

DISCUSSION BULLETIN

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DOCUMENTS

Where is the Socialist Alliance going?

An interview with Dick Nichols (National Co-convenor)

[This interview appeared in Green Left Weekly Number 518.]

Over the past two months, life in the Socialist Alliance has been stormy. The International Socialist Organisation (ISO) threatened to disaffiliate if the Democratic Socialist Party went ahead with a proposal to its December congress to convert the DSP into an internal current in the Alliance.

With the DSP's November 11 decision to put its proposal on hold, the Socialist Alliance waters have settled for the time being. Green Left Weekly asked Socialist Alliance national co-convenor and DSP national executive member Dick Nichols for comments.

Why did the DSP leadership withdraw its proposal?

Because the Alliance is too valuable to put at risk. Obviously, if the ISO felt so strongly about our move that it would threaten to leave the Alliance, we in the DSP had to take the issue seriously.

We are still firmly convinced that the basic idea behind the proposal is right — that the Alliance should become a united multi-tendency socialist organisation. But if Alliance members are uncomfortable about this, then it is best to slow down and give them space to consider what it might mean and where they think the Alliance needs to go.

The DSP still wants to take this step. We see it as vital, but we don't want to lose people because of any misunderstanding.

Don't the Alliance's problems go deeper? Look at its results in the Cunningham by-election, just 0.6 per cent of the vote.

The Alliance's 400 votes in Cunningham meant more than this low score suggests. First, nearly everyone who was sick of Labor — including many socialists — were always going to vote Green or for Peter Wilson (the union-backed community candidate) to make sure that the ALP lost.

Second, the Alliance campaign against the looming war on Iraq helped push the election's politics to the left. The spin doctors all rushed to tell us that Cunningham was decided on (admittedly important) local issues but the Greens opposition to Australian involvement in a war on Iraq was central to their win. Wilson went from conditional to unconditional opposition on the strength of the anti-war feeling.

Thirdly, the Socialist Alliance didn't flinch at the "tricky" issues that nearly everyone else thought it best to be a bit fuzzy and evasive about — like refugees' rights and the need to renationalise privatised public assets.

We were respected for our firm stance, especially by the most committed Green militants. So along with 400 votes for socialism, the Socialist Alliance finished this campaign with more members and much more profile and respect.

But with the Greens on a roll, the Socialist Alliance isn't going to survive if it keeps getting less than 1 per cent, is it?

Sure, the rise of the Greens squeezes Socialist Alliance's access to all those people who are disgusted with Labor for its betrayals and crimes. The Greens are now the first port of call for this vote. As long as this phase lasts, a vote for the Socialist Alliance will nearly always be a consciously socialist one.

That's also because the Greens, especially in NSW, currently present a left and pro-working class face, unlike the German Greens. The Greens are winning support here, that in France or Italy would go to the far left. The Alliance's 0.5-1.5 per cent is the vote for socialism at this stage in Australian politics, there is nothing we can do about that except recognise it and build on it.

We could always try to attract more votes from those disillusioned with Labor by working the still-rich vein of "little Aussie" populism. But that would just make us part of the problem. The point is to fight racism and nationalism, not surrender to them.

This dramatises the choices facing the Alliance today. We should, of course, continue to run the liveliest possible election campaigns but we have to do much, much more.

If the Greens are standing to the left, why does the Socialist Alliance need to exist?

It is certainly good that the Greens are progressive on most issues. Because of the Greens, Labor betrayals, like Premier Bob Carr's offensive on civil liberties, get attacked in parliament and reverberate more loudly.

However, there are three main shortcomings to the Greens, even at their most left. First, they don't put their main emphasis on the basic issues affecting the life of working people: working harder and longer to stay afloat, endless "restructuring" and insecurity at work, families (and women within them) increasingly stuck with the burden of child and aged care.

The Greens have usually taken the correct position on particular issues like workers' compensation, but they don't focus on the underlying imperative that Labor's total surrender to economic rationalism has created. That's the need to rebuild working-class organisation and representation from the ground up, in the unions and the political arena. That's the heart of the Socialist Alliance project.

Second, although the Greens are getting more involved in the movements and Green MPs are a welcome relief from Liberal and Labor hacks-in-suits, the Green approach still tends to feed the great illusion of Australian politics, that social progress comes from bumping the right people into parliament.

Third, despite the Greens' denunciation of many social and environmental evils, they balk at pointing the finger at their root cause. Liberal and Labor are

tools in the hands of our corporate and financial elites and can, if necessary, be replaced by other tools, including the Greens if they ever went down the German Greens' road.

These shortcomings all flow from the fact that most Greens think they can make capitalism work sustainably. They don't yet really grasp that it's the profit system, which puts corporate gain ahead of ordinary working people and the environment, that is the root cause of the problem.

So it's vital that the Socialist Alliance exists. No other force is going to provide a clear, anti-system point of view and consistently build the struggle against economic rationalism.

How can the Alliance grow? Some people would argue that the last period indicates that different affiliate groups, especially the ISO and the DSP, are operating with different political road maps.

Let's not exaggerate. The Alliance as a whole agrees on the need to step up work in the unions and in building the struggle for union rights, in the anti-war movement and in the fight against increased police powers and "anti-terrorism" laws. That agreement, along with a Socialist Alliance presence in community struggles and in elections, gives it a solid foundation for growth.

The point the DSP stresses is that the Alliance could be doing a whole lot more and that it's only the Alliance, as the left acting together, that can do it. Time and again we get evidence of what is possible when socialists really do collaborate; whether it is building a public meeting in defence of democratic, militant unionism in Victoria or forging united campaigns against US President George Bush's impending war on Iraq.

If the Socialist Alliance had access to more organisers, offices, literature and a newspaper, the socialist movement would rapidly take a big step forward in this country. This is the key issue for the Australian left to understand today. It's why the DSP made its proposal to stop building our own separate party and to focus on building the Alliance. We would still like to do it and we would like to see the other organisations in the Alliance do the same.

But that's the heart of the problem. The ISO says that the DSP approach confuses two processes, collaboration inside the Socialist Alliance and "revolutionary regroupment". The ISO says regroupment is ruled out by strong differences among the affiliates and can only be achieved by "deep-seated clarification of organisational theory and practice".

We in the DSP think this is a mistaken view of how socialist unity is achieved, and can actually frustrate its growth. Socialist regroupment, simply a term for increasing practical and theoretical collaboration leading to eventual unification, hardly ever comes about as a result of discussion of the historic reasons for our separate existence.

