

Australian pseudo-left Socialist Alternative hysterically denounces workers who voted for One Nation

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Socialist Alternative's annual Marxism conference, held over the Easter long weekend, marked a further lurch to the right by this pseudo-left organisation.

That was shown by the suppression of any discussion of the US war against Iran, which was not the subject of a single one of the conference's almost 150 panels. SAlt displayed a contemptuous indifference to the historic war crimes that are underway and covered for the Australian Labor government's active participation in it.

It was also demonstrated by the central theme of the event, the rise of the far-right and the anti-immigrant One Nation party in Australia. SAlt's essential line is to blame the population, including sections of workers, thus consciously deflecting attention from those who are responsible for the ability of the far-right demagogues to win a hearing: Labor and the corporatised trade union bureaucracy.

That was most starkly expressed in the contributions of SAlt's longtime leader Mick Armstrong. He denounced workers who voted for One Nation or may have indicated support for it in opinion polls as "lumpen" and "racist scum" who had to be "physically crushed."

Armstrong's hysterical outbursts were a concentrated expression of the real class character of the pseudo-left. Whatever the "left" phraseology it employs, SAlt represents affluent layers of the upper middle-class that are intensely hostile to the working class and the fight for a socialist perspective within it.

Armstrong gave a presentation on One Nation's result in the South Australian state election, where the far-right party won 22 percent of the primary vote.

Armstrong said nothing concrete about the context of the election, which occurred amid an enormous intensification of the global crisis of capitalism. He did not mention the Iran war, which was raging when the election was held on March 21, nor its social consequences in the massive surge in petrol prices and other essential goods.

Armstrong also was silent on the record of the incumbent state Labor government, which over the previous four years had imposed the cost-of-living crisis on ordinary people while presiding over the destruction of social services.

Covering up this context served a definite political purpose. Armstrong was denying the obvious reality that One Nation was

only able to pick up support by pitching to seething social discontent and widespread hostility to the major parties.

One Nation's most substantial votes were in rural and regional areas. It picked up three lower house seats from the Liberals, amid an existential crisis of the traditional conservative party.

But One Nation also received significant votes in Adelaide's working-class northern suburbs. In the seat of Elizabeth, One Nation received 33 percent of the primary vote, compared to Labor's 41.5 percent. In Port Adelaide it received 20 percent of the primary vote and in Mawson won over 25 percent.

These have been safe Labor seats for decades and decades. The sharp swings were clearly an expression of the anger over Labor's ruthless pro-business policies, which One Nation exploited.

But Armstrong's "analysis" of those results was simply an angry denunciation of ordinary people and an utterly false assertion that they were not part of the working class. Armstrong noted that "Left-wing people can often see the outer suburbs, and particularly people who do manual work in the outer suburbs, as quintessentially working class." He responded: "I think we've got to be pretty skeptical about that."

Layers of workers that had previously been employed in construction and other industries had become self-employed contractors, Armstrong said, before shouting that "Being a tradie does not make you working class!"

Armstrong noted polling which he said showed higher support for One Nation among poorer layers of the population, and declared: "Most poor people are not proletarians." They were "lumpenised layers of society" such as "retired people and students."

Those statements were an open display of middle-class prejudice and disdain for working people. They were also a grotesque falsification. The term "lumpen proletariat" has been used by the Marxist movement as a scientific designation, not an epithet, to denote layers of the population shut out of socio-economic life and thoroughly declassed.

Karl Marx and Frederick Engels frequently used the term to refer to criminals who had no connection to the working class and could be mobilised against its struggles by governments and the ruling elites. The idea that socialists view all student youth, retired workers and "poor people" as being akin to criminals and as enemies of the working class is simply obscene.

As for tradespeople, they constitute fully 14 percent of the labour force. Often working for themselves as independent contractors and living a hand to mouth existence, they are intimately connected to the working class across every major branch of industry.

Armstrong said nothing about why the number of tradies has skyrocketed over the past 40 years, except for a vague reference to “neoliberalism.” And in comments substantially centring on Elizabeth, the former centre of South Australia’s auto production, he did not mention the shutdown of the entire car industry, which forced many workers to become individual contractors.

