

Victorian Socialists expand across Australia: A political trap to corral mounting anti-capitalist sentiment

Oscar Grenfell
18 June 2025

A conference of the Victorian Socialists (VS), the electoral front of the pseudo-left Socialist Alternative (SA), ratified a national expansion over the weekend. VS will be renamed “the Socialist Party,” while groups based on the VS model are being established in all states and territories. In the coming weeks, these new organisations will be publicly launched across Australia, starting in South Australia this weekend.

A blunt warning must be issued, above all to workers and young people seeking a genuine socialist alternative to the increasing horrors of capitalism. The attempt by VS to claim the mantle of “the Socialist Party” and to describe itself as “the socialists” is a fraud being perpetrated by SA, with the backing of elements of the media and political establishment.

In reality, the new party has nothing to do with socialism or the interests of the working class. It is based on a vague “left” populism entirely tailored to saving, not abolishing, capitalist rule amid its deepest crisis globally since the 1930s, centred in the United States.

The fascistic Trump administration is the sharpest expression of a universal tendency. Acting on behalf of super-rich oligarchs, Trump is seeking to extricate US imperialism from its historic decline and crisis, through war abroad against its rivals and the establishment of dictatorship at home to wage class war against the social and democratic rights of the working class.

Similar processes are underway internationally. Around the world, including in Australia, governments are joining the rapidly unfolding world war, dramatically boosting military spending and imposing the burden on workers and youth. This agenda cannot be imposed democratically—thus the turn to fascism and police state methods.

Yet, as VS has since it was founded in 2018, the new Socialist Party will peddle the lie that the historic and unprecedented issues confronting working people can be resolved by pressuring the ruling class and its political representatives, particularly Labor and the Greens. This is national reformism, devoid of any progressive content, in an era without reforms.

All over the world, the capitalist breakdown has produced a deep crisis of the old parties of capitalist rule, as was graphically demonstrated in Australia in the last federal election. Labor “won” the election only because, in the minds of millions of voters, the Liberal-National Coalition was associated with Trump and his policies. But its primary vote was less than 2 percent greater than the record low it received in 2022. More than a third of voters gave their first preference to other parties and independents, yet the Greens, the party that epitomises pressure politics and was desperately seeking to form government with Labor, lost seats.

Amid this profound break-up of the two-party system, sections of the ruling class recognise the need for a populist “left” formation to act as a political safety valve for the mounting discontent, the radicalisation of

workers and youth and the growth of anti-capitalist sentiment.

This has been expressed in the media promotion of VS, the newly formed Socialist Party, and its frontman, minor social media celebrity Jordan van den Lamb, notably by the right-wing, pro-war, pro-Trump Murdoch press.

With the “South Australian Socialists” slated as the first to launch, Murdoch’s *Adelaide Advertiser* ran a completely uncritical article that amounted to free advertising of the new state organisation. It described Van den Lamb as a “rental advocate” who is “also known as the ‘Robin Hood of renters’.”

The *Adelaide Advertiser* reported without a hint of criticism: “Mr Van den Lamb said people want change and this will ensure everyone in Australia has the opportunity to ‘vote socialist’ in future elections.” The article is just one of many promoting Van den Lamb, or “purplepingers,” as he is known on social media, before and after the election.

The fact that SA has chosen Van den Lamb to lead the push to expand its electoral front nationally epitomises the fraud that VS and the Socialist Party have anything to do with socialism.

Van den Lamb has no connection whatsoever to the socialist movement or the struggles of the working class. He came to prominence a few years ago, by posting videos to social media pointing to elements of the housing crisis. His content never went beyond appeals to government, combined with individualistic solutions, such as the promotion of squatting.

He only began vaguely referencing socialism around the time he was selected as the VS candidate last year. But even then, Van den Lamb made little attempt to conceal his contempt for the traditions of the socialist movement. He mocked those who studied the Marxist classics, such as the works of Lenin. And he put forward in particularly crude form the perspective of pressuring Labor or even the Liberals to enact reforms. His perspective, he told an interviewer, was “increasing democracy,” which “you can kind of do in stages under capitalism itself.”

