

INTERNAL
DISCUSSION
BULLETIN

*Volume 2 Number 2
June 2002*



ANALYSIS AND COMMENT ON THE REFUGEE RIGHTS CAMPAIGN

Socialist Alliance and refugees <i>By Riki Lane</i>	3
A reply to Riki Lane <i>By Lisa Macdonald</i>	4
A reply to Lisa Macdonald <i>By Riki Lane</i>	6
Socialist Alliance and the trade unions <i>By Brian Sketchley and Melissa White</i>	6

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Socialist Alliance and refugees: the need for a united approach

By Riki Lane

*[This is based on an article in the current issues of **Workers' Liberty**, with some additional points. I have not been active in the campaign, so my information is drawn from conversations with those who have been, and may be inaccurate in some particulars.]*

Socialist Alliance has been a great step forward for the Australian left. Socialists from different traditions have worked together to mount election campaigns that have had some grip on the issues facing working people. We have started to establish branches with real roots in working class communities. Now we have to take the next step — to establish ways for the affiliated groups and unaffiliated members to thrash out common approaches to campaigns, or at least to understand and make a serious effort to resolve the differences.

Refugee support campaigning is a vital issue in politics today. Howard won the last election on the basis of xenophobia and racism toward asylum seekers. Unions are starting to seriously take up the issue, which necessarily involves taking on prejudices amongst their members. The ALP is in ferment as the Labor for Refugees network mounts a serious challenge to their leaders' cowardice.

Socialist Alliance can be proud that its members have been prominent in the campaigns. But there have been a number of disputes, not mainly over political issues, but more about organisational and "turf" ones. In Sydney, we have two campaigns, Free the Refugees (FRC) and Refugee Action Coalition (RAC). The FRC appears to be closely aligned to the DSP, while RAC is broader and has ISO members in leading positions. There have been coordination difficulties, with demonstrations being called within days of each other etc.

In Melbourne, there is a well attended central RAC and a number of local groups. One of these RAC West, is seen as dominated by the DSP and has been taking initiatives independently of the central group. DSP members have attacked the role of ISOer Judy McVey in representing RAC. DSP members also complain that they are excluded from the central leadership of RAC Central. Others argue that the DSP have no automatic right to representation and do not have well established activists.

"Turf battles" between the ISO and the DSP (and other socialist groups) have been a feature of the political landscape for years. They often have a very destructive impact, with other activists being frustrated and demoralised. People often think that

socialist groups are much more interested in building themselves than the movement.

The framework of Socialist Alliance offers the chance to overcome this problem. If we are to thrive, we need to develop ways for affiliates and other members to discuss tactical differences without engaging in destructive disputes in campaigns. We need open and honest discussion of political differences, not maneuvering for organisational advantage.

It seems obvious that we need a united national refugee campaign, composed of open activist committees. In large cities like Melbourne and Sydney, central groups should be making decisions about city wide actions, while local groups organise locally.

An important question this opens up is "front groups". Many socialist groups have had the practice of setting up campaigns that are closely linked to themselves. While other activists can join, the political leadership is clear. Sometimes this may be justified, where there are significant political differences with united campaigns, or where a group has been excluded. (Workers' Liberty of course opposes the exclusion of socialist, or other, groups from campaigns.)

Mostly, however, the "front" groups are seen as transmission belts into the particular socialist group. Their actions and policies are based on what will give advantage to the group without appearing to consider what actions and policies will advance working class consciousness and organisation. Hence the accusation arises of putting the needs of the group against that of the working class (Marx's definition of sectarian).

There was no reason to think that simply forming Socialist Alliance would cause its component groups to change their long established ways of acting in the labour and solidarity movements. But we have been cooperating well, which opens up the chance to discuss these issues in a serious and comradely manner, rather than in slanging matches.

For our part, Workers' Liberty thinks that you cannot separate out "building the revolutionary party" from building the class struggle. Seeing the preservation and extension of a group's apparatus as the group's primary goal is a recipe for sectarianism. The establishment of Socialist Alliance is an indication that we can all break from that method.

