

How Australia's pseudo-left Socialist Alternative covers for the union bureaucracy

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A session at last weekend's "Socialism 2025" conference in Sydney, run by Socialist Alternative (SAlt) provided a revealing insight into the pseudo-left organisation's attitude to the trade union bureaucracy and the working class.

Titled "Socialist strategy in trade unions: rank and file versus bureaucracy," the session used minor criticisms of the union apparatus to cloak what was in fact a crude defence of the status quo, aimed at promoting the conception that no alternative exists or can be built to the existing unions and their leaderships.

SAlt's concern, expressed starkly in the discussion following the report, is that, despite the efforts of the entire pseudo-left to glorify the unions and cover up their track record of continual betrayal, workers are turning against the bureaucracy or quitting the unions in disgust and frustration.

The session was a microcosm of the conference as a whole. Against a backdrop of growing opposition to genocide, war, state and federal Labor governments and capitalism itself, SAlt spent the weekend glorifying protest politics and promoting the fraud that "real change" can be achieved through appeals to the political establishment and its left-populist electoral front, NSW Socialists.

Emma Norton, introduced as a train driver, "trade union militant" in the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) and a longstanding member of SAIt, began her report by stating that "socialists love trade unions, of course." This was followed by a brief and severely limited explanation of why unions are fundamentally hostile to and incompatible with socialism.

She noted that the "basic ideology" of the unions is rooted in capitalism and the "assumption that there is a fair price for exploitation." Campaigns run by the unions, Norton said, "necessarily end in some kind of compromise with the bosses," while on everything other than the most elementary workplace matters they subordinate the struggle of workers to "any kind of political party that will be their political patron."

"At the top of every single union," she said, are bureaucrats with "a closer relationship to the bosses than the workers," "very strong ties to the Labor Party," see strikes as a "last resort," are "deferential to courts," and "generally averse to solidarity."

Confronted with this bureaucratic layer, which Norton portrayed as inevitable and immovable, what strategy does SAIt advocate for socialists? They must "orient to the existing unions ... even when they're shit."

To the extent that this included turning to rank-and-file workers, it was from the standpoint of encouraging greater militancy within the union framework: "just fucking strikes," "actual physical pickets" and "sometimes being willing to break the law."

Socialists, Norton said, also need to "orient to the bureaucracy itself," and when they "call something halfway decent, like a strike, socialists need to run with it and try to make it bigger and better."

Put plainly, Norton and SAIt are saying that it is permissible to lie to workers. Rather than warn them of the machinations of the bureaucracy, they are seeking to present its cynical manoeuvres in rosy colours. That is the antithesis of the basic tenet of socialists, which is to say what is. Instead, it is cynical public relations on behalf of a bloated, highly-paid union bureaucracy.

Norton's comments about her own experience as a rail worker and member of the RTBU gave an indication of how this plays out in practice. She noted that the industrial action called by the union bureaucracy in last year's dispute with Sydney Trains and the New South Wales (NSW) Labor government had "serious limitations," but that "our role as socialists wasn't to just pooh-pooh" the leadership.

Instead, Norton and other SAIt members in the RTBU "tried to turn every action that did happen into a cool experience for the workers around us," while offering suggestions to the bureaucracy, to demand a "higher pay rise" and "take more serious industrial action."

The reality is that while SAIt was cheerleading for the RTBU and promoting its pathetic industrial actions as "cool experiences," the bureaucracy carried out yet another monumental betrayal, resulting in a woefully inadequate 4 percent per annum pay rise—half what workers demanded. To prepare this sellout, the union cancelled one strike after another, kowtowing at every stage to the NSW Labor government, which, with the assistance of the corporate media and industrial courts, waged a vicious and slanderous vendetta directed not only against rail workers but against the wages, conditions and democratic rights of the entire working class.

The liveliest discussion in the session erupted after a nurse raised that she and some of her co-workers were losing faith and even quitting the union after successive betrayals. This concrete, real-life counterposing of rank-and-file workers to the union bureaucracy—ostensibly the topic of the discussion—was intolerable to the SAIt leadership present.

The answer, postulated by several SAIt members, was to build a "pole of attraction" within the unions. SAIt members would seek to "capture" workers' discontented with the officials and their sell-outs. Through occasional "militant" rhetoric, SAIt would convince workers to remain in the unions, while accepting the entire framework of these bureaucratic apparatuses.

The reality that SAIt's "militants" would serve the bureaucracy and defend its framework was spelt out by longstanding member Mick Armstrong. He declared that a "political core" of "20 people in hospitals" could not possibly have a transformative effect on the

broader union membership. That is, they would have to accept the policies and actions proposed by the bureaucracy, while prettifying them to other workers.

The problem is workers themselves, Armstrong contended, warning, “we should not bullshit ourselves to think there’s all these workers that are so super-militant today.”

