

Alliance Voices

Socialist Alliance Discussion Bulletin

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The deadline for the submission of resolutions to be put to the 2005 National Conference is midnight on Sunday, June 5, 2005.

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All Socialist Alliance members are invited to contribute to Alliance Voices. Please email articles to: ne@socialist-alliance.org, or mail them to PO Box A2323, Sydney South 1235.

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Strong lunatic medicine

By Niko Leka (Newcastle branch)

Being stupid myself, I really enjoyed hearing Carl Kenner use the word in his article about alternative medicine. I'd like to say the word stupid a few times myself, hence my reply. I'll start with my kenning of "stupid". I used to think I was ignorant, but not stupid. That is, I thought I knew some things, and although I was uninformed about other things, I was at least capable of learning. Therefore I could not be stupid.

But I was wrong, I had it ass-about. You see I am stupid, but not ignorant. I am finding out I am filled with knowledge that is bullshit. Dags of knowledge that alas no amount of crutching and sheep-dips could eradicate. Dags that even if I had a thousand PhDs on the politics of the Left I could not eradicate. Every single thing I know is suspect: bound up from birth in a fake culture based 'on top of a culture that was already false'. I just cleverly clutch at straws of hope. But let's move on.

You say you have two reasons for your argument. The first really is a motive, that "it makes us, and the left in general, look like a bunch of loonies from another planet every time we contradict well-known science and common sense..."

Your concern about looking like loonies is serious. Take a hysteriamine agonist to minimize blushing. I gather you would like all the ideas of the Left to be respectable. But this means acceptable to the majority of the population. The majority are of course those who are not Left. These people are opposed to the ideas of the Left. Therefore, they would naturally see ideas of the left as lunacy. D'y ken that this culture has 'got you from behind'? It has successfully implanted a motive that confounds your thinking.

Reflect Carl, isn't that exactly what we set out to do, to "contradict well-known science and common sense..."? Isn't it our primary task to expose how the authoritative appeal of "science" and "common sense" is used by

con artists [to] prey on the... most vulnerable parts of society. They are... unaccountable corporations making enormous profits".

You've said it. It is monopoly capital that owns and markets this thing it wants us to believe is "science". In the capitalist world, respectable science without sense is common-place. It's not only normal, it's what makes our world sick. Ivan Illich termed this "iatrogenesis". It means preventable illness caused by medical science. Illness not only of the body, but of culture and society as well. Here is an ordinary example:

A few years ago I turned up for a shift at the nursing home. The RN told me a patient was on a new drug called Celebrex. She knew nothing about it, not even what it was for. There was no product information. She gave it because it was prescribed. I heard about Celebrex on TV 'news' that night. It was a wonder anti-arthritis drug (Cox 2 Inhibitor) with no side effects. It swept through our nursing home, and throughout the Western world. Now, eight years later, this class of drugs is blamed for thousands of adverse effects and deaths. Why were so many smart people dumbed down so as to give this stuff out, without even thinking about what the results could be? What system kept these smart people quiet while it awarded them with respectable titles? Isn't it the same system that denigrates everything and anyone out of which it can't make a profit?

Lastly you mention you haven't studied science since high school. What makes you think it was science that you studied then? I went to high school too. It wasn't science, it was technology 101 presented as science. We came out believing the world was a machine, rather than with open minds and epistemological humility.

Thanks for your article Carl. It made me even more certain to remain uncertain about medicine. On the other hand, it made me feel quite definite there is a need for a strong, lunatic medicine as an alternative to "unaccountable corporations". I might experiment with a Marxist brew. Care to join me?

Agreements and disagreements

By Barry Healy (Perth Hills branch)

Melanie Lazarow in her "A Contribution to the discussion" (*Alliance Voices*, Vol 5 No 2, April 2005) succinctly illustrates many of the facets of the current state of our Socialist Alliance.

In response, I firstly want to say that I totally agree with her affirmation that "...the act of the revolution has to be the act of the working class itself, but that the revolution cannot be secured without organisation." I feel sure that the majority of SA members would agree with that statement, with the proviso that the sooner we can get on with the business of building Socialist Alliance as that organisation the better.

The question which Melanie's contribution raises is not whether the ISO has the right to relate to SA in any particular manner but, given the ISO's stated principle on socialist organisation why they choose to relate to SA in the manner in which they do.

My point is that Melanie's declaration of principle is no basis for the separate organisation of the ISO (or DSP for that matter). That very principle is something that unites us all and any serious-minded socialist would celebrate that.

If you want to see evidence of this compare *Socialist Worker* and *Green Left Weekly*. In edition after edition they each cover many of the same issues and events and push almost identical approaches. Where there are differences, such as the recent debate between David Glanz and Lisa Macdonald, they could easily be accommodated, literally side-by-side in the one newspaper.

These “differences” are simply not significant enough to warrant separate organisation, not if we are serious about our stated principles.

Similarly with many of Melanie’s other points. Historical differences over the nature of Stalinism? Given that the USSR no longer exists I think we can safely relegate that discussion to the category of “academic”. Fruitful, interesting and important, yes, but an academic debate none the less and no serious basis for separate political organisation.

Cuba? Yes, there are important differences of opinion, but what do they amount to in practice? The DSP defends Cuba against US attempts to subvert it and invade it. And the ISO? Don’t you similarly defend Cuba against US imperialism? Or do you call for a US invasion?

