

Australian election: “Purple pingers,” lead candidate for pseudo-left Victorian Socialists

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The Australian federal election has been marked by a further shift to the right by the entire political establishment, extending beyond Labor and the Liberals. The Greens have dropped their pacifist mask, unveiling a militarist program based on missiles and drones, while begging Labor for a coalition government.

The pseudo-left groups are advocating a vote for the Greens and Labor, under conditions where the Albanese Labor government has spent the last three years preparing for war with China, supporting the Israeli genocide in Gaza and inflicting the worst reversal to working-class living standards in decades.

The campaign of the Victorian Socialists (VS), the most prominent pseudo-left group, has been marked by complete parochialism. VS has said virtually nothing about the immense crisis of global capitalism, expressed most sharply in the coming to power of the fascistic Trump administration in the US, or the associated descent of the world into trade war, militarism and a threatened world war.

Its campaign is instead based on the claim that “pressure” on the parties of big business, Labor and the Liberals, above all through a vote for VS, will result in social reforms. This is a fraud, under conditions of a crisis of Australian capitalism and demands from the ruling elite for sweeping austerity. Most striking, though, is how limited the VS program is. It does not even call for the nationalisation of the banks or the expropriation of the billionaires. It is a program that is not socialist in any sense of the term.

That is also expressed in the selection by VS of Jordan van den Lamb as its lead candidate for the Senate in Victoria. A social media celebrity who goes by the handle “Purple pingers,” Van den Lamb has no record of involvement in the socialist movement or the struggles of the working class whatsoever.

Van den Lamb came to prominence after he began posting short videos on TikTok and Instagram in mid-2021, pointing to the housing crisis and the plight of renters. The content clearly resonated with layers of young people and he gained a substantial following.

But the videos themselves are politically bereft. Van den Lamb’s content is variations of a single, basic idea, which is already widely held among masses of people, namely that the housing market is unfair and that renters are the most disadvantaged. The videos, delivered in a flippant and unserious tone, generally do not go further than that and do nothing to politically educate the viewers.

To the extent that Van den Lamb advanced a policy, prior to his VS candidacy, it was largely advocacy of squatting. While socialists oppose police attacks and other repression directed against those forced into such dire circumstances, the socialist movement has never promoted squatting as a way forward.

To make the obvious point, squatting is not a viable option for most working people, including those facing homelessness. It is simply impossible to function for any length of time in the 21st century in a dwelling without power, running water or sewerage, and with the constant

prospect of police kicking in the door.

Politically, calls for squatting have been associated with individualistic and anarchistic tendencies, not the socialist movement. They present the fraud that there is some sort of individual solution to the housing crisis, an inherently systemic issue. And they are directed against the only real solution, the political mobilisation of the working class against the governments, the property developers and the banks, with the perspective of taking political power and reorganising society along socialist lines.

The bankruptcy of Van den Lamb’s pseudo-radical posturing is underscored by the fact that it has gone hand in hand with an orientation to the political establishment, including private meetings with senior politicians and a substantial amount of friendly coverage from the corporate media. This is an individual who is not seen as a threat, in the slightest, by the powers-that-be.

A February 2024 profile in the *Law Society Journal* revealed that Van den Lamb had “recently” held a private meeting with the New South Wales (NSW) Labor government’s housing minister, Rose Jackson, which he described as “really promising.” “She acknowledged the concerns that I and many renters have and the difficulties in tackling these concerns,” he reported.

At that time, the NSW government was proceeding with its plans to demolish public housing in the Sydney suburb of Waterloo, as part of a broader housing policy geared entirely to the demands of the property developers. In the months before February 2024, NSW Labor had also been the most aggressive government in the country in seeking to criminalise opposition to the Gaza genocide.

When Van den Lamb announced his VS candidacy last August, many of his followers expressed surprise that he was not instead running for the Greens. Indeed, his previous political statements did not go far beyond the bounds of that capitalist party. Van den Lamb only appears to have begun referencing socialism in the lead-up to becoming the VS lead candidate. Prior to that, he was a single-issue figure. For instance, he appears to have rarely mentioned the genocide in Gaza.