If we approach regroupment with the idea that we have to start with a big debate aimed at "clarification", focusing inevitably on what we disagree on, we will just get the sort of debates that have already gone on

between our separate organisations for years. Interesting to some, perhaps, but what will be the impact on the people who aren't interested in these debates, who want to get on with building the Alliance?

Moreover, on which of our differences do we have to have agreement before we can move forward? On Cuba? On Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution in underdeveloped countries? With that approach, hundreds of Socialist Alliance members would desert in disappointment and the organised left would return to the divided state it was in before the Socialist Alliance.

What about our differences on issues that are closer to home, like the nature of the trade union and ALP bureaucracy? Here we don't need to settle on an agreed theoretical conception of what ALP leader Simon Crean and Australian Manufacturing Workers Union national secretary Doug Cameron represent. We need to find the tactics to advance the struggle for working-class politics against the Creans and the Camerons.

Greater unity will only result from trying to meet the real challenges of the struggle, drawing a balance sheet of the results of our effort and moving forward on the basis of growing experience and joint correction of mistakes, that is, by applying a trial-and-error approach together.

This does not mean that theory and past differences are unimportant. It's a recognition of the truth of Karl Marx's old saying, "A step forward in the real movement is worth ten programs".

There's a big challenge here. We all have to be mature enough to put the best interests of the socialist movement ahead of our specific viewpoints, agreeing to put them to the test of united action and public debate. None of us will get things all our own way, we all have to accept that, but let's agree to accept the judgment of practice.

So how can these differences be resolved? Is the Alliance at a deadlock?

With the conversion of the DSP into a current within the Alliance now set aside, there's no reason why we can't get down to discussing the way forward. The DSP is convinced that most members, affiliated and non-affiliated, are in favour of changing the Socialist Alliance into a more unified organisation. The Alliance discussion will reveal if we are judging the mood correctly, and what specific shape members want the organisation to take.

To help discussion along, I've drafted a sort of "vision statement" or manifesto for the Socialist Alliance and invited everyone to comment on it. The ISO is opposed to its adoption as a Socialist Alliance document because it touches on the issue of revolution, which the ISO feels will turn off potential members.

I would be surprised if any of the present affiliates disagreed with the general line of this manifesto. It is, after all, an attempt to draw out the real basis of our successful collaboration above and beyond our founding platform. I think the debate will centre not on the statement as such, but on whether it would help the building of the Socialist Alliance. Do we need it, or should we just stick with our founding platform, or do we need some document that's somewhere in between?

The ISO has agreed to draft its own statement and this will advance debate a lot. With two drafts to compare, the discussion will become more real for many Alliance members. It should also stir unaffiliated Alliance members into having their own say.

This is the most important step that our discussion needs to take now. The more Alliance members grapple with the issues, and the more they take their little bit of responsibility for its future, the better our next national conference in May 2003 will be. ■

DSP: 'Socialist Alliance too valuable to risk such a breakdown'

By John Percy

To: National Executive, International Socialist Organisation

From: Political Committee, Democratic Socialist Party

11 November 2002

Dear comrades,

In your letter of November 3 [see *Internal Discussion Bulletin*, Volume 2 Number 5] you stated that the ISO National Executive felt it had no choice but to recommend to your December National Conference that it terminate your affiliation to the Socialist Alliance if the DSP's 20th Congress were to vote to implement our National Committee proposal to convert the DSP into a tendency within the Socialist Alliance .

This difficult issue was the subject of a useful and comradely interchange of opinions on a November 9 teleconference between our two organisations, on which a communiqué has been issued.

The DSP Political Committee again discussed the issue at its weekly meeting today, and has come to the following decisions:

- That, given the stance of the ISO National Executive, the DSP Political Committee will withdraw its recommendation to the DSP's 20th Congress that the DSP cease to operate as a public organisation before the May 2003 Socialist Alliance National Conference;
- That the DSP Political Committee will propose to the Congress that it authorise the incoming DSP National Committee to decide on the timing of the implementation of the proposal that the DSP cease to function as a public organisation.

The DSP Political Committee has adopted this stance in order to allow more discussion in the Alliance without the threat of ultimatums and a breakdown in relations. For us the Socialist Alliance represents too valuable a political gain with too large a potential to risk such a breakdown.

At the same time, however, the DSP continues to hold to its analysis of the limitations and potential facing the Alliance (as expressed in our initial letter to the Socialist Alliance National Executive and subsequent letters). We continue to share, for example, comrade Simon Millar's aspiration (expressed in the Alliance *Internal Discussion Bulletin*, Volume 2

Number 5) to see the socialist groups in this country unite into one party. Continuing and deepening left collaboration through Socialist Alliance offers the only feasible way to build the political basis for such a united party.

As things stand the Socialist Alliance offers the only practicable road forward today for greater left and socialist unity in Australia. Achieving a higher level of unity within the Alliance would be a huge step forward for the socialist cause, and would help anchor socialism on the Australian political map. Moreover, the Socialist Alliance cannot continue in its present form without squandering big opportunities and political space to the Greens.

If we all build on our considerable collective effort of the last year and a half we can continue to attract a much wider layer of socialists than are currently members of the affiliate groups in the Alliance , and prepare the conditions for a qualitative step forward.

In this context Alliance members, affiliated and non-affiliated, are already beginning to offer their own views as to how the Alliance should best advance. This is a precious gain of our discussion to date, and the DSP will do all it can to encourage the greatest possible participation by all Alliance members.

Out of this process the Alliance as a whole will be best able to develop the answers it needs as to how to go forward and how its relations with existing left organisations and institutions might best need to change.

For its part the DSP will also continue to put forward its own views as vigorously and clearly as possible and will be a willing participant in all actions, proposals and discussions that strengthen left and socialist unity.

The DSP Political Committee calls on all Socialist Alliance members, whether members of affiliate organisations or not, to take up the debate about the sort of Alliance we need and to help ensure that the Alliance May National Conference marks a big step forward for the socialist cause in Australia.

Comradely regards,

John Percy

On behalf of the Political Committee,
Democratic Socialist Party ■

Joint communique of the International Socialist Organisation and the Democratic Socialist Party

9 November 2002

Representatives of the Democratic Socialist Party Political Committee and the International Socialist Organisation National Executive held a teleconference today to discuss the difficult situation that has recently arisen within Socialist Alliance .

