

Uniting the Socialist Left: the Australian Experience

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An interview with Peter Boyle. Peter Boyle is National Secretary of the Democratic Socialist Perspective (DSP), a Marxist tendency in the Socialist Alliance in Australia. He was interviewed by Socialist Voice co-editor Roger Annis.

SV: The Australian left founded a project of left unity and activism in 2001. Can you describe the early years of that project and what it achieved?

PB: The Socialist Alliance was formed in 2001 on the back of great optimism about the prospects for left revival in the wake of the rise of a movement at that time against capitalist globalization. Some 20,000 people had participated in a three-day long blockade of a summit of the World Economic Forum in Melbourne the previous year. That was Australia's "Seattle" [\[1\]](#) and it was followed up on May 1, 2001 with mass blockades of the stock exchanges in all the capital cities of the country.

The formation of the Socialist Alliance was just one of a number of initiatives at the time to take this political momentum forward. While it has not had a smooth road since then, the Socialist Alliance is the only one of these initiatives surviving today in Australia. Regroupment projects inspired by anarchist ideology and attempts to create local social forums all proved short-lived.

The Socialist Alliance experience has been shaped by the ebbs and flows of the social movements. It became clear after the forward momentum of the post-Seattle anti-capitalist movement was cut off - after the failure of the global mass movements to stop the 2003 invasion of Iraq - that we were overoptimistic in 2001. We have seen movement retreats since then. But there have been some advances, too.

We should also see the connections between the global wave of anti-capitalist sentiment a decade ago and the new rise of anti-capitalist sentiment today: one builds on the other.

SV: What political forces initiated Socialist Alliance, and what new forces have been won to it?

PB: The Socialist Alliance was initiated by the Democratic Socialist Party (the predecessor to the Democratic Socialist Perspective of today) and the International Socialist Organisation. A handful of smaller left groups joined in. Other left groups, such as the Communist Party of Australia and Socialist Alternative, were invited but declined to join the Alliance.

The groups that did join the Alliance agreed on a common political platform focused on immediate class struggle responses to neo-liberalism. It was also explicitly socialist. We agreed not to make the historical and theoretical differences between the groups a barrier to working together around what

we agreed on. At the same time, the Socialist Alliance created forums for ongoing public discussion and debate.

The basic idea was that we didn't have to have resolved all the ideological and historical disputes that divided the various factions of the left before agreeing to organize together on a fighting program against capitalist attacks and for socialist solutions to the urgent problems society faces today. Indeed, we were more likely to resolve these differences after we had gone through an extended experience of working together around what we agreed on - which was substantial.

Stress on inclusivity

We agreed on a basic structure and constitution which put the emphasis on inclusivity. As the biggest of the groups that founded the Alliance, the DSP made concessions which restricted itself to a minority vote on leadership bodies and in conferences. We saw this as an interim confidence-building measure.

The unprecedented unity of these left groups, which until then had spent lots of energy criticizing each other, made a significant impact on the much broader layer of left activists who had not joined any of the pre-existing socialist groups. Hundreds of them joined the Socialist Alliance, quickly becoming the majority of its members. Among those who joined were a number of militant trade unionists.

These included shop-floor delegates as well as a few elected leaders of militant unions. One of these leaders was Craig Johnston, the former Victorian state secretary of the powerful manufacturing workers union. Craig was later jailed for several months [2] for leading militant industrial action and lost his old leadership position. He remains an active delegate in the construction industry and is still a proud member of the Alliance.

The formation of the Socialist Alliance was preceded by a sequence of political collaborations of the militant trade unions with the radical left between 1998 to 2001. These occurred in the state of Victoria in particular, but also in the state of Western Australia. They included militant mass picketing against the Liberal-National government's failed attempt to destroy the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) in the late 1990s, and the anti-globalization protests mentioned above.

These were political collaborations that extended outside industrial struggles. They posed the challenge of building a common political party.

Every national conference of the Socialist Alliance since its formation has been attended by leading militant leaders in the trade union movement, some of whom are Alliance members and others are still in the Labor party or not in any party. A number of these conferences have had their venues paid for by militant unions, and the Alliance also received the first public donations by unions to a socialist organization in decades.

