

The Victorian Socialists: A pseudo-left trap for growing anti-capitalist sentiment

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27 October 2026

The November 28 Victorian state election is a crisis election amid the breakdown of Australia's two-party political system. Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition face massive hostility over declining living standards, the destruction of essential social services and their bipartisan agenda of war and austerity. The far-right One Nation party is seeking to exploit this disaffection through a phoney populist pitch and anti-immigrant agitation.

Among growing numbers of workers and young people, anger towards the political establishment is finding expression in hostility to capitalism and an attraction to socialism. This raises critical questions: What is a genuine socialist perspective, how must it be fought for, and which organisations represent it? The answers require an examination of the program and class character of organisations claiming to represent socialism.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) insists that the election will resolve none of the immense problems confronting workers and youth—war, climate change, social devastation and the relentless attacks on essential democratic rights. There is no solution to any of these issues just within Victoria or Australia, nor within the framework of the profit system dominated by giant global corporations and financial institutions.

Whichever capitalist party forms the next government, the assault on living standards and essential services will intensify, alongside Australia's integration into US-led preparations for a catastrophic world war. The SEP is standing Morgan Peach and Peter Byrne in the Northern Metropolitan upper-house region to build an independent movement of the working class, including the formation of rank and file committees in factories, workplaces, communities, schools and universities against Labor, the Coalition, the Greens, the trade union bureaucracy and the entire capitalist political establishment based on a revolutionary socialist and internationalist program.

The pseudo-left Socialist Alternative (SAlt) organisation is advancing a diametrically opposed perspective through its electoral front, Victorian Socialists (VS), which is mounting its largest-ever campaign in the state election.

While seeking votes on the basis of the growing attraction to socialism, VS advances a program that has nothing to do with a genuine struggle for socialism. It is functioning as a vital political safety valve for the ruling class by diverting growing anti-capitalist sentiment into the dead-end of protest and pressure politics. Its utterly parochial campaign peddles the illusion that the immense problems confronting workers can be resolved through limited parliamentary reforms within the framework of capitalism as the ruling elites hurtle towards world war and dictatorship.

The very fact that the Victorian Socialists are standing candidates in every seat in both houses of parliament is itself a class orientation. Parliament is not a neutral institution that can be made to serve the working class by electing better individuals; it is a central instrument of the capitalist state. Under conditions in which parliamentary democracy is itself breaking down amid war, austerity and the turn to authoritarian rule,

the Victorian Socialists are attempting to railroad growing anti-capitalist sentiment back into the very setup through which this reactionary agenda is being imposed. The only force that can resolve what is an existential crisis of capitalism is the working class, the class that produces everything yet owns nothing.

Victorian Socialists peddle the thin gruel of reformism

The most striking feature of the Victorian Socialists' election manifesto and campaign material is the absence of any analysis of, or even substantial reference to, the unprecedented global economic and political crisis of capitalism.

The election is being held amid the opening stages of an undeclared third world war expressed on multiple fronts. The US and NATO are engaged in increasingly direct hostilities against Russia in Ukraine, with open discussion of the prospect of nuclear war. Trump is threatening renewed attacks on Iran, a country of 90 million people, as part of an imperialist onslaught throughout the Middle East, including the seizure of Gaza, the West Bank and the south of Lebanon by Israel. The US and its allies, including Australia, are accelerating their preparations for an assault on China, the main target of American imperialism.

The VS manifesto says virtually nothing about the implications of this global war, from the threat it poses to humanity's future to its role in driving austerity and a turn to dictatorship internationally. To the extent any of these wars are mentioned, they are brief and pro forma references, not least because SAlt supports some of them.

Notably, there is no mention of the US-led war against Russia in Ukraine, which SAlt has justified as part of a broader pro-imperialist line, including its previous support for Western-backed regime-change operations in Syria and Libya using extremist Islamist militias.

Elsewhere, VS has called for the Australian state to adopt a "non-aligned" position in international relations. This dovetails with calls by sections of the ruling class for an "independent" foreign policy to better advance Australian imperialism's own predatory interests. It is the opposite of a socialist perspective, which explains that imperialist war is the inevitable product of capitalism and can only be ended through an international movement of the working class aimed at overturning the profit system and its outmoded division of the world into rival nation states.

Even national Australian politics gets short shrift in the VS manifesto, which is tailored to the state-based parochialism promoted by capitalist parties in Victoria. A prominent heading, "Our vision for a better, fairer Victoria," suggests that the problems facing working people can be resolved or ameliorated within a single state under the existing social order.