Referring to the strike late last year by 1,500 warehouse workers at supermarket chain Woolworths, Armstrong angrily declared that workers “could have easily” defied the instructions of union officials and stopped trucks from crossing the picket line. In other words, rather than criticise the bureaucracy for orchestrating a sellout, he blamed the workers for failing to spontaneously rise up against it.

Armstrong was not just covering for the United Workers Union leadership, but for SAAlt itself. The pseudo-left organisation was intimately involved in the dispute. From day one, their role was to defend the bureaucracy and ensure that control of the strike remained subordinated to forces that, by SAAlt’s own admission, are closer to “the bosses than the workers,” “deferential to the courts” and “generally averse to solidarity.”

A central part of SAAlt’s role in the Woolworths strike was to prevent workers from speaking to Socialist Equality Party campaigners and coming into contact with a genuine socialist perspective, based on an objective analysis of the union’s filthy track record and the class forces behind it.

SAAlt members functioned as a literal cheer squad of the UWU bureaucracy. They manned the UWU’s phoney pickets, working closely with the Labor-aligned officials even as they attacked SEP campaigners and forced them to leave. Then, when the UWU called off the strike without any democratic mandate, the SAAlt members dutifully left, declaring the struggle over and helping to pave the way for the sellout that was imposed.

Having blamed workers for the unions’ betrayals, Armstrong effectively held them responsible for SAAlt’s complicity with the bureaucracy and the political establishment, expressing the position that nothing could be done to change the course of the class struggle by “socialists just burrowing away—unless we had 20,000 members in Sydney or something.”

A similar sense of helpless fatalism was promoted by Norton in the conclusion of her report. She stated that, while unions are “fantastic organs of working-class struggle,” they are not sufficient. Workers, she said, need workers’ councils to “overcome the natural sectionalism of the unions and the problems of the union bureaucracy.”

The question of how and when such organs would be conjured into being was left unanswered, save for a reference to them “being the seething outcome of democratic mass meetings” and that membership would be automatic—“you don’t have to join.”

Norton gave no explanation of why such committees would be necessary, given her and SAAlt’s positive depiction of the unions. Moreover, given SAAlt’s explicit declaration that the official bureaucratic channels of the unions must be upheld and adhered to, how would such “seething” mass meetings occur, under conditions where the union leaderships prevent virtually all democratic fora of workers?

Most glaringly, Norton did not explain why SAAlt has never, on a single occasion, called for the formation of such committees amid an industrial dispute. These committees were thus a thing of the never never, completely unconnected to the actual line advanced by SAAlt, which always echoes and dovetails with what is being advanced by

the bureaucracy.

The entire thrust of the panel made clear that even if SAAlt did decide it was necessary to form such a committee, it would be to capture discontented workers, and to establish a faithful adjunct to the bureaucracy, not to mobilise workers against it.

The conference session, in which leading SAAlt members expressed criticism of union bureaucracies that, while limited, would never see the light of day in *Red Flag*, underscores that their position on the unions is not accidental or mistaken. But even in this setting, in front of a largely friendly audience, Norton and SAAlt were determined to cover over the class role played by the unions.

Her critique belonged in the mid-20th century, when unions were still capable of extracting limited concessions for workers within a nationally regulated economic framework. She made no attempt to explain the corporatist transformation of unions the world over, starting in the late 1970s. The contradiction between the globalisation of production and the nationalist orientation of the unions led them to become direct agents of big business, slashing the wages and conditions of workers to ensure that “Australian” capitalism was “internationally competitive.”

SAAlt is silent on this transformation, because it exposes as a fraud the conception that some combination of increased militancy and political appeals from workers could compel the union bureaucracy to make a left turn. The reality is that unions are not only “not sufficient” as organs of revolutionary struggle, but diametrically opposed to the interests of the working class, even at the most basic level of defending jobs, wages, conditions and safety within a single workplace.

Along with the rest of the pseudo-left, in Australia and globally, SAAlt continually promote and excuse the betrayals of the bureaucrats, because they represent the same upper-middle-class interests. They serve as the last line of defence for the ruling class, using anti-capitalist rhetoric and calls for greater militancy as a mechanism to keep workers locked into the framework of the union bureaucracy and Labor.

To escape this stranglehold, workers need their own organisations, independent from the union leaders and democratically run rank-and-file committees. They must be fought for and built in every workplace, not on the basis of reforming or advising the bureaucracy, but of destroying it and returning the power—and the vast financial resources—hoarded by the apparatus to workers themselves.

Such rank-and-file committees will provide the venue and means to bring together union and non-union workers, as well as youth and the unemployed, across different industries and around the world, in a unified struggle for jobs, wages, conditions and democratic rights. This is not just an industrial fight, but a political one as well, directed against the capitalist system and all of its organs, including Labor and the unions, as well as their pseudo-left defenders.



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