

PRECONFERENCE DISCUSSION BULLETIN

The founding conference of the
Socialist Alliance in Australia

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IMPORTANT NOTE: ALL AMENDMENTS TO THE DRAFT PLATFORM AND CONSTITUTION
MUST ARRIVE WITH THE NATIONAL CONVENORS BY JULY 23, 2001

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The logo for the Socialist Alliance features the word "Socialist" in a bold, black, sans-serif font. A red five-pointed star is positioned above the letter "i" in "Socialist". Below "Socialist" is the word "Alliance" in a larger, bold, red, sans-serif font. The "A" in "Alliance" is significantly larger than the other letters and overlaps the bottom of the "S" in "Socialist".

PLATFORM PREAMBLE FOR A WORKERS' PLAN

Workers' Liberty proposes changes to the preamble of the platform.

The main point of our proposals is to make it clear that the agency that can create the socialism that the SA advocates is the self-organised working class. We can connect the capitalist present to the socialist future by being for self-directed working-class organisation in the present. The action program of the Socialist Alliance is an action programme in so far as it gives support and political voice to working-class struggle and interests at every opportunity. We are not simply angry about the injustices of the present, we stand for a socialist future that is neither pie in the sky, nor the product of legislation. It will be the act of the working class.

We as the SA can do the greatest service to creating that future by making it the central theme of our campaign that we live in a classed society and that we side with the working class. We should challenge the invisibility of the working class in Australian politics, not fudge it as just one issue in a rainbow coalition of interests.

Neither should we present ourselves, or a later, larger edition of ourselves as a SA, as the force that can or will create socialism. Our aim is to give voice to the struggles of those who will create socialism. So, for example, we cannot "empower communities" ourselves: working-class communities through struggle can discover their own power.

Draft platform preamble: (changes in bold)

Theme

For a workers' plan to rebuild Australia — tax the rich, seize control from the profiteers, rebuild jobs, expand public services, create a democratic republic.

Introduction

The Socialist Alliance stands on a platform of total opposition to the profit-driven economic rationalist agenda of social austerity, privatisation and deregulation. While tremendous wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few, millions of us face transport chaos, low pay, job insecurity, homelessness, racism, and environmental destruction. **Working-class communities who campaign for their needs and rights can**

empower themselves as a collective alternative to private ownership, and could then redistribute the wealth of society, create jobs, expand public services, and improve welfare and services.

The tremendous wealth of Australia is concentrated in the hands of a tiny minority. Only by ending the concentration of power in the hands of that minority can the wealth that exists be used for the benefit of working people. Every major industry should be re-organised on the lines of social provision for need-publicly owned, and democratically controlled by the workers and the community.

The Socialist Alliance will stand candidates in the next federal election to give a voice to working-class struggle, to the need for working-class political representation. We will stand to offer an alternative that Labor is not. We recognise that on issues such as the GST, health and education, Labor is offering far less than what traditional Labor voters want. The Socialist Alliance stands in complete opposition to the racist and right-wing Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party.

If elected, a Socialist Alliance candidate would reject the perks and personal pay-outs of parliamentary office and take only an average worker's wage. In parliament, Socialist Alliance candidates would use their position to give a voice to workers' struggles and social movements, fight reactionary policies and promote the mass campaigns that can defeat the attacks on jobs and living standards.

A movement for change **requires above all that the labour/working-class movement renovate itself** by developing policies, campaigns, industrial struggles, internal democracy and co-operation with all workers, environmentalists, anti-racists, and other social movements, to put forward an alternative to corporate control of society. A sustained mass campaign of total opposition to the ruling class offensive can bring together the forces to replace capitalism with a socialist society, based on co-operation, democracy, **liberty** and ecological sustainability.

By socialism, we mean nothing like the old Soviet Union, but instead solidarity raised from a principle of resistance to the guiding principle of society. We mean the working class organising to liberate itself from the rule

of profit and create its own democracy, abolishing the privileges of managers and officials. Every major industry should be reorganised on the lines of social provision for need, publicly-owned, and democratically controlled by workers and the community. No rich and no poor, no profits and no wage-slavery, no mansions and no homeless, no jobless and no overworked!

A two part platform

Workers' Liberty proposes that the list of policy points should be divided into two parts, one to encompass the full extent of the programme we can agree upon as socialists, the other a section for central items for the coming federal election (much as the British SA adopted an extensive platform and a set of “priority pledges”). This

would enable us as an Alliance to discuss and develop a fuller socialist programme, and to campaign in the elections on a more immediately relevant action platform. This would mean we could keep items in the platform that we all agree with, or at least discuss them as policies on their merits, even if we are not all convinced that they should be argued for in material for the coming election. For example some SA members think that the demand to “open the borders” is too advanced. Others think “disarm the police” gets no real grip on electoral politics this side of full socialist revolution.

If this approach to the policy points is to be used, it will be most helpful to making progress at the Conference if the affiliate organisations in the National Liaison Committee agreed to it in advance of the Conference.

