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Contributions to Alliance Voices
Cuba

By Chris Slee (Wills Branch)

In the Socialist Alliance Discussion Bulletin volume 3, number 6, Jonathan Sherlock says: “The question of Cuba cannot be glossed over in any discussion of socialist theory. But more importantly, the different positions on Cuba lead to different visions for the Socialist Alliance”.

I am not convinced that differences over Cuba lead to “different visions for the Socialist Alliance”. Nevertheless, Cuba is an interesting and important topic, so it is worth looking at some of the debates about Cuba amongst socialists.

Did a socialist revolution occur in Cuba?

Jonathan says:

If you believe that Cuba is somehow socialist, however distorted, then you believe that it is possible to bring about socialism via several hundred guerrilla fighters coming down from the mountains at the right moment and seizing power. You will believe that the working class, while important, is not the only agent for bringing about socialism; that socialism can be brought about without working class struggle.

This statement indicates that Jonathan has a mistaken view of how the Cuban revolution happened. It was not just the work of “several hundred guerrilla fighters”. The workers and peasants played an active role in the revolution. For example, workers in Cuba’s second largest city carried out two general strikes during the period of the guerrilla struggle. The Batista regime was finished off by a general strike coinciding with the entry of the guerrillas into Havana in January 1959 and developing into an insurrection that destroyed the old army and police.

In the period following the insurrection there was an ongoing struggle between the workers and peasants and the capitalists. There was a fierce struggle over land reform for example. The workers and peasants participated in mass demonstrations and other forms of struggle. They joined organisations such as the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (CDRs) and the militia. These struggles culminated in the expropriation of all capitalist property in the early 1960s. Social ownership and the organisation and mobilisation of the masses laid the basis for gains in terms of health, education, women’s rights and relative social and economic equality.

Has the revolution degenerated?

Some left groups acknowledge that a revolution did occur in Cuba, resulting in the creation of a workers’ state, but think either that it was bureaucratised from its inception, or that it rapidly degenerated. They believe that the Cuban government represents the interests of a privileged bureaucratic layer and must be overthrown.

Cuba certainly has problems with bureaucratisation, privilege-taking, and corruption of individual officials. But this does not mean that the state represents the interests of a ruling bureaucracy. It certainly doesn’t mean that the only solution to these problems is to overthrow the Cuban government.

Lenin said in 1921-22 that the Soviet state suffered from “bureaucratic distortions” (see for example Lenin’s Collected Works, vol 32, page 48). But obviously Lenin did not call for the overthrow of the government he led. Rather he sought to alert Communist Party members to the dangers and inspire them to combat bureaucratic tendencies in the party and the state. Fidel Castro has followed a similar policy.

Many left groups in imperialist countries start from an ideal model of what socialist democracy should look like, and find that Cuba falls short of this ideal. They then conclude that Cuba is not democratic at all.

But there is a difference between an imperfect socialist democracy and a Stalinist bureaucratic regime.

The left groups that condemn Cuba often hold up the soviets (workers’ and Peasants’ councils) that were created during the Russian revolution as an ideal model of workers’ democracy. But once the civil war started, parties that supported the counter-revolution were banned. Within a few years the Bolsheviks were the only party left in the soviets. Trotskyist groups generally consider the banning of opposition parties a regrettable necessity given the objective situation in Russia at the time. Yet the same groups often condemn Cuba for being a one-party state.

In a backward society under attack from imperialism, real institutions of workers’ power inevitably fall short of the ideal. Cuba is no exception.

The Russian soviets began as democratic institutions, then deteriorated under the impact of civil war, and were eventually taken over by the Stalinist bureaucracy. In Cuba the direction of motion has been different. In some ways Cuba has become more democratic over time.

In the early years of the revolution there was mass participation in carrying out the social transformation, but there was no formal democratic structure through which the masses could elect the government. People participated in the struggle through a range of revolutionary mass organisations (Committees to Defend the Revolution, militia, workers’ assemblies, etc). Members of these organisations were consulted about proposed new laws and decisions, and were able to influence government policy, but did not directly control the top leadership of the country through formal democratic channels.

Beginning in 1974 the system known as People’s Power was created. There are elections at the local, regional and national level. Delegates can be recalled by those who elected them and do not have any monetary privileges.

People’s Power democracy has its limitations, such as the fact that those who disagree with government policies can not form a new party to contest the elections.

But the reality is that under present conditions any significant opposition party would almost certainly be a pro-capitalist party. If Cuba relaxed its laws restricting the ability of opposition groups to receive US funding, the US government would pour in literally hundreds of millions of dollars to create opposition parties and (in association with Rupert Murdoch, etc) opposition media.

Allowing a bourgeois opposition party to be established is regarded (rightly or wrongly) as too risky at
present, given the threat of US invasion. The situation is comparable with that in Russia during the period of civil war/foreign intervention which followed the October 1917 revolution, when opposition groups were banned for giving political support to armed counter-revolutionary forces allied to invading imperialist armies.

The Cuban government’s recent actions in arresting a number of “dissidents” and executing three boat hijackers may seem harsh, but we need to recognise the context. The US has just invaded Iraq. The Cuban government has a reasonable belief that Cuba is on the list of countries to be invaded in the short- or medium-term future. It therefore feels it can not allow a “dissident” movement funded by the US government to undermine the unity of the population in the face of this threat.

The limitations on democracy in Cuba are mainly due to the government’s need to defend itself against imperialist pressures and threats. This does not exclude the possibility that the government can make mistakes in how it deals with dissent. There have been cases where injustices have occurred.

But Cuba has shown the ability to correct many of its past errors. One important example is the treatment of gays.

At the time of the revolution, many Cuban revolutionaries shared the anti-gay prejudices of the broader society. One result was that there was a period between 1965 and 1968 during which gays were sent to labour camps. But the situation has improved markedly since then. Today the government supports efforts to counter anti-gay prejudice.

(If you have a chance, it is worth seeing the Cuban film Strawberry and Chocolate. The two main characters are a gay man and a Communist Party member who is vehemently anti-gay. The film ends with the CP member overcoming his prejudice and embracing the gay man. In real life the struggle against prejudice is far from over. But the fact that the film was made and shown in Cuba shows the progress that has been made).

Cuba is not an ideal model of a socialist society (any more than was Russia after the October 1917 revolution, even when the new state was led by Lenin and Trotsky). But if we expect perfection we will always be disappointed.

**Has capitalism been restored?**

Since the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, Cuba has been forced to make increased concessions to capitalism.

It has allowed foreign capitalists to invest in Cuba, in the form of joint ventures with the Cuban government. It has allowed market forces to play a much bigger role than previously. Some left groups think that these concessions mean that Cuba is now a capitalist state.

The measures taken by Cuba are similar to the New Economic Policy in the Soviet Union in the early 1920s. The NEP was seen by Lenin and Trotsky as a necessary partial retreat, which would be followed by renewed efforts to expand the socially owned sector of the economy at a later stage. Cuba today has a similar perspective.

The Cuban government retains 50% ownership of joint ventures, and sets the rules for what areas foreign companies can enter and how they behave.

Cuba has maintained free education and health care, making possible continued progress in these areas. Infant mortality is now lower in Cuba than in the United States.

The Cuban CP is continuing to wage a struggle against capitalist ideology.

Castro regularly attacks neo-liberalism and defends socialism at mass rallies.

