

South Australian Socialists launch: The pseudo-left promotes reformism, parochialism

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The launch of the South Australian (SA) Socialists was held in the state capital of Adelaide on Saturday. The event was the first of a series, following the announcement after the May 3 federal election that the Victorian Socialists (VS) model will be expanded to all states and territories, alongside the establishment of a federal Socialist Party.

The Adelaide meeting confirmed the utterly opportunist character of the expansion. The pseudo-left Socialist Alternative (SA) organisation, which controls VS and the new offshoots, is not building anything remotely connected to a socialist movement of the working class. Rather, it is constructing an electoral apparatus, based on vague left-populist phraseology, reformism and state-based parochialism.

For SA, the electoral fronts are a means of cultivating ties with elements of the union bureaucracy, the Greens and the Labor Party, while seeking to parachute its leadership into the corridors of power and influence. The objective function of the new outfits, amid a massive breakdown of capitalism globally and a crisis of the Australian political establishment, is to divert growing anti-capitalist sentiment into the safe channels of parliament.

The form and content of the Adelaide launch demonstrated this orientation. It was held in the function room of an upmarket pub in the city centre. The venue was clearly selected with a view to attracting layers of the affluent inner-city middle class and student youth, not workers.

Around 70 people attended, many of them appearing to be SA members, including some from Melbourne. Aside from SA, the attendance was primarily composed of the broader middle-class “left” milieu.

The three speakers, SA leaders Anneke Demanuele and Tom Gilchrist, along with Jordan van den Lamb, had no prepared remarks, or even notes. The entire event lasted for less than an hour.

Demanuele, a longstanding SA member from Melbourne, chaired the meeting. She began by stating that the launch was occurring “at an extraordinarily important time,” because “Capitalism, not just in Australia, but all around the world is in crisis.”

Demanuele noted the US-backed Israeli strikes on Iran and the genocide in Gaza, the climate catastrophe and the worsening cost of living, but she simply listed these developments, without providing the slightest analysis. They scarcely featured throughout the rest of the meeting, except for perfunctory references to the “horrors” of the genocide and war. That was all the more striking, given that the war against Iran is a significant turning point in world politics and history, dramatically widening the conflagration already underway in the Middle East.

The fight against imperialist war has always been at the cutting edge of a genuine socialist perspective. Marxists explain that imperialist war is rooted in the objective contradiction between an integrated global economy, and the outmoded capitalist nation-state system. The fight against war thus hinges on uniting and mobilising the working class internationally against capitalism and all its political representatives, with the aim of establishing a socialist society on a world scale.

That is anathema to VS and its offshoots, based as they are on parochialism and nationalism directed against such an internationalist perspective and any independent mobilization of the working class. For the past 19 months, SA has played a key role in derailing mass opposition to the Gaza genocide, restricting it to nationally-based moral appeals to the federal Labor government to end its complicity. Moreover, while they claim to oppose the assault on Iran, SA has a long record of pro-imperialism, including open backing for the US-led regime change operations in Libya and Syria.

In addition to war, the other plank of the ruling elite’s response to its crisis, a turn to authoritarianism, was largely ignored. Trump was mentioned a handful of times during the meeting. But the vast implications of his rapid moves to establish a dictatorship in the US, the centre of world capitalism, were not even touched upon.

There was a need for a “political alternative,” Demanuele stated, that would place “people before profits” and “stand up to the violence of this system.” But no real program, policies or platform was outlined during the entire event. The speakers said nothing about what socialism actually is or how it can be fought for, demonstrating that such references were simply window dressing.

The real focus of the meeting was made clear by the remarks of Tom Gilchrist, a SA leader introduced as the secretary of the SA Socialists. “In just nine months, we are planning to run in the South Australian elections,” he began.

“Why a socialist party and why now?” Gilchrist asked rhetorically. Gilchrist’s answer made clear that the new party was a state-based and reformist electoral outfit. SA has always been an opportunist party, oriented to Labor and the union bureaucracy. But its leadership has decided that even its occasional “revolutionary” rhetoric is an encumbrance to advancement within the political establishment.

Gilchrist dispensed with such rhetoric. The sole reasons he gave for the establishment of a socialist party were worsening conditions in South Australia, including in health, education and housing. Labor had been elected “three years ago on the basis that they would fix these problems,” but it had “done next to nothing to address any of these problems.”

Gilchrist referenced AUKUS, the militarist pact between the US, the UK and Australia. But it was solely to complain that nuclear-powered submarines would be constructed in South Australia and that nuclear waste would be dumped in the state. The fact that the submarines were one component of a massive build-up for war with China was not mentioned.

The “solution” presented was to join and vote for the SA Socialists. It supported “investing in public health and housing” and “building a city that works for the people here and not just for the interests of militarism or the companies.” This grab bag of policies accepts entirely the framework of the existing political set-up and the capitalist system itself.

SA is peddling milquetoast reformism, under conditions of a 40-year offensive against the working class, enforced by the ruling elite and its

political instruments such as Labor. With the capitalist class globally responding to the crisis by seeking to return social conditions to those that existed in the 1930s, SAAlt is lying to workers and youth that a little bit of pressure and a large vote for their candidates will somehow ameliorate the worsening social crisis they confront.

That orientation was also expressed in Van den Lamb's remarks. A minor social media celebrity who came to some prominence by posting videos about the housing crisis, Van den Lamb was parachuted in as the lead VS candidate for the federal election last year.

"What's pissing you off about capitalism, Jordie?" Demanuele asked.