RESOLUTION ON TRADE UNION AFFILIATION TO THE ALP

The National Executive of the Democratic Socialist Party discussed this issue at its July 9 meeting and wishes to submit the following resolution to the Founding Conference of the Socialist Alliance

Conference resolves that the Socialist Alliance will:

- Continue to encourage individual unionists to join the Socialist Alliance;
- Initiate and encourage widespread discussion amongst rank and file unionists and in union forums about ALP affiliation and an alternative political strategy to reliance on the ALP;
- Promote and support union disaffiliation from the ALP, and
- Encourage union support for Socialist Alliance on the basis of our policy and platform, which champions workers' interests and social and democratic rights.

Explanatory Note

By Melanie Sjoberg, national industrial coordinator (Democratic Socialist Party)

An increasing number of workers and unionists are disillusioned with the ALP and this is often accompanied by a growing frustration with their unions' affiliation and uncritical support for the ALP. The most immediate example has been in NSW where union activists are questioning the role of the ALP in slashing workers' compensation and the limited nature of the Labor Council fight because of its reliance on ALP parliamentarians. The disaffiliation of the Fire Brigade Employees Union and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union printing division is the sharpest expression of this sentiment. A meeting of MUA members at White Bay have passed a motion for ALP disaffiliation. Calls for ALP disaffiliation have also been raised at regional meetings of union activists in Newcastle, Wollongong and Lismore.

Many public sector unions on the other hand are not affiliated to the ALP. However, their political

support for the ALP is demonstrated by providing support and funding to the ALP at election time and by promoting ALP policies and candidates. The ACTU's planned marginal seats campaign for the coming federal election is by default a campaign for the ALP.

Questioning the allegiance of formally non-aligned unions, their political practice and allocation of political funding is also important. The 2000 National Tertiary Education Union national conference endorsed an election strategy that included the option of political support and funding for progressive candidates who have policies compatible with NTEU policies on higher education and workers rights. This is a model that we should attempt to extend to other unions.

There is a similar political trend in England and Scotland where the Socialist Alliance and Scottish Socialist party are at the forefront of building an alternative to Blair's British Labour. The Firefighters Union has conducted extensive discussion and one third of delegates at a recent conference voted to disaffiliate from British Labour. Unison, the largest union and biggest provider of funds to British Labour received overwhelming endorsement at its national conference for a review of its political funding and support for Labour. The communication workers and rail unions are raising similar debates.

This is a healthy dynamic as it opens the space for a genuine discussion about what kind of political alternative is necessary to advance working class interests. This discussion can encompass, not only the formal question of union affiliation to the ALP, but also support for alternative progressive candidates, alliances and parties, along with a radical strategy of mass action to defend and extend social and democratic rights.

The concept of the Socialist Alliance as an alternative to the ALP must be more than a formal platform or statement. We need to offer some direction at the union and workplace level that opens up the political debate about the strategic path for unions as well as providing practical assistance to workers' struggles.

A PROPOSAL FOR AN APPROACH TO THE SOCIALIST ALLIANCE PLATFORM

By the Freedom Socialist Party and Radical Women

The current platform of the Socialist Alliance is a good start. It contains concrete demands which working class people can relate to. We favour retaining this basic approach.

However, we believe the platform urgently requires more detail. In adding this detail, we will also be able to show how the Socialist Alliance will fight for the needs of the working class in all of its diversity. The demands of women, queers, Indigenous people, people with disabilities, people of colour, immigrants and refugees, unemployed and unorganised workers must be integrated throughout our entire platform, not confined to a discrete “no discrimination” section.

To highlight what we mean, we are putting forward the following section “Education for all, not just the rich” to replace our existing education platform. Our existing policy is comprised of the following: in the section “Axe the GST, Tax the Rich”, we currently raise the demand “free tertiary education”. In the next section “Public need not corporate greed” we demand “end government funding of private schools”, “no subsidies to wealthy schools”. That’s basically it, although some of the other demands are related. While these are perfectly good demands as they go, our platform needs to do more. It needs to conjure up an alternative vision. We propose to delete existing demands about education and replace them with a new section:

“Education for all, not just the rich”

- *Free, quality, secular education*
No up front university fees; Abolish the Higher Education Contribution Scheme; Abolish all TAFE fees and fees for post graduate and overseas students; Stop public schools from imposing fees in the form of “voluntary levies”.

- *A guaranteed independent income for students*

A fully indexed, living wage for students set well above the poverty line; abolish the student loans scheme.

- *Increased funding for public education*
Fund tertiary and TAFE places for all who qualify; end government funding of private

training providers and schools; halt forced amalgamations and school closures; increase corporate taxes to fund education and training.

- *Needs-based, diverse staffing of public education from kindergarten to university;*
Improve quality through hiring more permanent teaching staff to reduce teacher workload and class sizes; end the casualisation of employment in all sectors of education; no discrimination in employment; affirmative action programs to train and hire more Indigenous educators and more women in non traditional areas; stop the harassment of union activists and other dissenters.

- *Guaranteed access for all*

Develop, fund and enforce policies to ensure that women, migrants, Aboriginal people, gays and lesbians and people with disabilities have access to an education free from harassment, stereotyping and discrimination; education in an atmosphere of respect for all viewpoints and for dissidence and non-conformity. Full funding for literacy programs: every person has the right to learn to read and write. Ensure full funding for English as a Second Language programs; provide courses in Indigenous and other community languages; fully fund resources to integrate students with disabilities; expand childcare places at universities and TAFE colleges.