The situation has emerged because of the decision of the DSP National Committee to propose to the party's 20th Congress that it vote to transform the DSP into a tendency within the Socialist Alliance and the ISO NE's response to this proposal, namely to recommend to the December ISO national conference that the ISO withdraw from the Alliance should the DSP Congress vote to adopt the DSP NC proposal.

Discussion on the teleconference canvassed many of the issues that have been touched on in recent correspondence between the two organisations (contained in the Socialist Alliance *Internal Discussion Bulletins* Volume 2 Numbers 4 and 5).

Both organisations expressed the view that the experience of the Socialist Alliance had been an invaluable gain for left unity and for the construction of a working-class political alternative in Australia, and that all avenues for resolving the conflict should be explored so as to avoid jeopardising the Alliance .

Both organisations acknowledged the other's good will and good intentions in pursuing their specific proposals via-à-vis the Socialist Alliance , and committed themselves to continue the dialogue begun at this meeting with a view to reducing the areas of disagreement as much as possible.

Both parties stressed the need for a thorough, open and inclusive discussion within the Alliance as to how it should develop and undertook to present their specific viewpoints within this discussion.

The two organisations agreed that their representatives should next meet during the Sydney protests against the World Trade Organisation (13-15 November). ■

An open letter to the DSP from Socialist Democracy

By John Tully

To: John Percy,
National Secretary,
Democratic Socialist Party.

10 November 2002

Dear John,

There is virtually no support outside of the DSP for the DSP leadership's proposal to "dissolve" into the Socialist Alliance . Even inside the DSP, there is opposition to the proposal as it stands. However, the proposal now has the weight of the DSP's national committee behind it. This is an enormous error. We are writing to urge you, to plead with you, to shelve the proposal at this stage. If the DSP goes ahead with the proposal and the ISO carries out its threat to leave, the Alliance will collapse. Thus, we might well squander the best chance for left wing unity in a whole generation.

More than that, we will be condemned to eke out our political lives like hamsters on a treadmill, expending plenty of energy but never going beyond the confines of an iron cage.

The Left is now probably weaker than it was 100 years ago. The affiliates of the Alliance trace their most direct roots to "the generation of 1968". For most of the thirty-odd years since then, we have been at

loggerheads. At times the antipathy has gone beyond rudeness to physical violence. We have come a long way towards breaking down the old sectarianism, but if the Alliance implodes now, it will take much longer than thirty years to put the pieces back together. To invert the old cliché, nothing fails like failure, and there will be little enthusiasm for a re-run. Not in this generation, anyway.

If nothing else, the proposal has been useful in demonstrating the great differences that exist within the Alliance. Each of the affiliates has a different viewpoint on how to proceed. We need to work these out and the process cannot be forced. Far better for us to consolidate our joint work, and to consider other ways to bring about greater unity and to bring in broader layers outside of the existing left milieu. It is precisely because we agree that there has never been a greater need for a united left party that we are asking you to apply the brakes. Let us have the discussions and debates we need to have, but without time lines and without unilateral actions. Please listen very carefully to what the ISO and the other affiliates are saying. There is still time for a change of course.

Comradely greetings,
John Tully
for Socialist Democracy ■

Reports to Democratic Socialist Party October National Committee meeting made available

National Socialist Alliance has been informed that the Democratic Socialist Party has decided to make public three reports which were given to its October 5-7 National Committee meeting and which have been mentioned and quoted in discussion within the

Alliance. The reports in question—[*Imperialist crisis and the impetus to international left renewal*](#) by John Percy, [*Building the Socialist Alliance*](#) by Dick Nichols and [*Party building tasks and perspective report*](#) by Peter Boyle—can be found at www.dsp.org.au. ■

Where to now for the Victorian Trade Union Solidarity Committee?

By Simon Millar (Wills branch)

[The following comment was distributed after the first meeting of the Victorian Trade Union Solidarity Committee.]

Thirty-eight trade unionists attended the first meeting of the Trade Union Solidarity Committee at Trade Hall on Tuesday, November 19. This committee has been set up by the Socialist Alliance but is open to all unionists interested in building and supporting militant unionism in Victoria. The topic for the meeting was “Building rank-and-file unionism” and Tom O’Lincoln spoke on the Militant Minority Movement established in the 1930s by the Communist Party of Australia. He was followed by Steve Roach who spoke on his experiences in building the breakaway Shearers and Rural Workers Union.

The history of the Militant Minority Movement is not well known but invaluable in showing socialists what is possible when a socialist party makes a conscious and long-term effort to organise within the trade union movement. For a detailed account of this movement both Tom O’Lincoln and Paul True have written pamphlets. [If Socialist Alliance members want a copy e-mail me at samillar@optusnet.com.au and I can arrange to send you a photocopied version.]

Steve Roach gave a brief history of the Australian Workers Union and the early shearers union providing the background to the formation of the breakaway Shearers and Rural Workers Union. He emphasised the crucial importance of rank-and-file organisation and control over trade unions and highlighted a number of key disputes that were won by the rank and file refusing to be sold out by their officials.

Maureen Murphy spoke on the aims and objectives of the committee and handed out a flyer that detailed the projected educational and organisational tasks for the committee. We had a very interesting discussion with people raising the particular problems they face in their workplace. There was also a debate on questions of the sociological nature of the trade union bureaucracy, the dangers of taking leadership positions in the unions and the question of how to raise political demands in the trade union movement. Also the key question of organising the unemployed was raised as

well as how to work effectively within existing trade union campaigns even if they are limited.

It was an excellent first step. As one of the organisers I know there were many apologies and many more trade unionists willing to come to future meetings. The unity brought about by the establishment of the Socialist Alliance has created the possibility of uniting a significant layer militant trade unionists. We also see the committee as providing the organisational framework from which to reach out and connect with, win over and organise wide layers of workers. The committee I believe has the real potential to not only develop better organisation and politically unity amongst both socialist and non-socialist trade union militants, it will also provide a crucial stepping stone to revolutionary politics and socialism.

The key to the committee’s success will be in its ability to attract and involve militant workers outside Socialist Alliance’s membership, combined with winning fresh layers of workers to militant unionism and, in time, socialism. The committee will need to develop a broad platform and be open to both ALP, anarchist, Green and independent unionists. It will also need to in time attract unorganised and unemployed workers. For this to happen the committee must not degenerate into a talk shop—it must be constantly outward-looking, practical and inclusive.

