

Australian pseudo-left conference: Protest politics and reformist electoral fronts to trap anti-capitalist sentiment

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The pseudo-left Socialist Alternative (SAlt) organisation held a two-day conference in Sydney on the weekend of August 16–17. Billed as “Socialism 2025,” the event was attended by several hundred people, and included participation from most of SAlt’s leadership, including those from interstate.

The event, though pre-planned, coincided with escalating opposition from workers and young people, particularly to the Gaza genocide and Labor government’s complicity, but encompassing broader issues including militarism and widening wars, mounting social inequality and austerity.

The weekend before the conference, some 300,000 people marched across the Sydney Harbour Bridge against the Labor government’s support for the genocide, in one of the largest anti-war demonstrations in the country’s history. Tens of thousands also marched in other cities.

The SAlt conference was a case study in how the pseudo-left seeks to divert that opposition back into the dead-end of parliamentary politics. While using “socialist” and even “revolutionary” rhetoric to win support from radicalised students and youth, SAlt is closely linked to the Labor-aligned trade union bureaucracy and collaborates with the Greens.

In an event spanning dozens of panels, many issues were raised. But the political essence of the conference was to argue for and justify the subordination of opposition to the political establishment in the form of Labor, the Greens and the trade union bureaucracies, and through them, to the capitalist system itself.

A glorification of protest politics

SAlt’s modus operandi includes the glorification of endless protests, based on futile appeals to the powers that be. That has been the organisation’s role throughout almost two years of mass demonstrations against the Gaza genocide.

At the opening panel of the conference, SAlt leader Josh Lees was treated as something of a celebrity for his involvement in the Palestine Action Group (PAG) that has organised protest rallies, including the Bridge march.

Lees and other speakers presented that march and the broader protest movement as the way forward. “This is the kind of campaign we’ve been fighting to build for two years in the PAG,” Lees declared of the Bridge march. It showed that “we’re actually winning that fight.”

Lees claimed that the Bridge protest had resulted in a “pretty big shift in policy outcomes” with [Labor prime minister] “Albanese already saying he will adopt Palestinian statehood.” The recognition pledge is a fraud,

amounting to a promise to “recognise” a pile of rubble and corpses, while the imperialist powers including Australia continue to back Israel.

Lees hastened to point to the token character of recognition and to call for sanctions and an end to Australian weapons exports to Israel. But the import of his statement was clear. If Albanese was pressured into a step such as “recognition,” he could be pressured into those measures as well.

All of this was aimed at preventing any objective assessment of the protests. The result is a jarring disconnect between Lees’ claims of “successes” and “victories” and the actual situation in Gaza, where Israel is rapidly expanding its brutal ethnic-cleansing operation with the clear aim of completing its “final solution” for the Palestinians.

The protests have manifestly failed to halt the Zionist regime’s barbarous war. SAlt’s perspective of endlessly appealing to the governments to shift course has served to subordinate mass opposition to the very political forces, above all the Labor government, that support the mass murder, politically and materially.

Lees and the other SAlt leaders, however, simply called for more of the same. “What we need is an organisation that can seize the moment like we did with the march,” Lees stated, adding that SAlt needed to grow to “organise on a sustained basis.”

Throughout the conference, other speakers justified the focus on protests by declaring that large demonstrations created a “sense of solidarity” and showed ordinary people how powerful they are. In reality, protests lacking any viable political perspective simply serve to let off steam, sow demoralisation and foster the illusion that nothing can be done.

There were glaring omissions by speakers on the conference’s opening night on the question of Gaza.

Lees and the other speakers made no mention of the role of the union bureaucracy. The unions have not held a single strike or industrial action to halt supplies to the Israeli war machine, instead ensuring that workers remain on the job and that shipments continue to be dispatched to Israel, including vital military goods.

Closely aligned with and increasingly integrated into the union apparatuses, the pseudo-left is intensely hostile to the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) which calls for workers to take matters into their own hands. The SEP has insisted that it is necessary for workers to form rank-and-file committees, independent of and opposed to the bureaucracy, to prepare and coordinate industrial action to block the flow of military supplies. The SEP’s call is in line with the urgent appeal issued by the Palestinian trade unions for such action early in the genocide.

There was another notable omission. In line with SAlt’s protest politics, the Israeli genocide was largely presented as a single issue, disconnected from the broader eruption of imperialist militarism on a world scale, including throughout the Middle East, particularly targeting Iran as well as the US-NATO war against Russia and the advanced US-led preparations

for conflict with China.

