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Australia

DSP perspectives on Socialist Alliance

- IV Online magazine - 2002 - IV344 - October 2002 -

Publication date: Friday 11 October 2002

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The letter below has been sent on behalf of the National Executive of Australia's Democratic Socialist Party to the National Executive of the Australian Socialist Alliance. The DSP is starting a process of discussion on a proposal which, if accepted by the party's Congress at the end of the year, would mean that it would do its public political work within the framework of the Socialist Alliance.

September 3, 2002

Dear comrades,

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I am writing to you on behalf of the National Executive of the Democratic Socialist Party to advise you that we have initiated a discussion in our party about making a radically bigger commitment towards left unity within the Socialist Alliance.

If a majority of our members accept our proposal the DSP will cease to operate as a public organisation and begin to operate as an internal tendency in the Socialist Alliance from January 2003. Our members will, from that point, be building and recruiting to the Socialist Alliance rather than the DSP.

We will then commence negotiations with the Socialist Alliance about taking as much of the political and organisational assets we have built up through the DSP into the Socialist Alliance as is possible. We undertake to pursue this process within the democratic framework of the Socialist Alliance and in a thoroughly open, consultative and inclusive manner.

The objective of our tendency will be to pursue the transition while ensuring that the gains of our three decades of work as a party will not be lost to the left as a whole.

We are confident that this will be a big step forward for left regroupment in Australia and that we will be able to agree, in stages, on concrete steps forward for the Socialist Alliance. This is based on the substantial political consensus and comradeship collaboration achieved since the founding of the Alliance.

1 State of the Socialist Alliance

In the year and a half of its existence the Socialist Alliance has managed to establish itself as the 'face of socialist unity' in Australian politics. While we should not exaggerate its impact and visibility, it certainly enjoys, as a result of its electoral registration, election campaigns and overall work (including a presence in campaigns), much greater profile than any of its affiliates or any other left organisations. Its modest but solid election results (around 1.4 per cent at best in contests with the Greens, up to four per cent where they have not been present), its 2000 plus members and broader periphery confirm this judgement.

The Socialist Alliance has to one degree or another drawn around itself a large part of those who view themselves as socialists and left-wingers. These amount to roughly three times the membership of the founding affiliates. It has

drawn hundreds of people into activity who would not otherwise have got involved in left politics or who are returning to it after a considerable lapse. It has begun to extend socialist organising into new regions (like northern Tasmania) and it has the potential to repeat this sort of regional growth in other states.

Many working-class and trade union militants are looking seriously at the Socialist Alliance as their possible new political home. The general attitude is still 'wait-and-see' but further growth of the Socialist Alliance electorally and/or as a campaigning vehicle in the unions and communities will draw many such militants into its ranks.

These gains have been won on the foundation of successful collaboration among the affiliates. Both at the founding conference and through the ongoing work of the Socialist Alliance National Executive we have been able to find - despite some disagreements - a correct and reasonably timely response to all the main political challenges of the day. It has consolidated a broad consensus as to what constitutes a principled socialist and pro-working class orientation in Australian politics. It has shown that the left can work together, a fact that is appreciated well beyond the ranks of the affiliate organisations themselves.

This experience tells us that the real political basis of the Alliance extends beyond its formally adopted founding platform and constitution to a consensus around a principled class-struggle approach to international and Australian politics.

2 The international context

The Alliance's successes aren't the result of Australian political trends alone. The rising wave of resistance to neo-liberal globalisation and the spread of alienation from labour and social-democratic parties - experienced as enforcers of austerity by millions of workers - opens up the possibility of creating mass revolutionary socialist parties in country after country.

Australia has yet to experience mass mobilisations as powerful as those in Barcelona, Paris and Rome or a vote for far left candidates as high as that achieved in the first round of the French presidential elections (over 10%) or the 8% the Scottish Socialist Party is currently polling. Nevertheless, the unity expressed in the Australian Socialist Alliance has its roots in the same basic social and political trends - the rise of the (still very heterogeneous) movement against neo-liberal globalisation and the emergence of class-struggle trends in the trade unions (like SUD in France, Cobas and SinCobas in Italy or the Victorian left unions in this country).

Our Socialist Alliance is also part of a global trend to revolutionary left regroupment, especially in the advanced capitalist countries. With due regard to all that is specifically Australian about it, the emergence of the Alliance parallels the rise of the Socialist Alliance in England, the Scottish Socialist Party, the Portuguese Bloco de Esquerda, Denmark's Enhedslisten, as well as the 'left turn' of Rifondazione Comunista and the recently launched proposal of the French Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire for a new mass party of the radical anti-capitalist left. These organisations and others like them have been meeting for several years now at the level of a European anti-capitalist left and their latest gathering in Madrid has produced a comprehensive statement of position on the burning issues of world and European politics.

Within all of these organisations the issue of what degree and form of unity it is necessary and possible for the far left to achieve has been at the centre of discussion and debate.

3 The potential for and constraints on the Socialist Alliance

The Socialist Alliance has large, maybe very large, unfulfilled and as yet untested potential. However, the constraints under which the Alliance is presently labouring, if not lifted, will leave much Alliance growth potential unexploited.