Recent developments show that there are grounds for optimism of an outbreak of political maturity. The

Socialist Alliance convenors have opened a discussion about how best to build the refugee campaign and how to deal with differences in Socialist Alliance. Honest, open dialogue can undermine hostility and suspicion.

There are two issues of political substance underlying the skirmishing. One is Labor for Refugees, and the indication that it gives that the ALP is not totally moribund as a part of the working class movement, something which the DSP rejects, and the ISO and Workers' Liberty do not. The second is the "Open the borders" slogan, which the DSP (and others) advocate, while RAC (and the ISO and Socialist Democracy) does not. RAC apparently requires its local groups to limit themselves to its five central demands — perhaps some flexibility needs to be shown to allow activists to raise other demands as well

These issues mean that there are significant differences of emphasis in the refugee campaigns. But are they a sufficient basis for separate campaigns? I think not.

But the question is clearly posed for many activists: Do the DSP have a perspective of establishing a national Free the Refugees Campaign (FRC) along the lines of Committees in Solidarity with Latin America and the Caribbean (CISLAC) or Action in Solidarity with Indonesian and East Timor (ASIET)? I think this suspicion underlies much of the hostility. Obviously, the DSP is able to do this if it wishes — but is it in the best interests of the refugee movement?

There seem to me to be a few workable models for a united, national refugee campaign:

1. RAC is the campaign, and allows some flexibility around demands for local groups;
2. RAC is one campaign, FRC is another, other groups (like No-one is Illegal) are others. An umbrella group is set up to coordinate major actions;
3. A combination of 1 and 2 where the left have one united campaign in RAC, but there are ad-hoc umbrella groups with unions, Amnesty, churches etc.

The latter seems the preferable option to me, as there just is not the sufficient political basis for separate left campaigns. Especially as we are working together in Socialist Alliance, it would be a major mistake to allow our refugee work to be split.

We also need to think about how the refugee solidarity campaigns can make links with workers. The Labor for Refugees experience shows that there are real opportunities in the mainstream labour movement. Other issues in terms of trying to relate to workers are:

- Investigating how different groups of workers come into contact with asylum seekers and TPV holders, and seeking to educate our fellow workers in workplaces about the issues;
- Encouraging further exposure of secrets and scandals about the treatment of refugees;
- Making sure that we in the Socialist Alliance give a *high* priority to visibly responding to issues affecting Australian workers directly, e.g. Ansett collapse, to bridge the gap between refugee supporters and the broader working class, the gap that Howard exploits with his fear and scare campaigns. ■

A reply from Lisa Macdonald

To: Riki Lane

CC: Socialist Alliance National Executive members

From: Lisa Macdonald

23 March, 2002

Dear Riki,

I felt it was necessary to respond to your March 19 comment piece to the Socialist Alliance National Executive in order to at least set the record straight. I do not yet know how much of your comment piece is drawn from the article in Workers' Liberty, but I hope that you and your comrades will make any corrections necessary to that after considering my response.

Your concentration on supposed "turf battles" between the ISO and DSP both misrepresents the

reality on the ground and is misleading with regard to the main issues in the movement. In fact, DSP and ISO comrades are working together in many committees, not just refugee committees. Discussion is needed (in any movement) about the political positions and direction of the movement, and those discussions and debates are being had in many of the refugee committees and public meetings. However, differences in appraising campaign developments, such as the advent of Labor for Refugees, has not stopped the DSP and ISO from collaborating with each other on a range of projects.

While both the DSP and FRC want to, and have been, collaborating with Labor for Refugees since its formation last year (FRC has regularly invited L4R to address its public meetings and actions, for example), our campaign work will also be guided by a

determination that developments in the ALP do not hamstring or in any way weaken the growth of a politically independent movement.