One of the lessons of the Militant Minority Movement was the key role of publications. They produced a paper called *Red Leader* and many Job Bulletins for each union, which were written and distributed by rank-and-file militants. While it would be foolish to try and simply replicate the Militant Minority Movement the committee is having a discussion (on Sunday, November 24 at the Resistance Centre, 5th Floor Druid House, 407 Swanston St opposite RMIT at 1pm) on establishing a trade union bulletin for the committee.

We are in the very early stages of organising ourselves but I am excited at the nature of the work ahead of us. Thus far we have a contact and e-mail list with over 200 names. For the committee to work the current organising committee, which is open to

volunteers, will need to be expanded. It really needs a core of ten or so trade union activists who are prepared to prioritise building the committee. We plan to have monthly meetings of the committee and monthly meetings of the organising committee. Also a key part of our work will be the individual caucuses, discussion groups, rank-and-file groups (whatever is appropriate for the particular union) that will provide the avenue for united action within each union.

We have to make the group accessible to workers by having realistic intervals between meetings, keeping meetings as short as possible, avoiding jargon, sectarian behaviour and tying theoretical debate to practical issues. The key work now facing the committee is to find key activists in each union who are prepared to organise fellow committee members into an appropriate grouping. These union-specific groups will then need to develop a collective understanding of the politics of their union and the key issues confronting the membership. These groups may become the embryos of a broad rank & file group or a caucus within an existing rank-and-file group.

Once these union specific groups have developed a perspective (this will grow and develop over time) then the committee meetings will become the forum for report-backs. Through discussions at both the general and organising meetings the union specific groups will be able to draw on the committee as whole for help with their work. Also the bulletin will play a key role in reporting the activities and political perspectives of each of the union specific groups. The committee is a loose organisation which will aim to reach decisions by consensus due to the many different political perspectives. It would be destructive at this stage to try and dictate the policy and practice of committee members. Democracy, friendly collaboration agreement on very broad principles is all we need to establish working unity.

The other key aspect of the committees work will be education. We plan to launch the monthly meetings with an educational topic. My suggestion for the first major meeting next year will be to organise a well-spoken academic to give a lecture on the history of

Australian Trade Unionism. Topics such as this should appeal to a broad range of trade unionists and hopefully inspire new workers to become more involved in the organisational side of the committee.

None of what I have said is set in stone—it is just my current vision of how I broadly see the committee working. The above work will also need to be supplemented with public meetings called over key issues that have arisen, picket line solidarity work, trade union rallies, 3CR radio work and an end-of-year trade union conference.

While we are not in a period of mass discontent and strikes amongst the organised and unorganised working class I believe the conditions are well and truly ripe for establishing a militant heart in the Victorian trade union movement. For the committee to be successful it must not be a flash in the pan—it will take years of consistent work to build. It will provide the best forum based on practical day-to-day activity from which to deepen both our influence and understanding of the Victorian trade union movement.

It will also hopefully train up and steel significant numbers of trade union activists and future leaders embedded in the trade unions so that when there is an upsurge in struggle workers will flock to our banner. Also theoretical differences can be thrashed out in the real world of practice and not the void that currently exists. I also hope that similar committees are established in all other states so we can operate in the future on a national level.

I urge all the socialists out there who have been frustrated at the socialist movements isolation from the working-class, who want to see the world shattering ideas of Marxism and socialism once again stir the hearts of millions of workers, to embrace this project and make it a reality. As we know only the working-class can end capitalism in conjunction with revolutionary organisation and ideas.

[If you wish to be involved in the Trade Union Solidarity Committee please contact Simon Millar on 9386 5917 samillar@optusnet.com.au or Riki Lane on 9387 7819 or 0400 877 818.] ■

DISCUSSION: the Cunningham by-election

Socialist Alliance and Cunningham

By Riki Lane (National Co-convener)

Cunningham represents a huge kick in the teeth for the Australian Labor Party leadership. It graphically demonstrates the big shifts in how workers relate to political parties. Its significance is not just that the ALP lost a safe seat—the first federal by-election loss by an opposition party since 1943. It is also how they lost which is important.

Ten per cent voted for Peter Wilson, a candidate supported by the South Coast Labor Council, running on a fairly wishy-washy program. He ran after ALP Head Office, Sussex Street, imposed a right wing candidate on the local left-wing branches. This came on top of branch-stacking by the right.

On polling day, many local ALP members were handing out “How to vote” leaflets for Wilson and arguing against the ALP campaigners who were bussed in from elsewhere to support the official candidate.

What Wilson’s campaign represented was in one sense just the usual manoeuvring between the left and right ALP factions. Wilson represented only a partial organisational break, still completely on the political terrain of Laborism. A previous example was when the ALP Left gave under the table support to independent Phil Cleary when he first ran and won the federal seat of Wills in Melbourne after Bob Hawke retired.

However, by making the organisational break, by preferencing the Greens so that they won, it has made a difference to the whole political landscape. The Greens are on a roll, now seen as a realistic alternative in conventional opportunist electoral terms. Their chances of winning ALP inner city seats in the Victorian and NSW state elections now look much improved.

The Greens are making a pitch for unionists’ votes. They leafleted the October 24 rally in defence of Martin Kingham, pledging if elected to obstruct implementation of anti-union laws and support union preference in state contracts. [Martin Kingham is the CFMEU Victorian leader being brought before the courts for not handing over union membership lists to the Cole Construction Industry Royal Commission.]

Alliance response

The Socialist Alliance needs to argue that we are the only consistent working class alternative, but also keep pressure on the Greens from their left. It is good for working class politics if the Greens take a higher profile on class issues. It helps to build up the tensions between their very good left policies, their opportunist leaders, and the middle class section of their support base.

Socialist Alliance received a small vote, 0.6 per cent, in Cunningham. This was to be expected once Wilson entered the election. We did have some political impact by keeping the Greens and Wilson to an unequivocal anti-war position. The Socialist Alliance made some mistakes in the Cunningham campaign, particularly with our preference policy. The local branch decided to put the Greens before Wilson,

then the Democrats, and then the ALP. This continued their position from the federal elections, where they were the only branch to preference Democrats before ALP.