Indigenous Struggle

Sam Watson, a respected and militant leader in the Aboriginal community also joined the Alliance, and remains its spokesperson on Indigenous affairs. He has stood as a Socialist Alliance candidate in state and national parliamentary elections. Since then several other leading Aboriginal activists have also joined the Alliance.

The Indigenous struggle is very important in Australian politics because the social legacy of the colonial dispossession of the Aboriginal people is horrible. Aboriginal people suffer racism, extreme economic marginalization and Third World health and housing conditions. This is one of the

richest countries in the world. The indigenous struggle has massive moral weight and points to an alternative way of living based on sharing and working with nature.

Solidarity with the aboriginal rights struggle has an added urgency ever since the adoption by the federal government in 2007 of “emergency” legislation, known as the “Intervention,” which authorizes police and social agencies to intervene with draconian powers against the political, social and communal rights of Indigenous people in the Northern Territory. This attack continues under the newly elected Labor Party government and is being extended into other states in the country.

Apart from movement leaders, a number of left-wing intellectuals also joined the Alliance. These included one of Australia’s most prolific Marxist historians, Humphrey McQueen.

A number of former Labor party members, former Communist Party members and a few former Greens members, including one former state secretary of the Greens, also joined the Socialist Alliance.

Test for left groupings

This was an important opening for the left in Australia, which was (and remains) small and relatively isolated in the labour movement. Would the left seize this as a chance to build a multi-tendency socialist party with a significant connection to the labour movement and other key social movements? This was clearly the wish of the large majority of Alliance members who were not members of any of the founding affiliate groups, and the DSP agreed with them. However, all the other affiliated revolutionary socialist groups disagreed. Each thought their own “correct” programs would be liquidated if they built the Alliance as our common party. They could conceive of the Alliance only as a site for their “real” revolutionary parties to intervene in or, at best, as a “united front of a special kind.”

This view, which is sectarian because it spurned a chance to unite politically with a broader layer of left leadership in the movements, was rejected by the majority of Alliance members in at least three national conferences in a row (in a situation where the DSP restricted its representation in both delegates and elected leadership bodies).

SV: Some groups and individuals who were a part of the founding of the Socialist Alliance or of its early years then departed. Were their departures justified, and did they end the project?

PB: Their departures were not justified and these departures did not kill off the Socialist Alliance.

By the Socialist Alliance’s May 2005 national conference, it was clear that all the other revolutionary groups affiliated to the Alliance were opposed to taking the Alliance forward. At most they were willing to participate in the Alliance as a loose electoral front in which a minority retained veto powers by right of their group affiliate status. They began to pull back even the relatively modest resources they put into the Alliance. By 2007, all the founding affiliates aside from the DSP and Resistance, a youth organization allied to the DSP, had formally left the Alliance.

Also in 2005, a minority emerged in the DSP which essentially agreed with the sectarian approach of other affiliates who opposed building the Socialist Alliance as a new multi-tendency socialist party.

The DSP majority decided that it was be wrong to abandon the Socialist Alliance, arguing that the large majority of people who had joined and were not members of the founding affiliate groups still saw the Alliance as their party and that the Alliance had won a modest but significant broader recognition and respect in the labour movement.

The DSP then underwent a protracted three-year-long internal faction fight, which took significant energy away from building the Socialist Alliance. But through all this the majority of the non-affiliate group membership of the Socialist Alliance continued to see the Alliance as their party. Craig Johnson and Sam Watson are still members, as are most of the militant trade union shop-floor delegates and social movement activists.

Others have joined the Socialist Alliance since. A group of Sudanese communists affiliated to the Alliance last year. They produce Green Left Weekly's Arabic-language supplement (a significant gain, as Arabic is one of the major minority language groups in Australia today). [3] A prominent Sinhalese public defender of Tamil rights in Sri Lanka has joined, as have some Salvadoran community supporters of the FMLN. And there is a small but steady stream of former Labor party members.

Continued growth

The majority of the members of the Socialist Alliance are still not members of any affiliate group. So the confidence of the DSP majority in the need to keep building the Socialist Alliance has been confirmed. The Alliance is the biggest socialist organization in the country, and it is continuing to regroup the left in a modest but nevertheless significant degree.