The Labor government's support for the Gaza genocide is inseparable from its participation in all of those conflicts, particularly its transformation of Australia into a frontline state for war with China. Australia's integration into this unfolding global conflict makes clear that moral appeals for Labor to change course are a complete dead end and a diversion from the necessary struggle by the working class against imperialist war and the capitalist system itself.

SAlt is hostile to such a political struggle. For years, it has openly supported elements of the imperialist war drive. It functioned as a cheerleader of the CIA-led regime-change operation in Syria, hailing it as "a revolution" for more than a decade. And SAlt presented the US-NATO war in Ukraine against Russia as a legitimate struggle for "democracy."

Under conditions where the Syrian "revolution" has resulted in a US-backed Islamist regime that collaborates with Israel and is carrying out pogroms against minorities, the issue was simply buried at the conference. So too was Ukraine, whose dictatorial far right regime in Kiev serves as a spearhead for Washington's drive to subjugate Russia.

New electoral fronts promote reformism

In line with its role in the protests, peddling illusions in Labor and shielding a complicit union bureaucracy, SAlt has established a series of electoral fronts that function to divert workers and youth attracted to socialism, back behind the parliamentary set-up.

SAlt established the Victorian Socialists (VS) in 2018 on the basis of seeking to secure a seat within the Victorian state parliament. Leading SAlt members openly declared that their aspiration, if they won a parliamentary position, would be to function as a "loyal" opposition to the state's big business Labor government, collaborating with it on "progressive" policies while making occasional limited criticisms.

If anything, the VS 2025 federal election campaign was even more crassly oriented to the political establishment. SAlt selected as their lead candidate Jordan van den Lamb, a social media celebrity and single-issue housing activist. During the campaign, he declared that socialism amounted to "increasing democracy," which "you can kind of do in stages under capitalism itself." He held out the illusion that Labor or even the Liberals would enact social reforms if sufficient pressure were applied.

Immediately after the federal election, SAlt announced that VS would be expanded nationally. Over the past two months, it has launched similar state and territory-based electoral fronts. A new national organisation is also being formed, under which SAlt will contest elections. Like VS, all of the new entities are based on a minimalist reformism, peddling the fraud that the social interests of working people can be secured through parliament.

The Sydney conference made clear that the SAlt leadership aims to train a membership in opportunism and duplicity. On the one hand, they had to function as loyal foot soldiers in the new electoral fronts. On the other, they had to be able to posture as "revolutionary socialists," when needed, as window dressing.

That double-act was most clearly articulated during a panel led by longstanding SAlt leader Mick Armstrong. The panel was ostensibly to draw a balance sheet on the experiences of "broad left parties" undertaken by other pseudo-left groups during the 1990s and early 2000s.

Armstrong proclaimed such efforts a "failure." The perspective of uniting "reformists and revolutionaries" in a single organisation had not been successful anywhere, he declared, giving several examples.

He ridiculed those "leftists" who had "lived in a fantasy world that Syriza and Podemos would save them." Syriza, the Greek Coalition of the

Radical Left, had been a "test case" of such experiments, he stated. Elected in January 2015, amid the collapse of the social-democratic PASOK party, Syriza promised to end crippling austerity, but "ended up imposing even harsher austerity measures than the mainstream parties had carried out."

Armstrong omitted to mention SAlt's own attitude to Syriza at the time. Armstrong himself responded to Syriza's victory with a *Red Flag* article headlined: "A stunning victory for the left in Greece," which began: "In probably the most important parliamentary elections in Europe since World War II, Greek workers have defied an incredible media scare campaign and voted solidly for the left wing anti-austerity party SYRIZA."

The article promoted the illusion that with sufficient "mobilisation" from below, Syriza would carry out its anti-austerity pledges, while accepting the entire framework of Greek and European capitalism. SAlt continued to promote this line, even as Syriza repeatedly capitulated to the European bankers within its first months in office despite widespread determined popular opposition.

All of this was a cynical exercise in covering up SAlt's record. But other political calculations were involved, hinted at by Armstrong's statement that in some circumstances it would be permissible for "revolutionaries" to enter such "broad left parties" provided they maintained a degree of organisational independence.

What was implicit in Armstrong's presentation was spelt out by other SAlt leaders in the discussion. Jerome Small, referenced the experience of the Pabloite Democratic Socialist Party (DSP), which in 2001 had created Socialist Alliance as an electoral front composed of several pseudo-left organisations. The DSP had liquidated itself entirely into Socialist Alliance, even as most of the other groups left it. The result was that Socialist Alliance today was small and "not very left-wing."