The Bolshevik Party allowed vigorous debate on life and death issues relating to the very survival of the Russian Revolution. Melanie, are you seriously suggesting that our Socialist Alliance, as a multi-tendency socialist party can’t incorporate a debate and ongoing differences over the definition of the Cuban state? If such arcane issues are the decisive edge of political organisation then left unity is impossible in any form and we may as well just go live in Life-of-Brian-Land.

I believe that a rich, mature debate over questions such as Cuba would raise the whole political level within SA.

Socialist Alliance is looking like another left-wing party and no longer like an alliance of groups and individuals, Melanie says. Well, after two national conferences deciding to take SA onwards to a multi-tendency socialist party I should hope that it would be showing some of those signs by now. I hope that Melanie isn’t saying that majority decisions shouldn’t be acted upon.

On the “centralised bureaucracy” controlling funds, I’m amazed to hear that SA has enough resources to support a bureaucracy. We are further advanced than I thought!

When our Perth Hills branch formed we encountered a major stumbling block in trying to regularise our finances. We were aware that they had to be ready for AEC audit at any time and we had to be reasonably professional. But, most members were hard-pressed parents of small children or just plain too inexperienced.

Our Treasurer ended up keeping our funds in a biscuit tin under her bed for a year. Records were scraps of paper stuck in the tin. It became a major bugbear and sapped our energies. A Perth comrade, Mark Lockett argued for ages that we should centralise our book keeping and following his advice has liberated our branch. The only problem is that it means that comrades are not immediately aware of the importance of fundraising or of the overall picture of SA finances.

Maybe things look different in Wills branch. Certainly the ISO has directed its cadre to the area so you have more people available for organisational matters; the rest of us must make do with the resources that our communities present. I am pleased that Melanie doesn’t counterpose the Wills experience to the rest of SA. That not only depoliticises debate into a sterile battle of “models”, it actually prevents the useful sharing of experiences across branches.

The ISO has championed a minority position regarding the development of SA, against those majority votes at national conference and no doubt that does feel uncomfortable, as Melanie reports. That’s unfortunate, but it is only to be expected and principled socialists can live with that. After all, the DSP at one point was prevented from becoming an internal tendency in SA (as a means to further the unity process) by an ISO veto; the DSP’s right to relate to SA in its preferred manner was stymied. DSP members took it on the chin and got on with life.

Melanie appears to be accusing the DSP of using its numbers in SA to railroad decisions through. Given the unfortunate recent experience of crude number crunching used to destroy the English Socialist Alliance her concerns are serious.

The answer to that would be to increase democracy in SA and try to get past our current, “federalist” structure of hardened caucuses. I look forward to an SA in which people who came from the different traditions will sometimes join together on some questions and then line up differently on other occasions.

Finally, I appreciate Melanie saying that Socialist Alliance is an important part of the work of the ISO, albeit only one part of the ISO’s activities.

That is very reassuring given that here in Perth a prominent ISO member, Alan Woodcraft, has recently been telling non-aligned members that the Socialist Alliance is “dead”. Not only that but also that the ISO’s attitude towards SA is that “SA is the shield, the ISO is the sword” (which, while being colourful, makes little sense). He has also declared that the ISO is organising a broad left faction within SA to “take on the DSP” (hmmm...a broad left faction within the broad left alliance? No wonder the left is so open to satire).

WA ISO members were notably absent from duty while our recent election campaign was running but have been full of complaints afterwards. The ISO has the right to relate to Socialist Alliance in whatever manner it chooses, Melanie. And those of us who consistently carry the load of building SA have a right to have an opinion of the ISO.

So, I for one do not look forward to the “loss of the ISO” that Melanie predicts. I look forward to working with the ISO in building Socialist Alliance.

End the Occupation: Lessons from the Newcastle rally and APISC speakers Ahmed Shawki and Stan Goff

By Niko Leka (Newcastle branch)

Ahmed Shawki, editor of *International Socialist Review*, USA, said at the Asia Pacific International Solidarity Conference (APISC) at Easter that sentiment against the war is huge but in comparison the resistance organisations are tiny. The recent Newcastle rally, organised and conducted by a handful, but attracting a turn-out of 150 people and seven high-profile speakers, illustrates the truth of this observation.

What lessons can we learn from this?

1. Need to be efficient!

Start contacting those organisations that are going to be involved early on, and be quite explicit in what you are asking them to do. Next time, we will try and identify those organisations that are interested much earlier. It is easy to forget that other organisations have to contact their membership, reach agreement, and then identify and allocate tasks.

2. Not only be quite open about the organisations that can contribute, but also be assertive.

For instance, in Newcastle the ALP, Greens and Newcastle University Students Associations generally co-operate with the NoWAR Collective, as do some of the religious organisations. We did not approach the unions or local charities. We don't know what other organisations we may have overlooked. However, we did *not* make it an aspect of our liaison to get a firm commitment to active participation. We simply assumed this would happen if an organisation had agreed to help out with (say) photocopying, or leaflet distribution, or speakers. If we are to build a movement then it's not enough that we ask other organisations to help out on specific aspects; we have to insist that other organisations actively participate – in planning, as well as in bringing people on the day.