All this indicates that the Cuban leadership, while forced to make concessions to capitalism in the economic sphere, has not given up on the struggle for socialism. There is no guarantee of success. If Cuba remains isolated in a capitalist world, the pressures for complete restoration of capitalist economic relations will increase. But the battle is not lost yet.

**Further reading:**


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**Wot test? — Testing children for the New World Order**

*By John Morris (Marrickville Branch)*

The events post-S11 2001 have overshadowed a significant development in the USA that has major implications for education globally.

As his first (yes, before defence and oil oligopolies) legislative act upon becoming the world’s most powerful man, George Bush junior passed a bill through congress that ties funding for the most disadvantaged of US schools to their performance on mass testing regimes. Teachers will be held “accountable”, with local school boards able to sack poor performing teachers and direct funds away, yes away, from these disadvantaged schools. Of course, in America you can substitute “disadvantaged” for coloured, mainly black, people.

His first bill after his war on Iraq was to enable cuts to be made to the funding of schools that refused to allow a wing of the military to set up in them. This despite the rise of full-stream military schools across mainly poor districts — the US army is mostly composed of poorer people gambling that they will get an education from the world’s dominant military before they get a bullet.

These bills show the dominance of education in manufacturing a society compliant to the domestic and foreign interests of the wealthy.

Australian politicians also are tinkering with testing to create their compliant society.
The Federal Liberals since 1997 have teamed up with shock jocks to create a crisis of fear that students are failing “basic skills” and that employers are getting staff that can’t issue the correct change.

However, the initial report delivered to then Education Minister David Kemp, showed literacy and numeracy in the 90% range. Kemp’s responses — form his own committee, develop new standards, then pronounce a crisis!

Yet the right-wing economic rationalist push to reduce education to a set of scores that can be easily compared, digested and marketed continues. The English Literacy in Learning Assessment (ELLA) test has been used by the NSW government to determine the allocation of Special Support teachers — not to increase the overall number — with the bizarre result that performance sees your STLD days disappear.

Add in KIDMAP, SNAP and primary Numeracy Tests, Computer Skills Tests and of course the BST (Basic Skills Test) and many teachers rightly feel we are being driven by the testing agenda, rather than by users of it.

This feeling is not an accident; here is the rationale as dictated by Louis Gerstner, chief executive officer of IBM, in the New York Times, in the mid-1990s:

“We must establish clear goals and measure progress to them. We must articulate exactly what we expect from schools. Teachers, principals, students, and parents, and we must provide rewards and incentives to reach them... If the goals are not met we need to enact stiff penalties, changing leadership, and even dismissing staff members in schools that aren’t performing... All of this will require... testing and assessment of both students and staff.”

This quote moderates the progressiveness of the recent shift in educational practice towards outcomes (set standards rather than reporting by a percentage mark). While it is to be welcomed that we depart from the “bell-distribution” model that guarantees a ratio of failures, outcomes are in line with the idea of measured, marketable education “products”.

What to do? The push to force education to be more “market friendly” is global and linked with similar agendas for water, health and electricity. Hence we need to link up with the global anti-capitalist struggle through the union movement’s opposition to GATS (General Agreement on Trade in Services). Millions globally have attended the anti-capitalist rallies.

We can’t rely on Labor. They are presiding over increased testing regimes in many Australian states. We need to directly combat the testing push locally. Certainly, teacher pay agreements should not include trade-offs for mass testing. Many British teachers have gone so far as to ban SAT tests this year.

The New South Wales Teachers Federation has banned ELLA tests and marking twice in recent years, principally over the connection of special teacher provision to the results. On the first occasion they were levied with a $40,000 fine from the government — yet this was never collected, mainly due to final settlement of a salaries agreement.

Testing should be subservient to the overall education process, not as an end in itself, and especially not as a commodification process.

Placing the test as the ultimate indicator demeans the role of teachers — they are in reality more able to make an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of a student aided by their own testing mediums rather than any “one size fits all” mass test. Of course, Louis Gerstner and company know only too well testing is needed to regulate teachers as much as students.

Education should be free and enlightening, not measured and miserable.

This leads to the age-old question of the funding priorities of the state. The allure of the military to provide an educational path for poorer working-class communities is perhaps the greatest evidence of the need for a socialist challenge to pro-war budgets.

[John Morris is a High School Teacher and delegate to NSW Teachers Federation Union. He is a member of the Socialist Alliance or the union is doing about Medicare. Yet at the last two National Executive meetings the issue has not been discussed. Medicare was only discussed at the Victorian State Executive in relation to planning our intervention in the Victorian Trades Hall Council’s anti-budget campaign.

In Melbourne there is to be a Defend and Extend Medicare conference made up of delegates from the various local campaign committee’s. To the best of my knowledge Socialist Alliance in Victoria will have no input at this conference. A rally is to be held in Melbourne on 10/6/2003, which I only found out about by listening to community radio. As a Victorian State Executive member I have little to no knowledge of what our local branches are doing to build this campaign.]
I had pushed for the trade union committee to build a public meeting on the issue with the aim of setting up a Unionists for Medicare group to act as a political catalyst. The aims would be similar to Workers Against the War, to encourage the trade union bureaucracy to organises mass demonstrations and strike action. I missed a meeting and by the next meeting the public meeting had been changed to “globalisation and tariffs”.

I have always seen it as a major weakness of the socialist movement that we hop from campaign to campaign, take up a wide spectrum of issues but never focus our combined energies on one key issue and use that actually make a difference. We have meagre resources and a limited number of activists, yet I’ve heard more spin about killer Coke and the Solomon Islands than I’ve heard about Medicare. If the campaign was well in hand and we were effectively marshalling our forces to intervene in the campaign at all levels, produced Medicare leaflets promoting our vision of universal health care combined with details of all the activities going on, I would not be so concerned if a few comrades took up other issues of importance. This is not the case and instead I feel we have been diverted from properly planning, intervening, coordinating and monitoring our activities around this key issue.

Both Medicare and education are stirring workers and unions into action. The ALP realises this and is for the first time in years actually organising around these issues in order to win themselves votes. I have heard comrades complain that the ALP controls the campaign; well of course they do, and considering their relative weight so they should. If we were of a similar size then we would control the campaign, though not like the ALP does.

Do we have a fear of being involved in “mainstream” politics? Why do we feel we have to find little niche issues in order to profile ourselves? I am of the firm belief that it is time for us to have full confidence in our politics and our ability as activists to participate in the campaigns around health and education and win a broad layer of support for our ideas and practice.

I don’t think this state of affairs has happened consciously but reflects years of past practise. To remedy the situation I am urging that all states and territories contact their branches so as to provide a report on the Medicare campaign and Socialist Alliance’s involvement so far. From this report the national executive can then assess what needs to be done on a state-by-state basis to truly lift the profile of this campaign and our involvement in it. It then needs to be the major agenda item of state executives and finally become a central pillar of all our branches’ activity. I am not calling for us to stop all the necessary day-to-day work we must continue to carry out. We will naturally need to continue to make a political position clear on the various national and international issues that have arisen. But if we are going to have any sort of impact in regards to defending Medicare and Education it is going to require us to carry out a nationwide campaign until the issue is won or lost. It’s not just a topic for a branch meeting then we move onto the next issue.

