

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".

AMENDMENTS TO DRAFT PLATFORM

1. ON AUSTRALIAN FOREIGN POLICY

By Dick Nichols

Acting National Convenor

I propose that we introduce an extra section into the platform to be called "Against Australia's imperialist foreign policy", to be inserted after the section "Fight corporate globalisation" and to include the following dot points:

- Stop Howard's military expansion; no military ties with repressive regimes [this point is presently included under "Fight Corporate Globalisation"].
- Solidarity with Indonesia's peoples, not its military and police
- End ANZUS
- For a nuclear-free Pacific
- No to APEC

2. ON ENTERPRISE BARGAINING

By Chris Spindler,

Batman Socialist Alliance, Melbourne

I want to take up one of the policies on the Socialist Alliance platform, namely "No Enterprise Bargaining" [see under Section "Jobs not Profits—ed.]

I guess the sentiment of this is to support the idea of pattern bargaining as being against the splitting of the movement into enterprises.

The problem is that unions spend a great deal of time trying to join up non-union shops and getting them EBAs as a step to get them into the movement. From this viewpoint some bosses would also be happy with the demand "No Enterprise Bargaining". Maybe we could change it to "No individual contracts—support industry bargaining or pattern bargaining". This takes up two important themes—being against government moves to encourage individual contracts and outlawing pattern bargaining.

3. TO SECTION 'FREE THE REFUGEES'

[The section presently reads

Close the detention centres;

Full rights for asylum seekers

Open the borders, funding for settlement]

By Tony Dewberry

Wills Socialist Alliance, Melbourne and member of Socialist Democracy

- I think there are real problems with the call for open borders. Unlike other demands in the draft program this one is a maximum demand i.e. its realisation is achievable only under socialism. There is nothing transitional about it in the sense of taking existing levels of working class consciousness as our starting point. It has an all-or-nothing quality that dissolves the need for more considered policies addressing the actual current situation. If we are for open borders then how can we then call for a higher migrant intake, a higher refugee intake? How can we say we are for more family reunions and the abolition of business migration? These are all problems

that will have no meaning if the borders are open. But that is a very big "if".

- I believe there are serious problems with this demand especially in a section on the rights of refugees. Do the refugees have to wait until we have won a world without borders to come to Australia? In fact refugees have a right to enter Australia even with its borders. The concrete problem we face is that the Australian government is not meeting international human rights obligations that exist under international law, here and now, even in a world with borders. We let the government off the hook completely if we link the entry of refugees to some future utopian condition.
- The call for open borders may have some propaganda value in a section on globalisation and the free movement of capital but is out of place in any section where policies are needed that address the pressing needs of some of our potential supporters - migrant workers and refugees.

4. AFFORDABLE, QUALITY HOUSING IS A RIGHT! A PROPOSAL FOR A SOCIALIST ALLIANCE HOUSING POLICY

By Brigitte Ellery

Geelong Socialist Alliance, for Radical Women

Alison Thorne

Wills Socialist Alliance, for the Freedom Socialist Party

Our current platform is silent on the question of housing. Clearly this is just an oversight, but one which needs addressing. We offer the following proposal.

Housing is a basic human right. Currently there are thousands of people on waiting lists for public housing throughout Australia. Many are forced into the private rental market where up to 50% of income or more goes on rent and accommodation is often below a decent standard. Across Australia there is an increase in homeless people. Therefore we demand:

MAKE DECENT HIGH QUALITY HOUSING AVAILABLE FOR ALL!