3. Focus on the politics of engagement.

Stan Goff, from the US Military Families Against the War, argued at the APISC that in rebuilding the anti-war movement we have a pedagogic task - to identify the war as part of a systemic question, not anti-war but anti-empire.

This means facing the simple naive underlying hopes that: a) we will have 51% of Newcastle, say, marching in opposition to the war, and b) as a result, Howard will withdraw all troops.

Certainly, at the first rally I had ever taken part in organising I was disappointed at the 'low' turn-out. As comrade Perry Brown - another organiser for the NoWAR Collective - pointed out to me, we need to identify not just the immediate aim - troops out now - but the longer-term aim: the real war is one of empire, it is far more than military engagement.

Part of identifying the war as empire, and de-legitimising it, involves questioning the idea that in Australia one of the major parties can somehow be 'manoeuvred' into bringing the troops home now. This is 'pie in the sky'. It is no different to the ACTU's attitude that we should keep our heads down and wait until the ALP get into government to undo Howard's fourth-term agenda.

It is surprising not only how many people see the same processes at work in the Iraq occupation as in the Australia-US Free Trade Agreement, but the number who quietly, reluctantly admit that this whole system of representative democracy has failed. Although more people are starting to agree on the diagnosis, it is far more challenging to achieve agreement not only on the treatment, but on how to start managing the condition!

This is where keeping the issues associated with empire - the war in Iraq, the WTO-like Forbes 500 Conference, the fourth-term industrial agenda - firmly in the public domain is *the* aim of the Newcastle NoWAR Collective.

It means becoming more clear and explicit, through the action of opposing the military invasion and occupation of Iraq, that the roots of the Collective's opposition go much deeper. But irrespective of just where these roots go, the Collective's job is to create the political space where we can come together to talk.

This is vital, not because through it we'll somehow develop one 'true' course of action, but because we learn how to understand each others' ideas and try out our ideas. It is the work of doing this that will lead to more people gaining confidence and experience in the public arena. Remember, the distinction between the "personal" and the "political" is one which is artificially imposed and meant to keep us silently at home, mumbling prayers or curses before the sanctified domestic tabernacle of "world news".

We do have individual circumstances to deal with as well as these public issues - our family life, our working life. We're not paid, like representative politicians and their staff are, to do this political stuff as if we had no other responsibilities. But if more of us are confident to speak out and to tackle issues, knowing and confident that there are others to take care of the angles we can't, then we overcome the sense of individual futility - that as individuals we can't do enough, and we can't do it all alone.

A final note: de-legitimising the empire in Iraq is going to become a lot more difficult with a puppet government set up. Already many corporate war profiteers have contracts with and paid for by the Iraqi government. Meanwhile, the media have gone absolutely quiet on the intensity of attacks by the Iraqi resistance - not a word. Even if the resistance was electronically tagged and assassinated by the 'thought police', the most difficult, the most slogging part of the struggle, is dealing with the process whereby the empire becomes normalised.

The DSP "model"? Unity!

Andrew J Martin (Brisbane South branch)

It's been four years since the inception of the Alliance, a period longer than my brief foray into political activism. I was drawn to the Alliance specifically because I saw that it was an initiative for the left to work together and become a viable force for real social change beyond being a tiny outpost of bickering propagandists.

Although my initial activism was with the ISO, it was the DSP which I saw as being the overwhelming driving force for unity; it was the DSP's arguments that made the most sense and whose intention of left re-groupment was the most genuine.

However the ground was and still is tenuous, with the DSP by far being the largest of all the activist organisations in Australia. The sheer weight of numbers of the DSP without charting a sensitive and practical path in this project could have isolated all other affiliates from having a viable role to play in left unity.

The problems of the Alliance are still quite elementary, and they are mostly that of unity. Clearly, each affiliate organisation has disparate aims in what they hope to achieve – but primarily most affiliates seek to build a Marxist cadre party in their own strictly defined fashion and use the Alliance as a pool for recruitment. The DSP is actually the exception to this rule.

Our aims are quite straight forward: we seek to transform the situation of what amounts to the bitter, hardened, sectarian madness of building several different Marxist organisations that compete with each other into a mass workers' party that accommodates different streams, strands, thoughts and differentiations of socialism, the key objective being a working-class political alternative to the ALP. Specifically we see SA as an anti-capitalist campaigning party that works beyond being merely an electoral front and involves the broadest number of people seeking an alternative to parliamentary politics.

Those aims are still quite broad and are shared by the majority of the membership of SA. At the founding conference, the DSP was by far the largest grouping in the Alliance; the unaffiliated members being a small but not insignificant minority. The situation now is that the "independents" have the largest weight of numbers and it is they who will decide the direction the Alliance takes. In 2001 the membership of the Alliance was at a little over 800. The membership now stands at around a steady 1400 – a 40% increase – proof of the Alliance's success as a serious new force in politics.

Conversely, membership of the DSP and the ISO has dropped; a further indication of where the balance of power is swinging in the Alliance. The DSP does not welcome this decline in either of the affiliates and it is certainly not a devised trend on our behalf.

In fact, our approach to SA is hardly devised at all. The ISO's paranoia about the DSP having a model that we base SA's branches on is unfounded. We simply do what works. Further, there are branches that have no affiliates as part of the membership, such as the Taree branch in NSW and the embryonic Sunshine Coast branch in Queensland. The DSP approach has been to offer as much help as we can in building those branches, but they operate autonomously.