- *Curricula which serves the needs of students*

Eliminate stereotyping in curriculum materials and resources; run courses which explore and teach about the history of oppression including women’s studies, Aboriginal studies, ethnic studies, gay and lesbian studies and labour studies; education for life, not just for work.

- *Students, staff and community control of education*

Student control of student affairs: independent student unions; replace business representatives on governing councils with elected union, student and community representatives.

We encourage comrades who have specific areas of expertise to work on developing and expanding other parts of our platform. The principles we recommend are that the demands be concrete and adopt the transitional method. In Radical Women’s key programmatic document, *The Radical Women Manifesto* we adopt this method and explain it thus: “our platform is based on the Trotskyist concept of transitional demands,

demands that arise from everyday necessity and cry out for solution, but can never be fully realised under capitalism. And for this reason, they expose the rotting system.”

We also encourage comrades to think outside narrow definitions of straight, white, male, unionised, blue collar workers when formulating demands which speak to the urgent needs of our class.

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PROPOSAL ON SOCIALIST ALLIANCE PREFERENCE POLICY FOR THE FEDERAL ELECTION

The following proposal on preference policy for the Socialist Alliance in the next federal election comes from the Democratic Socialist Party, which discussed the issue at the July 9 meeting of its National Executive.

This founding conference of the Socialist Alliance resolves:

- A. That for the *House of Representatives* the conference recommend to Socialist Alliance local groups that our approach to preference flow be:
1. Progressive left candidates (e.g. Progressive Labor Party);
 2. **Either** Green (where the Green candidate preferences Labor before Liberal) **or** ALP (in any seat where the Green candidate directs preferences to the Coalition parties, splits preferences between the Coalition parties and the ALP or does not direct preferences);
 3. All other parties with the Coalition parties second last and One Nation last.
- B. That for the *Senate* the Socialist Alliance adopts the following preference policy:
1. That Socialist Alliance preferences will flow first to progressive left candidates (e.g. Progressive Labor Party), then to the Greens, then Labor and then to other parties with the Coalition parties placed second last and One Nation last.

Note on the proposal

By Dick Nichols

The main problem that Socialist Alliance preference policy has to solve is whether, and on what conditions, to preference the Greens before the ALP.

If our policy could be decided solely on the basis of the policies of the other parties then there would be no problem—Green policy is more progressive than Labor's.

The problem arises because many local Green groups, which decide Green preferences, are *indifferent* as to whether the ALP or Coalition wins seats, and hence indifferent as to whether Labor or the Coalition (“the major parties” in Green lingo) form government.

On this basis the Greens indulge in horse-trading with the ALP over points of their policy and punish the ALP with split tickets or non-direction of preferences if they can't get a deal.

The Socialist Alliance is not indifferent as to whether the Coalition or Labor forms government. We want to see a Labor government, but not because it is going to be markedly less reactionary than the Coalition. Rather, it's because the experience of Labor in government is a precondition for further breaking down Labor's political hegemony over working people. That can only come about through combining their experience of Labor's brand of economic rationalism with the ongoing building of the Socialist Alliance.

This stance means that for the House of Representatives, where the issue of government is determined and where Green preferences may help elect Liberal candidates, we must preference the ALP before the Greens in any seat where the Greens do not preference the ALP before the Coalition parties.

However, in the Senate, where who will govern is not the issue, our main aim, besides getting Socialist Alliance candidates elected, should be to increase the representation of candidates who are more progressive than Labor, chiefly the Greens. Progressive politics in this country would gain from a greater presence of progressive “dissidents” in the Senate, as can be seen from the role played by Bob Brown on many issues.

Therefore, even though the Socialist Alliance would disagree with any Green preference policy that did not preference the ALP over the Coalition parties and even though Green preference policy might conceivably place one more Liberal and one less ALP hack on the Senate benches, we should still preference the Greens over Labor in the Senate.

It will be important for Socialist Alliance local groups to explain this preference policy to Green members and voters, especially to the many young people who are anti-corporate in sentiment and are being drawn towards the Greens. The core of our argument should be that there is no way that the body of Green policy (let alone genuine sustainability) can be realised *unless the mass of the working people who presently vote ALP are won to a mass red-green alternative*. Electoral

tactics including preference policy have to be subordinated to this end. Horse-trading over this or that policy point in exchange for Green preferences might achieve a few gains at the

margin—if an ALP government gets elected and sticks to its promises—but in strategic terms it only acts against weakening ALP hegemony.

