

Socialist Alternative hysterically defends Voice referendum as its crisis deepens

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The pseudo-left Socialist Alternative organisation has entered into what can only be described as hysterics over the crisis of the Labor government's referendum to enshrine an indigenous Voice to parliament in the Australian Constitution.

The WSWs has already documented how Socialist Alternative and its publication *Red Flag* shifted their position on the Voice. In 2022 and early 2023, *Red Flag* posted articles condemning the proposal to create the indigenous advisory body as "tokenism." It noted that the institution would be dominated by an "indigenous elite," and would do nothing to address the horrendous social conditions confronting ordinary Aboriginal people. *Red Flag* stated that the Voice could be used to impose even deeper attacks on indigenous people.

The criticisms were limited. They were couched in the racialism of the political establishment. This presents the dire plight of most indigenous people as a racial question, not a class one, to shield the capitalist system of responsibility.

But what Socialist Alternative raised was true as far as it went. And none of its criticisms of the Voice have been refuted by subsequent events. What has become evident is that while the Voice has support from much of the political, business and media establishment, there is declining support for the proposal among ordinary people, who view it with skepticism and distrust.

The clearer that popular hostility has become, however, the more Socialist Alternative has promoted the Voice. That may seem paradoxical, but it is entirely in line with the political and class character of Socialist Alternative.

Despite its left-wing phraseology, Socialist Alternative is an organisation that represents affluent layers of the upper-middle class, tied to the political establishment, above all through Labor and the union bureaucracy. The pseudo-left party is stepping in to defend the federal Labor government, under conditions in which it is in a rapidly deepening crisis.

Of course, Socialist Alternative cannot admit that. Nor can it point to any progressive content in the referendum, or in the policy of the Voice itself.

So, the pseudo-left party is compelled to concoct another basis on which to insist that the Voice must be supported. This was spelled out in a *Red Flag* article by Jordan Humphreys this week, titled: "Why the left should vote Yes in the referendum."

The article is tortured, to the point that it makes the basic circumstances of the referendum entirely incomprehensible.

Humphreys begins: "As the referendum approaches, the key dynamic in the debate is clear. The conservative right views a defeat for the Voice as a chance to strike a devastating blow against support for Indigenous rights among the Australian population."

Elsewhere, Humphreys asserts that the dominant characteristics of the referendum are "pervasive anti-Indigenous racism in our society," and an all-encompassing "racist atmosphere" that has received "no push back at

all."

The uninitiated reader would not even know, from this presentation, how the referendum has come to pass. The clear implication of Humphreys' opening paragraph is that the "conservative right" called and organised the referendum, in order to "strike a devastating blow" against indigenous people and to successfully incite a pogromist atmosphere.

The entire presentation is false. In fact, the Voice has bipartisan roots. It was the "conservative right" in the form of then Coalition Prime Minister Tony Abbott who convened a meeting of Indigenous leaders, and of Labor leader Bill Shorten in 2015. The aim was to deflect anger over deepgoing austerity measures, by initiating processes towards "Constitutional recognition" of indigenous people. The Coalition continues to back such recognition, which is a component of the current referendum, while opposing the Voice on tactical grounds.

The proposal for a referendum has been a key plank of the Labor government's program, ever since it was elected in May, 2022. *Red Flag* scarcely acknowledges the fact that the referendum has been organised by the current government, which is pushing a Yes vote.

To do so would invite questions that Humphreys simply cannot answer. Why would Labor select, as one of its central policies, an initiative doomed to failure as a result of mass racism?

Labor's calculations were the exact opposite. The party's strategists had identified a mass sentiment in favour of redressing the crimes against Aboriginal people and the appalling conditions most continue to endure. Labor hopes to cynically parlay those sentiments into support for the government and to put a progressive gloss on an agenda otherwise centering on escalating preparations for war with China and an austerity offensive against the working class.

In other words, Labor's decision to hold the referendum can only be understood as an acknowledgement that there is massive and overwhelming anti-racist sentiment and support for Aboriginal rights.

These sentiments did lead to majority support for the Voice in most early polling. Throughout the latter stages of 2022 and into this year, polls showed that as many as 65 percent of voting age respondents were intending to vote Yes. A protracted decline has seen that fall to 45 percent or less.

Humphreys says nothing about this shift, because he has no way of explaining it. Is it really the case that up to 20 percent of the adult population has become racist over the past six months?

Humphreys also does not relate the Voice to a single other political issue. This is particularly telling, inasmuch as all recent polling indicates that the crisis of the Voice is part of a crisis of the Labor government. Albanese's approval rating has plummeted over the past six months, the same period in which the Voice has tanked.