If we are going to establish ourselves as the party of the working-class then we have to take up real issues of the day and have a red-hot go at winning them. We have to demonstrate that we are not just a talk shop but also a party of action capable of tackling and defeating these attacks from the bosses and their representatives. It will be through such struggles that we will build a strong and united socialist party, which Australia and humanity so desperately needs.
National finances report

[The Socialist Alliance National Executive meeting of June 27, 2003, unanimously passed the following motion on finances.]

“As an initial measure, in accordance with the conference resolution and leading into consideration of a more complete budget proposal to the National Executive at its next meeting, that:

(i) The national treasurer, under direction of the National Conveners, be authorised to begin to construct and implement a system of automatic deductions for voluntary donations from SA members.

(ii) The National Conveners draft a letter to members asking then to participate in the system and provide them with all the necessary information on its workings.

(iii) The need for increased finances and member contributions be explained in the context of publishing and campaign projections contained in existing conference resolutions, ongoing SA commitments, and the need for a National Treasurer/Administrative Officer (motion below). The immediate need for a National Treasurer/Administrator is outlined in the attached discussion paper below.

The National Executive agrees:

It calls on the Alliance to set an initial target of $50,000 in the coming year in regular donations.

That this money be paid into the national account and split -- 75% to the national office to employ administrative/organising staff, and 25% to be remitted to branches. Money to branches will be paid according to which members donate (eg: if members of a branch donate $100 a month to the appeal, the branch shall receive $25).

That once the regular donations have reached $50,000 per annum on a sustainable basis (ie: once regular donations exceed $4200 a month), the NE should revisit how much is remitted to branches, with a view to moving to a 50-50 split.

The NC notes that national staff may include a mix of part-timers, and that they shall be paid at $35,000 a year, pro rata.

The NC also notes that branches shall continue to receive 75% of membership dues and retain any money raised through local fund-raising efforts.

(iv) The National Conveners begin a process of consultation with local branches about the implementation of the conference resolution on finances.”

National Conveners’ budget discussion paper

[Following paper was presented by the National Conveners to the NE as background to the motion on finances.]

Infrastructure considerations for Socialist Alliance as a multi-tendency socialist party

The May National Conference recognised that the Alliance would require a much higher level of income in the coming years than has been the case to date.

The existing national apparatus for conducting SA activities, (eg: publications, office space and operating costs), is essentially a sponsored arrangement through the larger affiliates. SA independently contributes only a portion of its actual running costs at best.

Likewise at regional/branch levels, where operational infrastructure costs are largely underwritten by affiliates, (eg: office space, computer and phone use, etc).

Most of the income stream to SA goes to branches and most of the existing money also resides there at present. The current arrangement is a 75%/25% split on membership fees. Nationally produced items, (eg: publications, campaign materials), are billed to the branches. They are largely cost recovered from branches, apart from the subsidised infrastructure provided by affiliates (facilities and labour).

The expectation that affiliates can continue to subsidise and underwrite Alliance activities is untenable. As SA continues to grow, continued affiliate financial support underpinning SA activities will be unsustainable and has probably already reached the limits of their capacity.

The National Conference decision to progress the move from a predominately electoral alliance toward a multi-tendency socialist party will add stress to existing shortcomings in Alliance infrastructure arrangements.

Operating as a more fully-fledged party between election cycles, the continued rapid growth in Alliance membership and branches, and the greater election efforts that will flow from that at national and state levels, will exacerbate and further expose these shortcomings.

In political terms, the structural and gathering political crisis in the ALP and the challenge of the growing Greens alternative, makes a more professionalised electoral effort both imperative and urgent. Likewise, in order to respond effectively to these opportunities and challenges, we actually need to be an alternative, not just announce it. The day-to-day organisation, program, public presence and political interventions of the Alliance need adequate resourcing to realise our potential. We need to look and be an alternative to gather in those breaking from Labor. This also applies to those who are thinking about the Greens, or who are already members but feeling the shortcomings, and for those in union and movement struggles who as a result of our coalition and united front work want to join a broader movement for a socialist change.

Income:

At this stage, it is difficult to provide any accurate account of income that could be expected once the automatic voluntary donation system is up and running. It will be the foundation of our income stream and the “guaranteed” portion of our budget that will permit sound planning. A reasonable medium term goal would be to receive a sustained base average of $5 per member/per week by the end of the year. Based upon a 1000 member Alliance, that would give us a core operating income of approximately $250,000 annually. A 50/50 split would bring approximately $125,000 of core operating income into the national apparatus annually. The actual figure will become more apparent, and the sharing arrangement with branches adjusted, as we move through the full budget process over time.
**National apparatus infrastructure requirements:**

The major infrastructure problems that need to be solved relate to labour, office space and operating facilities, and the establishment and professionalisation of party operations.

In terms of the national apparatus, labour for implementing National Convenor and National Executive decisions, the SA web site, SA budget/accounts, compliance with requirements of being a registered electoral party, and for producing alliance publications is largely supplied by affiliates. Also, office space and operating facilities and running costs, (eg: phone and electricity), are supplied by affiliates.

The National Conveners and National Executive is already showing the strain of providing the political leadership role for the SA while largely also having to carry out the decisions made in terms of primary production of materials and practical administration. The political leadership of SA is not full time and SA is not in the position to have a paid full time political leadership in the foreseeable future. However, it is possible, and necessary, to begin to shift the growing administrative burden through having paid staff.

**Staffing:**

The most important, in this respect, is to create the full time position of SA national treasurer/administrator.

As a registered political party we have to comply with specific electoral commission regulations and audit provisions, plus maintain our registration on a yearly basis. Moreover, as we grow and more money flows through our organisation, we are going to come under increased scrutiny from our political enemies as well as from within our own ranks that correct accounting procedures are followed. We need a full-time treasurer/administrator to ensure this happens nationally, and within each branch, to the required standards. Additional tasks would be to ensure that National Conveners/National Executive administration is conducted efficiently (eg: meetings, minutes, conferences, branch liaison). In future years, the position could be split as required. It would work under the direction of the National Conveners.

Projected expenditure for the position is approximately $40,000. A base salary of approximately $35,000 plus $5,000 ancillary obligations.

**Office space and operating facilities:**

We need to begin the transition toward paying our way at the Abercrombie Street office [in Sydney] and, ultimately, financial independence in our office infrastructure. It is unrealistic to move away from Abercrombie Street as such a large portion of our gratis labour and office equipment resides there. The National Conveners propose that we approach the DSP for dedicated office space, an appropriate rental arrangement for that space, cover phone and electricity charges, and begin to build up our own office supplies and equipment (eg: the computer that the National Executive decided to purchase). We propose to ask the SA treasurer to prepare an initial costing in advance of a final negotiation between NC and the DSP.

**Professionalisation of SA operations:**

Professionalisation of operations to comply with the formal requirements of a registered political party will automatically flow from employing a national treasurer/administrator.

The National Conveners propose that it is also a matter of priority that we engage dedicated SA legal services to arrange appropriate structural and on-call legal protection. This will likely eventuate in our requirement to incorporate SA. We will also need insurance for our operations, especially with proceeding to engage paid staff, and to engage formal accounting services. We propose to ask the SA treasurer to investigate and cost these items as soon as possible.

It is an expectation that the cost of office space/facilities and professionalisation can be contained within the remaining $10,000 of our initial core income target of $50,000.