We propose to:

- All housing developments must include the provision of local health, education and other services and access to quality public transport;
 - For community control of public housing through democratically elected housing boards comprised of tenants and housing workers;
 - Strengthen legislation covering both public and private tenants rights;
 - Enact rent control—for a sliding scale of rent for low income people-based on earnings. All rents to be capped at a maximum of 20% of income;
 - Mandate high standards for private accommodation and require landlords to fix problems and maintain private housing stock in good condition. Nationalise and renovate all substandard landlord holdings;
 - Expand funding to housing cooperatives;
 - Provide high quality, community based, supported accommodation for people with disabilities or other special needs. Fully fund refuges and other secure emergency accommodation for women and children escaping domestic violence;
 - Establish a publicly owned and controlled housing finance corporation to provide low-interest home loans for those in need.
- Establish a large scale building program to make good quality, energy efficient, affordable public housing available for all who choose it. Stop the privatisation of public housing;
 - Build creatively designed public housing designed to suit a wide variety of domestic arrangements including the needs of people living communally, extended families and Indigenous communities;

AMENDMENTS TO DRAFT CONSTITUTION

1. ACCOUNTABILITY OF PARLIAMENTARIANS

By Sue Bolton,

Burwood Socialist Alliance, Sydney

I wish to propose an additional section in the constitution, to read as follows:

3. Accountability of Socialist Alliance parliamentarians

3.1 The Socialist Alliance does not allow its parliamentarians to exercise a conscience vote. As they have been elected on the basis of the Socialist Alliance platform they are required to vote in accordance with that platform and publicly advocate it.

3.2 Socialist Alliance parliamentarians shall be accountable to the national conference of the Socialist Alliance, and in between conferences, parliamentarians shall be accountable to the national executive.

3.3 If elected, Socialist Alliance candidates shall pledge any income above the average wage of a skilled worker to the Alliance to help fund its work.

Explanatory note In the draft constitution, "Aims and objectives" 2.4 states: "In parliament, Socialist Alliance representatives would use their position to support workers' struggles and social movements, fight reactionary policies and promote the mass campaigns that can defeat the attacks on jobs and living standards."

This section clearly indicates the role expected of Socialist Alliance parliamentarians in helping foster the political and industrial struggles of working class people and their allies outside the parliamentary arena. However, by itself, this section does not ensure accountability of Socialist Alliance parliamentarians and does not spell out how Socialist Alliance parliamentarians should fulfill this role.

Once elected, any Socialist Alliance parliamentarian would face intense pressure to play by the rules of the parliamentary club and spurn extra-parliamentary mass political action.

If a situation arose where the government was forced to negotiate with minor parties and independents over legislation, there would be intense pressure on Socialist Alliance parliamentarians to engage in horse-trading with the government in order to achieve some minimal element of the Alliance platform. This situation is intensified by the fact that capitalist governments are smart enough to introduce legislation which is mostly nasty, but has enough little carrots in it to sucker in Democrats, Greens or independent parliamentarians.

If you look at the record of Greens parliamentarians and independent parliamentarians over the last 15-20 years, it's when they are in "balance of power" positions that they often get cornered into horse-trading and eventually supporting rotten deals. This question doesn't arise when both the major parties join together to pass legislation.

There would also be pressure on elected parliamentarians to spurn extraparliamentary mass political actions and instead concentrate on the so-called "real" game of engaging in empty parliamentary debates over legislation. An example of the folly of this approach is the public debate over mandatory sentencing in the Northern Territory and Western Australia. The Greens Senator Bob Brown did the right thing by introducing a private members bill calling for the overturning of mandatory sentencing. That did help galvanise public opinion against mandatory sentencing, especially after the death in prison of an Aboriginal teenager in the Northern Territory.

However, because the Greens did not use the public profile of their parliamentary position to call for and build a mass people's movement of nationally coordinated demonstrations, pickets and public meetings against mandatory sentencing, the federal government regained the initiative and was able to placate public opinion with a token solution.

To ensure that Socialist Alliance parliamentarians don't get caught up in horse-trading with governments over legislation, and to ensure that the public profile of parliamentarians are used to help build and support extraparliamentary

campaigns, Socialist Alliance parliamentarians need to be accountable to the annual conference of the Socialist Alliance, and, to the Socialist Alliance national executive.

