

Australian pseudo-left promotes alliance with pro-Zionist Labor Party

Oscar Grenfell**27 December 2023**

Amid widespread and growing anger over Israel's genocide of the Palestinians, the Australian Labor government is engaged in a cynical attempt to distance itself from the slaughter, while continuing to fully back Israel.

The campaign began on December 12, when Labor shifted its position, voting in favor of a ceasefire resolution in the United Nations General Assembly. Even as it voted for the non-binding resolution, Labor reiterated its support for the Zionist war effort, covering up the genocidal character of what is unfolding and calling for a full Israeli victory.

Since then, several Labor MPs have cried crocodile tears over the high death toll. Sharon Claydon, a federal Labor MP attended a vigil for Gaza on December 17, making vague and mealy-mouthed "humanitarian" statements. Last Saturday, Labor's workplace relations minister and leader of the House Tony Burke showed up to a similar vigil in Bankstown, but does not appear to have said anything.

The phony public relations character of these empty gestures is obvious to anyone who is politically literate. Labor is seeking to dampen down outrage over its complicity in the mass murder, without shifting its position in the slightest. For those such as Burke, with seats in working-class areas with a large Middle Eastern and Islamic population, crass electoral calculations are clearly at play.

The Labor governments are exceedingly weak, reflected in the recent departure of several state and territory leaders. Anger over the genocide is intersecting with deep-going opposition to the cost-of-living and social crisis. The federal Labor administration proceeds with massive tax breaks for the wealthy and other pro-business policies while presiding over the worst reversal in working-class social conditions since World War II.

Under these conditions, Labor requires political reinforcements. The pseudo-left groups, speaking for an affluent layer of the middle-class, tied to Labor and the trade union bureaucracy, are stepping in.

At recent vigils and rallies, speakers from pseudo-left organisations, such as Solidarity, have hailed Labor's UN vote as a step forward. It is, they declared, proof that protest politics, aimed at pressuring the government to shift its position, is working and must be continued. This is a fraud, aimed at

blocking a political struggle against the Labor government and preventing workers and youth from drawing the necessary lessons from the experiences through which they are passing.

Increasingly, the pseudo-left is insisting that an alignment with Labor, or a segment of it, is the critical issue in the Gaza protest movement.

This line was spelled out most clearly in an article featured by Socialist Alliance's *Green Left Weekly*. Published on December 16, it was based on the remarks delivered by Vivienne Portzolt to a Socialist Alliance meeting earlier this month.

Portzolt is a member of Jews Against the Occupation, which has helped to highlight growing opposition among Jewish people to Israel's war crimes. This has undercut the Zionist lie that all opposition to Israel constitutes antisemitism.

However, the line Portzolt advanced, essentially that of Socialist Alliance, is thoroughly reactionary. From the article, it is entirely unclear whether or not Portzolt even considers herself a socialist. The words capitalism, imperialism and socialism are absent. What she said would have been compatible with membership of openly capitalist parties, such as the Greens, or even Labor.

The remarks, published under the title "How can we build the movement for the liberation of Palestine?" insist repeatedly that such a movement must be "broad." Portzolt stated: "All sections of society must be mobilised in the campaign. The unions, artists, teachers, school students, sports people, journalists and doctors."

Notably absent is any reference to the working class. Under conditions where weekly mass protests have overwhelmingly been attended by ordinary working-class people, many from the western suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne, workers do not get a mention. What Portzolt is advocating is a movement dominated by the middle-class, in keeping with the essentially right-wing political program she advances.

In the most significant portion of her article, Portzolt declares: "While we are angry with Labor for its stance on Palestine, and many other things, we need to work with pro-Palestine activists within Labor: They are an important source of pressure on the hierarchy, as are the unions. We must partner with Labor activists to deepen that pressure until the Labor hierarchy caves in."

What is presented as a schema to take the movement forward, is in fact how the pseudo-left subordinates workers and young people to the political establishment. “Activists” must collaborate with Labor Party members, including presumably figures like Burke and Claydon, in an uncritical manner, despite the fact that they are part of a governing party and government backing the Israeli genocide.