In a flippant tone of deadpan irony, Van den Lamb replied: "We're paying more for lower quality housing, so yeah that's lovely. Also, people are dying because of that, so there's a bit of urgency with the housing stuff... Even from a liberal, human rights sense, international law guarantees us the right to a continually improving standard of housing."

Invocations of moral outrage devoid of any serious analysis and program, particularly when it is treated as something of a joke, have nothing to do with socialism.

Both Demanuele and Van den Lamb spoke about another central preoccupation of the VS expansion: deepening relations with layers of the corporatised trade union bureaucracy.

Demanuele stated that the Queensland Socialists had been "providing political assistance" to "delegates" and "activists" within the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union (CFMEU) and the Electrical Trades Union, and had recruited some of them. What that assistance consisted of, she did not state, but she referenced the campaign against the federal government's takeover of the CFMEU's construction division.

The CFMEU leadership has responded to this major attack on the democratic rights of workers, by blocking any mobilisation against it. With the support of the pseudo-left, including SAAlt and VS, the CFMEU officials have subordinated widespread opposition to a forlorn High Court challenge, which was defeated last week, and to backroom lobbying of the Labor government.

Demanuele and Van den Lamb also spoke of their involvement in the strike by 1,500 Woolworths workers late last year, which they described as an "inspiring" struggle. In reality, VS and SAAlt functioned as the cheerleaders of the right-wing leadership of the United Workers Union (UWU). They aggressively promoted the UWU leadership, as it isolated the strike and forced Socialist Equality Party members away from pickets with threats, because the SEP warned of an impending sellout. When the UWU unilaterally shutdown the strike and imposed a company agreement restricting wages and maintaining onerous conditions, VS and SAAlt presented this as a victory.

This is the real content of SAAlt's orientation to the unions. They are seeking to deepen their relations with a thoroughly corporatised, Labor-aligned bureaucracy, which has functioned as an industrial police force of governments and corporations for decades. SAAlt, like other pseudo-left organisations, has numbers of members within the lower rungs of this anti-working class apparatus and serve as its political defenders and apologists. VS has in the past received significant donations from the unions for services rendered.

In addition to the unions, the new electoral fronts are orienting to layers of the Labor Party and the Greens. Van den Lamb claimed that VS had recruited numbers of individuals directly from both of those parties. Demanuele stated that many people had joined those parties because they wanted to implement progressive changes to society.

For the past forty years, Labor has functioned as the principal instrument of the banks and the corporations, in attacking jobs, wages and conditions. It has no mass base, let alone mass membership in the working class, and is a bureaucratic shell filled with aspiring careerists. As for the Greens, their membership is concentrated in the most affluent layers of the middle

class, with some studies indicating its base is the wealthiest of any of the country's political parties.

These are the political waters in which SAAlt is fishing.

The "informal" character of the launch notwithstanding, it was an event tightly controlled by SAAlt. There was no opportunity to ask questions. Demanuele encouraged audience members to speak to one another, midway through the meeting, about "what was pissing them off" about capitalism. Several audience members, including longstanding SAAlt members, were selected to report back.

It appears that Gilchrist has been installed as secretary of the SA Socialists, without any vote. There was no discussion at the meeting on the program or policies that the SA Socialists would be based upon. In other words, this is an entirely anti-democratic operation. SAAlt is determined to maintain a firm grip over its new electoral fronts, with those who join serving as footsoldiers for its parliamentary campaigns.

The promotion of political unseriousness and deliberate vagueness serves the same purpose. To the extent that there is discussion with the membership, it will be kept at the lowest level possible. Questions of policy and program will be skated over, enabling the leadership to pursue whatever opportunist maneuvers it wishes.

The establishment of the new electoral fronts marks a further lurch to the right by the pseudo-left. These tendencies, including SAAlt, trace their origins to right-wing splits from the Trotskyist movement in the post-World War II period. Rejecting the revolutionary role of the working class and the fight for its political independence, they instead oriented to other class forces, such as social-democracy and the Stalinist bureaucracy. They did, however, falsely claim some connection to revolutionary socialism. Now, even such a verbal connection is being dispensed with.

Instead, the pseudo-left is coming forward, amid a breakdown of the profit system and its old political mechanisms, to establish new outfits based on a phony left-populism that is firmly within the bounds of capitalist politics. The pseudo-left is seeking to advance the interests of the upper middle-class social layers that it represents, including through advancement in the unions and parliament, while buttressing the political mechanisms of the capitalist system, upon which those privileges are based.

Above all, this is directed at preventing an intersection between mounting anti-capitalist sentiment among workers and young people, and a genuine socialist perspective. Such a perspective must be based on all the lessons and political capital accumulated by the Trotskyist movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), which alone embodies the revolutionary perspective of Marxism.

The ICFI and its sections, such as the SEP in Australia, fight for the development of an independent movement of the working class, including through a rebellion against the corporatised union bureaucracies and the establishment of independent rank-and-file workplace and neighbourhood committees, controlled by workers themselves.

It advances the struggle to build an international anti-war movement of the working class, based not on the bankrupt protest politics peddled by the pseudo-left, but on a socialist and internationalist program directed against the source of war, the capitalist system itself.

The ICFI explains that none of the issues confronting the working class, from war, to the climate catastrophe and the assault on social and democratic rights, can be resolved within the rotting framework of the profit system. Once again, the alternatives are socialism or barbarism. Workers and youth seeking a way forward must reject the political frauds of the pseudo-left and instead take up the fight to build a genuine socialist movement, that is by definition, revolutionary, socialist and internationalist.



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