**Regional/branch infrastructure:**

Priorities for regions/branches will be largely set by them. However, certain requirements will naturally flow from the national obligations above with regard to compliance. Likewise, staffing and office space/facilities needs will likely parallel national office rationale.

State and branch organisers will be needed to ensure the appropriate standards for accounting, electoral registration, administration, and liaison with the national office. Engaging paid organisers will also help expand the growth of SA branches and membership and our political work. Salary costings for state organisers should start from the same standard for the national treasurer/administrator, adjusted for lower cost of living indicators in smaller regions. It may also be desirable to allow for the introduction of part-time aid organisers and introducing a second tier of full-time positions.

Regional/branch executives should open negotiations with sponsoring affiliates to begin establishing the financial independence of SA operations. This may involve shared leases on existing premises with an affiliate, or taking over existing leases and fully re-badging premises as SA, or perhaps developing Political Activist Centers in collaboration with other political organisations. Developing an independent base of dedicated SA office equipment (eg: computers) is essential to allow our work to expand. Likewise, an identifiable physical location for members, supporters, and new contacts to congregate and hold work meetings is a priority.
National publications report

[The Socialist Alliance National Executive meeting on June 27, 2003, unanimously adopted the following motions on publications.]

1. Publication names:
   That Socialist Campaigner be the name for the SA newsletter.
   That Alliance Voices be the name for the SA internal discussion bulletin.
   That Socialist Alliance be retained as the name for the SA broadsheets.

2. Socialist Alliance magazine:
   NE recommends the establishment of the following regular Alliance publication:
   (i) A Socialist Alliance magazine, thematically focused on Politics, Theory, Research, History, Culture. We propose the name of Common Cause (to be confirmed as to its availability, and subject to discussion and agreement with the Miners’ Federation)*. This name reflects the socialist unity principles of the Alliance and the outreach rationale in relation to engaging our target audience for the magazine, both as readers and contributors.
   (ii) A 32-40 page (double-sided A4 production) with a firmish outer cover in keeping with the magazine format. A bi-monthly, or quarterly if necessary, publication schedule. Centrally produced by SA national (with cost-neutral affiliate production support) in hard copy and posted on the SA web site. Full cost recovery billed to branches, consisting of branch sales of about $5 per issue plus any additional cost subsidisation from general branch income.
   (iii) An editorial board consisting of: a managing editor (Lisa Macdonald), to ensure production and financial requirements of the magazine are met, plus a working editorial board of 6 SA members: Humphrey McQueen, David Glanz, plus 4 other prominent SA writers/academics to be confirmed. (eg: Verity Burgmann, Dick Bryan, Alastair Greig, Pat Brewer, Rob White). Additionally, an editorial advisory board consisting of any remaining, and willing, affiliate representatives, but with a focus on a cross-section of people from outside SA, national and international.
   (iv) A “first issue launch” to coincide with nationally coordinated SA regional forums thematically focussed on “shaping the left/progressive alternative vision for Australia”. These forums would be broadly based to draw in written contributions and presentations from our target audience on relevant national and regional issues. We should advertise our intention (well in advance) that selected forum papers will be considered for publication in the second and subsequent issues of the magazine. This would encourage a greater number of contributions, and improve the quality. The forums would double as part of our program of SA political outreach work as well as serve as a basis for organically generating broader networks to initiate and revitalise our SA policy working groups.”
   [* It has been confirmed since that the name Common Cause is not available.]

3. Developing a national newspaper for SA:
   National Executive recommends that a formal letter be sent by the National Conveners to the main newspaper-producing affiliates, the DSP and ISO, to explore their options/suggestions on how SA may progress toward a national newspaper in a way that transcends the current competition barriers outlined in the NC discussion paper (see below). The letter should recognise that this goal can only be realised through greater integration with the existing affiliate newspapers.
   National Executive recommends that the response from the DSP and ISO on greater integration options be circulated for discussion and response in the Alliance as a whole. The framework of this discussion to address the following criteria:
   (i) How the democratic rights, political integrity and diverse public voice of all Alliance affiliates and the general membership can be accommodated within a single national newspaper.
   (ii) How the SA editorial board, and guiding principles, should be established to ensure this guaranteed diversity operates within a framework of socialist unity and presenting a common socialist voice to the Australian community.
   (iii) How the existing audience reach and political resource for the left/progressive milieu and the working class represented by Green Left Weekly and Socialist Worker can be preserved and enhanced through greater integration.
   (iv) How the transition toward a SA national newspaper can occur within the framework of affiliate options and concerns.

National Conveners’ discussion paper on publications

[Following paper was presented by the National Conveners to the NE as background to the motion on publications.]

The National Conveners considers it important to have a wide consultation and discussion within the Alliance on publications, arising from conference decisions.

The Socialist Alliance conference resolution on publications says:
   “Conference resolves: That the Socialist Alliance will seek to produce its broadsheet regularly every three months; That the Socialist Alliance will produce a monthly newsletter; That the Socialist Alliance should move to produce its own regular publication aimed at:
   • Propagating the Alliance’s analysis of contemporary politics and its own policy alternatives;
   • Providing analysis of trends in the trade unions and various social and environmental movements;
   • Stimulating and housing debates in the broadly anti-capitalist and anti-neo-liberal camp (Greens, left ALP, various movements); and
   • Reflecting debate within the Alliance itself. That the incoming National Executive, in the light of discussion at this conference and any further suggestions received from Alliance members and
affiliates, produce a draft plan for the publication covering format, frequency, editorial board, name, funding and any other relevant issues.”

The conference resolution sets out a decision for three types of publication: a quarterly broadsheet, a monthly newsletter and an intent to produce a regular Alliance publication. In addition, the Alliance currently produces a regular internal discussion bulletin. Finally, conference passed a perspectives document for a multi-tendency socialist party, which includes a specific motion for progressing toward a Socialist Alliance national newspaper. This means conference is committed to having either 4 or 5 regular Alliance publications.

The National Conveners propose to deal with these as a package, for NE consideration and for Alliance consultation, so that an integrated decision in keeping with conference intent and member aspirations can be achieved.

**Summary of approach:**

There are three major areas of concern that should be addressed in order to progress the conference resolution and guide our considerations.

1. We need clear boundaries and rationale for the publications we produce, both to ensure there is no overlap between them as well as that they have a sustainable niche within the Alliance and in the public domain.

2. We need to have the resources, both financial and production, to be able to deliver on the commitments we undertake.

3. We need an implementation strategy that relates Alliance publication objectives to existing affiliate publications and the political milieu in which the Alliance operates.

These three areas of concern will be addressed in the course of outlining these draft publication proposals.

**Current publications:**

There are three current publications being produced by the Alliance.

1. The Socialist Alliance broadsheet.

   It is a double-sided A3 continuing publication, scheduled by conference to be produced quarterly. It is largely produced by the two affiliates publishing regular newspapers (DSP/GLW and ISO/SW), and subsidised through affiliate production labour and facilities. It is distributed as an insert within the two affiliate papers and as a stand alone handout through direct Alliance distribution at meetings, rallies and stalls. It is free of charge to Alliance members and the public, and fully cost recovered through Alliance branch income, apart from the gratis infrastructure costs are recovered by the branches via a $2.50 charge.

   Central infrastructure production costs are absorbed by the DSP.

   It is the principal vehicle through which the entire Alliance membership communicates. It covers matters of SA politics, policy and campaigns and shares member information and experiences to assist the growth of SA.