Similarly, the rush to extend VS nationally and form the Socialist Party following the federal election last month has been completely devoid of programmatic or policy statements.

For genuine socialists, working from the vast heritage of Marxism and its contemporary embodiment, Trotskyism, the establishment of a political party above all requires the elaboration of a perspective and program that objectively articulates the interests of the working class. Such a program, which formulates the tasks of the party, must be based on the lessons of history and an assessment of the nature of the epoch and the world situation.

The only article announcing the expansion, by SA leader and VS communications manager James Plested, is less than 600 words. Notwithstanding its brevity, the article underscores the utterly opportunist calculations involved. The decision to expand, it explains, was based on

"the positive results for Victorian Socialists (VS) in the federal election and the significant momentum the party has gained."

The article references the growth of inequality in Australia and the increasing wealth of the billionaires, and then bemoans the fact that "the Labor Party has shown no interest in changing this," as though that were a surprise.

The limited criticism of Labor largely serves as a vehicle for an overture to the Greens. Plested complains that "Labor politicians have spent much of the time since the election attacking the Greens—the one mainstream party that did offer something in the way of a left alternative to aspects of the status quo."

In reality, the Greens have hurtled to the right. Their election campaign was based on appeals for a coalition with the pro-business, pro-war Labor Party. To that end, for the first time, the Greens unveiled their own militarist program involving the acquisition of drones and missiles, and their national leadership kept silent on the Gaza genocide, which they had previously condemned.

By giving a nod to the Greens as a "left alternative," Plested was signalling to the Greens leaders and the political establishment more broadly that the new VS-linked formations are willing to engage in friendly collaboration with the capitalist parties.

VS, Plested wrote, had been established "to force open a space for the politics of rage, hope and resistance..." After boasting about the VS vote in the federal election and the prospects ahead, he concluded by declaring that the new parties would "shake up the rotten status quo of capitalism and finally start to win real change."

Genuine socialists do not seek simply to shake up the capitalist status quo but to abolish the profit system and reconstruct society from top to bottom, to meet the pressing needs of the vast majority, not the profits of the super-rich.

VS is not building a socialist party in any sense but a "left" populist formation based on deliberately vague slogans that clarify nothing and allow the leadership plenty of room for opportunist manoeuvres with Labor, the Greens and other groups that are hostile to the fight for socialism.

The very limited character of this "real change" is demonstrated by the VS election program at the federal level. It proposed, for instance, a 10 percent tax on the wealth of billionaires and called for the re-nationalisation of the Commonwealth Bank, but accepted that the other major financial institutions would remain under private ownership.

The rest of their policies, including such things as a major expansion of public housing, were indistinguishable from the Greens, in that they were presented as a wish list to be enacted by a capitalist government, whether Labor or Liberal-National, something that will never occur.

What characterises both Plested's article and indeed the entire Socialist Party project is its nationalism and utter parochialism. None of the crises facing the working class in Australia or internationally—war, climate change, pandemic, the rise of fascism and the deep assault on democratic and social rights—can be resolved within the framework of the nation state. Plested fails to even raise the issues, let alone say anything about what must be done. The words "Gaza," "war", and "Trump", to name a few, simply do not appear.

The same nationalism was abundantly evident in the VS federal election campaign. As for its interventions in Victorian state elections, VS has presented the problems confronting workers and young people, such as the degradation of social services, as essentially local issues with local parliamentary solutions, rather than expressions of the intractable crisis of capitalism, which requires a revolutionary movement of the working class across Australia and globally.

The founding of VS by Socialist Alternative had nothing to do with the revolutionary traditions of Marxism. Rather, it was inspired by the left populist movements that had been developed by similar pseudo-left

parties internationally, which proved to be political disasters and dead ends for the working class.

SAlt aggressively promoted Syriza, the Greek Coalition of the Radical Left for years. Syriza came to power in 2015, following the collapse of support for the social-democratic PASOK party amid mass strikes and protests against its deep cuts to living conditions. Syriza immediately betrayed its promises to end PASOK's austerity agenda and implemented some of the deepest social cuts in Europe.