LESSONS OF THE ASTON CAMPAIGN

By David Glanz

- 1) We were right to stand. Although Aston is not natural SA territory we received more than 300 votes, started the process of putting ourselves on the map, and gained enormous confidence from being able to mobilise 150 supporters on election day.
- 2) Our general assessment—that people hate the Liberals, but have no faith in Labor and are looking for an alternative—fitted like a glove. Both major candidates pledged themselves to the \$1 billion Scoresby freeway. Both floundered on whether Australia should sign the Kyoto global warming protocol. Both supported the GST. The result was that the Liberal vote dropped by 8.5 per cent but the Labor vote fell too, meaning that a by-election that should have been Labor's for the taking was decided by postal votes.
- 3) We need to be patient; it will take time to establish the SA as an alternative. We were swamped in a field of 15 candidates and struggled to establish a profile. It was clear on polling day that while many liked our how-to-vote card slogan, "Scrap the GST", they didn't know who we were and weren't going to vote for us. The more often we stand, the better it will be. In the federal election there will be fewer competing candidates.
- 4) Given the difficulties, including not having the party name on the ballot paper, our vote was very credible. Aston is an outer-eastern suburban seat with no recent history of leftwing organising. While three minor candidates recorded zero votes in at least one booth each, we got votes in all 32 booths, showing the value of a big presence on the day. Our best booths returned 1.1 and 1.0 per cent (0.45 per cent for the electorate as a whole, just shy of our stated objective of 0.5 per cent). To put the vote into perspective, only four of the 15 candidates saved their deposit. Only seven received more than 1 per cent. The Greens complimented us on our performance. Their vote (2.4 per cent) was only 0.7 per cent higher than their Senate result in Aston in 1998.
- 5) Our prime audience is among disgruntled Labor supporters. This was particularly clear in Aston, where anti-capitalism has so far had a small impact compared to inner-city areas. The people who joined us (six recruits in Aston itself,

and a number elsewhere as a direct result of the campaign) mostly described themselves as appalled by Labor's drift to the right. A former ALP member turned up at the GST rally with a homemade placard supporting our candidate, Josephine Cox. One voter came up to her on polling day to say: "This is the first time I've not voted Labor in 40 years—this time I've voted for you."

6) This points to the future of the SA. Our first step, creating an alliance of far left groups, is necessary but not sufficient. We need to reach out to those breaking from Labor but not in agreement with the ideas of the founding groups. Part of this is making our ideas and proposals more concrete. We found out very early on in the campaign that saying "no to economic rationalism" meant very little, saying "scrap the GST" meant a lot. Our leaflet was strongest when it detailed our public transport policies, weakest when it simply repeated the platform without local content. In future campaigns we will need to research things like which local schools are overcrowded, which hospitals have the longest waiting lists, etc.

7) SA members can be enthusiastic and self-sacrificing. Where we rang SA members who are not part of an affiliate group and asked for their help, we got it. This helped get the 150 out on polling day; it also helped make the new SA members feel they were part of a group with energy and organisation. On my booth, for example, we were helped by Peter, who lives in a rural area near Melbourne and who discovered the SA when he got a leaflet on M1. He had joined but had not been contacted by the group until he was rung for Aston. He turned up at 7.30am on polling day and worked tirelessly until 6pm. There were other examples like that—our members are a resource, so let's inform and involve them.

8) Preferences were a lively question. A minority of those attending campaign committee meetings voted to preference Labor. A majority voted to preference the Greens on the basis that their vote was in the current circumstances a left protest vote. In the end, we preferenced Labor anyway because the Greens split their how-to-vote card. The SA is not neutral between Liberal and Labor,

and we were not prepared to help the Greens if they in turn were in any way helping the Liberals.

9) While we set out to win as many votes as possible, we did not give way on questions of principle. Concretely, the cutting edge of the argument was refugees. A number of people commented that they supported “everything you say” except on refugees. This provoked interesting arguments about the way that the Liberals were scapegoating asylum seekers to divert attention from things like the GST. In the case of one ETU member, who attended our public meeting, patient argument paid off. He joined the SA and supported the campaign to the hilt in the following weeks.

10) Things we did right. We campaigned at the TAFE campus and went to one metal shop and two picket lines. Our GST protest was a big success, with 70 attending and big coverage on the TV, ABC radio and in the Sunday Herald Sun. We got almost weekly coverage in the two local papers by doing a few simple things: finding out the name of the reporters covering the election, their deadline and their phone and fax number, and sending in a lively, professional media release on time each week. We looked for different angles, like the GST, support for the Johnson Tiles picketers, etc. By getting in early and providing a picture of the candidate, we got a decent personal profile published in one of the papers. All up, there were some four or five stories published with headlines and many “in briefs”. The candidate wrote a “thank you” letter to be published in both local papers, thanking supporters and pledging to be back.

11) Things we did wrong. We didn't go back to the TAFE and we didn't visit any other workplaces. We didn't follow up the GST action with other protests or stunts. That left a space for the Greens, public transport supporters and the HEMP party to make a mark. We didn't use the letters column of the local papers, where the candidate could have spoken directly to the local debates. We held our public meeting on a week night at 8pm in the middle of winter, instead of a

Sunday afternoon. We didn't try to get a list of endorsements from local people that we could publish to support the campaign.

12) The campaign cost about \$2800: \$1500 for the letterbox pamphlet, \$660 for the how-to-vote, \$350 for the deposit and about \$300 in incidental printing and other expenses. We ran this campaign on credit, using state SA funds, because of its strategic importance. There will be no such latitude for other campaigns and SA branches need to make fundraising an urgent priority. We will recoup most of the cost of the campaign, hopefully, with the Saturday night social at the SA founding conference.

13) Election day. Not only were we on every booth, but on many we had card tables, collection buckets, balloons, posters and membership forms. Each booth had an SA booth captain who was responsible for a final ringround of volunteers for her/his booth, for bringing the “show bag” of how-to-vote cards, forms, balloons, etc, for providing the table and bucket, and generally for cohering and leading our team. We aimed for four people on a booth, with two on a couple of tiny booths and six on the minority of 1998 pro-Labor booths. We hoped that sheer curiosity would bring some people to our tables; in general that didn't work. On one booth SA people used a Nike petition and filled five sheets. In future, we should have a petition at every booth. The candidate set out to visit each booth; this was subverted by the need to courier spare how-to-votes to where we were running out. Ideally, we should have two campaign cars on polling day: one to ferry the candidate, the other to do problem-chasing. Having a post-election party was a must and a great success.