2. The Socialist Alliance Internal Discussion Bulletin.

   It is/will be a regular monthly publication for the Alliance membership, supporters and the public. It is an 8-page (4 double-sided A4) publication, produced and distributed along the same lines as the Internal Discussion Bulletin, with central production costs currently absorbed by the DSP. Hard copy costs will be recovered by branches through a $1 donation.

   It is the central vehicle for organising and disseminating information on upcoming Alliance events, political campaigns, and experiences/suggestions for building SA. It is for members, supporters and the general public.

3. The SA Newsletter (in progress).

   There is no existing overlap of concern. Any overlap in relation to the “building SA” content between the internal Discussion Bulletin and the Newsletter, (ie: requirements for extended discussion on building SA, can be comfortably accommodated within the Discussion Bulletin. It would be useful to have the names of the publications reflect their overall purpose, both content and audience, in order to retain a sense of boundary and niche.

   The name Socialist Campaigner is a National Conveners’ recommended provisional name for the Newsletter. The name develops the political activist and outreach dimensions necessary for building the Alliance.

**Boundaries between the three existing publications:**

There is no existing overlap of concern. Any overlap in relation to the “building SA” content between the internal Discussion Bulletin and the Newsletter, (ie: requirements for extended discussion on building SA, can be comfortably accommodated within the Discussion Bulletin. It would be useful to have the names of the publications reflect their overall purpose, both content and audience, in order to retain a sense of boundary and niche.

The name Socialist Campaigner is a National Conveners’ recommended provisional name for the Newsletter. The name develops the political activist and outreach dimensions necessary for building the Alliance.

Alliance Voices is recommended for the internal Discussion Bulletin. It will help build the “unity in diversity” culture of the Alliance, give the Discussion Bulletin a greater political weight within the life of the Alliance, and appeal to supporters/contacts as a way to check out the SA internal democratic process of inclusive political expression and dialogue.

The National Conveners propose to retain the existing name of Socialist Alliance for the broadsheet. This has partly to do with the distribution of the broadsheet being so heavily dependent on being an insert within existing affiliate publications. We need to be clear in distinguishing it from the hosting affiliate and publication, which an additional prominent name could compromise. Presenting the broadsheet as a Socialist Alliance political issue statement helps confirm our organisational distinctiveness. Moreover, the broadsheet is a transitional publication for the Alliance (discussed below), which does not require a separate ‘continuing brand’ niche that a particular name helps create.

**A regular Alliance publication:**

Conference clearly outlined the desirability of a regular Alliance publication additional to the broadsheet. It outlined a focus on canvassing broad issues in relation to socialism, SA policy positions, and a left/progressive milieu target audience. National Conveners propose the following publication to reflect conference intent.
A Socialist Alliance national newspaper:

A bimonthly/quarterly magazine, in conjunction with a continuing quarterly broadsheet, goes some way to responding to conference intent to develop a regular Alliance publication. It remains inadequate to the Alliance membership ambitions for a national newspaper. Only a weekly, or at least fortnightly, national newspaper can fill the publication void that remains to fully develop the growth potential of the Alliance.

There are several major hurdles that need to be addressed to enable the development of a national newspaper.

The development of a SA paper separate to existing affiliate publications immediately confronts practical barriers of being “in competition” with these papers:
1. A separate SA paper would compete for a significant share of the same audience.
2. It would also compete in terms of production resources, in that all SA productions are heavily reliant on affiliate labour, written contributions, production skill and equipment, which has largely been provided gratis.
3. A non-affiliate SA capacity and commitment to sustained written contributions and production resources (including financial) necessary to progress any SA publication, especially a separate weekly/fortnightly national newspaper, remains untested.
4. Existing affiliate newspapers (especially Green Left Weekly) have an audience share and brand recognition well beyond SA.
5. The SA budget available, and necessary, in order to proceed towards a national weekly/fortnightly newsletter will take some time to determine.

There are two recommended ways to proceed toward a SA national newspaper:

As an immediate measure NC recommends that SA endeavour to increase the size and frequency of the broadsheet, beyond the 4-page quarterly minimum standard set by conference. As a medium term goal, an 8-page broadsheet produced on a bi-monthly basis should be the aim.

This will enhance the available political material and presence of SA and provide a platform for expanding general SA member involvement in producing the broadsheets. In practical terms, this is a limited measure as it will quickly test the barriers of existing affiliate capacity to deliver the resources currently provided to broadsheet production. SA should guarantee to cover affiliate cost for existing and increased broadsheet production.

In conjunction with expanding the size and frequency of the broadsheets, the National Conveners recommend that a formal letter be sent to the main newspaper-producing affiliates, the DSP and ISO, to explore their options/suggestions on how SA may progress toward a national newspaper in a way that transcends the current competition barriers outlined above. The letter should recognise that this goal can only be realised through greater integration with the existing affiliate newspapers.

The National Conveners recommend that the response from the DSP and ISO on greater integration options be circulated for discussion and response in the Alliance as a whole. The framework of this discussion to address the following criteria:

Resolution on Socialist Alliance stalls
Adopted by the National Executive, May 30, 2003

That as a matter of policy, all Socialist Alliance stalls be required to carry the principal publication of each Affiliate. Each affiliate is responsible for making this publication available to branches.

If Affiliates choose to have specific stalls separate to an existing Socialist Alliance stall, their principal publication will still be available from the Socialist Alliance stall. A reciprocal obligation to carry the principal Socialist Alliance publication is expected, but not required.

Each branch is responsible for setting the practical guidelines for demarcation of Socialist Alliance and affiliate and member material, and overseeing implementation.

Guidelines for international representatives

[The Socialist Alliance National Executive meeting of June 27, 2003, unanimously adopted the following motion establishing guidelines for members representing SA while overseas.]

All affiliates are encouraged to implement the comradely spirit of the resolution and accept some flexibility in application. In regions/branches where affiliates have no representative present to administer their principal publication sales, affiliates are requested to either donate their papers or run an account with the branch. Branches are requested to forward cheques to the appropriate affiliate as practical or, minimally, on a quarterly basis.

Affiliates are encouraged to participate in Socialist Alliance stalls.
international socialist currents; they and the non-aligned members all deserve positive representation, to diverse socialist currents and organisations overseas.

2. Where selection for international representation is an issue, the National Executive should make decisions based on criteria drawn up specifically around the objectives of the representation, and opportunities should be transparently and equitably made known to the membership.

3. National Conveners’ letters authorising representation should outline:
   (a) to whom the representation is agreed
   (b) what are the objectives of the representation
   (c) what positions of SA are to be prioritised in representation
   (d) how will it be reported to SA

4. Nothing in these guidelines should prevent SA members from representing their tendency/affiliate organisation to co-thinkers overseas, but they should delineate clearly when they are representing SA and when they are representing affiliates.

Greetings sent by the Socialist Alliance to the National Conference of the Progressive Labour Party

June, 2003

Dear friends and comrades,

The Socialist Alliance sends greetings to the Progressive Labour Party on the occasion of your national conference this weekend and hopes that your deliberations are fruitful.

Your conference is being held in a context of growing confidence among left and progressive people in Australia and around the world following the historic mass mobilizations against the United States, Britain and Australia’s war on Iraq. These mobilizations revealed a deep disquiet in society and a new willingness to take action in a united way.