The decline in Labor's fortunes has nothing to do with race. As all pollsters and serious commentators have acknowledged, it is an outcome of widespread and mounting anger over the refusal of the government to

do anything to address the cost-of-living crisis. Labor is insisting that workers must “sacrifice,” while overseeing real wage cuts, the elimination of working conditions and budget austerity. This social context, which points to the fundamental class dynamic of the referendum, is not mentioned by Humphreys.

Nor is the fact that what is underway is not only a crisis of the Labor government but of the entire political establishment. Humphreys asserts that the right-wing is ascendant. But Liberal-National Coalition leader Peter Dutton, who heads the official No campaign, remains one of the most unpopular figures in recent Australian political history. While unquestionably dogwhistling to racist sentiments, his primary strategy is to remain in the background.

In other words, every indication is that the crisis of the Voice flows from the alienation and hostility of working people to the political establishment. These moods are inchoate and politically confused, but they centre on social, not racial questions.

Socialist Alternative could confirm this fact, if only they ever spoke with workers. The only time the organisation has campaigned in working class areas was when its parochial front group the Victorian Socialists were trying to clamber into the state parliament and required votes.

Socialist Equality Party campaigners have certainly not found mass racist sentiment. Instead, they have encountered skepticism that the Voice will solve anything for indigenous people or any other workers, substantial disengagement, and in some cases limited knowledge that the referendum is even occurring. Put simply, a policy that was supposed to galvanise support for the Labor government has fallen flat.

Humphreys’ assertions of a right-wing rampage are not primarily directed against the far-right. They are an attempt to hector and intimidate everyone who is not a right-winger into lining up behind the Labor government’s Voice policy. That is demonstrated by his vociferous denunciations of independent Senator Lidia Thorpe and the “progressive no” campaign that she leads.

The WSWs has previously exposed the reactionary character of Thorpe’s politics. She does not oppose the Voice on a class basis, that is from the standpoint of developing an independent socialist movement of the working class against the political establishment and the capitalist system.

Thorpe is an Aboriginal nationalist, whose primary complaint is that the Voice is not delivering sufficient privileges to an indigenous elite. She calls instead for a Treaty. Her positions, though, have undoubtedly struck a chord with layers of the population, including indigenous workers and youth, who have been through bitter experiences with various indigenous advisory bodies.

Socialist Alternative does not oppose Thorpe because she is a pro-capitalist Aboriginal nationalist. Indeed, to the extent that the organisation criticised the Voice in an earlier period, their positions tended to echo those of Thorpe. Instead, Thorpe is condemned by Socialist Alternative for failing to line up behind the Labor government.

In classic redbaiting fashion, failure to support Labor is presented as an alignment with the far-right. This is connected to Humphrey’s assertion that any opposition to the Voice will “help the racist right score a victory against Indigenous people.” The only legitimate position is to fall behind Labor, or one will contribute to a major setback in the struggle for indigenous rights.

The issue is that neither Humphreys, nor the Labor government, nor the advocates of the Yes campaign, are able to say how the Voice will advance the interests of ordinary indigenous people. It is, he acknowledges: “shallow symbolism, and the campaign to support it by the Labor government, NGOs, prominent Indigenous figures and corporate Australia is undoubtedly moderate and conservative.” It does not seem to

occur to Humphreys that this is precisely why the Voice is in a crisis, not “pervasive racism” among ordinary people.

Humphreys’ own argument distills, in a peculiar form, the character of Labor’s campaign itself. There is no real pretence that the Voice will resolve anything, especially the social crisis facing ordinary indigenous people. Instead, there is a moralistic insistence that it must be supported, as a “symbolic” step forward, lest the No vote prevail and racism score a victory.

That this has nothing to do with left-wing, let alone socialist and working-class politics, should be clear. It is the argument of a layer of the upper-middle class anxious to align with a right-wing, big business Labor government, as it conducts an offensive against the working class and deepens the drive to war with China.

Socialist Alternative’s positions also have nothing to do with a genuine fight against racism. The greatest factor facilitating the rise of far-right forces internationally is the absence of an independent movement of the working class. The suppression of the class struggle, and the apparent dominance of right-wing bourgeois parties such as Labor, enable fascistic forces to posture as alternatives to the status quo and to pitch to mounting social anger.

The fight against the far-right is thus, above all, a struggle for the political independence of the working class, something Socialist Alternative bitterly opposes. Its entire position is the opposite: to subordinate the working class to the Labor government and to prevent the development of an independent socialist movement.

The claim that there is no alternative but to fall into line behind Labor is a fraud.

The alternative is the Active Boycott campaign being advanced by the Socialist Equality Party, against the pro-business racialism of the official Yes and No campaigns. The SEP is connecting its fight against the whole anti-democratic referendum to the development of a movement of the working class against war, austerity and capitalism, the system that is responsible for the oppression of indigenous workers and youth and the brutal exploitation of the working class as a whole.

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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