The approach of the DSP is in line with the constitution of the SA. Article 8.4 of the S.A constitution states: "Branches shall be responsible for ensuring a political discussion at branch meetings, carrying out campaigns in their area in support of workers' and social movement struggles, and for the running of election campaigns.

Article 8.5 explains further: "Providing their material does not contradict the core Alliance platform, local Alliance groups shall be free to raise additional, specific demands within their material."

In other words, as long as branches operate in accordance with the overall aims of the Alliance they can campaign however they want and not according to any specific model.

It is folly to raise grievances that are artificial – David Glanz is not just seeking to exploit the differences between the two largest affiliates, but is further creating divisions based on deception. It's one thing to raise differences, but to manufacture them is an act of desperation and it discredits the ISO as a genuine partner in left unity.

It is the classic case of creating a formula or theory to suit their position and to justify in large part their abstention from building the SA. Comrade David Glanz's criticisms are so baseless he fails to even describe exactly what "formula" he is opposed to. He makes remarks such as, "Wills branch is in many ways different from most other branches. It does not operate according to the formula that the Democratic Socialist Perspective says is the key to success." However, never has the DSP said that we have the key to success. We concentrate on the strength we have in unity, but there is no holy grail to success.

David's further criticism is based on the premise that the DSP is somehow wholly responsible for running the Socialist Alliance (and if you believe David, doing so badly): "The DSP has put a lot of resources into the Socialist Alliance and I am sure it wants to see vibrant, campaigning branches which are rooted in the local community. Yet its current formula for building the Alliance, which is very similar to the way the DSP used to build itself, has shown itself to be a less than satisfactory strategy." What strategy David is talking about we are left to only guess. What exactly is it that the DSP is doing wrong?

In Brisbane we *are* more or less responsible for running the Alliance, the ISO having abstained from branch building activity since the federal election, begun setting up *Socialist Worker* stalls (sporadically) across from SA stalls in Queen Street mall, and collapsing the Inala branch into South branch - the only branch in Brisbane that they had the majority of membership.

Confronting David's attack on the DSP is akin to banging your head against a brick wall because it's not based on anything we have or haven't done. The ISO in Brisbane has for all intents and purposes turned their backs on the

Alliance and yet David is posturing that they have a better way of doing things. How can David be so assured of success when national activity of the ISO is at such a low level? Let's have a reality check.

My hope is that the ISO do not retreat to building the small cadre force of the ISO and give up on building the Socialist Alliance. Globally we are witnessing the slow rebirth of the left. The Socialist Workers Party in Britain at the founding of the SA gave us an excellent greeting where they mentioned the fallout that was occurring against social democracies throughout Europe. 300,000 protesters were at the G8 summit in Genoa in order to say "no" to the neo-liberal policies being implemented throughout the world.

The mood on the left then was overwhelmingly a fresh look at regrouping against capitalism - as it should be now. The differences of views in the face of tear gas, water cannon, pepper spray and water cannon at the G8 protests were insignificant. What was important was what we shared – the strength in collectivism and solidarity.

To sum up I'll finish with the remarks Chris Bambery, national secretary of Socialist Workers Party, Britain, left us with in his fraternal greetings to the first Socialist Alliance conference: "This is the time for unity. Let's unite around what we agree on. Let's work together. This is our time. As we chanted in Genoa, "We are winning!"

Hobart's Cuba and Venezuela film festival

By Susan Austin (Hobart branch)

This is a report on our recent film festival. I thought it would be useful to share our experiences as other branches may be interested in doing similar things.

Background

In July last year our Socialist Alliance branch hosted a very successful solidarity evening with the Venezuelan ambassador and a screening of the documentary about Venezuela *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*. Word about this fantastic documentary soon spread and we had many people asking if we were going to organise another screening. After the Australia-Venezuela Solidarity Network was established last October, we voted at a branch meeting to affiliate to it. Although we did not have the resources to set up and run a local solidarity committee, we had a representative linked in to that national network and looked for opportunities to do further solidarity work.

When Andrew, a local musician, approached us late last year with an interest in helping to organise a Latin American film festival similar to ones he had heard about in other states, we took him up on the offer. Although not a member of Socialist Alliance, he supports us, regularly buys Green Left Weekly, and has a special interest in Cuba.

How we did it

We researched a wide variety of Latin American films and decided to narrow it down to 7 films shown over 4 nights. We wanted to present a range of films: both cultural and political; factual and fictional; real and animated; thus bringing people along to Socialist Alliance events that may not have otherwise had much contact with us. We chose to focus on Cuba and Venezuela because we had a good selection of films on these countries and they are the most interesting in terms of how they are developing and defending living revolutions that are standing up to US imperialism. However, we also took advantage of Filмотека's assistance in loaning us some of the films from the Melbourne Latin American film festival, including a comedy about Latin American politics and soapies called *Bolivar Soy Yo*.

