

# The disinterest of Australian pseudo-left Socialist Alternative in the war on Iran

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The illegal US war against Iran marks a turning point. It is not only a return to the most blatant forms of imperialist criminality, a war of extermination waged against a country of 93 million people, but a component of a developing global conflict that threatens the very future of humanity.

In Australia, as internationally, there is mass opposition to the war, with the latest opinion polling showing that 72 percent of the population is hostile to the attack on Iran. Anger over the bombardment itself is intersecting with growing concern over the spike in petrol costs and inflation being imposed on the working class.

The fight against this war is at the cutting edge of the struggle waged by genuine socialists. As the world Trotskyist movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and its sections, the Socialist Equality Parties, have explained, the war is a concentrated expression of the breakdown of capitalism. It is not the result of the grotesque and criminal persona of the president of the United States, Donald Trump, but the only means by which a crisis-racked American imperialism attempts to resolve its crisis at the expense of its rivals and of the working class internationally.

Contained within it are all the central issues facing the working class: the threat of a world war, the real danger of nuclear annihilation, the turn to authoritarianism and the relationship between war abroad and the offensive on social and democratic rights domestically.

Above all, the ICFI has stressed that the war underscores the urgency of building an independent movement of the working class, based on a socialist and internationalist perspective, as the only means of halting the descent into catastrophe.

The response of Socialist Alternative (SAlt), Australia's largest pseudo-left organisation, has been the diametric opposite. The aim and cumulative impact of both its coverage and its activities related to the war, have been to downplay the significance of what is unfolding and to prevent workers and youth from drawing any political lessons.

SAlt's response to the war has substantially been a non-response. The distinct impression from its publication, *Red Flag*, is that the war is viewed as a political inconvenience by this pseudo-left organisation.

That is because the scale of the war and its undeniably global character exposes the utter bankruptcy of SAlt's political perspective, based upon the promotion of appeals to the Labor government and claims that voting for its own reformist electoral fronts in state elections will improve the situation confronting the working class, within the existing national social and political order.

*Red Flag* wrote about the war on March 1, the day after it was launched, in a comment denouncing the US attack as illegal and based upon lies. It gave no indication of what workers and young people should do or how the war could be opposed, concluding only that "We have to resist this descent into barbarism."

Then, for the best part of nine days, *Red Flag* fell silent on the war, publishing nothing about it. For much of that time, its initial March 1

comment was buried on the *Red Flag* website, and would scarcely have been visible to the casual observer.

That was strange, extraordinary and has yet to be explained. SAlt, which claims to be socialist and anti-war, had nothing whatsoever to say about a massive and criminal war as its opening stages were unfolding and it was rapidly engulfing the entire Middle East.

While it had already published its March 1 statement, the nine-day gap inevitably brought to mind the old adage that "silence is consent." Let us recall what actually happened in the first nine days.

The first of those nine days saw the school bombing, killing up to 175 girls. On the same day, the US carried out the targeted assassination of Iran's leader, the Ayatollah Khamenei and many of the government's senior officials. Trump declared the US had actually killed a number of senior leaders who had been pinpointed by the US administration as possible replacements for Khamenei. In addition, there were more than 900 strikes against 500 targets nationwide. Tehran, Isfahan, Kermanshah and many other cities and towns were bombed. Hundreds of Iranians were killed and thousands injured.

A most significant event which occurred in the first nine days was the sinking of the IRIS Dena off the coast of Sri Lanka by a US submarine. The fact that three Australian naval personnel were present made clear that the Australian government was not just issuing verbal support but was actively involved, including the high possibility that North West Cape intelligence station provided the US with the location of the frigate.

Under conditions of a deluge of pro-war propaganda, in Australia and the other imperialist centres, SAlt abandoned the scene to the government officials and corporate pundits, doing nothing to combat their lies or to advance an alternative.

In politics, such unexplained silences, particularly about the major political development of the day, very frequently indicate internal divisions within an organisation.

The question is whether there were elements of SAlt, including in its leadership, who viewed *Red Flag's* initial comment, limited as it was, as too forthright and unambiguous a denunciation of the war? SAlt has, for well over a decade, repeatedly supported imperialist interventions, including in the Middle East, on the basis of the same phony humanitarian pretexts as have been deployed by the imperialist powers and the press in their assault on Iran.

Whatever the backroom manoeuvrings, it was evidently decided by SAlt's leadership that to maintain any credibility, it would need to ostensibly oppose the war. *Red Flag* has since published a number of articles, offering general criticisms of the illegality of the war and saying almost nothing about what is to be done about it.

Those articles, however, have had no discernible impact on SAlt's activities.