14) Comrades found the campaign to be fun and worthwhile. It provided invaluable experience and profile. Thanks to all who took part. We're on our way.

David Glanz was the Aston by-election campaign manager

A DISCUSSION AFTER TASMANIAN SOCIALIST ALLIANCE LAUNCH

Adrian Beith wrote:

“After looking at the Socialist Alliance webpage, I found their policies are hardly radical.. It is only an expansion of the capitalist-welfare state, and not all that much different than what I would expect from the ALP left.”

Alex Bainbridge replied:

The most significant thing about the Socialist Alliance is that nine different socialist groups are putting forward a united position for the federal elections. This makes a socialist voice much stronger and easier to hear and significantly has already created an atmosphere where there is more collaboration and cooperation in practical campaign work. (Naturally, not all differences have evaporated, but the Alliance is a significant step in the right direction.) In addition, because of this practical display of unity, scores if not hundreds of activists from around the country who are not part of any of the nine affiliated organisations have been inspired to get more

involved in the socialist movement and have joined the Alliance. This also is a positive thing.

Adrian complains that the (draft) platform is not radical enough. The platform is designed for a specific purpose: to be an action platform around which people can unite to challenge the economic rationalist policies of the major parties. The (radical) socialist movement will take steps forward as the popular mass movement for social justice makes advances.

Building a fighting movement to expand the “capitalist-welfare state” - under attack by capitalist governments and opposition parties here and around the world - is part of the process of assembling the activist force that is necessary to fight for the more radical change that is necessary. The Socialist Alliance most certainly plans to build this fighting movement, something that cannot honestly be said about the ALP left judging by its recent *record*.

Why not join the Socialist Alliance and help?

THE DEBATE ABOUT PROGRAM WE NEED

By Dick Nichols

What is the draft platform of the Socialist Alliance? It's a series of "dot points" on matters on which the nine founding affiliates agree. These outline a principled socialist stance on most of the issues of the day in Australian politics, being basically driven by the idea "let the rich pay" or "people before profit".

Yet this is just a starting point, the foundations of the house we are looking to build together. The question that immediately arises is: how should we *conceive of* our draft platform politically? Is it "reformist" or "revolutionary"?

Some comrades say or infer that the platform should be viewed as a summary of the positions that the ALP or its left wing used to put forward—demands for reforms that the dictates of global capitalist competition now make unrealistic for any party contending for government.

According to this viewpoint the platform should be seen as the basis for a mass party of reforms with its social support base mainly made up of disaffected ALP voters and with its main focus on elections.

Other comrades agree that such indeed is the "genetic code" implicit in the Alliance's draft platform, and for that very reason insist that we need to add in more advanced demands to ensure that it is unambiguously revolutionary.

I think that both these approaches are mistaken and both could impede the Socialist Alliance from fulfilling its potential as an all-round weapon of resistance against economic rationalism and as a voice for socialism.

Just an election platform?

Maybe the first point we need to get clear is that, while our platform is *electoral*, it certainly doesn't mean that the Alliance is *electoralist*—none of us think that our body of demands can be won by winning seats in parliament. We're not parliamentary reformists and an integral part of our message is that mass struggle is the fundamental method for winning social change.

Secondly, while the Socialist Alliance has been founded to stand in elections it won't even

succeed as a vote-winning operation if it sees its role exclusively as *representing* our side in the class struggle at election time.

Why, for starters, should the vast pool of people who are fed up with Labor and generally progressive-minded vote Socialist Alliance and not Green (or PLP)? The Greens, especially their "social left" variant in the NSW Legislative Council, are adept at giving what parliamentary support they can to the causes of the day. Their parliamentarians make a point of appearing at every protest, picket-line and progressive meeting going. They do media-stunt "protests" at election time. Moreover, their program on paper is with some exceptions just as progressive—and certainly a lot more elaborated—than our draft platform.

Nor should we have any illusions that calling ourselves "socialist" is a big plus over the Greens in electoral terms. We will probably get the votes of that still small group which identifies as socialist but for many more who hate Labor and Liberal (and identify with the rising anti-corporate sentiment) "socialism" if it means anything still conjures up gulags, inefficiency and bureaucratic state domination.

The unmatched advantage of the Green tag in this field is its ambiguity—all sorts of people whose real social interests are contradictory can call themselves "green". That's the underlying *social* reason why the Greens can always oscillate on preference policy.

The Alliance has to embody not just a better electoral platform but a different *type* of politics. This can only mean doing more of what we have already started to do—taking the initiatives of resistance (like our successful national day of protest against the GST) and pointing out the way forward for all the struggles that erupt. Our limited intervention in the NSW workers' compensation dispute gave us an idea of what can be achieved—rank-and-file unionists, firefighters, electricians and others, got in touch with us as a result of reading our leaflet and model motion.

In short, to win influence at the electoral level the Socialist Alliance has to be seen to be *leading the fightback in practice*. The Alliance has to continue and strengthen the increased left unity achieved at S11, M1 and initiatives like the

Melbourne Nike picket. We have to look toward building Socialist Alliance as *the* left, anti-corporate vehicle on campus and in the unions.