More and more we hear expressed people’s anger and dismay with economic rationalism and its attendant program of privatization and the destruction of public education, health care and other services. The spirit of unity in action generated by the anti-war movement needs to be transferred into building opposition to this other war, and to reversing Australian governments’ attacks on trade union and workers’ rights.

The results at the ballot box also give cause for hope. The crisis in the Labor Party and the rise of the Greens shows that a growing number of people are looking for alternatives to the left. The very good vote obtained by the PLP’s candidates in the recent NSW election underscores this trend.

In the union movement, too, there is widespread dissatisfaction with the status quo, and the beginnings of a rebellion against conservative union leaderships’ refusal to fight the employers’ and government’s neo-liberal agenda. This is resulting in the formation in a number of states of genuinely pro-worker, militant, rank-and-file groups and candidates in union elections.

All of this represents exciting opportunities and challenges for the organised left in this country.

It was against this exciting backdrop that the Socialist Alliance held its own national conference in Melbourne on May 9-10. The conference was very successful and the 121 delegates had wide-ranging discussions and debates about Australian and world politics, campaigning, and the next steps in building the left and working-class movements. The resolutions and plans relating to rebuilding democratic, militant unionism were particularly encouraging.

The decision made at the conference that the Socialist Alliance become a broad, united, multi-tendency party reflected the growing weight of non-aligned members of the Alliance, who are now a majority of members nationwide. This decision also reflects the desire of Alliance affiliates and members to progress further the process of building left unity in Australia. To that end, the conference passed the following resolution unanimously:

That this second National Conference of Socialist Alliance:

Noting that a number of left and socialist organisations still remain outside the Alliance:

Resolves to renew our invitation to all such organisations to join the Alliance;

Reaffirms that the Alliance is prepared to seriously negotiate a collaborative relationship with any left organisation which has differences with specific aspects of the Alliance platform; and

Instructs the incoming National Executive to arrange meetings with all left organisations as are prepared to engage in dialogue with the Alliance.

We regret that it was not possible to meet with the PLP leadership before your conference, but look forward to that meeting as soon as possible, and to strengthening the collaboration between PLP and Socialist Alliance members in the many local and nationwide struggles and campaigns that will undoubtedly arise in the next period.

We wish you all the very best for a successful conference.

In solidarity,

Michael Morphett
(for the National Conveners)
In defence of minority rights within SA

By Alison Thorne (Wills Branch and FSP representative on the SA National Executive)

Some background to this contribution

I am submitting the following article, which was published in the Freedom Socialist newspaper (Vol. 24 # 2), for the next edition of the Socialist Alliance Discussion Bulletin. I am doing so because the case it puts, while currently a minority view within Socialist Alliance, is a legitimate one, which the Freedom Socialist Party will continue to argue for — as is our right.

The Freedom Socialist Party believes that in the current period socialists in Australia need to organise effective, democratic united fronts – which bring together broad layers of working-class people in action around agreed socialist goals. We also need to create tightly knit, democratic, revolutionary leadership organisations uniting socialists with a shared program and a commitment to take up the necessary and very serious fight to topple capitalism. This is why we have enthusiastically backed and built the Socialist Alliance, but at the same time have made it clear that we will not dissolve our revolutionary organisation.

The good news is that the resolutions passed at the second national conference of Socialist Alliance do not currently require us to dissolve and clearly state that all affiliates have the right to produce their own publications and circulate them publicly. This is a right which we are currently exercising.

But the bad news is that the view of the majority within Socialist Alliance is that affiliates ultimately should dissolve into one very broad multi-tendency socialist party. We don’t agree. Indeed we think that this course of action will eventually destroy the Socialist Alliance and seriously weaken the revolutionary left in this country.

We will continue to put our case while at the same time pushing for Socialist Alliance to unite in action by taking up important united front campaigns. We are proud of our contributions at both the national level and the branch level since the recent conference. These include initiating the proposal for Socialist Alliance to actively support Indigenous workers struggling for just compensation for decades of stolen wages. We also proposed the motion to the national executive for Socialist Alliance to joint the campaign against the murder of unionists in Colombia by backing the International Day of Action to Stop Killer Coke.

Given the Freedom Socialist Party’s approach to our work in Socialist Alliance — which is open, honest and transparent — we are disappointed with the way critics of our article chose to respond. Within days of publication we encountered members of the Alliance who had been sent the article via e-mail as a PDF file. I understand that this PDF was distributed by Acting National Convener and DSP executive member Peter Boyle. This article was not distributed to all National Executive members, nor was there any suggestion that the article be submitted for publication in the Internal Discussion Bulletin. We have no idea how widely the article was sent or what, if any, covering commentary was sent with it.

But the first response I personally received to our opinion piece was an aggressive late night phone call at home from National Convener and leader of the non-aligned Caucus, John Van der Velden. He used apolitical and abusive language and insultingly called me “a wrecker.”

The Freedom Socialist Party considers this behaviour is a crude attempt to intimidate a comrade putting a minority view — and we will not tolerate it! Having seen the implosion of the Progressive Labour Party through the use of exactly that kind of tactic, we are not about to stand by and see such behaviour emerge as a method of “debate” in the Alliance. We demand that it cease — now!

We are for open, transparent political debate, and so I’m submitting the article and this preamble to the Internal Discussion Bulletin — for all to see, to analyse and to respond. We don’t resile from forcefully arguing our position. What we will never do is substitute aggression for comradely debate.

On a slightly different topic, I understand from what some members of the non-aligned Caucus (NAC) have said to me that they felt disappeared. But the Freedom Socialist piece was not about the NAC. But I will take this opportunity to comment on the NAC and non-aligned participation in Socialist Alliance more broadly.

We consider that the NAC did not create the conditions in Socialist Alliance where the future of the Alliance was under threat — the DSP’s precipitous announcement of its plans to dissolve did this. Further, it is obvious that the NAC is not politically homogenous. There is a wide range of views and motivations. We are critical of the formation of a caucus on this basis because we cannot see what it has to hold it together in the long term, other than the elevation of being “non-aligned” to a principle — which would be in fact a kind of anti-revolutionary red baiting. But, at the same time, we welcome the more active participation in Socialist Alliance of the diverse individuals who make up this caucus.

We also accept — and have from its inception accepted — that many who identify as part of the NAC got behind the caucus because they feared the disagreement between the DSP and ISO would wreck the Alliance and they wanted to prevent this. We don’t agree with their tactics but do not question their honesty and sincerity.

To thrive and develop, Socialist Alliance needs more non-aligned people to join and more participation by non-aligned members. The NAC is unlikely to be the vehicle which achieves this goal, because it has no “program” other than the organisational principles stated in its original letter — which were adopted in a somewhat modified form by the recent National Conference.

FSP believes that what will involve more non-aligned people and continue the conditions which enable diverse affiliates to work effectively together is (1) continuing to stand in elections; (2) building effective SA union caucuses and (3) strengthening unity in action around agreed campaign demands.

There is a lot of interesting commentary around about Socialist Alliance at the moment. The discussion at the conference, which we argue focused far too much on the organisational at the expense of the political, hardly
scratched the surface. This Internal Discussion Bulletin is an important vehicle for the exchange of ideas. So let’s use this forum, rather than rely on any less public circulation of ideas. This way everyone can join in.