I would like to propose that a section entitled "Accountability of Socialist Alliance parliamentarians" be added to the draft constitution of the Socialist Alliance. It would

best fit in between the current Section 2 "Aims and objectives" and the current Section 3 "Membership". I also propose that the 2.5 on the income of Socialist Alliance parliamentarians which is currently the last point in Section 2 "Aims and objectives" be shifted to the new section on "Accountability of Socialist Alliance parliamentarians" ..

2. ON PARLIAMENTARY ALLOWANCES

By Benie Rosen

Burwood Socialist Alliance, Sydney

I would like to propose an amendment to the section of the Draft Platform covering the "perks and personal payouts" of parliamentary office.

The amendment reads:

"If elected, a Socialist Alliance member would use the perks and personal payouts of parliamentary office for the purpose of supporting the activities and campaigns of the working class. The salary that the socialist parliamentarian would retain would be commensurate with their personal needs and family responsibilities, and also legitimate electoral expenses. The remainder would be allocated to advance the Socialist Alliance and its working class aspirations."

3. ON BRANCHES, CAUCUSES AND TENDENCIES

By Tony Dewberry

Wills Socialist Alliance, Melbourne and member of Socialist Democracy

[On 6.1. The basic unit of the Socialist Alliance shall be the local branch. A branch shall have at least seven members. Members live in the area covered by the branch, which shall be organised on the basis of federal electorates.]

This needs more detail given that for some time our electorate based branches will not match the spread of our membership. Therefore we need an amendment to the effect that:

"At-large members living in an electorate not covered by a branch have a right to join a branch of their choice."

In the interests of transparency we should also assure the right of any Socialist Alliance member to attend any meeting of the Alliance. I would propose as an amendment:

"Any Socialist Alliance member has the right to attend, as an observer, any meeting of the Alliance. The official participants in any meeting would have the right to decide for or against granting speaking rights to such observers."

[On 8. Caucuses

8.1. Any individual member or affiliate organisation shall have the right to form a caucus for the purpose of influencing Alliance policy and activity. As far as possible caucus meetings shall be open and transparent. However, once Alliance policy and campaigning priorities are decided caucuses are expected to abide by them and not organise public campaigns in opposition to Alliance policy.]

What is actually being referred to here is a political tendency and the wording of the constitution should reflect this. It should read:

"8. Tendencies

8.1 Any individual member or affiliate organisation shall have the right to form a tendency for the purpose of influencing Alliance policy and activity. However, once Alliance policy and campaigning priorities are decided tendencies are expected to abide by them and not organise public campaigns in opposition to Alliance policy."

The middle sentence should be deleted. A political tendency is a voluntary, autonomous grouping of members. The right to form a tendency means the right to meet separately. Meetings of a political tendency are therefore not

open meetings. I realise that the clause is probably intended to mean that tendencies should openly declare themselves but it is open to other interpretations and should be scrapped in the interest of clarity.

Given that the branch is the basic unit of the SA the right to form tendencies will be ineffective unless a tendency, or indeed an individual member, has the right to contact other branches to publicise and argue for their positions.

Therefore I would suggest an amendment to the effect that:

“ Branches shall keep and make available to members a list of the postal and email addresses of all other branches to allow correspondence between members.”

This would allow correspondence to be listed in the correspondence item of branch agendas and that correspondence to be discussed or tabled (depending on the desire of the receiving branch meeting).

RESOLUTIONS

1. FOR AN INCREASED FOCUS ON YOUTH

By David Silcock

Wills Socialist Alliance, Melbourne

We all recognise that in the anti-capitalist movement young people have been to the fore. This sadly is not reflected through out our new organisation. At least one branch can claim that the average of members attending is in the low 40s.

The SA Platform makes one reference to young workers on equal pay, a call for free tertiary education and for the decriminalisation of personal drug use.