The DSP welcomes the current diversity in refugee rights campaign groups and activities. We believe that this is a strength for a new and growing movement, in large part because it helps safeguard the movement's political independence from the major parties. Further, the number and range of refugee rights organisations that now exist nationwide is facilitating a rich growth of ideas and activities in many sectors, making it very difficult for the Howard government and ALP opposition to isolate and dismiss the movement as just one section of the community.

All groups have the right to take initiatives and they should be supported as far as possible. This is the only way to build a broad and inclusive movement. In this spirit, the DSP is interested in working with all refugee rights groups and has been involved in the building of many refugee rights committees, alongside the ISO, other members of the Socialist Alliance and other left-wing activists. For the record:

- DSP members last year helped to establish the Refugee Rights Action Network in Western Australia, with members of the ISO and others.
- We initiated Adelaide RAC, with others, after the first Woomera trip in 2001.
- We initiated the University of Queensland RAC this year with others.
- We initiated the Newcastle Action for Refugee Rights this year with others.
- We have members active in Illawarra RAC, Canberra RAC, Brisbane RAC, Lismore RAC, Melbourne RAC and Melbourne West RAC.
- We helped to establish the Darwin Refugee Action Network.
- We initiated, this year, Rural Australians for Refugees groups in Rockhampton and Geelong.
- We have worked in Sydney RAC and continue to liaise with Sydney Refugee Action Coalition.
- Our members in Rockhampton, Darwin and Lismore hosted the 2002 Freedom Bus tour events in those cities, organising the largest meetings and rallies during that tour.
- A number of our trade union members are also members of Labor for Refugees.

In Sydney, we have concentrated our efforts on building the Free the Refugees Campaign. FRC is not, as you imply, a DSP "front group" and I am sure that many members of the FRC, including the dozens of refugees from different communities who are

active in FRC, would strongly object to such a characterisation of their organisation.

FRC was established in Sydney's western suburbs two years ago after members of the DSP and the Worker Communist Parties of Iraq and Iran were driven out of RAC by a couple of individuals (including Maqsood Alshams, one of the people behind the exclusion of socialists from the Sydney Palm Sunday 2002 committee). These individuals were vehemently anti-communist and after attacking the DSP and WCPI members in RAC for our attempts to democratise the committee, turned on the ISO, resulting in a further split in RAC late last year (into the Refugee Action Coalition and the Refugee Action Collective).

FRC was established in central Sydney after a successful community march in Newtown in late February. The march was called by FRC only after the local Socialist Alliance branch meeting decided not to initiate an action in the area, and after DSP/Socialist Alliance members attended a meeting of Marrickville RAC to raise the idea of a rally and were told that the group did not intend to call any actions for the next two months. In any case, they said, the Marrickville group did not consider Newtown to be an area they were organising. Having decided to call the rally, FRC approached all other refugee groups, including RAC, to endorse and speak at it.

FRC now comprises many activists, including Greens and ALP members, and has hundreds of email subscribers. Its campaign activities are currently framed by the demands:

- End mandatory detention & close the detention centres
- Full citizenship rights, not temporary protection visas Funding for resettlement services, not detention
- No deportations
- End the "Pacific solution" and the racist scapegoating of refugees.

So it is clear, FRC has not adopted the Socialist Alliance's demand of "Open the borders".

FRC has a proud record of work with all other refugee rights groups. This is reflected, for example, in the range of organisations that have participated in FRC's "People's Enquiry" public meetings, and in the very broad list of endorsements for FRC's protest rally at Villawood detention centre on March 31. FRC posts other refugee rights groups' actions, including Labor for Refugees', on its email lists and includes them in its fortnightly hard copy calendar of campaigning activities in Sydney.

In this framework, FRC has always sought to avoid clashes of events. The 2000-strong Saturday February 2 rally (which you allude to in your reference to “demonstrations being called within days of each other”) was initiated by FRC before any publicity was around about the RAC-Labor for Refugees rally on Thursday January 31. RAC made no attempt to involve FRC in the planning of the rally, and it had not been mentioned at the previous RAC meeting (on January 21), which was attended by a DSP member in order to invite RAC to participate in a January 24 emergency rally around the Woomera hunger strikes and to take part in the RAR-inspired protest in Canberra on February 12.