We investigated different ways of getting funding, including canvassing local businesses for sponsorship, and ended up with a pub, a bookshop and a printing business providing sponsorship totaling \$420. The promotion was excellent - Andrew designed great colour posters and we organised SA and Resistance members to put them up around shops, cafes, pubs, universities and libraries. We wrote a media release which netted us a good article containing all the program details in the entertainment section of the local newspaper. We leafleted salsa classes, Spanish classes, the film society and lots of other events. We organised postings on various email lists, including the Tasmanian Writer's Centre (500+ members), Son del Sur Cuban band (another big mailing list), as well as all our usual channels. We advertised the SA website on the posters and organised a link to the program from the website. There seems to be a lot of general interest in Latin America, and there was a good response to our leafleting with heaps of people saying they'd heard about it and asking for multiple copies of the program.

Outcomes

The film festival ran on a Thursday and Friday night for two weeks from 31st March to 8th April at a local music venue in Salamanca. About 50 people attended the first two nights (despite the simultaneous launch of the "10 Days on the Island" festival), with many buying festival passes and coming back each night. (We kept the prices low to encourage attendance).

About 35 people turned up to the third night for the Venezuelan documentaries, with many people, even the bar attendant, being impressed, especially by *The Revolution Will not be Televised* (there was a good response as well to Oceanfilm and Aleida Guevara's *Chavez: Venezuela and the new Latin America*. We had great feedback on all the films, including *Comandante*.

Our last night on 8th April finished with a dance floor full of people moving to Latino rhythms. 70 people turned up to see the film *When the Spirits Dance Mambo*, about Afro-Cuban religion, music and dance, including the local salsa teachers and many Latinos, and many more people turned up afterwards and paid to come in for the dance party.

Rene, our El Salvadoran SA comrade, gave a very well received speech in between about Latin America's revolutions and the need to look beyond charity towards the real causes of poverty and inequality. He also coordinated the music for the party.

We raised over \$700 on the door, contributing to an overall total of just under \$1600 profit to be donated to the Venezuelan Solidarity Brigade.

Each night we spoke a bit about Venezuela, made the links between Venezuela and Cuba, and plugged the brigade. On the Venezuela night we spent more time explaining the role of Socialist Alliance and encouraging people to join if they were inspired by Venezuela and Cuba. People got leaflets on the brigade, on SA, and on the SA branch meeting the following week which included a toast to the Venezuelan revolution and a screening of *Enter the Oil Workers*. Promoting the festival gave us ample opportunities to talk about Venezuela with people, the great majority having heard nothing about what has been going on over there but showing a keen interest in learning.

Over the four nights we sold a moderate amount of reading material and merchandise, including a few issues of *Seeing Red*. We gained five or so extra Socialist Alliance supporters, a few of whom are interested in joining, 12 people put their names down on the Australia-Venezuela Solidarity Network contact list with a few indicating they were keen to help and a few interested in the brigade, and a whole page of people who want to be kept informed about other film screenings.

One of the people who bought a *Seeing Red* came to the office the following week and said he thought it was a fantastic magazine, "much higher quality than just left rhetoric" and said he would subscribe. After returning from a trip to South America he hopes to talk to us about helping the Socialist Alliance. He is a member of the Greens and seems keen to foster increased collaboration between the two organisations.

We developed a good working relationship with Andrew, who was impressed with how SA members all pitched in at the right moments to get the show on the road. A writer and DJ who's spent time in Mexico and published a book highlighting the plight of imprisoned activists there turned up to promote his book and help with the music.

Overall, I think Socialist Alliance won increased profile and credibility from putting on such a well-received cultural/political event. It demonstrated that there is an interest in both Cuba and Venezuela and that film screenings can be effective tools for raising awareness, money and profile. It's also an example of how Socialist Alliance can attract and creatively benefit from the support of a range of people outside our existing membership.

Building Socialist Alliance between elections - responding to some misunderstandings

By Kieran Latty (Sydney Central branch & NSW state co-convenor)

Since the last federal election many Socialist Alliance branches have suffered from a degree of disorganisation. There has also been a degree of despair at the apparent lack of a united presence at the March 20 rallies.

Following David Glanz's contribution to *Alliance Voices* (Vol 5, No 1), some members of Socialist Alliance have sought to reinforce a mistaken view that the ISO has a purely electoral view of the Socialist Alliance and that this is partly behind some of our current problems.

It has also been raised that the ISO has a purely local view of the Alliance and is against national work and infrastructure.

I take personal and political insult at the second charge, having been responsible for a good deal of SA's national and state-wide material, such as a number of profile posters, placards, our national coreflutes, state-wide leaflets around the War, IR laws, our state and federal election campaigns, to name just a few.

It is true that the ISO believes that election campaigns are important. In a period of low industrial struggle, the fractures in electoral politics have been one of the most important developments in Australia, notably the rise of the Greens. Electoral campaigning allows us to communicate class politics and socialist solutions to whole sections of society we would otherwise have little connection to.

But the lessons of four years of electoral campaigning shows it is not automatic that the continued rightward shift of Labor will lead to people voting or sympathising with Socialist Alliance. That is why it is necessary to make a concerted effort to establish connections and support among our communities in between and during election campaigns.

The ISO's position can be summarised by our motion at our last conference:

1) The continuation of the Liberal government, combined with the rise of the Greens, has limited the potential for a consistent socialist vote, particularly at the national level. Despite the poor showing at the federal election, SA's campaigning has earned the SA more members, support and profile. The recent good results in the Melbourne council elections, combined with other good results, show that our federal result is not an accurate indicator of our existing or potential audience.