This was essentially based on the various candidates’ attitudes to the war drive. The approach taken to preferences flows from a class-free analysis of the various parties. The DSP, in particular, see the ALP as just another capitalist party and thus see no problem in putting the Democrats before the ALP. In the same way, for the DSP, Wilson’s union base was less important than his policy inadequacies compared to the Greens.

If you took the argument to its logical conclusion, we should have preferenced the quasi-fascist Citizens’ Electoral Councils (CEC) before the ALP. They take a stand against the war drive, for refugees, against the anti-terror laws. They recently got many prominent unionists to sign statements published in newspaper advertisements. Obviously, that they are a poisonous anti-worker and reactionary organisation precludes any support.

Why then, would Socialist Alliance not consider as important the relationship to the working class of the ALP and Wilson’s campaign?

Workers’ Liberty argues that Socialist Alliance needs to base its approach quite differently. We have to make a working-class orientation central. The whole experience of Wilson’s campaign demonstrates, in a strange way, the continuing connection of the ALP to the unions. The revolt by ALP members and unionists was about the ALP leaders betraying workers’ interests and treating them as pawns.

Socialist Alliance needs to relate effectively to the growing discontent with the ALP by workers. A perspective for a mass class struggle workers party means that a break like Wilson’s is crucial. Connecting with those backing his campaign should have been at the centre of our politics.

If Socialist Alliance had the opportunity, we should have considered withdrawing our candidate and actively supporting Wilson. This would have been difficult, given the attitude of Wilson’s campaign, but would have created the possibility of discussing genuine socialist politics with unionists engaged in a concrete break from the ALP. As he nominated very late in the day, there was no real chance for us to consider this option. However, it indicates the flexibility we need towards union sponsored candidates.

By making opposition to the war drive virtually our only focus, Socialist Alliance missed an opportunity to put class-struggle politics centre stage. This is particularly a problem on the NSW South Coast, with its long history of militant union organisation centered on the “steel town” of Wollongong. If we are really to lay down roots in the organised working class, we cannot keep orienting mainly to activists in the movements and campaigns.

Socialist Alliance can do important work to prepare the ground for a serious militant workers' party. Two goals stand out: we can prove to the left of the labour movement that the hard left can actually work together constructively; and we can provide an anti-capitalist pole of attraction for workers seeking a home to the left of the ALP. However, only a political break by left unions towards building a socialist alternative to the ALP can make a mass party a reality.

For now the unions remain committed to the ALP, so the old formula of its "dual character as a bourgeois workers' party" retains relevance, although increasingly undermined by workers both leaving the ALP and voting for alternatives. Socialist Alliance needs to encourage unions to take up a political fight around the sort of policy that Socialist Alliance stands for.

What is crucial is the unions taking an overall political stance and defending it. This would best take the form right now of a serious brawl with the ALP leaders over union rights, refugees, the war etc. It is not individual unionists leaving the ALP or individual unions disaffiliating that will advance the working class, but a collective political and organisational break by a significant section of the union movement.

We only distance ourselves from working class militants if we give any credence to the Democrats as an alternative to the ALP. Socialist Alliance nationally

should adopt a firm policy that we always direct preferences to the ALP before any outright capitalist parties, including the Democrats.

We also need to differentiate ourselves from the Greens and progressive independents by clearly proposing and emphasising socialist/working class answers to daily life problems—such as unemployment, decline of industry, development and environment.

For example, in the Illawarra we could argue for workers to develop their own plans for industry—to reduce hours (at same pay), provide jobs for all, and to reduce pollution, against the profit taking policies of the companies that own the industries. Unlike the Greens, we argue not just for legal restrictions against development, but public ownership of large parcels of land and decisions on how to use land to be made by residents, indigenous communities, workers. Public facilities such as health, education, transport and housing need more resources—tax the rich to pay for public provision of these services.

To summarise: Socialist Alliance needs to be focused on a perspective of helping to create a mass class-struggle workers party; connecting with unionised workers is central. Our attitude to preferences needs a class analysis at its base, not just radical social movement politics. ■

Lessons of the Cunningham by-election

By Anne Picot (Sydney Northside branch)

[The following article was printed in Socialist Worker Number 504.]

Now that the total votes in the Cunningham by-election in Wollongong last month are finalised I think there are things to add to Michael Thomson's report (*Socialist Worker* Number 503).

The vote for the left unions candidate, Peter Wilson, in opposition to the official Labor candidate is the really significant feature of the contest.

Peter Wilson as president of the South Coast Labour Council was a high profile local candidate and got 10.6 per cent of the primary vote.

All the other candidates preferenced against Sharon Bird, the official Labor candidate, so we should ask where did the second preferences, which lifted her vote from 38 per cent of the primary votes to 47.8 per cent on a two-party preferred count, come from.

Since it is unlikely that the right wing independents' voters would have given them to Labor, the most likely source is the 10.6 per cent of voters who voted for Peter Wilson.

While the voters of Cunningham are rightly angry with Labor, they cannot be considered to have "broken" from labourism.

The source of their anger is the failure of Crean's Labor party to measure up to the supporters' expectations of what Labor should be doing.

This means that we cannot expect disappointed Labor supporters to fall into the arms of the Socialist Alliance.

It will take more than a glossy program and enthusiastic supporters on polling day to persuade Labor supporters to desert a party they have long-standing, political, union and social ties to.

The message for the Socialist Alliance is that it is worth running candidates—we have to demonstrate we are serious and have something distinctive to contribute.

The efforts of Chris Williams and the Alliance supporters in Wollongong helped raise the issues of the war on Iraq and refugee rights in the by-election.

But it will take long-term and patient work alongside Labor activists to win them to a left alternative on anything more a protest basis.

Supporting Labor for Refugees' initiatives, collaboration with Labor people in anti-war groups, debating with Labor supporters how to take on the Labor right are crucial steps in building a relationship with Labor supporters.

We have to show in practice as well as in ideology that the Socialist Alliance is worth their interest and ultimately their membership. ■

DISCUSSION: left unity

For a Socialist Alliance newspaper

By Chris Slee (Wills branch)

Socialist Alliance needs its own newspaper, one supported by all Socialist Alliance members. The lack of such a paper is holding the Alliance back.

At present there is a tension between the paper sales of the affiliates and work to build Socialist Alliance. With a common newspaper the two would go hand in hand.

The affiliates rightly place a high importance on distributing their press. A socialist newspaper or magazine is an important instrument for explaining socialist ideas to people who are beginning to question aspects of society. It is also a vehicle for recruitment to the organisation.