I hope that this clarification of the DSP’s work in the refugee rights movement, the approach and activities of FRC and the broader situation on the ground in Sydney facilitates a more accurate and constructive discussion between Socialist Alliance members. For those of us who are directly active in the refugee rights movement, these political and organisational discussions will continue in the campaigning groups and networks, hopefully in the spirit of consultation and cooperation that has prevailed to date.

Comradely,

Lisa Macdonald

(A member of the DSP, Parramatta Socialist Alliance branch, and the Free the Refugees Campaign.) ■

A reply from Riki Lane

Lisa,

I note that you do not directly answer the question “Do the DSP have a perspective of setting up an FRC on the lines of Action in Solidarity with Indonesia and East Timor (ASIET) or Committees in Solidarity with Latin America and the Caribbean (CISLAC)?” This question was not posed in the Workers’ Liberty article, but I think it is appropriate in the context of what will hopefully be a robust internal debate in Socialist Alliance. You must understand why other people see this as a live question.

I have no intimate knowledge of the refugee work in Sydney, but know that the DSP were forced out of the original RAC committee. What are the principled reasons for maintaining separate FRC and RAC groups in Sydney? I posed several alternatives for a united campaign - either RAC as the umbrella group, with some relaxation of its limits on demands, or another umbrella group that includes both FRC and RAC. What do you favour?

I am sure that the DSP is doing a lot of refugee work, and has worked with RAC, the ISO and Labor for Refugees in many places. The only work I have direct contact with is at La Trobe University, where Resistance have set up a Free the Refugees Club (which I have joined). ISO and RAC activists feel they have been pushed out to some degree and have concentrated on building for Woomera 2002, while FRC has built the APISConference.

There seems to be more hostility between DSP on one side and ISO/Socialist Democracy on the other in Melbourne than there is in Sydney. What are our priorities as Socialist Alliance? Surely building the most effective possible movement in solidarity with the refugees, not recruiting to Socialist Alliance or any of its affiliates.

I look forward to the discussion on Friday night.

Riki ■

Socialist Alliance and the trade unions

By Bryan Sketchley (unaligned member, QPSU) and Melissa White (Workers’ Liberty, NTEU)

Brisbane, 14 June, 2002

As one of its objectives, the Socialist Alliance strives to politically represent the constituency of the working class. That is why we ran candidates in the last federal election. However, at present there are severe limitations, both political and practical, on Socialist Alliance’s ability to represent that class constituency. These will become permanent defects of our organisation unless we change at least two conditions of Socialist Alliance’s existence.

First, there are major political defects in the platform, which is as yet indistinguishable in class terms from anything that the Greens presently offer or the ALP of

yesterday offered (or still, as a matter of fact, has the *capacity*, in principle, to offer). Whilst it is true that this is a result of the fact that Socialist Alliance is an alliance existing as a federated balance of power of groups with different political views instead of a unified organisation, it is not the whole of the reason for the defective platform. We simply didn’t get the best we could have got at last year’s founding conference in Melbourne. Our sights were set too low. They were set low for a combination of political-psychological reasons, which are well worth examining in detail, but of which we mention only two here;

- The DSP comrades have become accustomed to scoring low results in elections as a result of their own electoral work, so that even a result of 1% seems like a “victory”.
- The ISO comrades have become fearful of “alienating” workers, so that they want to eliminate any half-way reasonable political demand from the platform (note the debate around the demands to “disarm the police” and “open the borders” at the founding conference, where they sought to have both demands removed).

It would still be possible to secure a platform that is more explicitly for working-class struggle and working-class interests, and which links these to the goal of socialism, even within the current, limited parameters of debate that we all live under. In such a situation, we would like to see the platform better accommodate the short-term demands of the Australian working class against socialist criteria, so that each political demand is linked carefully with the requirements for establishing workers’ representation in parliament in this country.