Finally, I’d like to invite SA comrades — especially those in areas where the Freedom Socialist Party does not have a branch — to check out the Freedom Socialist and the Freedom Socialist Bulletin. Our publications take an optimistic revolutionary feminist approach to world affairs. An introductory subscription to both the Freedom Socialist and the Freedom Socialist Bulletin costs just $12. Send a cheque payable to the Feminist Education Association to PO Box 266, West Brunswick, 3005.

Let’s discuss!

**Electoral alliance hijacked by Democratic Socialist Party**

*(Article by Alison Thorne published in Freedom Socialist)*

Australia’s Socialist Alliance has changed direction just as it was establishing itself as a viable united front that runs boldly socialist candidates and engages in non-electoral campaigns, including antiwar work and defence of militant unions.

For two years, eight left organisations and numerous individual members successfully worked together in SA whiles maintaining separate activities outside it. However, at its second national conference held May 10-11 in Melbourne, the alliance adopted a resolution that calls on all affiliated groups to dissolve and fuse into a single, multi-tendency party of both reformist and revolutionary socialists.

The push for a multi-tendency party was opportunistically initiated by SA’s largest affiliate, the formerly Trotskyist Democratic Socialist Party, whose leadership will inevitably dominate the revamped alliance.

The Freedom Socialist Party (FSP) strongly opposed changing the character of SA, for two reasons. First, although DSP touted its proposal as an advance for “genuine left unity,” it pooh-poohed the need to first establish how much agreement exists on essential political questions. Without this foundation, “unity” is a sham, and will destabilise the alliance, not strengthen it.

Second, a politically heterogeneous coalition cannot topple capitalism. For that, a serious, focused revolutionary party is needed, the kind of party against which SA is now slamming the door.

**Significant dissent**

Only one other organisation in SA backed DSP’s proposal. Shortly before the conference, however, the plan picked up support from some non-affiliated SA members who organised themselves into a “non-aligned caucus.” DSPers plus members of the non-aligned caucus had the bulk of votes on any issue.

Nevertheless, nearly a quarter of the delegates rejected the resolution for fusion put forward by the non-aligned caucus — voting instead for a resolution from FSP and the International Socialist Organisation aimed at enhancing SA’s effectiveness as a broad united front.

With its sister organisation, Radical Women, FSP also circulated a leaflet called “Don’t Risk Blowing Up the Alliance by Forcing Affiliates to Integrate or Leave.” The flyer stirred enough thought among non-aligned members that they withdrew a proposal that would have required affiliates to dissolve within a year. (To read FSP’s conference materials, visit www.socialism.com.)

**Program is key**

Delegates spent hours debating organisational matters like the multi-tendency proposal, the SA constitution, and publications. Yet only 90 minutes were scheduled to discuss SA’s platform.

FSP had prioritized this all-important area and presented an 18-section platform proposal that integrated the demands of the most oppressed sectors of the working class. However, backroom machinations led by DSP resulted in a “discussion” process where a single delegate’s objection could sink a platform section with no debate and no vote.

Despite this, seven sections were adopted, fulfilling demands by SA candidates for more developed policy on workers’ rights, education, health, transport, housing, welfare, and fighting corporate globalisation.

Henry Noble, National Secretary of the U.S. section of the FSP, delivered greetings to the conference, telling delegates about impressive antiwar organising by U.S. unionists.

Noble also commented on the debate over the nature of SA: “Just yesterday it was said here that ‘a step forward in the real movement is worth ten programs.’ But how can you know which way is forward without a plan for where you are going? My union experience tells me if you don’t see an agreed-upon plan, then look for a clandestine one. Because there’s always a plan.”

Inded. In practice, SA members have had to fill policy voids with something, and it has been most likely to be the program of the biggest affiliate, the DSP. For example, when Brigitte Ellery, an SA candidate and Radical Women representative, asked for details of the SA position on refugee rights, she was referred to the DSP newspaper, *Green Left Weekly*.

**United fronts needed, and a vanguard party too!**

FSP helped to found SA because of the urgent need to return socialism to the political map.

Social democracy (i.e., liberal reformism like that of the Australian Labor Party) is in crisis. Some working-class voters, disgusted by ALP’s support for corporate globalisation, attacks on unions, scapegoating of refugees, and refusal to outright condemn the war on Iraq, have turned to rightwing populism. Others have turned to the Green Party, which has shaken off its single-issue image. Still, the Greens believe that real social change can be won via parliament, a dangerous illusion that ignores history and the bankruptcy of global capitalism.

SA must survive to be a strong pole of attraction for working people looking for lasting answers to their needs. Australia needs a Socialist Alliance that is broad, democratic, outward-looking and daring.
The fact that many non-affiliated members are stepping forward to take on leadership roles is inspiring, and FSP looks forward to collaborating with them. FSP will work to retain and expand the features of SA that attracted us to it while resisting any calls to dissolve our organisation.

We will continue to build the Freedom Socialist Party and promote our Marxist feminist program. The working class needs united fronts like SA to educate and agitate for socialism, but it also needs a revolutionary party to lead the final conflict which will achieve it.

[Alison Thorne attended the Socialist Alliance conference as a delegate. She is the FSP representative on the SA national executive committee and a past SA candidate.]

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**Reply to Alison Thorne**

*By John van der Velden (Canberra Branch, and member of SA National Executive and National Co-convener)*

Comrades,

I have had the opportunity to preview the Alison Thorne/FSP entry for the next discussion bulletin. I feel a brief response is required to accompany the printing of that piece.

It is not entirely self-evident why the FSP wants to raise the political temperature in the Alliance with this DB entry. Perhaps they are anticipating a backlash from the Alliance membership to the “Hijacked” article and think that by doing a pre-emptive strike they can emerge as the aggrieved party.

Comrades have the right to express their honest opinions and circulate them publicly. It is a reasonable expectation that they provide something resembling an honest account. The new Alliance stalls policy ensures the article will be circulated nationally if that is what Alison wants.

However, this sort of insidious campaign of creating suspicion and division does nothing to build the Alliance and effectively becomes a wrecking operation. I’m not the only person who thinks that. Many people have expressed outrage at the headline and contents of the article and contacted me to bring the article to my attention. More than a few are asking if this reflects an FSP intention to leave the Alliance.

What is to be gained for the Alliance with this article?... or a DB preamble making an exaggerated public political issue about private arguments in phone calls and questioning comrades integrity in circulating published articles? I received one (of many) as a photocopy in the mail. What’s next? Publishing private email and recording private phone discussions so we can have verifiable public slanging matches in the Alliance, and hired gun lawyers at 30 paces? I’m quite sure this is not the “method of debate” the vast majority want emerging in the Alliance. It certainly will not strengthen and undermine a political course they oppose. Nor will it get us very far down the track of the serious debate the FSP needs emerging in the Alliance. It certainly will not match in the Alliance, and hired gun lawyers at 30 paces?

I did Alison the courtesy of giving advance notice of my reaction to the article and my intention to respond publicly. It turned out to be a short phone call, which may have been longer had there been a glimmer of constructive potential to the discussion. I reject that it was “late” or that I used “apolitical and abusive language”. It is of course impossible to fully defend oneself against allegations over what transpired in a private discussion. Nor should one have to. Granted, my response was not particularly complimentary. If you write politically aggressive misrepresentations you should expect a sharp response. My apologies to Alison if she felt unduly offended. However, it is as disingenuous to twist a private argument into a public “immunity from criticism” defence as it is to hide this irresponsible article behind a “minority voice rights” position.