The constitution mentions young people once, calling for their involvement.

Whilst some of the groups on the left have clear youth work organised, most noticeably the DSP, the SA is failing to focus on this stratum in a manner which reflects its importance. We need to

develop a method and organisation which will fight for and be fought by young people.

We need to take up in a practical sense the harassment of young working class youth by the police. We need an organisation which reflects the dreams and aspirations of young people. We need an organisation which gives young people air to breathe. We need a youth section.

RESOLUTION

“This conference resolves that Socialist Alliance calls a conference of all people under 27 years of age to establish a youth section. This conference to be held in the third week of January 2002. This conference to propose a name for the youth section, constitution and specific platform for socialist youth.”

PUTTING POLITICS INTO PRACTICE: SOCIALIST ALLIANCE, A PRO-CHOICE CAMPAIGNING ORGANISATION

By Margarita Windisch

Seat of Melbourne Socialist Alliance, Melbourne

The recent killing of a security guard at the Fertility Control Clinics is a stark reminder of the tenuous nature of abortion rights for women in Victoria and Australia. Australia and the Philippines are the only two countries in the Asia Pacific region that have abortion in the criminal code. In Australia it is the ONLY medical procedure covered by the Crimes Act.

While access to abortion has been relatively open to all/most women in Australia, due to a liberal interpretation of the law, this state of affairs has experienced considerable challenge from the conservative anti-abortion /women forces in the last few years. The debate over a women's right to choose has shifted so far to the right that even many "pro-choice" feminists emphasise the question of "morals" (meaning right and wrong abortions) over the fundamental right of women to choose.

In the feminist movement socialist and pro-choice feminists have consistently warned against complacency on the issue and argued for the need to put the repeal of all anti abortion laws on the platform at Reclaim the night, IWD and other feminist actions/rallies/marches. Our insistence to incorporate pro-choice demands faced much criticism from the liberal and identity politics section of the women's movement—ranging from the issue being "hetero-sexist" to "quasi irrelevant in the 21st century in Australia".

Well unfortunately they were proven wrong. The attack on abortion rights has reached a new zenith were the anti-choice forces have created an atmosphere so emotive and reactionary that murder has now become part of it and has even been legitimized by some of their key spokespeople.

The mainstream media is desperately trying to speculate the assassination of the security guard away from the organised anti-choice forces. They have urged 'both sides of the abortion debate to use constraint and to refrain from any form of

protest out of respect for the grieving family members of the victim and traumatised clinic staff and clients. It is a concerted ideological attempt by the establishment to depoliticise the issue and stifle any pro-choice activities.

The fact that a pro-choice protest occurred at all was due to the quick thinking and the initiative of Socialist Alliance Seat of Melbourne members. This was a perfect opportunity for the Socialist Alliance to take a stance, put its women's rights platform in practice and possibly re-ignite a new pro-choice campaign. We made a decision to hold the protest at Parliament steps to draw the links of the violent anti-choice campaigns with the government's refusal to take abortion out of the Crimes Act. Press releases with two key demands—repeal all anti abortion laws and stop persecution /violence against clinic staff and clients—went out to all media outlets with a massive response.

Socialist Alliance members were able to highlighted the legal status on abortion, the need for law repeal and condemn the refusal of all mainstream parties to challenge the status quo and attack their despicable "conscious vote" on abortion that members can practice in parliament.

Socialist Alliance was mentioned and speakers were quoted in the mainstream newspapers, on Radio National, MMM, and others outlets. *The Australian* even editorialised against the Socialist Alliance, demanding that Steven Bracks tell us off for being "insensitive" by protesting. *The Age* carried footage of the protest, featuring our pro-choice Socialist Alliance banner and placards. This is exactly the news coverage we want: we are THE political organisation to get involved in if you want to be active, are pro-choice and want to fight for women's rights!