The poverty of the platform is not our main concern here, although we note it well. We will contribute further to that discussion in subsequent submissions. It must be said, however, that what we raise below cannot occur without a simultaneous significant development of the Socialist Alliance political platform.

The second, practical, condition that must be met before we in Socialist Alliance can ever succeed in representing the constituency of the working class politically is that we must take up trade union issues immediately, and not in a superficial way. The Socialist Alliance has an incredibly weak relationship with the working class. Individual members are, of course, some of the best rank-and-file union activists in the country. However, as an organisation we stand in a relationship to the working class which is not much more substantial than one in which we merely advertise our existence to the class on election day, and hold trade union seminars to make contacts. We don’t act.

Our job is as follows. We need to secure the conscious agreement of ordinary people in their workplaces and communities before socialist politics can prevail. So, we need to be part of the struggle of workers inside their own organisations to win concrete demands, and to form relationships with workers in their own organisations. Said in a different way: we in Socialist Alliance need to develop a structured intervention in the working class within a timeframe that puts demands upon us of a sort that demonstrate a commitment to the centrality of the working class in socialist struggle. *There is as yet no systematic Socialist Alliance involvement in these biggest collective organisations of the working class*, despite the fact that there is more debate than ever at present about Socialist Alliance placing itself to capture the unions disaffiliating from the ALP, especially those in Victoria. Yet, we have not even done the rudimentary work amongst rank-and-file unionists to capitalise on these disaffiliations from the ALP and the general disaffection with and depression about the Government. Why not? To us, it seems like inconsistent madness.

Socialist Alliance is not *by definition* the best grouping to lead the unions and their industrial struggles. Our proposal

is that Socialist Alliance comrades now work hard in order to become that best grouping of advocates for workers in their trade unions. The trade unions are the most dominant organisations of the working class, and a top priority for the allocation of the energies and resources of the Socialist Alliance, which should be directed in making political interventions into them. This is a central orientation we propose for Socialist Alliance over the coming years before the next federal election.

We realise well that there are lots of things that can be done in union work, and what we propose below only covers a few of them. However, we think these points below are the most important tasks, taking priority because they are things which start preparing the ground for the development of a long-term perspective on Socialist Alliance’s orientation to the trade unions. In general, we believe that the groundwork should be laid for the development of militant, rank-and-file networks or caucuses in unions, particularly through an involvement in and solidarity with industrial struggles. This could be structured along four main lines of development, and we note them here, starting from the immediate objective (in point 1), moving through two medium-term objectives (points 2 and 3), and finishing with the longer-term objective (point 4). They are not exhaustive:

1. Each union where the Socialist Alliance has comrades should be assessed. This would include things such as assessing the present state of the leadership of the particular union, finding out about the issues facing the union, investigating how the union is responding on those issues, devising what we think is a necessary union response on those issues, investigating all the responses of any militant caucuses or pre-existing rank-and-file groups. On the basis of such assessments, the Socialist Alliance comrades in that union should try to plot out a short, medium and long-term course of action. This will involve joining in with an existing left caucus if that is at all possible, or else trying to find, cultivate and rally militants already in the union. Most likely comrades will ‘get the ball rolling’ in forming such political relationships around an immediate single issue in the workplace or union. That would be a good start.
2. That would be such a good start, that Socialist Alliance comrades who manage to join or form such caucuses in unions should be able to begin to develop caucus platforms. These could start out from the single workplace issues we mention in point 1, but, we suggest, could draw connections with and put particular emphasis on the issues of:
 - Democracy and accountability in their own union specifically, and in the labour movement more broadly;
 - Fostering commitment amongst workmates to the idea of rank-and-file action as politically preferable over reliance on the courts etc;
 - Becoming familiar with union rights and industrial laws, and seeking to raise the level of general knowledge about these things amongst the rank-and-file;

- Rallying workmates around the traditional industrial issues such as pay, conditions, occupational health and safety, social hostility towards the boss;
- becoming familiar with and generous in knowledge about wider industry and production matters, suggesting policies for workmates' roles in developing community links for wider social justice matters, such as environmental concerns and humanitarian issues.