The groups that left the Alliance did so despite being able to agree on a common political platform and despite years of common experience working effectively together in the trade union and other social movements. This is the amazing part of our experience, and it should not be missed. Between 2001 and 2005, the Alliance proved that the fractious left could work together and that in doing so it could become more effective.

But it also showed us that the political will to do so has to be there as well. The various left groups that walked out of the Socialist Alliance can work together in the future if they have the will to do so. Everyone in the left has to confront the following questions sooner or later. Are you serious about your socialism? And what is more important - preserving many micro-parties, each defending its programmatic shibboleths and the ordained leadership role this is supposed to give them, or struggling to win real leadership authority in a bigger, broader and more effective party of left regroupment?

By and large, the Australian Greens party still claim most of the progressive vote in this country. This has discouraged smaller socialist groups from staying in the Socialist Alliance, at least to participate in elections. The fact is that the Socialist Alliance has usually struggled to get more than 1.5% in elections, though in local elections in NSW and Victoria last year, Alliance candidates received votes from 4.5% to as high as 18.9%.

Under increasingly draconian/exclusive electoral registration regulations, the relative breadth of the Socialist Alliance made it possible to get the word "socialist" onto ballot papers in most states/territories and nationally for the first time in decades. Our modest election campaigns also raised the profile of socialism.

Each one of the alphabet soup of small socialist groups say they'll be in a new left party if what is on offer is a new mass party. They'd be in such a party even if its politics was reformist or liberal. The Socialist Alliance is not a mass party, but it is an opportunity to build a bigger party around a class struggle program, like that of the New Anti-Capitalist Party in France [4]. I don't think the left should pass up on what we have achieved to date.

SV: What role did the Alliance play in last year's federal election that saw the Labor Party

returned to power?

PB: A major reason why the Alliance continues to hold the loyalty of forces broader than the smaller socialist groups is that it played an active role in building a mass fightback against a set of draconian anti-union and anti-worker laws introduced by the former Liberal-National federal government. These were laws that threatened to smash rights won by the labour movement over the last century and it was clear that the previous government had the will and the numbers in parliament to push them through.

The left had two choices at that point. It could retreat, circle the wagons around the revolutionary program (or rather their umpteen variations of it) and survive as little socialist groups living off a few idealistic youth recruits from the campuses. Or it could try and build the best possible mass fightback in the labour movement and continue with left regroupment.

We had this discussion in the DSP and in the Socialist Alliance, and a majority of members were in favour of fighting for the best mass resistance possible. Even if a fight could not stop these laws from being passed, a workers' movement that put up a mass fightback would come out with the greatest strength to fight again another day.

In May 2005, alongside the Socialist Alliance national conference, we initiated a broader gathering of militant trade unionists called the Fightback Conference. [5] It was a powerful gathering, as all the affiliate groups at the time acknowledged.

The militant section was a minority in the trade union movement at that time, as it is now, but it resolved to fight. First, it won mass support among union delegates in the state of Victoria, initially for a mass response to the anti-worker laws which were outrageously named "Work Choices" by the Liberal-National government.

Mass actions for union rights

The first mass action against Work Choices took place in June, 2005. Some 350,000 workers mobilized around the country and did so against the wishes of the top trade union leadership, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU). The ACTU leadership had decided that industrial and street action would put off voters and so the trade unions should wage the fight through multi-million dollar television advertisements instead.

But after trade unions in Victoria, Queensland, and Western Australia decided to break from this approach, the ACTU began to crumble. In the state of New South Wales, a panicked union leadership called mass delegate meetings to try and ram through the ACTU's "clever tactics" advertising perspective. But to their horror, the delegates voted for mass action. The Socialist Alliance was blamed for taking over these meetings. We wish we had had the strength to do that. In fact, this was a largely spontaneous expression of rank-and-file wishes.

The second national mobilization took place in November 2005. This time the ACTU backed the call-out and regained control of most of the platforms, though militant unionists still featured in some cities and led the platforms in a couple of regional cities. About 650,000 workers mobilized in what was the biggest single workers' movement mobilization in Australian history.