SAlt also promoted Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn. Sanders, who claimed to be leading a "political revolution" against "the billionaire class," funnelled his supporters back behind the Democrats, a party of Wall Street and the CIA. Corbyn, who asserted that it was possible to transform the British Labour Party into a socialist organisation, bowed down to the right-wing of this capitalist party, culminating in the coming to power of Keir Starmer, a Thatcherite war hawk.

When VS was formed in 2018, SAlt explicitly cited Corbyn and Sanders as its models. In its semi-internal conferences, SAlt still references the support won in an earlier period by these political charlatans as what it is seeking to accomplish through VS. Like Corbyn and Sanders, SAlt is offering its services to the ruling class to divert the growing anti-capitalist sentiment among workers and young people into the dead-end of parliamentary and protest politics.

The VS and SAlt leadership is composed of pseudo-left operators who have collaborated for decades with the trade union bureaucracy in the suppression of any independent movement of the working class. Time and again, they have functioned as the defenders of the union apparatus, hailing one crass betrayal after another as a "victory." When fighting for basic conditions and rights requires a rebellion by workers to break out of the union straitjacket, VS and SAlt promote the fatal illusion that the unions can be reformed.

Little was reported of the VS conference over the weekend. It did pass a resolution opposing the genocide in Gaza. But it repeated the bankrupt perspective of appealing to the Labor government that is complicit in the war crimes, even while acknowledging that the Australian political establishment would not end its backing of the Zionist regime.

The resolution called for Australia to break from the AUKUS military pact with the US and the UK and to expel American forces from the country. However, there was no suggestion of building an international and socialist anti-war movement. The call for a break with the US aligns with the positions of sections of the ruling elite, who wish for a more "independent" foreign policy, backed by greater military spending, to advance the interests of Australian imperialism.

The main focus of the conference, however, appears to have been on plans for various election campaigns. A report on the VS website, after dealing with procedural issues related to the election of party leadership and plans for a formal constitution, immediately turns to the 2026 Victorian state election, and plans to field candidates in all 86 seats.

SAlt has always presented VS as a means to enter into the Victorian parliament, with a single seat in that assembly presented as something akin to the holy grail. These are clearly opportunists in a hurry. At present, their members are motivated by the prospect of winning seats in one or other forum of capitalist rule, whether it be state or federal seats or council positions, which all come with pecuniary entitlements, some of them substantial.

The critical issue for workers and young people attracted to socialism is to reject this new political trap. The establishment of a pro-capitalist electoral apparatus is the outcome of the decades-long march to the right by the pseudo-left. They derive from tendencies that broke from the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement, decades ago, rejecting its insistence on the revolutionary role of the working class and the fight to build a revolutionary party, and instead orienting to Labor, the union bureaucracy and the other props of capitalism.

The pseudo-left speaks for an affluent layer of the upper middle-class ensconced in the union bureaucracy, as well as academia and upper echelons of the public sector. This is a social milieu that advances its own privileges within the framework of capitalism, through identity politics, based on race, gender and sexuality, as well as political outfits such as VS, aimed at gaining access to the corridors of the political and media establishment.

The pseudo-left functions as the last line of defence for capitalism, continuously promoting the fraud that Labor and the political establishment can be pushed to the left, while venomously opposing a revolutionary socialist perspective.

What is required is the development of an independent movement of the working class, directed against the entire political establishment. That means the formation of rank-and-file committees at workplaces and in neighbourhoods, independent of the corporatised union bureaucracy, which the pseudo-left endlessly promotes as it suppresses any action by workers and enforces the dictates of governments and corporations.

But above all, the crucial issue is the construction of a genuine revolutionary leadership, aimed at uniting the working class internationally, with the perspective of abolishing capitalism, establishing workers' power, and beginning the transition to a socialist world. That perspective, which is the only way to halt the plunge into barbarism and world war, threatening the very existence of humanity, is fought for by the Socialist Equality Party and its sister parties of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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