VS advances reforms including a major expansion of public housing, wage increases and improvements to healthcare and education. It denounces inequality and the domination of the ultra-wealthy. But its policies are exceptionally limited and do not even rise to the level of Labor's abandoned program for "the socialization of the means of industry, production, distribution and exchange"—which, like the policies of VS, was there as window-dressing.

VS calls for a state-owned bank, not the nationalisation of the existing banks. It advocates public ownership of energy and some essential infrastructure, while leaving vast swathes of the corporate elite untouched. Even the billionaires get off relatively lightly, with a proposed 10 percent wealth tax rather than expropriation.

For all its denunciations of capitalism, this reformist program leaves the levers of economic power in the hands of the banks and major corporations. Within the framework of capitalism, even these measures are completely unviable. VS characterises Australia, or more precisely Victoria, as "wealthy" and readily able to fund reforms, ignoring the reality of a major slump in the real economy, a massive financial bubble, ballooning state and federal debt and an intensifying austerity offensive.

If there is no underlying crisis, the result of the inherent contradictions of capitalism, between globalised production and the nation state system, and socialised production and the private ownership of the productive forces, then pressure and appeals are presented as possible and legitimate. The VS manifesto denies the objective basis for the turn by the outmoded capitalist classes to a program of war against their rivals and war against the working class, to justify its promotion of threadbare reformist palliatives.

The VS program closely resembles that of the Greens, a capitalist party that advances a "wish list" of policies while collaborating with pro-business Labor governments. VS attempts to distinguish itself through references to socialism, a "movement from below" and even vague calls for "revolutionary change." But the operative clauses of its manifesto present a movement "outside parliament" as "the only way change can be won inside parliament."

In its practical campaign, even SAlt's cynical use of "revolutionary" phraseology is largely dispensed with. Omar Hassan, a lead VS candidate and longstanding SAlt leader, recently told right-wing radio host Tom Elliott that "All the best things about [our society] have just a little kernel of socialist principles in it." Hassan cited universal healthcare, which has never remotely existed in practice, and declared: "We want to extend that to the whole economy."

This presentation conceals the basic reality that the ruling class and its political representatives are destroying the last vestiges of the welfare state in a social counterrevolution. Only by the working class taking power, expropriating the corporations and billionaires, and beginning the socialist transformation of society can even the most basic social rights be secured.

The same reformist orientation is evident in the statements of numerous VS candidates.

Some make no substantive reference to socialism at all, while others openly present their role as securing better parliamentary representation for local communities, in formulations indistinguishable from those used by Labor or the Greens. Some regional candidates complain that services in their areas have been neglected compared with Melbourne, reproducing the regional-versus-metropolitan grievances long exploited by right-wing populists to divide working people.

The catch-all character of the campaign is underscored by VS's decision to stand in every electorate across Victoria, including the wealthiest. Candidates in these electorates likewise promise to represent "their communities." VS is seeking to assemble the broadest possible electoral constituency around diffuse opposition, populist slogans and promises of parliamentary reform.

This underscores the fraud in one of the VS campaign's central claims: that it is building a "left" alternative capable of countering growing support for the far-right One Nation party.

VS acknowledges that the discrediting of Labor has created conditions in which One Nation can make a phoney populist pitch. Yet its own campaign within the framework of parliament promotes the sham that governments, particularly Labor, can be pressured for limited concessions. On the other hand, as blurted out by its leading member Mick Armstrong in the aftermath of the South Australian election campaign, SAlt blames workers who voted for One Nation, branding them as irredeemably racist and backward.

Labor is chiefly responsible for the decades of attacks on jobs, wages, living standards that have produced immense social anger. One Nation is seeking to exploit this disaffection, diverting hostility towards the political establishment into nationalism, anti-immigrant chauvinism and attacks on the working class.

Central to this process has been the role of the trade union bureaucracy. The unions have systematically suppressed workers' struggles, imposed sellout agreements and maintained the political subordination of the working class to Labor. This has enabled successive governments to intensify their austerity offensive while preventing the emergence of an independent working-class response, creating the political vacuum that the far right is seeking to fill.

VS covers up this record. While condemning Labor, its manifesto is almost silent on the role of the union bureaucracy, Labor's chief prop. Instead, it calls for the unions to be strengthened and peddles the illusion that they can be made more "militant," under conditions in which their apparatuses play the central role in enforcing cuts to jobs, wages and conditions and suppressing the development of a movement of the working class.

