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Australia

Left Unity in Australia

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The newly formed Socialist Alliance (SA) was officially launched on April 10, 2001 at public meetings in Sydney and Melbourne, the two largest cities in Australia. Around 300 people attended the meeting at the Sydney Trades Hall. The standing-room-only Melbourne meeting attracted a similar number to the inner suburban Brunswick Town Hall. Both meetings enthusiastically backed the Alliance project and many of those who attended joined SA on the spot.

The meetings heard greetings from a number of prominent figures, including the legendary Jack Mundey, the militant leader of the Green Bans movement in the late 1960s and early '70s; Ellen Kleimaker, the women's officer of the Victorian Trades Hall Council; and Annie Delaney, of the Textiles, Clothing and Footwear Union. Victorian Metalworkers' union leader Craig Johnston was due to speak but was absent due to serious illness.

The Socialist Alliance is an unprecedented development in Australian left politics. Nine socialist groups - many of which have previously been at loggerheads - have agreed to unite to field a joint slate for this year's federal election. Almost all of the socialist groups, including the two largest, the International Socialist Organisation and the Democratic Socialist Party, have joined. The larger parties have stressed that they will not seek to dominate by weight of numbers. Supporters of the Fourth International are also involved in the project via their membership of Socialist Democracy, one of the participating groups.

Both individuals and organisations are eligible to join. There is general agreement that the new Socialist Alliance must be more than an electoral coalition of the existing socialist groups if it is to be successful. To realise its potential, it must set about recruiting thousands of individual members and providing them with a political home they feel comfortable with.

SA will seek to become representative of the working class in all of its diversity: blue and white collar, employed and unemployed, male and female, gay and straight, white and black, immigrants and native born. As a Socialist Democracy statement put it: the Alliance needs to be able to "convince potential voters that we are serious about being elected to parliament. A left parliamentary wing would complement the developing extra-parliamentary mass movement against capitalism. It would mean that we had 'arrived' and were a force to be reckoned with. After all, recent years have seen Marxists elected to parliaments in a diverse range of countries, including France, Scotland, Germany and Ireland. In Brazil, Marxists have formed a provincial government in Rio Grande do Sul."

As David Glanz, a national leader of the ISO, told the Melbourne meeting, the Alliance was only made possible because the Australian Labor Party has drifted so far to the right in recent years and had wholeheartedly adopted the agenda of neo-liberalism - or economic rationalism as it is known here. It is up to the left to unite to mount a challenge to neo-liberal hegemony. SA will become, Glanz predicted, "the voice of the S11 generation". (S11 was the name given to the mass picketing and protests at last September's meeting of the World Economic Forum in Melbourne). [1] Other speakers stressed that SA would provide a genuine socialist alternative to the populist demagogy of Pauline Hanson's racist One Nation party.

The Alliance will be launched in other cities over coming weeks, and organising has already started to build local branches in the industrial suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne. Although SA is not a new party, it is a real breakthrough towards left unity, and might be a step towards such a party.

It will allow the left to project itself as a much more credible alternative to the existing 'mainstream' parties.

Participating organisations will adhere to the basic platform, but will remain free to disseminate their own material. For once, in a history overshadowed by sectarian feuding, there is a real spirit of socialist pluralism in evidence.

The nine organisations which have united to form the Socialist Alliance are: Workers' Power, International Socialist Organisation, Socialist Alternative, the Iraq Worker Communist Party (Australia), the Freedom Socialist Party, the Democratic Socialist Party, Workers' Liberty, the Workers' League and Socialist Democracy.

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[1] See John Tully, "A Stunning Success", IV324 October 2000.