According to us, it is absolutely fundamental to the prospects of creating a new class struggle leadership in the labour movement that such caucuses are built on a broad class struggle basis, and *not* on a token lip service to "socialism". The above suggestions about how to orientate to workmates in workplaces where Socialist Alliance members are placed is designed, as we've said, to build militant rank-and-file union caucuses. This, in turn, will lay a basis for Socialist Alliance comrades to fight for the political leadership of such caucuses. In turn, again, this will lay the basis for the next medium-term objective in which;

3. Socialist Alliance comrades consciously re-direct their energies into intervening in unions by producing rank-and-file bulletins wherever possible. Rank-and-file bulletins, produced systematically, are the best way to make political arguments that are relevant to the issues workers are dealing with in any given union that we decide to target, and the best way of cohering union activists around an Socialist Alliance programme. Where possible, we should propose the creation of formal opposition groupings in unions and announce this in rank-and-file bulletins, or, where such groupings already exist, we should be active in them. Further, Socialist Alliance is positioned to demonstrate that isolated union matters are tied to bigger working-class concerns, such as the devastating "slowburn" effect of individual contracts (AWAs) and casualisation.

The precise details for the production of rank-and-file bulletins need not be worked out in detail now and can be worked out as their production becomes a real possibility in any workplace. The general idea is that militant caucuses, once formed, should endeavour, in a rank-and-file publication, to cover industrial and workplace and political issues in a 'nitty gritty' style.

We point out that two out of the twelve cognate segments of the platform are relevant here, and we include these here to remind people what we already have. Amongst other things, caucuses could cohere politically around these segments of the platform.

FULL UNION RIGHTS

- *Every worker should have the right to join a union and oblige their employer to recognise and negotiate with the union. Unions should have the right to gain access to workplaces, to inspect company plans and*

books, to strike, to picket effectively, and to act in solidarity with other unions or social causes.

- *Repeal anti-union laws—the Workplace Relations Act and sections 45 D and E of the Trade Practices Act.*

1. *No individual contracts*
2. *Stop the attacks on workers compensation, increase the entitlements for injured workers*

And,

JOBS NOT PROFITS

1. *Shorter working week with no loss in pay; nationalise under workers' and community control companies that threaten mass sackings*
2. *Guarantee workers' entitlements*
3. *Stop casualisation; for full employment with permanent jobs*
4. *Stop national competition policy massacring jobs*
5. *For industry-wide agreements; no trading-off of jobs and conditions.*
6. *All workers to have access to an award*

Finally,

4. Once Socialist Alliance members have established a core group of militants in a union, and made progress with that group in developing a platform for the union, they should seek through that group to run candidates in all upcoming union elections, wherever possible, but *not* at the expense of already-existing left caucuses in unions (which they should have integrated with and galvanised). The Socialist Alliance should seek union electoral opportunities, but we should *not* counterpose our own candidates against other candidates who genuinely represent the need for reliance upon rank-and-file organisation and class struggle. In such cases, Socialist Alliance members should help to politically invigorate non-socialist candidates and offer to help with and support their campaigns. We fight for union positions on the basis of trying to convince members that we can best lead a fight for their trade union concerns, *not* on the basis of asking them to vote for us as an act of adherence to the Socialist Alliance. We must earn that political adherence, and as yet, we do not have it.

In conclusion, the Socialist Alliance has the potential to become a grouping with roots in the organised working class, a grouping that is well in evidence in political, industrial and ideological battles big and small, and a grouping capable of providing a consistent class analysis, offering coherent and militant solutions for the working class. If the Socialist Alliance recognises the need of the Australian working class for such a political organisation, then the Socialist Alliance should, accordingly, recognise the need to re-orientate its energies and resources towards concerted union work.

Workers of All Countries, Unite! ■