This is all the more true because a quick electoral success for the Alliance is unlikely and converting disillusionment with Labor into active support for the Alliance will be a long and winding road. Indeed, if we persist with this false expectation we will be setting ourselves up for electoral disappointment at the same time as underrating the real gains possible in terms of consolidating a clearly socialist pole of attraction in Australian politics.

What this all implies for our platform is that we have to see it as an *action program*—it mustn't just tell the voter where we stand, it must show working people and other "social actors" where and how we and they should fight.

Not revolutionary enough?

Others—including certain ex-socialist wise heads from within the Greens and the ALP left—remark how little of the "full" socialist program our platform encompasses. Shouldn't we take out insurance against a reformist interpretation of our "dot points" by adding in some unequivocally revolutionary demands?

This reaction also mistakes the platform's purpose. Its point is not to provide a shortened version of the full revolutionary program—a *Communist Manifesto* in miniature. Rather it presents an outline of the socialist answer to the capitalist offensive and capitalist social values in every concrete case.

It is based on the understanding that to have the Socialist Alliance platform "come off the page" requires two things above all: (1) *getting a hearing* from the victims of the capitalist offensive and (2) convincing them that we are proposing a *feasible plan of resistance*.

Let's not forget that the potential audiences for the Socialist Alliance inevitably come to us with heads full of all sorts of prejudices and illusions in simple solutions and quick fixes. We are competing with a gamut of political shysters—including One Nation—each with a panacea for the moment and a flash line in "anti-globalisation" fakery.

Such is the real political universe created for us by capitalist restructuring in a small imperialist

power where anti-socialist prejudice still runs pretty deep. In that context revolutionary phraseology and "advanced demands" set down to reassure ourselves of our own revolutionary *bona fides* more often than not provide free kicks to the enemy.

The great American revolutionist James P. Cannon confronted these sorts of concerns at the First Workers Party Convention in 1921, and his words are still relevant:

I have talked to comrades who have fears of reformist tendencies. They are afraid we did not put enough revolutionary words in our program. Comrades, there is no danger of reformism in a party that is organised and led by class-conscious fighters. *Reformism comes only from those who do not want to fight*, and the guarantee that our organisation will not be reformistic is not alone in our program, but in the composition of the delegates who have fought consistently and determinedly on the basis of the class struggle in the past, and that is the guarantee of our activity in the future. (*Speeches for Socialism*, Pathfinder Press, p. 27, emphasis added)

Given this conception of our platform, how should we then apply it? Surely our message must always have the following four elements:

1. Victims of economic rationalist policies can't defeat attacks on their livelihood without organised resistance and struggle. (For example, the GST can be beaten but it will require building a big anti-GST movement);
2. To win a struggle we have to know (a) what we are fighting for and (b) who our potential allies are;
3. Any positions won or held through the struggle will always be at risk while the levers of power remain in the hands of the major parties;
4. That's why we need to build the global political alternative (which can't be anything but socialist).

Starting from plans of resistance and "sectoral" responses to capitalist attacks doesn't mean that we don't want to talk about the "maximum programme" of socialism. Quite the reverse. Our message always has to make clear that the gains of any struggle can only be consolidated if the working people and not the corporate elite become the masters of society.

However, this message cannot be our *starting point*. That's what the platform is for—it provides the immediate demands and proposals that give us

the best chance of rousing people's will to resist and of strengthening their confidence that the battle can be won.

What discussion on program?

The very fact of the formation of the Socialist Alliance as a united, stronger voice for socialism in this country *promises* to change the balance of political forces in this country. By that very token it also starts to make "the socialist program" a less propagandistic matter and should force a change of gears from all of us in our thinking about program. But do we thereby conclude that the existing draft platform is pretty much all the Socialist Alliance needs?

That too would be wrong. We definitely need to work at improving and elaborating our platform, but always keeping in mind its purpose. This requires us to avoid a number of traps.

The main one is what we can call the PLP or Rainbow Alliance trap—endless policy elaboration in the abstract. We can get lured into this cul-de-sac if we look at the detailed programs of opponents like the Greens and start to feel nervous about covering our embarrassing policy nakedness. As the election heats up our opponents will certainly be scoffing about our lack of a detailed position on all "issues of government", as if we can't possibly be serious without a fat document on, say, tariff rates in the shipbuilding industry.

Developing that degree of policy detail would, of course, require setting up policy committees, squander a vast amount of effort and run the risk of generating endless and fruitless polemic, as happened in the PLP.

We can avoid this trap if we keep in mind that our platform is not a *governmental program*. We don't offer those who will listen to us a list of things we would do if elected, but rather a "line of march" for working-class and popular resistance.

At the same time, however, we already feel the pressure to elaborate our policy in those areas where the Alliance is engaged in struggle and initiative, for example, against the GST. Because of our national day of protest we have already been asked hundreds of times: "What would you people do about the GST?" or "How would you replace a GST?"

Our response has been to apply in a more-or-less detailed way the principle that the rich and the corporate elite can and should pay more. This has been summarised in the fact sheet produced by comrade Rebecca LeMay and a "Repeal the GST Open Letter" directed at the ALP that has been drafted by comrade Janet Burstall on the basis of an ACT TLC resolution. It's our next shot in the GST war.