The DSP National Executive analysed these constraints as follows:

- The rise of the Green vote means that even less than previously can the Socialist Alliance hope to grow as a purely, or mainly, electoral formation. However we have been unable to progress much beyond electoral work even though that was the express intent of all affiliates at the founding meeting and first national conference.
- While the Socialist Alliance affiliates are maintaining and building their own organisations, this places an unavoidable constraint on what they can do to build the Alliance. They are leading important mass movements like the struggle for refugee rights (mainly outside of the framework of the Alliance) but this also means that every rise in movement activity has the potential to lead to a reduction in commitment to Socialist Alliance-building.
- The Socialist Alliance has no publication except its web page and issues-based leaflets and irregular broadsheets. These have been invaluable in giving the Alliance profile on the issues of the day but they are no substitute for a regular paper putting a comprehensive Alliance position and building its presence in all sectors of the population.
- While the Socialist Alliance has developed a majority non-affiliate membership, those who bear the burden of its work are still mainly members of the affiliate organisations. A couple of hundred independent Socialist Alliance members contribute to the work of the organisation to some degree or other, but its survival still depends on the efforts of the affiliates.
- The existing Socialist Alliance 'apparatus' is struggling to maintain the basics of membership records and finances, let alone responding in a timely way to national and international political issues.
- Inspiring a bigger contribution from existing Socialist Alliance members and further extending its membership will, in the short run at least, require a bigger contribution from the members of the affiliates. There are local groups to be organised, hundreds of members whose concerns and areas of interest the Alliance must get to know, especially in those regions where branches do not yet exist (around 200 in New South Wales alone).

The DSP National Executive is convinced that this growing impasse cannot be broken by affiliates applying a 'more of the same' approach to building the Socialist Alliance. While it is up to each affiliate organisation to decide on its course, we are confident that DSP members will be prepared to radically increase the resources devoted to its construction.

4 Political basis for greater unity

Our collective experience in building the Socialist Alliance has revealed its actual political basis. There is a significant amount of shared socialist program among the Socialist Alliance affiliates. While this is not formally outlined as a program of the Socialist Alliance, the founding documents refer to the fact there is more common ground than that sketched out in the initial Socialist Alliance platform.

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This has been confirmed in practice by the actual experience of having to take a stand on such testing issues as the 'war on terrorism', Palestine and the current attacks on the most militant union leaderships in Australia.

When we reflect on the success of the Socialist Alliance in developing positions of consensus or by very large majorities on such issues and add to this the high degree of unanimity reached over practical work (witness the results of the August Victorian and New South Wales state conferences), it seems obvious that there is great potential for transcending or repositioning some of the traditional differences among the Alliance affiliates. The democratic culture that the Socialist Alliance has established can only help this process.

Our experience in working together surely confirms that left regroupment and unity will come about, and can only come about, on the basis of our rising to the objective challenges that are being posed by an intensifying class struggle and movement of anti-capitalist resistance. It will be our success in meeting these challenges - including the challenge of giving concrete and credible form to the socialist alternative at every turn - that will provide and strengthen the programmatic basis of the Alliance.

In this context, existing differences among affiliates will have increasingly less weight and the grounds for the maintenance of the existing minimalist organisational form of the Socialist Alliance increasingly less operative. How important our existing differences really are and what organisational form they really justify should be tested out by serious debate in the context of ongoing joint work within the framework of the Alliance.

5 The Democratic Socialist tendency and the Socialist Alliance

Our proposal would make the Socialist Alliance and its bodies the political framework governing the work of former DSP members and the organisation that they would work to build. Within this framework the goal of the Democratic Socialist tendency would be to make itself redundant in step with the further development of the Alliance.

In the transition phase ex-DSP members of the tendency would carry out their discussion and decision-making within the bodies of the Socialist Alliance and caucus only as necessary.

The tendency would strive to promote the principle of Socialist Alliance caucuses in the movements and the trade unions. These, of course, need not be - and in many cases should not be - the exclusive form for a left or progressive caucus, but our experience to date shows that where Socialist Alliance members act in a united way within campaigns the impact is powerful and positive and we should seek to make it the norm.

The DSP National Executive has advised the national leadership of Resistance of this proposal and urged it to consider Resistance's role as an independent socialist youth organisation in this step towards greater left unity. We have recommended that the coming Resistance conference discuss its support for the Socialist Alliance and initiate appropriate discussions with the Socialist Alliance and other left groups involved in the youth sector.

We are still working on our exact proposals for that process of transition but they will remain flexible and, of course, subject to negotiation and the democratic decision-making of the Socialist Alliance.

We want to involve all components of the Socialist Alliance in the thinking out process. We intend to considerably

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expand the pages in Green Left Weekly for public discussion and debate on how to strengthen and build the Socialist Alliance and other issues.

Our proposals will be further discussed and developed at the DSP's October 5-7 National Committee, after which the DSP will advise the Socialist Alliance National Executive of any amendments and elaborations that the NC adopts. The position adopted at the NC will become a central proposal for the DSP's 20th National Congress (28 December 2002-1 January 2003), where it will be subject to a vote by the party as a whole.

If any Socialist Alliance National Executive member feels they need further clarification, please do not hesitate to get in touch with me.

Comradely greetings,

John Percy,

National Secretary, Democratic Socialist Party