

Australia: Broad Marxism 2012 conference is a welcome step

Sunday 15 April 2012, by [BOLTON Sue](#) (Date first published: 14 April 2012).



Malalai Joya speaks to the Marxism 2012 conference. Photo: Socialist Alternative/Flickr

The decision by the organisers of the three-day Marxism 2012 to invite a broader range of international speakers and allow other socialist groups to set up stalls at its three-day Marxism 2012 conference in Melbourne over the Easter long weekend was a welcome and positive step.

The conference is organised each year by Socialist Alternative and its sister organisation, the International Socialist Organisation of Aotearoa/New Zealand.

The keynote speakers at the conference were radical journalist John Pilger, Afghan democracy and human rights activist Malalai Joya and Aboriginal activist Gary Foley. Their sessions were the overwhelmingly best-attended conference sessions.

As well as the keynote speakers, the organisers brought speakers from the United States, the Philippines, Bahrain, Japan, New Zealand, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Palestine and Chile.

The broad range of international guest speakers drew 925 people over the course of the conference and made it the biggest left conference in Australia for many years. A very broad range of the left in Melbourne attended.

The conference theme of "Revolution is in the air" signalled a big focus on the inspiration of the Arab revolutions. There were well-attended sessions on the Egyptian revolution and also on Palestine.

Sessions with the best-known speakers drew the biggest numbers to the conference, but many people who bought tickets to see Joya and Pilger also stayed to attend other sessions, listening to other impressive international speakers, and taking part in discussions about Marxism.

Running parallel to the bigger sessions were several streams of workshops: Radical Australian working class history, the foundations of Marxism, revolutionary moments, key texts of Marxism, Marxist thinkers, a people's history of the world, Marxist theory and rival ideas on the left. Many of these were as well attended as the feature sessions.

Some Occupy Melbourne activists attended the opening session of the conference and joined a lively debate in a session titled "Occupying a dead end? The politics of 'anti-politics' in the movements

today”.

A big gap however, was any serious discussion about climate change and the role that the socialist movement can play in helping build a climate movement that is capable of stopping runaway climate change. This meant that key activists from the radical wing of the climate movement did not attend.

Other left and progressive groups that were present with stalls were Socialist Alliance, the International Workers of the World and the Revolutionary Socialist Party. In addition, Socialist Alternative members who are active in Students for Palestine, the Equal Love campaign, Refugee Action Collective and Workers Solidarity Network set up stalls for these campaigns.

Australia Asia Worker Links held a workshop at the conference, although this was not advertised in the conference guide.

The large conference attendance indicates that there is a strong interest in Marxist and socialist ideas, especially sparked by the global economic crisis and the fightback in Greece and Spain, the Arab revolutions, and the occupy movement in the United States.

It is encouraging to see some opening up of the Marxism conference. However, the discussion could be even richer if the event evolved to become a conference of the whole left, including speakers from other socialist groups and allowing these groups to have workshops. The socialist and broader progressive movement in Australia would benefit from such a discussion.

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P.S.

* From Greenleft Weekly, Saturday, April 14, 2012:

<http://www.greenleft.org.au/node/50677>