Again he was covering up for the Labor and the union bureaucracy. The growth of tradespeople is the direct consequence of the massive assault on jobs, spearheaded by the Accords between Labor governments, the trade union bureaucracy and the major corporations in the 1980s and 1990s. In a combined offensive, they shut down whole sections of industry, laid off hundreds of thousands of workers and initiated an assault on wages and conditions that has continued to this day. All of this was enforced by the union bureaucracy, which shutdown shop committees and other forms of working-class organisation and suppressed any struggle against the massive cuts.

In Elizabeth, it was the state Labor governments and the unions that helped the car companies to impose round after round of redundancies, and to ensure an “orderly closure” of what remained of the GM Holden plant in 2016, ending auto manufacturing altogether. The result has been a social disaster, with real unemployment in the area approaching 20 percent, poverty rates far above the national average and whole generations consigned to a future of precarious and insecure work, or unemployment.

While denouncing the victims of this offensive, Armstrong said not a word about its perpetrators in Labor and the union bureaucracy. That is because SAlt functions as an adjunct of the union leaderships, promoting the fraud that they represent the working class, justifying their sellouts and opposing any independent rank-and-file organisation.

It is precisely Labor and the union bureaucracy that has created the social crisis upon which far right forces such as One Nation prey. And Labor and the unions themselves have always been based on anti-immigrant Australian nationalism, that is very similar to the demagoguery of One Nation itself.

The federal Labor government has stepped up the persecution of refugees, and is blaming immigrants for the social crisis created by its own pro-business policies. While supporting the Israeli genocide in Gaza and participating in the war against Iran, it is completing Australia’s transformation into a frontline state for a US-led war against China. That has gone hand in hand with Labor leading a massive crackdown on opposition to the genocide and anti-war sentiment. On all of these fronts, there are no fundamental differences between Labor and One Nation.

The fight against reaction, including the far-right, thus requires the building of a socialist movement of the working class, independent of and implacably opposed to Labor and the union bureaucracy. But that is precisely what the pseudo-left is seeking to prevent. Armstrong and other SAlt speakers instead called for the “rebuilding” of the unions, and promoted their electoral fronts,

which are based on opportunist manoeuvres oriented to the union bureaucracy, the Greens and Labor itself.

The ballots in working-class suburbs for One Nation had the character of a protest vote. Socialists explain to workers that such a protest is utterly bankrupt. One Nation is a vicious capitalist party. Its anti-immigrant demagoguery serves to divide and weaken the working class and to divert it from a struggle against the source of the social crisis, the capitalist system itself. One Nation is being promoted by elements of the ruling class, including the multi-billionaire Gina Rinehart, to direct social discontent into reactionary channels and to engineer a further lurch to the right by the entire political establishment.

But SAlt’s positions have nothing to do with a fight against the far-right. The clear subtext of Armstrong’s remarks was fear and anger over the fact that the grip of Labor and the union bureaucracy is breaking down in key areas of the working class. He was at pains to deny that such a shift was occurring, ludicrously claiming that Labor still retained a stable mass working-class voting base, despite the swings against it, which are a continuation of a decades-long trend.

It is in that context that Armstrong’s outburst at another panel on the far-right should be viewed. Speaking from the floor, he declared that the roughly 20 percent of people who voted for One Nation are “racist scum” who must be “physically crushed,” and that “the idea they can be won to socialism is a nonsense.”

This was the voice of a loyal ally of the Labor and trade union bureaucracy, insisting that workers are irredeemably backward, that they will never make a break from the capitalist parties and that if they do, even in the most disoriented form, they should be suppressed.

Armstrong’s comment recalls the remarks of another SAlt leader, Corey Oakley, at last year’s Marxism conference, where he declared that “The working class is f.cked in terms of where the class struggle is at.” It is just that Armstrong was even more explicit in blurting out SAlt’s hostility to the working class.

As significant as the remarks was the response. Armstrong’s rabid denunciations of “poor people” and “tradies” were enthusiastically applauded by the audience at the Marxism conference, who are drawn to SAlt’s hostility to the fight for the political independence of the working class and socialism that is central to Marxism.



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