A common Socialist Alliance newspaper would be able to reach a wider audience than the newspaper of any affiliate, and would therefore be more effective in spreading socialist ideas. It would also be a powerful means of recruitment to Socialist Alliance.

A newspaper would involve Socialist Alliance members from different political backgrounds in regular common work to distribute the paper, as well as in writing for it and raising money for it. This would mean that there would be more regular and systematic joint work between members of affiliated organisations, and more opportunities for the active involvement of “independent” Socialist Alliance members. Of course, it would be up to individual members whether they want to become involved in these areas.

A common newspaper would also provide a new framework for discussion of political differences. The paper should be open to political debate amongst members of Socialist Alliance (and with non-members). Discussion of political ideas between comrades coming from different traditions would be a week-to-week event rather than something that happens intermittently.

Dealing with political differences

Some may say there is not a sufficient level of agreement to produce a common paper. But if we look at *Green Left* and *Socialist Worker* there is a very high level of agreement on most issues. Articles on the same topic generally take the same line.

Of course there are differences between affiliates over issues of theory—state capitalism, Permanent Revolution, etc. But how important are these differences in practice?

The disappearance of the Soviet Union makes the debate about its nature academic. The nature of Cuba is still an issue, but I think this debate can be carried on in the pages of the paper without causing major practical problems.

What about Permanent Revolution? Differences over this issue might prevent unity amongst revolutionaries in Third World countries such as Indonesia (though it should be noted that Lenin and

Trotsky were able to agree on the practical tasks of the Russian revolution in 1917 despite theoretical differences over the nature of the revolution). Lenin ridiculed those who used theories as “formulas” to be memorised and repeated. He quoted Marx and Engels who said: “Our theory is not a dogma but a guide to action”. He also quoted Goethe, who said: “Theory my friend is grey, but green is the eternal tree of life” (*Collected Works*, Volume 24, pp. 43 and 45).

In any case, the theory of Permanent Revolution should not divide us here in Australia. Our tasks in relation to the Third World are those of solidarity. We can agree on demanding union rights for Indonesian workers and freedom for political prisoners, giving material aid to militant unions, etc.

We may have different opinions on the strategy and tactics of revolution in countries like Indonesia. We can debate these in the pages of the Socialist Alliance newspaper, and invite contributions from Indonesian socialists. Affiliates can also publish their own theoretical journals to discuss these issues.

Of course differences over practical questions will arise from time to time (they also arise within parties where everyone supposedly agrees on the big theoretical issues). How will we deal with such differences if Socialist Alliance has a common newspaper?

I would suggest that the editorial and the cover stories would attempt to reflect the views that we hold in common, while more contentious issues would be debated inside the paper.

Perhaps the most notorious example of differences amongst the parties that subsequently became affiliates of Socialist Alliance was the debate which occurred in 1999 over whether we should demand the sending of Australian troops to East Timor. (The DSP supported this demand, seeing it as a way to prevent the massacres that were occurring there and ensure East Timor’s right to independence from Indonesia. Other groups disagreed). How could we have dealt with such a situation if Socialist Alliance had existed, with a common newspaper, at that time?

The cover story and editorial could have had themes on which all affiliates agreed, e.g: “Indonesian troops out of East Timor!”, “No Australian aid to the Indonesian army!”, as well as supporting the industrial action taken by Australian unions affecting economic links with Indonesia. The question of Australian troops to East Timor would not have been the subject of an editorial but would have been debated in the pages of the paper.

The way forward

How do we reach the point where there is one newspaper that is seen by all (or nearly all) Socialist Alliance members as their paper?

In my opinion only the Socialist Alliance national conference has the moral authority to decide on a common Socialist Alliance newspaper with the realistic expectation that nearly all members will accept the decision.

But what do we do in the meantime? Do we let Socialist Alliance continue in its present state until then?

I believe that Socialist Alliance can take a modest step forward in this period. I would suggest to all Socialist Alliance branches that they hold regular (preferable weekly) Socialist Alliance stalls in their local area. (In many cases the existing regular *Green Left* and *Socialist Worker* stalls could be transformed into Socialist Alliance stalls).

At these stalls Socialist Alliance leafleting and recruiting should be combined with sales of the

publications of the affiliates. This is important, because otherwise the affiliates will be reluctant to carry out regular Socialist Alliance stalls because it would damage paper sales. And a decline in sales of the left press would be harmful to the broader task of raising socialist consciousness amongst the working class and its allies. Thus the tables at Socialist Alliance stalls should have copies of the newspapers of any affiliate group whose members are participating in that particular stall. Usually this would include *Green Left* and *Socialist Worker*, but it could include other publications as well.

This would enable the members of different affiliated groups and independents to come together on a weekly basis for common activity. It would provide an opportunity for informal discussion outside of Socialist Alliance branch meetings. ■

Letter to the Socialist Alliance regarding the DSP proposal

By Narendra Mohan Kommalapati (Canberra branch)

This is regarding the DSP proposal to dissolve itself and work within the Socialist Alliance. Nothing in my experience had prepared me for the proposal. However, I find the attitude of some members disturbing. I joined the Socialist Alliance because I do not understand the differences between the various left groups. I expect it will evolve into a single party, and I assume the DSP's proposal is based on its seeing an opportunity—and a challenge—that should not be squandered.

If the proposal is based on some ulterior objective such as dominating and dictating to the SA, that is all the more reason for other groups to remain in the Socialist Alliance and oppose the plans based on the principle of unity and struggle.

To threaten to walk out is negative and a throwback to the old days of sectarian mud-slinging. Let us not forget that the existing strength of the left in Australia is very small compared to the power of the state and the parliamentary parties. If the DSP shows that it has no vested interest in retaining a label, I think it is a welcome development. If others have reservations about it, let us have an open forum where the issue can be thrashed out. The left has been in existence in Australia for at least half a century (to my knowledge). That is experience enough to discuss differences and arrive at unity.

I don't think unity will "eventually" happen. ■

Comment on the Socialist Alliance unity debate

By Lalitha Chelliah (Batman branch)

[The following article appeared in *Green Left Weekly Number 519*.]

I have followed to a certain extent the debate around the Socialist Alliance unity debate. As member of the Socialist Alliance member and not a member of either the DSP or ISO it has been interesting to observe some reflections in the presentations so far.