What the Socialist Alliance is presenting here is not "our policy" in the sense of what we would do if government were miraculously handed to us tomorrow and we had to find \$150 billion a year in tax revenue. It is, however, "our policy" for reversing the shift in the tax burden from the mass of working people. That is, it's a policy whose parameters and degree of detail are set by the needs of this particular struggle. Those parameters, that degree of detail and the specific demands that need highlighting will change as the struggle develops.

This will be the case, sooner or later, in all the "policy areas" covered by our platform. And it tells us how we need to approach the job of elaborating it. We need to have an ongoing policy discussion, we need to draw on all the expertise, interest and passion of Alliance members, but we also need our discussion to be real and not idly speculative or scholastic.

I suggest the following general method to achieve this goal:

1. To have an ongoing policy discussion in all areas. It can be leisurely and conducted through the discussion bulletin.
2. The results of these discussions to take the form of concrete proposals that go to the incoming National Executive and the next National Conference.
3. The incoming National Executive to be empowered to adopt interim policy positions as needed, drawing on the collective expertise of Alliance members and in full consultation with local and regional groups.

In this way we can have the best of both worlds. We can rapidly attack the issues around which the political developments will require us to have more detailed policy. We can also maintain the background ferment of debate and policy elaboration, which will help the Alliance refine its own stance and prevent us from just repeating old formulae.

Nor need our policy discussion and development be some semi-secret internal process. Indeed, since we are also permanently engaged in the battle of ideas against all brands of capitalist ideology our “policy development process”—carried out in appropriate forums—can also help shine the light of publicity on the general socialist cause.

Here one idea that has emerged within the DSP is that of holding public Socialist Alliance policy seminars or forums. These would be a useful prelude to our election campaign and an occasion for filling out and discussing our “dot points”. Each major city could specialise in a particular theme that best exploits the political openings and expertise of local Alliance members and

supporters. For example, Canberra could handle foreign policy, Sydney globalisation and economic policy, Melbourne environment and Brisbane indigenous rights and so forth.

Surely the point to most keep in mind is the need to link policy debate to the needs of building the Alliance on a solid and principled socialist basis at every turn in the social struggle. If that’s our touchstone we shall not, despite inevitable and necessary debate and divergence, go too far wrong.

Dick Nichols is an Acting National Convenor of the Socialist Alliance and a member of the National Executive of the democratic Socialist Party.

MINUTES OF JULY 6 NLC PHONE HOOK-UP

8 July 2001

To: All NLC members

Dear comrades,
Please find attached the minutes of the July 6 hook-up

Ian Rintoul (National Convenor)
Dick Nichols (Acting National Convenor)

The hook-up began at 7pm.

1. Attendance and apologies

The participants in the hook-up were:
(Melbourne) Carlene Wilson, David Glanz, Graham Matthews, Alison Thorne; (Canberra) Janet Burstall; (Sydney) Phil Sandford, Ian Rintoul, Dick Nichols. Apologies were received from Lisa Macdonald who was sick and whose place was taken by Graham Matthews.

2. Finances and fundraising (Dick Nichols and Ian Rintoul reported)

- *National poster*

Agreed unanimously: To distribute copies of the draft poster and develop a final version as quickly as possible.

- *Rod Quantock*

State of action: David Glanz to pursue

- *T-shirts and badges*

Agreed unanimously: That all local groups be advised of the availability of t-shirts from Melbourne. That the NLC produce 2000 badges ASAP with the theme Socialist Alliance, People Before Profit!. That the national convenors produce the design and the method of production be decided after seeking commercial quotes.

- *Acting national treasurer*

Agreed unanimously: That the affiliate organisations chase up potential candidates for the position of acting national treasurer and report back to next hook-up.

3. GST National Day of Protest follow up (Dick Nichols reported)

Agreed unanimously: That Janet Burstall produce a draft petition/open letter directed to the ALP, demanding that in the light of overwhelming public opposition to the GST it commit itself to "full rollback" (i.e. repeal). That the draft petition/open letter be based on the

resolution on the issue adopted by the ACT Trades and Labor Council. That the NLC investigate an appropriate occasion/event for presentation of the petition/open letter.

4. Preconference discussion (Dick Nichols reported)

- *Web-based discussion (see attachment A)*

Agreed by majority of 5-3: That the Socialist Alliance not have a web-based preconference discussion.

(For: Graham Matthews, Alison Thorne, David Glanz, Ian Rintoul, Dick Nichols. Against: Carlene Wilson, Janet Burstall, Phil Sandford)

- *State of preconference discussion*

State of action: Dick Nichols stressed the urgency of NLC affiliates getting in their contributions to the preconference discussion.

5. Conference (Dick Nichols reported)

- *Delegate election procedure (see attachment B)*

State of Action: Janet Burstall explained that draft tally sheets would soon be available for returning officers and that she would produce a model election done according to the system. Janet also volunteered to field any inquiries from local groups and to make available the details of local representatives of the Proportional Representation Society to also help out.

- *Childcare*

Agreed unanimously: That the Alliance hire professional childcare workers for the duration of the conference.

