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Australia

Historic breakthrough for Australian left

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The Australian Left has had a long history of fragmentation. A variety of small groups, none of them with more than 500 active members, have often put more energy into sectarian squabbles than in seeking ways of working together against the common capitalist enemy.

Six months ago, there was an extraordinary breakthrough when nine socialist organisations [1] came together to form the Socialist Alliance. That breakthrough was consolidated at the first national conference of the Alliance, held over the weekend of 4-5 August at the Melbourne Trades Hall.

We run little risk of hyperbole if we use the word "historic" to describe the conference. It was probably the first time since the formation of the Communist Party of Australia [2] in the early 1920s that there has been such unity.

One hundred and fourteen delegates from 29 local groups from every state and territory of Australia worked together in a spirit of constructive non-sectarianism that would have been inconceivable even 12 months ago.

The conference agreed on a fighting electoral platform with which to contest this year's federal elections [3] and adopted the most democratic and inclusive of any constitution of any political organization in the country.

The delegates also agreed to campaign jointly on a number of issues, including the anti-globalisation protests against the Commonwealth Business Forum later this year. [4]

The two main political slogans with which the Alliance will contest the elections are: 'Fight Racism' and 'Fight Economic Rationalism' (as neo-liberalism is known here).

Although the Alliance is dominated by the nine socialist organisations that made the original call, significant numbers of unaffiliated people have joined.

These include the prominent environmentalist and former construction union leader Jack Munday; [5] Annie Delaney [6] from the Textiles Union; Ken Fry, a former Labor Party parliamentarian and minister; and Craig Johnston, the Victorian Secretary of the Amalgamated Manufacturing Workers Union.

It is a sign of the healthiness and maturity of the Alliance that the conference debates were spirited, but comradely. There was little sign of the old "winner-take-all" mentality that used to blight relationships between left organizations.

Differences

There were, however, some big differences, the most important of which was over the nature of the Alliance.

A minority of delegates wanted the Alliance to adopt a "maximum" program and to proceed rapidly to form a revolutionary party.

A clear majority of delegates rejected this position, arguing in favour of a broad formation that could go far beyond the membership of the existing constituent organisations.

The majority position was that the key task was to bring the broadest possible layers of people into struggle. If it is to grow beyond the existing far-left ghetto, Socialist Alliance must be easy to join.

As long as people want to fight back against neo-liberalism and racism, then they should be able to find a political home in the Socialist Alliance. Talk of soviets, workers' militias and suchlike is not very helpful at this stage. The other danger, of diluting the socialist, anti-capitalist thrust of the Alliance, was also avoided.

Socialist Alliance is not perfect. We have a long way to go before we can become a pole of attraction strong enough to draw significant numbers of people away from the Labor Party. There was also a problem with gender balance on the newly elected national executive. However, given the unprecedented unity and goodwill that was consolidated at the conference, we can work together to overcome the internal problems and come out fighting.

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An amendment moved by Socialist Democracy specifically entrenches tendency rights in the constitution. The amendment was adopted overwhelmingly. The national conference also agreed to prioritise the following areas in election campaigning:

- scrap the GST (Goods and Services Tax) and tax the rich;
- action against poverty including an immediate 25% increase in all pensions and benefits;
- restore funding to public education; no state aid to private schools;
- stop privatisation;
- for a treaty now to ensure justice and genuine reconciliation with indigenous people;
- cancel Third World debts to Australia;
- stop uranium mining, save the forests;
- maintain and extend the public health system, no subsidies to private health companies;
- withdraw from the WTO;
- repeal all anti-union laws;
- close the detention centres, defend asylum seekers;
- stop casualisation and outsourcing; 25 hour week to create jobs;
- no to the Star Wars missile program, cut military spending;
- end all forms of discrimination, no to racism, sexism and homophobia.

[1] The nine organisations are: the Democratic Socialist Party (affiliated until 1985 to the Fourth International), the International Socialist Organization (linked to the British Socialist Workers Party), Workers Liberty, Workers Power, the Freedom Socialist Party, the Workers League, the Worker-Communist Party of Iraq (Australia), Socialist Alternative and Socialist Democracy.

[2] The Communist Party of Australia dissolved itself in the early 1990s.

[3] Australia has a three-tier system of government: local, state and federal or national. The federal elections must be held this year. All the signs are that the incumbent conservative Coalition government will be voted out in favour of the Australian Labor Party, which is led by the Blairite Kim Beazley.

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[4] Members of the constituents of the Socialist Alliance were active in last September's S11 protests against the World Economic Forum in Melbourne.

[5] Jack Munday was a central leader of the militant Builders Labourers Federation (BLF) in the late 1960s and early '70s. Munday, who was a member of the former Communist Party of Australia, became legendary because of his union's "green bans" policy, which saved much of Sydney's architectural and environmental heritage from the developers.

[6] Delaney is a key organiser of the "Fairwear" campaign against the use of sweated labour.