All questions of principle are excluded—from Labor’s role and class character as the pre-eminent party of Australian imperialism, to the roots of the genocide in a breakdown of global capitalism and an eruption of militarism that threaten a far broader war.

Portzolt essentially paints in rosy colours the moth-eaten Labor Party, which no longer has any mass working-class membership, much less internal democracy. Her remarks are essentially an advertisement for this party of big business that could encourage people to join Labor in the futile hope of changing it from within.

Connected to this is a promotion of the corporatised trade union bureaucracy. Portzolt exclaimed: “The growing number of unions engaging in the struggle for Gaza, flying their flags at demonstrations is just fantastic!”

Anyone who has been to the demonstrations knows this is simply a lie. None of the unions have had a substantial organised contingent at a single rally. They have mobilised nobody. To the extent that union flags have been raised, they have been held aloft by members of the pseudo-left themselves, who boast of the “struggle” they have waged to convince union leaders to allow them to carry the tattered rags.

Portzolt is compelled to criticise the Australian Council of Trade Unions, bemoaning the fact that it has not “taken a stronger position for the rights and lives of the Palestinians.” In fact, the ACTU, which works every day with the Labor government, backs Israel and is complicit in its crimes, having done everything it can to suppress opposition.

Portzolt acknowledges that the ACTU’s position is bound up with its ties to Labor. But, predictably, her only answer is that more “pressure” must be applied.

The article attempts to draw a distinction between the ACTU and other, supposedly more progressive unions. Portzolt states: “The Maritime Union of Australia [MUA] is taking a leading role in helping organise the campaign against the Israeli ZIM shipping line.” This is another flight from reality.

Amid limited protest action, the MUA has ensured the orderly loading and unloading of ZIM vessels at ports throughout the country over the past two months. Its officials in Sydney responded with fury when Socialist Equality Party members asked in October if they were planning strike action in defence of the Palestinians.

For all the talk of “pressuring” the Labor government, what is really being spoken of is political collaboration with Labor and the union bureaucracy. What it boils down to are PR exercises on behalf of the union bureaucracy and no criticism of Labor

politicians.

That is how the pseudo-left functions. In online and phone organising groups for Palestine its members, especially of the Solidarity group, have reacted with unconcealed anger to ordinary people calling for Labor members to be excluded, or to resign their party membership. “There are good people in the Labor Party,” is the invariable rejoinder.

The real danger, they insist, comes from the “sectarians.” Portzolt stated: “In the broad-based coalition needed for success, there is no room for sectarianism... We must focus on what we have in common, our shared humanity and passion for peace and justice.”

Sectarianism, for the pseudo-left, is the standard term of abuse directed against principled politics. Exposing the class character of Labor, raising the need for a socialist perspective, calling for the mobilisation of the working-class, independent of the corporatised and government-aligned union bureaucracy, all of which are essential to building a genuine anti-war movement are derided and declared illegitimate.

In other words, an amnesty for Labor politicians and union bureaucrats, and a political offensive against socialists fighting for the interests of the working class.

The pseudo-left is the last line of defence of a crisis-ridden political establishment. As mass anger grows, and major social upheavals are in the offing, the pseudo-left responds by moving ever further to the right, and ever more directly into alignment with the needs of the official political set-up, above all Labor and the Greens, to politically neuter and suppress the developing movement.

The alternative is the socialist and internationalist program advanced by the SEP. The working class must be mobilised to block supplies to Israel, including through strikes and industrial action. Above all, the genocide points to the burning urgency of the building of a revolutionary and socialist movement of the working class. It is a warning of what imperialism has in store for the whole world, unless it is stopped, as the US leads a proxy war against Russia in Ukraine and prepares for a catastrophic conflict against China in the Indo-Pacific.

With their stand in support of the Labor government, the pseudo-left are signaling they will be on board with this militarist agenda on every front.



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