The concern of SAlt leaders is two-fold. On the one hand, they are clearly fearful that in promoting the VS national expansion as the wave of the future, the middle-class elements they are recruiting will take the logical next step and abandon even the pretence of "revolutionary" politics. SAlt would dissolve into its own amorphous creation based on appealing for limited parochial social reforms.

Their more fundamental concern is that if SAlt dispenses with its "revolutionary" rhetoric, it could simply be bypassed by workers and youth amid a deepening political radicalisation. A layer of former DSP members left Socialist Alliance in 2008, declaring its open embrace of reformism, the Greens and the Labor Party had discredited it, and subsequently joined Socialist Alternative.

The cynical, calculating character of the panel was highlighted by those who referenced the VS expansion. Rick Kuhn, for example, declared it was "important to distinguish between the broad left and the socialist project [i.e., the VS expansion]. Isn't this the same thing? It's not." Kuhn described VS and its offshoots as a means by which "revolutionaries can relate to a broader layer of people, some of whom, most of whom, are not revolutionaries."

This rather tortured and convoluted argument is simply a justification for opportunism. SAlt will continue to vaguely reference "revolutionary socialism," to attract young people on the campuses. The VS offshoots will promote the lowest common denominator of reformism to win votes in elections.

That was demonstrated by a panel, immediately following the "broad left" discussion, on the establishment of the New South Wales (NSW) Socialists. The speakers, a number of whom had participated in the "broad left" discussion, left their "revolutionary" rhetoric at the door and spoke instead as aspiring reformist politicians.

Eleanor Morley, the convenor of NSW Socialists, declared that it had been established because NSW Labor Premier Chris Minns was right-wing and hostile to protests, and because the cost of public transportation

in Sydney had risen substantially.

Omar Hassan said that the VS offshoots “want to bring a certain radicalism,” because “mainstream politics” had become “humdrum.” Speaking on the experiences of VS in Melbourne, where Hassan has repeatedly stood as a candidate, he said “you don’t door knock in Thomastown,” a working-class suburb, “about the need to overthrow the capitalist system.” Instead, one must be “concrete and relatable,” and focus on issues such as “how could this [local] council better serve the needs of this community.”

The entire panel was dominated by similar declarations of the need to campaign on the most limited, parochial reforms, completely disconnected from SAIt’s occasional “revolutionary” flourishes. In other words, contrary to Armstrong, SAIt is seeking to build a Syriza-style formation that, if given the opportunity, would produce a similar disaster for workers in Australia, to that in Greece.

Conclusion

The role of the pseudo-left, in seeking to misdirect and politically neuter mounting opposition, is a global phenomenon. In one country after another, these tendencies have worked might and main to confine the opposition to the Gaza genocide to single-issue protest politics, based on appeals to the powers that be. The more that program has been refuted by the ongoing support of the major powers and the official parties for the massive war crimes, the more the pseudo-left has doubled down insisting that nothing else can be done.

The formation of political traps based on a vague left-populism that accepts the existing capitalist order is also an international development. In the US, Bernie Sanders continues to peddle the fraud that it is possible to “fight the oligarchy” within the framework of the Democratic Party, a party of Wall Street and the CIA. In Britain, Jeremy Corbyn, who repeatedly betrayed his supporters during his tenure as Labour leader, is forming a new party based on claims that it is possible to revive a social-democracy that can achieve reforms through parliament.

All of these tendencies seek to obscure the reality that workers and young people confront a capitalist system that is in deep crisis and is incapable of any progressive reform. Globally, the ruling classes are turning to fascism and dictatorship, to suppress mass resistance to their program of austerity and war that will end in a global nuclear catastrophe.

The decisive role of the pseudo-left is to prevent workers and youth from drawing the necessary revolutionary conclusions. Speaking for an affluent layer of the upper middle-class, ensconced in the union bureaucracy, the top echelons of the public sector and academia, the pseudo-left functions as a defender of the political establishment, by presenting the fraud that it can be pressured and cajoled into ameliorating social conditions and pulling back from disaster.

The Socialist Equality Party and the world Trotskyist movement alone insist that it is necessary to build a revolutionary movement of the working class, directed against the rotting capitalist system and all of its defenders. Such a movement must be international in scope, uniting workers around the world, and it must be based on an explicitly socialist program which identifies all of the issues workers confront as interconnected manifestations of a breakdown of the entire social order.

That revolutionary perspective, based on the independent mobilisation of the working class, is the only means of halting the Gaza genocide, preventing world war, and establishing a socialist society internationally.

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