2) The continuing rightward shift of the ALP further opens the space for a socialist alternative. Whilst this space will only become fully apparent under a Labor government, it is necessary for us to continue to build the profile and membership of SA such that we can fully take advantage of the future developments. We need to continue to intervene into the debates around the ALP.

3) Therefore, SA should concentrate on key electorates in the upcoming council and state elections, and concentrate on building roots in the local community by participating in and running campaigns such as in the defence of public housing and local peace groups, in addition to existing interventions into city-wide campaigns such as the Free Craig Johnston campaign.

Since the ISO conference, we have made a concerted effort to try and strengthen or re-launch peace groups and strengthen the connections between them and SA.

This approach has been adopted in principle by the NSW state executive, where we resolved that NSW branches should "be part of building broad public meetings alongside local Greens and ALP branches with the aim of strengthening or re-launching local peace groups".

Concretely this has meant SA comrades collaborating with the local council in Leichhardt to launch the Leichhardt peace group. Two SA members are now the convenors of this group.

In Marrickville Sue Johnston has been trying to get a similar meeting endorsed by the Marrickville council.

Reasons for lack of united activity after the elections

Despite a general consensus that Socialist Alliance should be active between elections, there has been a real breakdown in SA's work after the election. To ascribe this to ISO's apparent electoralism is wrong.

There are real reasons why there was a high degree of unity and activity around the federal election – namely that the election campaign provided a real focus for united activity. We had a whole swath of activity which every Alliance member could be a part of – from distributing Alliance leaflets, putting up Alliance coreflutes, doorknocking, organising polling booths, etc.

Since the election there has not been a similar clear focus to mobilise the membership around. It also seems we have suffered from disorganisation as many branches have not been properly meeting.

It is not enough to say that there are joining forms and stalls and that this is the basis for united action. I used to do SA stalls every weekend, but got annoyed at always being the one trying to do SA specific activity. Selling *Green Left* and building the Asia Pacific International Solidarity conference may be the priorities for some, but not all SA members.

I think these problems can be transcended if we have a clear political message and focus for campaigning over the next period.

Concretely, I propose that SA has a clear focus on making a political argument about the significance of Howard's IR agenda to the rest of the left - SA should be the ones making the arguments in the stop the war and refugee movements about why the left as a whole should support the union movement.

Secondly, we need to be the ones arguing that united action can defeat Howard - to cut through the pessimism and passivity of some trade union officials and workers.

This means SA must focus on building the May Day rallies, agitating for mass delegates' meetings and for action on June 30.

Every SA member can do something, whether in a union or not - mass leafleting our new SA leaflet on IR laws, putting up our SA May Day poster, marching in the SA contingent at May Day, putting up solidarity motions and mobilising people for May Day and June 30 from our campaign organisations.

If we can position SA at the head of a mass campaign against Howard, we will be so much better placed in all areas of struggle, from electoral work to the campaigns against war and around refugee and indigenous rights.

SA helps organise a 200-strong "Stop Black deaths in custody" meeting

By Paul Benedek (Brisbane West branch & Queensland state co-convenor)

Around 200 people packed Inala Community Hall on April 14 for a fiery public meeting on fighting racism and stopping black deaths in custody - jointly organised by Socialist Alliance and the Youth Affairs Network Queensland (YANQ), with sponsorship from Sisters Inside, One Tribe, and others.

The meeting had significant media coverage, featuring in news bulletins and on Stateline, and on the ABC webnews under the heading, quoting Murradoo Yanner, "Parliament full of rich, white racists".

The meeting was a chance to unite the community in discussing, and organising action around, the intense police and government racism that continues to see huge levels of brutality and murder of Aboriginal people, especially in police custody. From the police killing on Palm Island to the police chase that killed TJ Hickey, to the KKK-style lynching of Aboriginal youth in Goondiwindi, the Aboriginal community is under attack, but, when there is leadership, is passionately willing to fight back.

Yanner was fantastic, giving very much a class analysis of racism, denouncing both "sides" of politics, expressing solidarity with refugees, and noting that most white people are poor to middle-class and don't benefit from the system. It was captivating, a sort of local Malcolm X. Yanner's lead, alongside great speeches by SA member Sam Watson and Reverend Alex Gator, helped ensure discussion was, while full of moving stories, positive and resolved to take action.

A large list of names was collected on the night to be part of a rapid "response team" to act when any incidence of police racism or violence occurs, and the meeting determined to hold a public rally in around 2 weeks' time.

The idea of the meeting was raised with SA member Adrian Skerritt, after Reverend Alex Gator's grandson was assaulted by police. Through a network of Socialist Alliance, YANQ - particularly its young director Siyavash Doostkhah - and SA Murri activists Nicole Clevens and Sam Watson, plus Reverend Gator, the basics of the meeting were able to be confirmed. A particular coup was getting Yanner, probably one of the most politically sharp, high-profile Aboriginal speakers, who was to be down in Brisbane for a YANQ conference.

To their detriment, the Greens declined our offer to be one of the sponsors of the event.