There were more mass mobilizations in the next two years, and although the anti-worker laws were passed into law in March 2006, the Liberal-National's Prime Minister John Howard became a widely reviled figure. Finally, Howard (who lost his own seat in a blue-ribbon Liberal district!) and the Liberal-National government was swept out in the November 2007 elections.

Since then, we've had a chance to test the theory that putting up a fight against the anti-union laws preserves the strength of the labour movement (and other social movements). We've done so in the more difficult context of the new, Labor Party federal government that remains very popular, in part because of the memory of the anti-worker actions of the previous government.

The Labor government is trying to preserve as much of the neo-liberal measures implemented by previous governments (both Liberal-National and Labor) while appearing to stand for change. Labor PM Kevin Rudd is like an Obama without the charisma!

It is very clear already that on the fronts of workers' rights, Indigenous rights, climate change, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Rudd Labor government is betraying its promises to the people who swept it into government. It is working hard to minimize opposition to its betrayals. It retains a huge influence over most trade union officials as well as the loyalty of a conservative top leadership of the environmental movement and influential but conservative Aboriginal figures. We are seeing growing dissent on all these fronts, and Socialist Alliance continues to be among the activists in each of these struggles. However, most of the left outside the Alliance is still in the mode of retreat and abstention.

On April 28, some 15,000 workers in the construction industry took to the streets in Melbourne to protest Labor's failure to remove anti-worker laws dating from the Work Choices era that specifically target unions in this industry. These workers are in the forefront of workers' struggles today and they are an example of the future coming toward us. The most militant sections of this struggle is in the state of Victoria again, because this is where the militant section of the trade unions is strongest. They have a strong base at the shop-floor level in several industries. This is in part a legacy of the struggle of an earlier generation of socialists, led by militants influenced by Maoism the 1970s. But Socialist Alliance is now part of that section of militant unionists.

Another significant victory this year was at a national meeting of climate change groups in Canberra in February where the radical platform supported by Socialist Alliance and a number of other environmentalists, including a section in the Greens Party, was adopted. The first round of national mass mobilizations initiated through this process will take place in June to mark World Environment Day. Climate change is a critical political issue which the left needs to prioritize today.

SV: Your party has been reporting favorably on new parties of left regroupment and expansion in the Philippines, Indonesia, Venezuela and other countries. Are you encouraged by developments there, and are there lessons for the peoples of other countries?

PB: Australia is a rich imperialist country that is relatively isolated from the rest of the world. So in the DSP we have always attached great importance to staying in touch with struggles overseas. We seek to learn from these struggles as well as to make a modest contribution to the popularization of all struggles of resistance and progressive change - particularly in the Asia-Pacific region. Our international collaboration has kept us inspired and also as open Marxists - Marxists who take seriously Marx's own warning not to treat his powerful ideas as a religion.

The Venezuelan revolution is shaping the movement for socialism in the 21st century. Every real step forward for the socialist movement is worth more than a thousand paper manifestos. We are determined to learn from the experiences of the revolutions today. That is why we have DSP comrades in Venezuela and in Nepal, making links and facilitating deeper study of the revolutionary experiences there. That is why our comrades play a major role in leading brigades to Venezuela twice a year since 2005.

I recently traveled to the Philippines in order to learn about and report on the new, mass party of the left that has been formed there, called the "Party of the Masses." We maintain fraternal ties with it and with parties and activists in Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, India and many other countries.

Party-building perspectives

Over the next six months, in the lead-up to a DSP congress scheduled for January 2010, members of the DSP are going to have a serious discussion about party-building perspectives. How do we best build on the gains we have made through the DSP and the gains made through the Socialist Alliance? We'll be involving Socialist Alliance members who are not members of the DSP in this discussion. It will be public.

My personal opinion is that it is time for the DSP to make a decisive turn towards building the Socialist Alliance as our new party. We've been held back by the hesitations of former Alliance affiliates and a former minority in the DSP for too long already. That's behind us now and it is time we moved forward. This opinion has been strengthened through many discussions with a broad range of our international collaborators who participated in the recent World at a Crossroads Conference in Sydney. [6] The DSP's broad international work allows us to think more creatively about what we can do to build a bigger and stronger socialist movement in our country.

SV: Could you explain what are some of the next steps that you might take in this direction?