In the election campaign, Van den Lamb has largely continued as a single-issue activist. Aside from raising the issue of rental rights, he has commented on only a handful of other questions. To the extent that Van den Lamb has spoken on the overall political situation, it has been to put forward in particularly crude form the need to pressure capitalist governments for concessions.

VS calls for a substantial expansion of public housing, caps on rents and other measures, but the entire thrust of their campaign is that such policies will be achieved by pressuring the major parties, especially Labor but even the Liberals. Van den Lamb has even gone so far as to develop something of a mathematical formula of VS parliamentary opportunism. If VS wins 10 to 15 percent of the vote, he has stated, it may compel the political establishment to shift course.

In an interview for the election campaign, Van den Lamb stated that socialism means “increasing democracy,” which “you can kind of do in

stages under capitalism itself.” That is, for Van den Lamb, “socialism” is simply a duplicitous label, behind which to practice capitalist politics.

VS and Socialist Alternative, the pseudo-left group which controls it as an electoral front, have attempted to provide Van den Lamb with some “left-wing” credentials. To overcome the obvious issue that their candidate is a social media celebrity, who has never taken part in a working-class struggle in his life, they promoted Van den Lamb as their frontman during the Woolworths strike last December.

However, VS and Van den Lamb simply functioned as cheerleaders of the Labor-aligned bureaucracy of the United Workers Union (UWU). They aggressively promoted the right-wing union leadership as it isolated the 1,500 striking workers, shut down the strike and rammed through a sell-out deal, betraying workers’ demands for pay increases and an improvement to extremely onerous conditions.

In a recent post to X, Van den Lamb gloated over the fact that Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaigners were repeatedly removed from UWU protests outside the striking warehouses. Our campaigners were targeted by the UWU bureaucracy because the SEP warned of the impending sellout, fought to expand the strike and called for workers to take matters into their own hands. Van den Lamb’s retrospective endorsement of the UWU’s attacks on the SEP only underscores the fact that he and VS are flunkies of the union bureaucracy, hostile to the fight to mobilise the working class independently of these corporatised apparatuses.

In some of Van den Lamb’s more recent videos, he has quoted the Russian revolutionary leader Vladimir Lenin. He reads such quotes, which have no bearing on the program he advances, as from a script developed by his VS handlers. But notwithstanding this threadbare attempt to provide Van den Lamb with a socialist colouration, he has made little attempt to conceal his contempt and hostility towards the traditions of the socialist movement and the fight for Marxism.

In a post earlier this year, he declared: “My favourite part about socialist theory is that most of it is short AF [as f..ck], which means you get more time to actually do the things. That being said, there are certainly some of us who sit behind a computer, masturbating over how they’ve read more Lenin than you, and I’d encourage some of those people to perhaps go outside.”

Van den Lamb is completely disdainful of the rich writings of Lenin, which are in some cases quite lengthy, or any of the other great Marxists—Engels, Marx himself and Trotsky—that are essential to the building of a revolutionary socialist movement of the working class.

A Greens or Labor Party politician would probably say something similar. This is a right-wing individual, who has made no class break whatsoever. He is a privileged young man who grew up in a wealthy family and has worked in senior positions in the federal public sector ever since graduating from university.

Van den Lamb’s marriage of convenience with VS

His candidacy has the character of a marriage of convenience with VS and Socialist Alternative (SAlt). For SAlt, Van den Lamb opens up access to a large social media audience as well as press coverage. To be blunt, they calculate that his celebrity will give them a large vote. For Van den Lamb, VS has provided an electoral apparatus, a few policies beyond his one-liners on housing, and “left-wing” credentials.

At a more fundamental level, Van den Lamb is a fitting representative of the pseudo-left. He already has some of what they want: celebrity status and access to the establishment media. His open indifference and hostility to political principle, while expressed in particularly crude terms, is shared by the pseudo-left as a whole, which increasingly regards even empty

revolutionary socialistic flourishes as an encumbrance.

To state that the pseudo-left has no connection to the working class and does not fight for socialism is correct. But it is also somewhat behind the times. These forces have moved to the right and are beyond such questions. Under conditions of a crisis of the major capitalist parties, their aspiration is to achieve prominence within the political establishment and advance the interests of the social layer they represent—a privileged, grasping layer of the upper-middle class.