Once the details were confirmed, we pumped out leaflets and posters from the Activist Centre and YANQ, with strong building across Brisbane through our six or more Saturday stalls and beyond, plus in the local Inala area through letterboxing. We also flooded email lists, and got the meeting into community noticeboards in some papers. Several people came to the Activist Centre to get leaflets, or emailed SA to get the leaflet file. In the end the word travelled far and people attended the meeting from Coffs Harbour and Palm Island!

At the meeting, SA had a good information stall, leaflets on all the seats (there were very few to be collected at the end so it seems people had taken the information away with them), and a large SA banner and placards.

This public meeting built on consistent work that Socialist Alliance has done over recent months. We were central to the rally that took place late last year in solidarity with the Palm Island community. The Socialist Alliance was a big part of building Invasion Day, and participated in the open organising meetings held at the local Jagera Indigenous Centre (for Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike). Socialist Alliance stood an all-Murri federal election Senate ticket in Queensland with Sam Watson and Nicole Clevens.

Socialist Alliance seems to be becoming more involved in Indigenous justice work beyond Queensland too - especially in the solidarity with the Hickey family and campaigning for a reopening of the inquest into the death of TJ in Redfern.

The Alliance is now much better able to play an ongoing and important role in the struggle against racism, and for equality and justice for Indigenous Australians.

Some ideas for future campaigning could include:

- * Touring Sam Watson around Australia to speak at public meetings organised by SA, community groups and others.

- * Getting Murrumbidgee Yanner down again for a public rally.

- * Consolidating and generalising the "rapid response" organising commenced in Queensland to involve more people in anti-racism, black rights campaigning nationwide.

Whither the SA? - an introduction to the 5 Key Markers

By Dave Riley (Brisbane Central branch & National Executive member)

It doesn't take much political insight to recognise that the triumphalist return of the Howard government at the October poll has impacted on the morale of those who are committed to a very different agenda. This insidious malaise has had its disorientating impact within the ranks of the Socialist Alliance as well. But this confusion about what we should be doing is now clearing as the old precept - 'Don't agonise, organise' - kicks in once again.

Nonetheless, this seeming downturn has availed us of an opportunity to evaluate the momentum of the SA's current trajectory. What needs to be done now to move this project forward?

The last 12 months have been dominated so much by our electoral activities that it is easy to forget what we are trying to do. At our last two national conferences we have affirmed a particular perspective, one that was absolutely committed to building a socialist party rather than persevere at the much shallower unity level of a coalition that only blossomed at poll time. Although he does not clearly state it, David Glanz's strident advocacy of a Wills-centred Alliance in a recent *Alliance Voices* (Vol 5, No 1) is essentially a call to put the SA into reverse mode.

What kind of party?

The party we have decided to build passes muster with the liberal use of such adjectives as multi-tendency, socialist, pluralist, united, etc., as though, if these attributes were repeated often enough, the formation would come into being under its own volition. But such a party needs to be constructed, and defining it verbally is not the same as forging it. Such a party is built at the coalface.

It's true that we need a concept in our head to format our endeavours, otherwise we would be travelling blind. This is where our thesaurus of adjectives can run out of resonance. Sooner or later we have to stop being abstract about this party we seek to build and begin to consciously build it.

Although the Scottish Socialist Party (2) is not a template, it is the kind of party that fits the attributes we consensually ascribe to - indeed it is the example of the SSP that inspired the formation of our Alliance in the first place. This is the spectre that seems to be haunting many of the affiliates too as so many of them are keen that the Scottish transition from alliance to party is not replicated here.

But it is worth exploring what the Scottish example has to offer us, even when it comes to the use of words: a party which "starts out on the basis of assembling those who are ready to fight capitalism and for socialism, a party that is rooted in the workplaces and communities, whose centre of gravity is in those workplaces and communities and not in parliamentary institutions, a party that is democratic and not dominated by a bureaucratic apparatus" (3).

That's a handy definition of a *process* of party building which is neither schematic nor abstract.

Are we there yet?

So how far have we come along this course we have set ourselves?

This Alliance of ours has primarily served as a pole of attraction on a left here that has fractured into an exotic miscellanea of competing closed caucuses which, in reality, not many people joined. Its achievement so far in that regard is self evident such that now the Alliance can boast that it has bought together not only Marxist outfits, but also left-wing academics, militant trade unionists, some important Indigenous leaders, migrant activists, and the like into a viable new formation the likes of which Australia has not seen since the demise of the old Communist Party. Currently the Alliance has some 1400 members. That figure is the actual paid-up membership and does not include every member of all the affiliated groups or the migrant organisation which has joined during the last twelve months. So there's that very real quantitative growth in an organised left presence that has meant that people are beginning to identify the socialist left with the Alliance. The Alliance has moved the socialist left away from the margins and extended its reach.

This is particularly the case among a significant layer of militant trade unionists in Victoria who have been greatly encouraged by the new signs of unity. The Labor Party has soured its traditional working-class constituency and among a small sector there is the beginning of a break from Laborism. I don't want to exaggerate this - but in terms of what the socialist left has experienced these last thirty years in the way of isolation from working-class struggles this is a bit of a breakthrough.

The existence of the Alliance has also enabled a greater co-ordination of campaign work nationally in trade unions, within the anti-war movement, for women's rights and so forth, so that now in a country the size of Australia we can expect a certain confident reach and influence that wasn't there before.