This Easter long weekend, it is holding its annual Marxism conference. The outbreak of a massive war has not altered its program even slightly. There is not a single session, among the roughly 100 that have been listed,

specifically devoted to the war against Iran. At the opening night of the conference on Thursday, the war was referenced, but only briefly and as one thing among many.

*Red Flag's* belated coverage of the war has a pro forma, going through the motions character to it. There is, nevertheless, enough material, combined with the history and trajectory of SAlt, to form a clear idea of its political line.

### **Covering for the Labor government**

There is an inverse relationship between the speed and enthusiasm with which the Australian Labor government embraced the illegal war on Iran, and the tardiness and delay of SAlt in saying anything about it. And that is not an accident. Amid the paucity of its coverage of the war, a clear theme emerges: an attempt by SAlt to downplay the role of the Labor government and to prevent any conclusions from being drawn from its active participation in the war.

The Labor government was among the first in the world to endorse the war, with Prime Minister Anthony Albanese rushing out a statement on the night of February 28, just hours after Trump had launched his sneak attack, explicitly backing the bombardment and repeating the lies used to justify it.

*Red Flag* did not write specifically on Labor's embrace of the war for the best part of a fortnight. And when it did, its March 12 article was flippantly titled: "Albanese signs up for Trump's war without even asking what it's about." That was nonsense and a cover for Labor. Of course Albanese knew that the war was for regime-change and complete US dominance of Iran.

The article lamented Labor's embrace of the war, but the cover continued. *Red Flag* treated as good coin Labor's claim not to have had forewarning of the attack, even though it is a central US ally and the Australian military is completely integrated into the American war machine. Labor's claim, contrary to *Red Flag*, simply has no credibility.

Labor's embrace of the war has been so open that promoting illusions that it can be pressured to change course, SAlt's stock in trade in relationship to the Gaza genocide, is difficult. The article nevertheless suggested that line by way of historical falsification.

It contrasted Labor's support for the attack on Iran with its "response to the Iraq war in 2003." *Red Flag* favourably quoted a speech made by Albanese at the time and baldly declared that "Labor leader at the time, Simon Crean, denounced the war, and Labor MPs spoke at demonstrations against it." That is simply a pro-Labor falsification of history.

In reality, in the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq, Labor leaders repeated all of the lies used to justify the assault on Iraq, including that it possessed weapons of mass destruction. Labor's sole criticism, essentially policy advice to the criminal Bush administration in the US and its Liberal-National counterpart in Australia, was that the war should not be launched until it received a United Nations rubber stamp. When the US invaded without the sanction, Labor swung behind the war. A Labor government, elected in 2007 and including Albanese and other current Labor leaders, would directly continue and oversee Australia's participation in the rape and occupation of Iraq.

*Red Flag's* falsification was aimed at covering up the fact that Labor's support for the Iran war is entirely in keeping with its role and record as the preeminent party of imperialist war. It has either presided over or supported from opposition Australia's predatory participation in every major war of the 20th and 21st centuries, from the two world wars, to Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan.

In addition to its falsification of Labor's record, *Red Flag* has not

published articles specifically dealing with the scope of Australian participation in the war. There is no article dedicated to the participation of Australian personnel in a sneak attack on an Iranian vessel by a US attack submarine off the Sri Lankan coast; even Albanese's announcement last month that Australia was dispatching missiles, an advanced warplane and personnel to engage in hostilities with Iran was not considered significant enough for an article to be written about it.

And what does SAlt propose workers and youth in Australia do? *Red Flag's* lengthiest article, by SAlt leader Tom Bramble, concluded by raising the need to demand an end to the war in Iran and the Middle East. However, its final lines were: "And in Australia, the priorities must be to shut down US bases, expel all US military personnel, scrap the AUKUS nuclear submarines and end all US-Australia military cooperation."

Those "priorities" were not connected in any way to building a socialist movement of the working class against the Labor government. In the absence of such a connection, the call for an end to the AUKUS pact with the US and the UK and a break with the US alliance is simply alternative policy advice for the Australian ruling class.

Indeed, a minority segment of the ruling class has put forward precisely the same demands as Bramble, not because they are opposed to war, but because they are fearful of the implications for Australian capitalism of being tied fully to an American imperialism that is on the war path globally, including in the Indo-Pacific against Australia's largest trading partner China. The call for an end to the US alliance has also been the central axis of the limited criticisms of the Iran war made by the Greens, a party that is openly pro-capitalist and that defends Australia's "national interests," i.e., those of big business and the corporations.

### **SAlt's pro-imperialist record amid a developing world war**

Bramble referenced the fact that the US attack on Iran was directed against other powers, above all Russia and China. But as the above makes clear, he did not draw the conclusion that what is needed is a global anti-war movement of the working class, instead peddling a variety of "left" Australian nationalism. And Bramble's reference to the global dimensions of the war was an exception, not repeated in other *Red Flag* coverage.