Socialist Alliance and sadly, as a matter of fact the anti-choice forces (obviously for their own despicable reasons) are the only organisations who to date have not dodged the real issue in public. And the real issue is crystal clear: a woman's RIGHT to choose. While we call for law repeal to guarantee the RIGHT, they call on the government to act upon the law to penalise the

criminal act of abortion to deny the RIGHT to choose!

Socialist Alliance is now well placed to further campaign on the issue in collaboration with other pro-choice forces and initiate meetings, speak-

outs and actions in it's own name. We should think about the viability of a private members bill to parliament, holding local "meet the candidates meetings" in the lead up to the federal elections on the abortion question and challenge candidates on the conscious vote.

SOME IDEAS FOR A SOCIALIST ALLIANCE JOBS POLICY

By Chris Spindler

Batman Socialist Alliance, Melbourne

This policy sketch is an attempt to offer some concrete solutions on employment and start some debate.

Hands up who is for unemployment! If there were a vote tomorrow on eliminating unemployment we would win it. If only it were this easy. It is clear though that working people have nothing to gain from unemployment. Workers, families, their communities are torn apart. It is only the bosses who have anything to gain from unemployment using it to keep wages and conditions down and promote competition between workers. We don't just need to minimise unemployment but develop the policies that will end it.

None of the major political parties currently has any real job solutions. They are essentially free traders who encourage business to hire and fire at will, they accept unemployment and offer laws which allow for the effective sacking of whole workforces. The liberals even want to make access to unfair dismissal laws restricted for small business employees.

Socialist Alliance on the other hand wants to work toward a system that does not endorse unemployment. To get there we need government to implement particular policies now and start to challenge the owners of capital who think that profits can come before people. Socialist Alliance rejects the idea that higher profits benefits us all—trickle down doesn't work. Higher profits in effect mean less for workers. Our policies would promote the idea that unemployment can be restricted and done away with. Pie in the sky? Read on.

KEEP FULLTIME, SECURE WORK

These type of policies reverse the trends in industry which see a less secure expendable workforce.

Place definite limits on the use of casuals, contractors, labour hire and part-time work. Real unemployment is higher than the government figures. Insecurity and insufficient hours is a real burden on working people.

- *Make company participation in funds that guarantee workers' entitlements in case of bankruptcy or closure (like Manusafe), mandatory.* (Company after company have gone bust taking workers entitlements with them. Manusafe protects the entitlements of workers making them portable and secure in the face of business closures.)
- *Promote apprenticeship schemes.* End the trend to de-skilling, multi-skilling and removing demarcations, which makes work more unsafe.
- *An immediate freeze on all tariffs.* The dismantling of tariffs has destroyed sections of manufacturing and rural production, governments and employers need to take responsibility for re-training in alternative industries if tariff reductions are going to destroy industry.

JOB CREATION NOT JOB DESTRUCTION

- *Develop job creation programmes.* But paid for not out of our strained pockets but by the wealthy.
- *Major infrastructure spending by the government.* In telecommunications, health, education, housing, sustainable energy, even manufacturing. The government should not just tender it out but be prepared to be an employer.

Where's the money coming from? State governments are to get a windfall from the GST. Rather than invest that money in community projects they have given tax cuts to businesses—once again out of our pockets and into theirs.

- *Impose a Tobin Tax,* that is, a tax on speculation or foreign exchange transactions. The movement of money, the investment in the stock exchanges is big business but it is not productive investment—companies should be forced to invest productively.

SHARE THE WORK AROUND

For a shorter working week with no loss in pay
We need to share the work around. To cut the working week to 35 hours even 30 hours will create hundreds of thousands of jobs. But for many workers living hand to mouth a cut in hours should not mean a cut in wages. This will mean

the shorter hours bill will have to come from company profits. Profits have been up. Banks show record profits. An indication is that executive salaries went up 22% last year. It's time to share the wealth around.