PB: The DSP is serious about left regroupment and we are serious about revolutionary socialism. We don't have the infantile delusion that the DSP is the vanguard party of the revolution. A real revolutionary vanguard has to be built through a process of regroupment/s and accumulation of political experience and actual political authority in the labour movement. What we have done in our tendency over the last four decades is but one small part of this process. This is not to minimize what we've done since our beginning as a party project in the early 1970s, but rather to have a sense of the true proportion of the work we have done and what has yet to be done.

We confront the challenge of left regroupment in a time of severe, triple crisis of capitalism. First, the climate change crisis, which threatens human survival on a global level; second, the worst global economic crisis since the Great Depression (though it is hitting Australia later than countries); and third, the widespread crisis of legitimacy of capitalist neo-liberalism. The legitimacy crisis of capitalist neo-liberalism is not a new phenomenon. It has been mounting up for more than a decade and underpins the revolutionary advances in Latin America and elsewhere, as well as wave of anti-capitalist globalization at the turn of the century.

The left in Australia is too small to force the pace of the movements needed to fight the capitalist "solutions" to these crises that are being prepared and beginning to be imposed. We have to be in the growing resistance to these capitalist "solutions." Any left group that is content to just shout from the sidelines "Capitalism has failed, embrace socialism!" is doomed to become ever more sectarian.

Discussion on popular power

That said, there is also an expanded room for political discussions about capitalism and socialism. If the left does this well, it will strengthen the forces that are building resistance movements to the triple crisis. So we need to put our minds to this challenge. Coming out of the World at a Crossroads Conference, we had some informal discussion about what to build in Australia as a next major international conference of socialist discussion, debate and collaboration. Michael Lebowitz, one of

our guest speakers, suggested that we hold a conference next year about historical experiences in popular power and participatory democracy that takes in experiences (contemporary and historical) from around the world.

We've forged growing links with the comrades leading the communal councils/commune process in Venezuela, which seeks to become a new base institution of popular power. We've got links with numerous socialists who have studied the real experiences of the Soviet system, the Cuban democratic system, and other such historical experiences of popular power. We've got links with socialists involved in workers' management or who have done real studies in previous such experiments.

We have links with militant trade unionists in Australia with years of real experience in militant shop-floor and delegate organizing. We have links with local government activists who have explored participatory democracy at that level, and so on. Can we bring all these comrades together in a common discussion? Well, we are discussing this and other ideas with a broad range of collaborators. History has shown that the biggest problem for the world's oppressed majority is not coming to an awareness of the failures and injustices of the capitalist system but developing the confidence that the majority can exercise its democratic power in a participatory and sustainable way. It remains the key ideological question upon which turns the prospects for the transformation of socialism into a mass movement in the 21st century.

References:

[1] The politics of the new movement for global solidarity¹

[2] Craig Johnston, welcome back to the struggle!²

[3] The Flame, Arabic supplement to Green Left Weekly³

[4] France's New Anti-Capitalist Party: An exchange between Alex Callinicos (British SWP) and François Sabado (LCR)⁴

[5] Union leaders: 'Defy Howard's laws!'⁴

[6] Left activists discuss solutions at World at a Crossroads international socialism conference⁵. Also see http://www.cpiml.org/liberation/year_2009/may_09/reports.htm⁶

P.S.

* From Socialist Voice June 6, 2009:

<http://www.socialistvoice.ca/?p=400>

Footnotes

[1] The politics of the new movement for global solidarity:

<http://links.org.au/node/124>

[2] Craig Johnston, welcome back to the struggle!:

<http://www.socialist-alliance.org/p...>

[3] The Flame, Arabic supplement to Green Left Weekly:

<http://links.org.au/taxonomy/term/319>

[4] France's New Anti-Capitalist Party: An exchange between Alex Callinicos (British SWP) and François Sabado (LCR):

[The radical left in Europe and the NPA in France: a debate](#)

[5] Union leaders: 'Defy Howard's laws!':

<http://www.socialist-alliance.org//...>

[6] Left activists discuss solutions at World at a Crossroads international socialism conference:

<http://links.org.au/node/999>

See also:

[World at the Crossroads Conference](#)