Throughout the genocide in Gaza, SAlt has presented the atrocities inflicted there as a single issue, unconnected to anything else. That has covered up the reality that the US-Israeli mass murder of the Palestinians has always been a component of a broader offensive throughout the Middle East, above all directed against Iran, and a developing global confrontation targeting Russia and China. SAlt's attempts to abstract the genocide from this context have served its protest politics line of endless plaintive appeals to the Labor government to end its support for Israel.

But there is another reason why SAlt says little or nothing about the development of world war. That is because SAlt has openly supported US imperialism in a number of the fronts of this emerging global conflict.

It enthusiastically backed the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine. It has presented the war, prepared and provoked by Washington as part of long-term plans for a direct assault on Russia, as a defence of Ukrainian democracy and human rights. That is a straight repeat of the propaganda of the imperialist powers themselves, who have transformed Ukraine into a garrison state on Russia's border and who are directing the war against Moscow.

SAlt's support for the war against Russia is not an aberration. It has taken the same line in the Middle East and North Africa, backing US-NATO regime change operations against Libya and then Syria in the early 2010s.

Even within the pro-imperialist pseudo-left, SAlt's support for the

regime-change in Syria has been particularly explicit and pronounced. In 2012 SAlt leader Corey Oakley declared that the Syrian civil war meant “the time for ‘knee-jerk anti-imperialism’ has now passed.” The world “has changed,” Oakley asserted, and “imperialism, in the sense of Western neo-colonialism, is not the main threat facing the masses of Syria, or of the Arab world as a whole.” At that time, the CIA was funnelling billions of dollars in funds and arms to Islamist forces, in a bid to unseat the Syrian regime of Bashar Al-Assad.

The operation against Syria was inextricably tied to US confrontation with Iran and Russia, with which Assad was allied. Here too, Oakley advanced the line of the US State Department. In 2014, Oakley wrote that “the British, Russian, French and US imperialists are no longer the only independent powers in the region.” Instead, countries such as Iran were “powerful capitalist states in their own right, playing the imperialist game, not mere clients of bigger powers.”

That falsified the dynamic of the war entirely. Iran provided defensive assistance to Assad, whose government was beset by a massive CIA-led regime-change operation.

The depiction of Iran as “imperialist” was also a gross falsification from an historical and theoretical standpoint. For Marxists, the imperialist powers are the centres of global finance capital, that throughout the 20th century engaged in the division and redivision of the world through predatory wars for resources, markets and profits. And for Marxists, Iran is not an imperialist power, but a historically oppressed nation that has been a continuous target of imperialism.

By drawing an equal sign between imperialist powers such as the US and Iran, and in fact presenting the latter as a more powerful player in the Middle East, Oakley and SAlt were functioning as imperialist propagandists. Their line, so clearly refuted by the war that is currently underway, served to disorient and poison public opinion, in a manner that could only serve to justify imperialist attacks on Iran.

## Conclusion

The openly pro-imperialist positions of SAlt, their misdirection of the movement against the Gaza genocide and their disinterest in the war that is being waged against Iran are not mistaken episodes. They are a political line reflecting definite class interests.

Notwithstanding its name, SAlt has nothing to do with socialism or the fight for the interests of the working class. It traces its origins to a right-wing split from the Trotskyist movement, the Fourth International, decades ago, which rejected the revolutionary role of the working class, instead orienting to social democracy and in the process accommodating imperialism.

Decades on, SAlt has shifted far to the right. It speaks for an affluent layer of the upper middle-class, ensconced in academia, the top echelons of the public sector and the trade union bureaucracy. This social constituency, which has benefited from imperialist war, seeks to advance its own privileges within the framework of capitalism, particularly through the deployment of identity politics based on race, gender and sexuality, not class.

SAlt’s current preoccupation is with the national expansion of its Victorian Socialists’ electoral front. The new electoral outfits that SAlt has established are based on a phony left-populism, which asserts the possibility of parliamentary reform in a period of capitalist breakdown and war. To advance these fronts, SAlt is cultivating ties with the union bureaucracy, which functions as a police force suppressing working class struggle and is a central ally of the pro-war Labor government.

A major war is a test of every political tendency, and from that

standpoint the assault on Iran has exposed SAlt’s utter bankruptcy.

Workers and young people should reject the pro-imperialist politics of the pseudo-left, and their cynical evasions, and instead take up the fight to build a socialist and internationalist anti-war movement of the working class. It is the International Committee of the Fourth International and the Socialist Equality Party that are dedicated to that fight. Apply to join today.



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