Similarly, for the first time in a long time our kind of politics has moved out of the inner-city left ghettos and begun to colonise suburban fringes and regional centres in an organised way. Given that the most that some of our affiliates could boast was a minuscule presence in two or three state capitals, this expansion to more than 30 branches nationwide for the Alliance is an extraordinary achievement in the space of just four years of political convergence.

So the *process* "of assembling those who are ready to fight capitalism and for socialism" has already begun. Our project has legs.

But it would be silly to conclude that we have come far enough. This, after all, is a process, not an ordered advance via a set of pre-ordained numbers we can tick off as we go. None of us have done this before - so we can only find our way by finding our way.

The art of politics...

While we can learn a lot from the Scottish experience we still have to do it ourselves. That means that we will make mistakes, that we will advance without a road map to guide us. But those mistakes will be *our* mistakes and any advance we make will be wrung through *our* activity. That's how we are going to learn, because the art of politics is knowing what to do next...then going ahead and doing it.

And that, primarily is the question we have to answer as we approach the SA national conference: what do we do next/what can we do *now* to advance the process we have already embarked upon?

Fortunately, the beginning of this discussion has already been sketched out in the Democratic Socialist Perspective's contribution to *Alliance Voices* in December last year (4). *The 5 Key Markers for the SA* (see below) is an attempt to exploit that resource and focus our attention on those key areas we need to consciously address if we are seriously going to advance this project. Many of these markers are already in play, so we can assess our progress with them at the coming conference.

At stake here is how best we can deepen the trajectory we have embarked on without being distracted from the core politics involved - and rest assured there will be many attempts to obscure the key issues at stake by trundling out the old furrphies of wedge and bogeyman politics in way of distraction.

We also want to be able to go away from this conference confident that all those who we elect to carry out our collective decisions actually do just that. If it's not too much to ask: we want a national leadership that leads.

The Socialist Alliance Unity Network

The Socialist Alliance Unity Network is a statement of fact - a network of SA members who are all dedicated to advancing this party building process within the Alliance. We want the politics up front and we want the politics to come first.

For the moment it is a public web page (5) that can archive some important contributions toward this particular trajectory in order to enrich the discussions we need to have.

At stake is supporting those conference resolutions which genuinely try to pilot the Alliance process through those key markers which are outlined here.

Notes:

(1) "Lessons of the Melbourne council election success" by David Glanz. *Socialist Alliance Discussion Bulletin* (Vol 5, No 1, March 2005) http://www.socialist-alliance.org/resources/idb/av_vol5_no1.doc

(2) Scottish Socialist Party <http://www.scottishsocialistparty.org/>

(3) "The broad party, the revolutionary party and the united front: A reply to John Rees" by Murray Smith. *Frontline 9* <http://www.redflag.org.uk/frontline/nine/09msreply.html>

(4) "Strengthening the united multi-tendency socialist party in 2005: a contribution to discussion" by the Democratic Socialist Perspective. *Socialist Alliance Discussion Bulletin* (Vol 4, No 16, December 2004)

<http://www.socialist-alliance.org/resources/idb/Vol%204%20No%2016.doc>

(5) Socialist Alliance Unity Network <http://sasocialistunity.blogspot.com/>

5 Key Markers for the Socialist Alliance

At its 2003 national conference the Socialist Alliance adopted a resolution aimed at transforming the Alliance into a broad based, multi-tendency socialist party. At the 2004 national conference some 75% of delegates reaffirmed this perspective.

The vast majority of SA members want to get on with the job of making their party a more democratic, cohesive and effective political vehicle for social change.

However, since the 2004 national conference little has been done to facilitate the structural transition of the SA into a united socialist party. In the meantime, the political situation facing workers has considerably worsened. We need organisation and resistance on the ground, not just in the electoral arena. Some of the successes we have enjoyed in our union work show what is possible.

We believe it is imperative that at our 2005 national conference we sponsor practical measures that give the SA a clear party trajectory. To help contribute to this process we suggest five key markers need to be attained.

The 5 Key Markers:

1. Increase the democracy and accountability of leadership at the local and national level by electing leadership teams based on carrying out the collectively agreed work of the Alliance rather than simply "represent" various viewpoints.
2. Streamlining day to day administration in the Alliance by employing a conscious division of labour at all levels and strengthening its financial independence while reducing the massive administrative burden that is falling on the local branches especially as it applies to the various electoral acts under which we function.
3. Coalescing the collective skills and experience of SA members by focusing our work on ongoing key campaigns and engaging the membership in broad campaign caucuses and discussions (eg: e-lists, district conferences, etc) as a supplement to activity at the local branch level.
4. Overcome the uneven way the SA membership is being serviced by consciously adopting techniques at the national and state/district level which further explore the effectiveness of our key communication tools (eg: web site, *Alliance Voices*, newsletters, email, etc) in reaching out to all members and supporters.
5. Continue to develop the political level in the Socialist Alliance by progressing such key projects as *Seeing Red*, *Green Left Weekly* and the 'book on socialism' while utilising local educational and forum initiatives which offer opportunities to collectively explore the socialist perspective .

Alex Miller (Sydney Central branch)

Andrew Watson (Northern Rivers branch)

Dave Riley (Brisbane Central branch)

Socialist Alliance Unity Network (<http://sasocialistunity.blogspot.com/>)