- *Action against companies who threaten mass sackings.* Currently companies can do as they please. They can close a factory with no consequence other than putting tens or hundreds out of work. Arnotts is an example—a productive, profitable factory with a market for its product. No other reason to close down than a multinational decision. There are no penalties on that company, the directors are not held responsible. This should change. And if another buyer can't be found the government should be prepared to buy it. *Nationalise it.* It can keep running, making a profit, employing 600 workers—why can't the government be an employer of last resort!
- *Action to re-train and re-employ workers.* There are other examples where factories close because they are unprofitable. Bad management, wrong sector of the economy etc. product not needed. It is the government that is in the position of being able to re-train the workers, re-tool the company for useful production. Take the example of the forestry industry. Workers in that industry should not be thrown on the scrapheap. If society demands that industry change (and it should in this case) then society through government needs to ensure the standard of living of those people and communities.
- *Nationalise it?* There should be no problems with such a concept. So many areas of the economy are socialised when there is a problem. HIH we all pay for, East Timor we pay for. Why not socialise responsibility for jobs and why not socialise some of the massive profits of some companies to help pay for real job promotion?

SOLVING THE JOBS PROBLEM IN A WORLD OF GLOBAL COMPETITION

Subsidies to business to build or make here, protectionism and tariffs, buy Australian and even content policies all have the same idea at heart—we aim to protect our jobs against the workers of countries overseas. On a state level we have seen how ridiculous this is with one state bidding against another for company investment. Again,

rather than seeing workers in other states or in other countries as competitors they have to be our allies.

Before a company cries poor we need to know what is happening. Companies need to open their books, they need to list what their managers get, they need to list any subsidies they already get.

- *Subsidies?* or our taxes being used to prop up profits. Look at BHP: millions in subsidies under the Steel Plan and then they closed Newcastle and/or Whyalla.
- *Tariffs and protectionism against overseas imports?* In the first place increasing tariffs doesn't work. In the 1930's tariffs were at their highest ever and still one third of the workforce was unemployed. It's not the workers overseas that should be targeted but those "at home".
- *The same goes for buy Australian:* this just means don't buy from "overseas". What about buying from companies that are union or treat their workers better or pay decent wages? The Core Labour standards of the right to organise, outlawing child labour, head in the right direction but they should be extended to include questions such as wages.

In the end the jobs question has to be looked at beyond trying to protect our patch. Lifting the standard of living overseas ensures there is no incentive for companies to go offshore—we need to head in this direction.

How?

1. *Reverse the North-South trade relationship.* Stop the exploitation that is occurring in the trade relationship between rich and poor countries. Second rate machinery that can't possibly be as productive as the advanced countries - these countries and workers are caught in a never-ending poverty cycle and they must be allowed to develop. As well as assisting in development these countries must have the third world debt cancelled.
2. *Create international bargaining.* We need to campaign for common outcomes internationally. Pattern bargaining has shown that common outcomes can occur statewide, even nationally. It also has to happen

internationally. The bosses work internationally, their money travels from country to country in search of the greatest profits, so we have to organise internationally to boost the wages and conditions of our fellow workers and to ensure that bosses can't find cheap employment and non-union havens.

Such international campaigns can be started in companies with factories in a number of regionally based centres. Many of the car and component companies have bases in a number of Asian countries—a common campaign can be started between all branches. And we can move to expand the ILO Labour Rights (it includes the right of association, the right to organise, no child labour) but it should also include wage rises,

working conditions and health and safe work practices.

3. Fund and help to organise internationally in the labour movement. Material and political support for the union movement internationally. The Canadian Auto Workers impose a 1c/hour/worker levy on companies. The union then uses this money to bring delegates from other countries to co-ordinate the campaigns talked about above.
4. *Link these policies to others that affect workers here and abroad:* against government support for IMF WEF etc. Against government plans to restrict unions' right to organise here. Anti-union law must be repealed, there should be no more stripping back of awards.