- *Lunch*

Agreed unanimously: That we schedule and hour-and-a-half for lunch

- *Literature tables and invitation to left and progressive groups*

Agreed by majority of 7 with one abstention:

That left and progressive organisations sympathetic to, interested in or observers of the work of the Alliance be invited to set up literature tables in the conference foyer. That tendencies hostile to the work of the Alliance not be granted such access.

(For: Grahame Matthews, Alison Thorne, David Glanz, Janet Burstall, Phil Sandford, Ian Rintoul, Dick Nichols. Abstention: Carlene Wilson)

- *Rally*

Agreed unanimously: That the issue of whether or not to have a rally, and if so of what sort, should be determined at the next hook-up, bearing in mind that we do not want to have a long rally

with numerous speakers and may choose not to have a rally at all.

- *Registration fee*

Agreed by majority: That the NLC endorses the following approach to the registration fee for the conference and conference financing (see Attachment C for details of costing).

- (a) Given that this is the founding conference of the Alliance and should be as representative as possible the total cost of the conference (including delegates' travel cost) should be spread equally across all local groups.
- (b) That on this basis the registration fee shall be \$120 per delegate, which would enable full reimbursement of travel costs, calculated at the cheapest fare available.
- (c) That local groups should immediately set up a fund to subsidise the expenses of their delegates, this fund to be financed as local groups think best (ie., by levy, special appeal, fundraising events etc)
- (d) That observers to the conference be charged \$10 for two days (full) or \$5 for two days (concession).

(For: Grahame Matthews, Alison Thorne, David Glanz, Janet Burstall, Phil Sandford, Ian Rintoul, Dick Nichols. Against: Carlene Wilson)

- *Status of "at-large" members*

Agreed unanimously: That any at-large member be able to attend the conference as delegate with one-fifth of a vote. That the at-large category apply to country and regional area where there is no chance of members attending a local group meeting. That in the case of borderline members the National Convenors be empowered to decide on whether members should be classified as at large. That at-large members not be eligible for reimbursement of travel expenses, but would pay only one fifth of the registration fee (namely \$24).

- *National Executive and national officeholders*

Agreed unanimously: That the NLC canvass the membership with a view to developing a list of non-aligned members who could potentially serve on the incoming National Executive and/or as officeholders. That the convenors present a definite proposal on the National Executive to the next hook-up.

- *Constitution*

Agreed unanimously: That an NLC position on the draft constitution be discussed at the next hook-up.

- *Reporters to conference*

Agreed unanimously: That reporters to conference be decided at the next hook-up.

6. *Publications*

- *Broadsheet (Dick Nichols reported)*

State of action: 22,000 broadsheets had been printed at a unit cost of 7.7 cents. The rush to get out this broadsheet had meant that there was inadequate participation by all NLC affiliates. For the next issue clear deadlines will be set enabling greater participation.

Feedback: Broadsheet needs (1) advertising of local group activity; (2) to have less text and give greater prominence to our platform and how to get in touch; (3) to give greater emphasis to our opposition to the Coalition government; (4) to regularly feature the red flay symbol, now that is being used on t-shirts.

7. *Electoral registration (Ian Rintoul reported)*

State of action: 650 national membership forms have arrived with the convenors to date. It is very important that outstanding national forms at present with local groups be sent in as soon as possible. The national convenors will begin the process of checking forms against the federal electoral roll next week.

[Phil Sandford had to leave the hook-up at this point.]

8. *Relations with other parties (Dick Nichols reported)*

State of action: The Socialist Party has indicated that it will be standing in Blue Mountains. Alison informed that former key figures in the PLP (e.g. Brian Carey in Canberra) were intending to join the Alliance.

9. *Other business*

- *Campaign against federal industrial law (Janet Burstall reported)*

Agreed unanimously: That the NLC would develop a proposal for a campaign against federal industrial law (Section 45D and E of the Trades Practices Act, the Workplace Relations Act) along the lines of our campaign to force repeal of the GST.

The meeting ended at 9.20pm.

PROPOSED ACTION RE CHANGE IN DELEGATE RATIO FOR THE FOUNDING CONFERENCE AND RELATED MATTERS

12 July 2001

*(Carried by 8 for and one (Workers Power)
against.)*

In the light of the difficulties that have been raised by local groups about raising the money to fund the number of delegates to be elected according to the original delegate ratio adopted by the NLC (one delegate for every five members); and

Given that a number of local groups would not then be able to send full delegations;

The NLC resolves:

1. To change the delegate ratio for the Founding Conference of the Socialist Alliance to one delegate for every nine members or greater part thereof. [For example, for 22 members two delegates would be elected (two for 18 and none for 4) , while for 23 members three

delegates would be elected (two for 18 and one for 5)];

2. To increase the conference registration fee to \$130 per delegate, due to an increase in the ratio of total fixed costs to total travel costs [see Attachment A “Registration fee proposal at 9 to 1 delegate ratio” and compare it with Attachment C from the minutes of the July 6 telephone hook-up]; and
3. To amend the standing orders proposed for the conference (see minutes of NLC hook-up of June 22 which state “non-delegate members to be eligible to speak but only if no delegates remain on the speaking list”) as follows:

“Delegates will have voice and vote. Non-delegate members will have voice. The speaking order shall be formed indiscriminately of delegates and non-delegates, but session chairs shall ensure that all delegates who wish to speak get the opportunity to do so.”