifice” through a vast reduction in their social and living standards, while the corporations and the wealthy continue to make a bonanza.

The conspiracy of silence which characterises the Yes and No camps of the Voice referendum is also evident in *Red Flag*. The underlying reason for the attempt to recast the filthy image of Australian capitalism in relation to its brutal and genocidal treatment of the Aboriginal people is to prosecute the war aims of US and Australian imperialism against China. *Red Flag* quite simply does not mention the war preparations of the Albanese government behind which the Voice is being promoted.

Under these conditions of looming war and major social crisis, the related aims of the referendum include to divide the working class along racial lines and divert attention from the essential class issues of militarism and austerity.

Socialist Alternative’s endorsement of the Voice is essentially an endorsement of the Labor government. It exposes the essence of this organisation. It has nothing to do with socialism or the interests of the working class. Instead, it is a party of the political establishment based in an affluent and grasping section of the upper middle-class, especially ensconced in the trade union bureaucracy, the higher strata of the public sector and academia. The interests of this selfish social layer dovetail closely with those of the indigenous elite.

Throughout the entire history of the socialist movement, it has been understood that racism is essentially a class phenomenon. It is deployed by the ruling elite to divide and weaken the working class. That is the aim of both the racist “yes” and “no” camps in the official referendum.

The Socialist Equality Party opposes both camps. It has initiated a campaign for an active boycott of the referendum. As a statement on the WWS last week explained:

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.

Note: Under conditions of compulsory voting, which makes it a crime to urge a boycott of the vote itself, the SEP calls 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.

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