In its program, social constituency, and political perspective, VS is a petty bourgeois formation running a reformist campaign that does not challenge capitalism, with an upper-middle class lead Senate candidate.

This basic reality was expressed with remarkable candour at SAlt’s recent conference, in several contributions by Corey Oakley, a leading SAlt member and VS’s registered officer.

Oakley declared that “the rise of” Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn had “legitimised the idea of socialism.” In fact, Sanders has, for the best part of a decade, sought to misdirect an increasing attraction to socialism, back behind the Democratic Party, the party of genocide and Wall Street. Corbyn played the same role in Britain. Their rotten politics paved the way for Trump’s victory in the US and in Britain the most right-wing Labour government in history, committed to massive war and austerity.

Oakley was silent on this. These are the models to be emulated, and their “rise” prompted SAlt to form VS in 2018 based on a vague reformism, very similar to that of Corbyn and Sanders.

In Australia, Oakley stated that VS was targeting “the inner-city heartland” of Melbourne, and particularly its middle-class layers, “People who would normally vote for the Greens, who think the Greens aren’t left-wing enough now. So that space has clearly opened up.” These people “are not disillusioned blue-collar workers,” he emphasised, but young inner-city renters.

That is, on the one hand, VS is promoting illusions in the Greens, under conditions where that party is begging for a pro-war, pro-business coalition with Labor. On the other, it is also fishing in the waters of the Greens, whose core voting base has always been the wealthiest of any party, even more so than Labor and the Liberals.

Oakley summed up the VS attitude to the working class in the most vulgar terms. “The working class is f..cked in terms of where the class struggle is at,” he remarked. That is a statement of intense class hostility to workers. And it is a fraud, because to the extent that the class struggle has been suppressed, the political responsibility lies, not with workers, but with the very union bureaucracies defended and promoted by VS.

To the extent that workers were of any use, Oakley explained, it was that “we’re able to get 5 to 10 percent of the vote in working-class areas.” Because, after all, “Getting a big socialist vote is the crucial thing.” Even most Labor and Liberal politicians are more discreet about the fact they are interested solely in votes, and in entering parliament.

Oakley’s latter comments were in response to a question from the Socialist Equality Party candidate for Calwell, Morgan Peach. The SEP candidate had recalled SAlt’s support for imperialist war over the past decade, including its championing of the US-led regime-change operation in Syria and of the US-NATO war against Russia. He had noted that SAlt had for years downplayed and denied the existence of a US-Australian war drive against China, while falsely presenting the latter as an aggressor in the Indo-Pacific, a line that dovetailed with the propaganda of Washington and Canberra.

Oakley, Peach pointed out, had infamously coined the phrase that it was necessary to dispense with “knee-jerk anti-imperialism,” i.e., to stop opposing imperialist war. How, with this record, could SAlt claim to be anti-war? he asked.

Oakley essentially refused to answer. Like a lawyer, he declared that he would not “relitigate” his past comments, or the US onslaught on Syria which has now resulted in the establishment of a CIA-backed Al Qaeda

dictatorship.

More revealing was the response of the audience, consisting primarily of SAIt and VS members. When Peach raised the issues of imperialism, many of them simply laughed. The clear impression was that for these middle-class layers, who comprise the social base of the pseudo-left, the scientific Marxist term imperialism was passe and old-fashioned.

The pseudo-left functions as capitalism's last line of defence, promoting Labor, the Greens, and the union bureaucracy and seeking to fill the political vacuum with a left-populist bourgeois party in the form of VS.

This is directed against the fight for a genuine socialist and revolutionary perspective, advanced in this election by the SEP and globally by our world party the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). The ICFI is based on the fundamental program and heritage of Marxism, as developed by the Trotskyist movement over decades. It advances and takes forward the bedrock principles of socialism—internationalism, a scientifically grounded confidence in the revolutionary role of the working class, and above all, a fight to provide that class with a revolutionary leadership.

Workers and young people seeking a genuine alternative to the descent into war, austerity and dictatorship, should support and join the SEP.

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