The claim that VS offers an answer to One Nation is false. Its parliamentary reformism and promotion of the existing union structures serve to confine growing opposition within the very political framework that has produced the present crisis. Far from combating the far right, this perspective obstructs the development of the genuine socialist movement of the working class necessary to oppose the entire capitalist political establishment.

A party without a program

The Victorian election is the first major electoral intervention since SAlt completed its nationwide expansion of the VS model with the establishment of the Australian Socialist Party (ASP) in July.

SAlt proclaimed the founding conference a "historic" breakthrough, presenting the ASP not merely as another socialist organisation but as *the* socialist party in Australia. Yet it published almost nothing about the proceedings. More than three months later, no record of the debates or resolutions has appeared, while the ASP's national website remains almost devoid of political content.

The most revealing accounts have come from political opponents. According to *Labour Tribune*, a publication associated with members of Labor's "left," the conference not only failed to adopt a founding program. It rejected a proposal to begin drafting one.

The publication reported that a leading SAlt member warned that a program risked committing the party to positions that might subsequently become unpopular. Another defended retaining the flexibility to respond to events as they arose.

These arguments expose the utterly opportunist foundations of the ASP. Leon Trotsky, the Russian revolutionary and founder of the Fourth

International, insisted: “The significance of the program is the significance of the party.” A program, which as Trotsky said is a “common understanding of the events” of the epoch and “of the tasks” that flow from it, defines the very political identity of a party and the class interests it represents.

The absence of a formal program does not mean the ASP has no political perspective. Its operative program is the left-populist electoral politics already advanced by VS. The rejection of binding political principles leaves it free to adapt to anything and anyone and to collaborate with forces ranging from the union bureaucracy and Greens to sections of Labor and even, under certain circumstances, the far-right.

The international precedents are a warning. The VS election manifesto declares that millions internationally have voted for parties like itself. It does not identify these organisations, but the most prominent examples of this international left populist tendency include Syriza in Greece, the Corbyn movement in Britain and the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) in the United States.

Syriza was elected in 2015 on promises to end austerity, only to impose the deepest cuts in Europe on behalf of the banks and financial institutions. Jeremy Corbyn became leader of the British Labour Party by posturing as a “left,” only to capitulate endlessly to the right-wing Blairites. Bernie Sanders attracted millions of votes with promises of a “political revolution,” before directing his supporters behind the Democratic Party establishment and creating the conditions for the fascist Trump to be elected.

The DSA’s Zohran Mamdani, elected mayor of New York last year amid widespread hostility to inequality and the political establishment has gone further. Mamdani has established an extraordinary relationship with Trump, holding repeated meetings with him, including hosting Trump at his official residence. He has pledged to collaborate with Trump, while cultivating relations with Wall Street, Zionist defenders of the Gaza genocide and the Democratic Party establishment.

These are the political models that SAlt is emulating. Far from representing a challenge to capitalism, such left-populist formations defend the domination of the banks and corporations and the capitalist state. Their record is one of imposing or facilitating massive attacks on the working class, suppressing opposition and paving the way for the far right. In Mamdani’s case, this has extended to open collaboration with the fascist Trump.

The revolutionary alternative

The social base of this left-populist politics is a privileged layer of the upper-middle class whose material interests are bound up with the existing capitalist order. For all its radical-sounding rhetoric, this milieu seeks to advance its interests through positions and influence within parliament, the trade union bureaucracy and other institutions of capitalist society. It is hostile to a revolutionary movement of the working class that would threaten its privileges.

SAlt’s emergence as a representative of this social layer is not an aberration. It is the result of a protracted political evolution rooted in its predecessors’ break with Marxism and Trotskyism decades ago, their repudiation of the revolutionary role of the working class and their turn towards social democracy and other political forces. Its accelerating shift to the right is a response by these privileged social interests to the immense crisis of capitalism in Australia and internationally, as the ruling elites hurtle towards war, dictatorship and social counterrevolution.

The Socialist Equality Party advances the diametrically opposed perspective: the international mobilisation of the working class against

capitalism. The SEP fights to unleash the immense social power of workers through the building of rank-and-file committees, independent of the union bureaucracies, to unify their struggles across industries and national borders against war, austerity and capitalist rule.

We are living through the most serious times, and such times demand serious politics. The SEP bases itself on the entire heritage of the struggle for Marxism and Trotskyism, drawing the lessons of the victories and defeats of the international working class. Its central task is to build the revolutionary leadership necessary for the immense class struggles that are developing and will inevitably erupt.

We urge workers and young people turning towards socialism to study this history, take up the fight for an international socialist perspective by supporting and taking part in our election campaign and joining the Socialist Equality Party.



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