One of the key elements of this debate has been, without being explicit, the urgency in reacting to the international and national onslaught of the right wing's views and actions. It ranges from the threat of war against Iraq to the refugees issues in Australia. This urgency seems to be reflected in the DSP's desire to dissolve into the Socialist Alliance. This view may be well and truly justified when viewed from the international and national political perspectives. At the

same time the ISO has tried to justify its views and concerns.

For me as an independent this debate raises a number of questions. Firstly the unity process for me was a dream come true. As a person who believes that the majority of people do oppose actions by the international and national politicians who act against the basic human values, I wanted a force that can and will act against such actions. Hence I joined the Socialist Alliance.

I still observe elements of the numbers game in the debate where the membership of the two tendencies has been raised. Is the thinking then aligned with the same parliamentary games played out in the capitalist arena in the ALP and the Liberals? Is this necessary?

Maybe it is idealistic to expect two groups who wish to unite to do so without suspicion of each other.

Is the suspicion about what has not been expressed thus far in the debate? So far the differences have been outlined clearly and yet the similarities have not been spelt out. Maybe it's time to take stock of the points of agreement and compare them against the list of disagreements. In my view, having read the ISO's views, they may feel that the list of agreed points are not sufficient to go ahead with the fusion.

Timing

The international and national political situation demands urgent action from the left to present itself as a credible force. The political gains of the Greens are not an accident. This gain away from the ALP demonstrates that people are tired of the Tweedledum-Tweedledee syndrome and wish to move ahead. The Greens are buoyant from their gain while the left is still struggling to work out its differences. The reality is that there is international political unrest, judged by the mobilisations against the WTO and the war against Iraq. The left has the opportunity to place itself on the agenda in the political arena. This means the internal squabbling has to be placed behind the political situation and the needs expressed by these mobilisations.

It is true that, as David Glanz says [see *Internal Discussion Bulletin* Volume 2 Number 5], that the Socialist Alliance can mobilise and act as a force as it has done so far. Where does this leave the independents who wish to be active? While organisations within Socialist Alliance caucus and form their views and present it at Socialist Alliance meetings the independents can only present as individuals. To me this is a formula for alienation. The feeling that organisations continue to function this way is a threat to the functioning and the ongoing building of Socialist Alliance. The independents obviously have not joined the ISO or the DSP for their particular reasons but are willing to join the Socialist Alliance.

This is an issue that needs to be explored. If the strategy of the two organisations is to form a mass party on the basis of socialist principles then the timing is more than perfect. Should this be delayed or hindered by the differences instead of going ahead on the basis of common ground? It is always easy to find differences, all it takes is two people to have a difference but a principled political person would move ahead in times like this to forge unity and keep our eyes on the common enemy. This view is demonstrated by the attraction of the Socialist Alliance to broader forces including the trade unions. While the two organisations have the ability to discuss as groups to present their views trade unions and other independents are waiting to be able to discuss their views in the Socialist Alliance.

To be or not to be Bolshevik

To me the common agreement amongst the two main organisations and smaller forces and independents is that Socialist Alliance is anti-capitalist. Tactics and strategies have to flow from this agreement. Socialist Alliance views have to be discussed and decided upon by the Socialist Alliance

not by small caucuses that wish to exert their views on others. This does not mean that groups cannot caucus and present a point of view. The point here is that Socialist Alliance has to debate as a whole all its views in the arena of its meetings. Policies, strategies and tactics have to follow the same path otherwise the independents become disenfranchised. The idea here is inclusive not exclusive.

Views on issues have to be based on the historical gains of the left and applied to the current situation. No view is blanket or inflexible. The flexibility remains within the principled position that Socialist Alliance is anti-capitalist. It is difficult to do wrong on this basis. It also does not mean that a transitional strategy is ignored. This view is demonstrated by the votes in Cunningham where the voters were happy with the Greens but not quite ready for the Socialist Alliance, demonstrating where the people are politically in Cunningham. This means that there are issues on which we can form a united front with the Greens and this has happened in the past. In the end, this is parliamentary politics and do we want to get hampered by this?

What do Bolsheviks do in the current situation? The Socialist Alliance is the arena to discuss this while a basis has already formed in the discussions clarifications will occur as we act as a force. For me politics comes from acting and discussing not just discussing. This does not mean that Socialist Alliance is not acting but I think we are hampered by the different organisations struggling to build their own groups as well as the Socialist Alliance. Add to this the fears of dissolving an organisation that the members have strived to build over many years. A difficult ask may be, but a necessary one given the political situation.

The working class

The ISO and the DSP have survived for several decades as small groups that tend to be dominated by young people. This is an issue that has to be discussed in the Socialist Alliance. There is a changing composition and age occurring in the working class. In the near future a larger proportion of the workers will be older and part of families with such responsibilities. Strategies have to design to orient to this changing nature of the working class. Unfortunately the Socialist Alliance is not ready yet to worry about such issues while the internal debate continues. This is precisely the issue with the unity process. How long are we to wait to allow the Socialist Alliance to operate as a legitimate fully functioning party? Should there be a time limit set and the two organisations work towards this or the discussion continues limitlessly? As an independent I have reservations about such an open-ended approach as it belittles the political urgency of the situation presented by the domination of the Socialist Alliance.

I look forward to working within the Socialist Alliance as a political party of many groups and individuals that is firmly anti-capitalist. ■

A contribution to the discussion about left unity

By Raul Bassi (Canterbury-Bankstown branch)

Introduction

I am thrilled about the level of discussion on left unity. I have never before seen such a large number of contributions to a discussion about left unity. This has made me think of making a small contribution on this very important issue.

I come from an old tradition of activism, politics and trade unionism. In that sense, the best I can do is try to pass on some experiences learned in those years.

As some of you know, for some of these years I lived in Argentina where the political conditions and history were very different from here. But looking at that history and looking at the situation now, it seems that Argentinian militants didn't learn from their past experiences when there was a high level of mass mobilisation.

The organisations of the revolutionary left were always trying to differentiate themselves from each other, sometimes nitpicking over small differences. This was even true of the organisation that I belonged to and that I defended. This nitpicking over differences didn't help the mass struggles.

Now in Argentina, more or less the same organisations with different names are repeating the same mistakes of the past. With the capitalist system and the political institutions in absolute crisis in Argentina, the left groups have focused on their differences rather than seeking to unite the left groups and put forward a socialist solution to the crisis. This has allowed the capitalist parties to continue to rule, and the capitalist system to limp along in Argentina, despite being in total crisis.