Several Affiliates were against the directions of the NAC statement and resolution at conference. All the misplaced concerns they expressed about being “required to dissolve”, etc, were answered in the NAC Statement and conference debate. No Affiliate is being “forced”, “asked” or “expected” to dissolve. Even the Democratic Socialist Party, who are offering to transfer their considerable assets to the Alliance (not an issue in the case of the FSP), will retain an identifiable internal tendency presence in the Alliance. I don’t think they will be wearing badges but everyone has a right to wear one. Internal and public tendency rights, including right of voice, are guaranteed. Only the FSP is continuing with this misrepresentation. Only the FSP is continuing to insinuate that NAC members are stooges of the DSP or, at best, well-intentioned but misguided political fools in some deeper takeover plot.

We are told in Alison’s article that “there is always a plan” so presumably the FSP has one underpinning this campaign against NAC and the SA Multi-tendency Socialist Party (MTSP) course post-conference. Whatever “the plan”, anything that includes public personal attacks to damage one’s perceived political opponent has no obvious merit for building the Alliance. Neither does inventing takeover conspiracies, a persecuted minority status, and creating fictional NAC enemies where none exist.

The exaggerated targeting of NAC defies rationale. NAC has no formal structure, regular meetings or leadership bodies. It has not formally caucused as such post-conference. NAC is a continuing network of non-aligned members connected by stated political support for seeing through the implementation of the NAC statement and resolution overwhelmingly passed by conference. NAC national executive members were elected by conference based upon this political position. We network to the extent that issues directly bearing upon implementation of the resolution require. This networking is governed by individual choice and is sporadic and regionally specific rather than national and organised. Perhaps the FSP feels the need to install me as “the NAC leader” so that they have a more concrete political target to attack in an effort to weaken and undermine a political course they oppose.

There was a Victorian NAC meeting of sorts in the lead up to the recent Victorian State conference. Non-aligned
members who attended resolved to oppose the Peter Murray (FSP) proposed constitutional changes that would have required SA branches to only send non-aligned members to represent them at Victorian executive meetings. It would have meant a branch being disenfranchised from having a vote if no non-aligned member was available. It would also have forced branch members to perhaps send a representative who may not have their political confidence. Importantly, it would have created an anti-Affiliate culture in the branches rather than the socialist unity culture for which NAC stands. NAC members rightly argued that non-aligned members should be elevated to leadership bodies based upon merit and that branch reps should reflect the confidence of the membership, regardless of affiliation. The FSP accusation that what NAC has done is set up an anti-affiliate dynamic in the Alliance is both a fiction and a contradiction to their very own proposals.

The FSP seems to have difficulty recognising political opportunity and NAC support even when it falls in their lap. One of the first acts by NAC national conveners post-conference was to propose an extension of the SA stalls policy. The amendment guaranteed that all Affiliates would have their principal publication distributed through all SA stalls around the country. All they have to do is send the material to the branches. This gives the smaller affiliates, who like the FSP only have a couple of members dotted around the country, access to the largest audience for their political views they have ever had. A straightforward case for receiving FSP support one would think. The national executive passed this by a wide margin. The DSP, who are active in most of the SA stalls around the country and thus face no difficulty circulating GLW or competition from other affiliate papers, supported the motion. The FSP/Alison actually voted against the very extension of the minority voice rights they claim are being violated.

The FSP comrades have much to contribute to the building of SA. It’s not clear to me what they hope to gain from this current approach. Sectarianism will undermine the Alliance, just as it has undermined the socialist movement for many years. Potential members will be driven away when they see it. Existing members will be burned out trying to fight against it, or give up in disgust. Only our real political enemies will gain from it.

If there is a political discussion to be had over the future shape and directions of the MTSP then it can only occur upon the basis of mutual respect, including respect for democratically derived conference decisions.

If the FSP want a serious debate over any genuine concerns in the SA conference resolution for a MTSP then I may well respond to the substance of these concerns. I can’t speak for others. But not many people are going to waste their time getting engaged in a debate wrapped in fabrications and public personal attacks. As an Alliance we need (and hope for) a more constructive approach.

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**Minority rights are fully respected in the Socialist Alliance**

*By Peter Boyle (Marrickville Branch and member of SA National Executive)*

Alison Thorne’s complaint that minority rights are under threat in the Socialist Alliance is absolutely without foundation. In fact, I do not think there is another political organisation in the world that has such a open and pluralistic approach in its constitution and in its practice.

Any individual member, group of members or affiliate group has unfettered rights to argue for their positions inside the Alliance or in public, to organise around such positions, etc. There is a discussion bulletin that is available from the website and, more than that, arrangements are being made to help circulate the publications of the smallest affiliate groups on SA stalls.

This means Alison, the FSP and any other member or affiliate has the total right to publish an article like the inaccurate and slanderous article “Electoral Alliance hijacked by Democratic Socialist Party”. But while she has that right, other Alliance members have the right to disagree and criticise it.

I think the article is most outrageous because it alleges that one affiliate group, the DSP, which had a majority of delegates “hijacked” the conference. This could only be done if a large number the non-affiliate delegates at the conference where acting as pawns or tools of the DSP. This slanders most of the non-affiliate delegates as complicit in or at least manipulated for the alleged DSP hijacking.

This is so totally out of touch with reality. First, conference delegates voted in different ways on different motions. Second, on the vote on the perspective of building the Socialist Alliance into a single multi-tendency socialist party the vote reflected the overwhelming thinking of most Socialist Alliance members, especially those who do not belong to any of the affiliate groups. They do not agree with the FSP that there is not enough political agreement for a united socialist party in this country today. So they voted that way and then are accused by the FSP of helping the DSP “hijack” the conference.

If some of these delegates that Alison accuses of hijacking the conference are outraged and choose to express their outrage then, I think, they also have the right to do so, in a civil manner. They are the real aggrieved parties in this matter and Alison’s claim that minority rights are under attack is an attempt to obscure this fact.

The right of Alliance members to hold and express dissenting and diverse positions means that I also have the right to circulate articles, including the FSP article, to other members of the Alliance or to people outside the alliance. I can do this with or without comment. I have distributed all the articles on the May conference by affiliate groups that I have come across. For those who are interested my list of links to such articles is below (and, if you know of articles I have missed please let me know).

I have distributed copies of the FSP article (initially in PDF format, and later in text and URL link) to DSP members and others in the Socialist Alliance who have
expressed an interest in reading it. It is my absolute right as an Alliance member to do so.

However, at no stage did I distribute copies of the FSP article from the position of acting national co-convener of the Alliance (in Lisa Macdonald’s absence last month). I was in two minds whether to comment about the FSP article in the discussion bulletin because I am of the opinion that it does more to discredit the FSP’s argument (an argument that FSP delegates and international guest Henry Noble used every opportunity to make at the conference) that the multi-tendency socialist party perspective was a mistake. But since Alison has made direct criticisms of myself, I have the duty to reply.

**Articles by Socialist Alliance affiliates on May 2003 SA Conference**


**Contributions to Alliance Voices**

Discussion and debate around the future of the Alliance will necessarily be sharp at times, as important political issues are at stake. However, the National Conveners request all contributors to the discussion bulletin to refrain from personal attacks and invective.

Riki Lane
Lisa Macdonald
David Glanz
Michael Morphett