This is why I am so thrilled about the discussion on left unity in Socialist Alliance .

Some points

Although election campaigns are useful to build the left alternative against the system, the struggle against the system does not start or finish with the elections. Our role as Socialist Alliance , regardless of how big or small our organisation is, is to talk to as many people as possible during the election campaign because that is when most people are open to listening to new political ideas, and try to find who among them are the most political people and who are the social, political or union leaders.

This is what I understand as the purpose of the revolutionary left participating in elections. We have to use the elections for propaganda purposes, agitating about the main issues against the system in each situation (refugees, war, industrial relations, health, jobs, education, etc). We are not there just to collect votes, although we welcome any votes because we know that they are votes for socialism. We also know that it is only in a real crisis that we can talk about socialists getting large numbers of votes. In the elections in Argentina, three months before 20

December 2001, the left got more than 15 per cent of the vote. Before that the votes for the left were small.

This use of the elections, together with explaining why the capitalist parties and the middle-class parties have no solutions to the problems, is the way that I understand socialist participation in elections.

The other role of Socialist Alliance, the most important, is the participation of the organisation in each and every action that questions the system. In the human rights field (racism, refugees, women's rights, anti-terror laws, profiling, Aboriginal rights, etc), in the anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist front (anti-globalisation, war, defence of democratic rights of under-developed countries), in the working-class struggle (defending union rights, supporting militant unionists in unions, wages and conditions, super-exploitation, etc), and environment.

Our participation in the elections has to be directed to play the most important role, that is, giving more people an understanding that any struggle cannot finish in a clear victory for the working class without a conscious socialist leadership.

This is important because the deep crisis of capitalism, makes the most "reformist" objective a concession the system cannot afford without bringing the whole system into question.

We should not forget that the biggest victories of humanity (Russian, Cuban and Chinese revolutions) started the fight with goals like peace, democracy and land reform, which were not considered by revolutionaries of the time to be the final socialist objective. What happened then was that the actions of the masses made these programs possible only with the destruction of the capitalist system.

It is Socialist Alliance 's role to be in all the actions, knowing that for some of the time we may be a minority but working in with the leadership in campaigns, or winning the leadership of campaigns by showing which are the best policies in each campaign.

Left unity

None of this can be achieved without a strong Socialist Alliance which is very well organised and ready to act. We cannot predict where and when the struggles will start, but we have to use each action to organise ourselves to gain experience, to extend our influence and to prove to everyone why we believe that the ultimate solution for all the social problems is the construction of a socialist Australia.

Back to Argentina; my experience has been that every time we were dodging the bullets or escaping persecution from the army or fighting in the streets, neither the bullets nor the army were asking me or those next to me what differences we had about how to build socialism. They were trying to stop us from fighting together against the system.

In this framework, I think the best way forward for socialism is to provide the Socialist Alliance with a strong and democratic organisation that is based on a

program that starts from socialist objectives and gives a socialist answer to the most important problems that the working class and the exploited face, allowing Socialist Alliance members to respond immediately to any political situation.

This is not a call for unity without principles. Far from that, unity has to be based on the principles of internationalism, unconditional defence of the working class and its organisations and struggles, human and democratic rights, and the strong commitment to be part of all struggles, campaigns and actions in defence of these principles.

But I am not naïve. I know there are important differences in theory and practice. These differences will limit the Socialist Alliance program in some way, but I am confident that there are many points, many

important points of agreement to build on. I understand the differences in many cases, some others I do not.

We can discuss differences along the road of building a united organisation, first trying to separate principles from semantics. Any point which is then clarified and which we reach agreement on can then be incorporated into the program, making it richer.

If everyone put all their efforts into developing the Socialist Alliance in this way, I cannot see how any of the organisations or independents could be forced to drop any of their convictions in the fight for socialism.

We do not know when the world situation, or the Australian situation will require our answers and our actions, but remember, we have to work very hard to not repeat the same mistakes which have been made in Argentina. History does not forgive such mistakes. ■

Questions raised

By James Crafti (Seat of Melbourne branch)

[First published in Socialist Worker Number 503.]

I agree with my party's (Democratic Socialist Party) proposal for our work within the Socialist Alliance.

Rather than re-stating bits of the DSP National Committee's position I thought I'd ask some questions for those who disagree with the DSP's proposal.

If the members of Socialist Alliance don't at least support revolutionary socialism what sort of socialists are they?

They obviously were prepared to join a party with the word "socialist" in it so are they utopian socialists or national socialists?

How can Permanent Revolution versus two stage uninterrupted revolution or other such disagreements between socialists be a reason for remaining separate when Trotsky and Lenin had these same disagreements during a revolutionary situation where this was a major

issue yet they were both leaders in the Bolshevik Party?

The DSP has said it cannot because of resource constraints continue to build two organisations publicly.

With all due respect to Simon Millar's comments (*Socialist Worker* Number 502) it would not just be hard but it would actually be impossible for the DSP to put forward a joint newspaper, maintain our current one and build two activist organisations.

People are on edge building one party and promoting an electoral Alliance. Any more "doubling of the workload" would see DSP and ISO members having nervous breakdowns.

This being the case would it be preferable for the DSP to stop building the Socialist Alliance? ■

DSP proposal will broaden Alliance appeal

By Kim Bullimore (Canterbury-Bankstown branch)

[First published in Socialist Worker Number 503.]

In her letter regarding the Democratic Socialist Party's proposal to cease operating as a public party, Angela Budai argues that this will create the perception that the Socialist Alliance is merely an "arm of the DSP" (*Socialist Worker* Number 502).

I find this argument a strange one.

Having campaigned on the streets of Sydney's Inner West and Canterbury-Bankstown for the last year and half as a Socialist Alliance member, the vast majority of people I met during that time placed little relevance on the fact that I was also a member of the DSP (if they even cared at all).

They had little or no interest in whether or not I was a member of any of the founding parties, or whether I was an "unaligned independent".

What interested them was the fact that I was part of a united left group actively campaigning against war and racism.

What is important to the "ordinary" people and the "broader community" on the streets of Burwood, Lakemba and Bankstown isn't necessarily that we are offering an "alternative at the ballot box", but the fact that we are out on the street every week, campaigning in a united manner against racism and war, for workers and refugee rights, for the rights of the women and the Palestinian people.

What they care about is that we not only offer an avenue for ordinary people to become active in such campaigns—something that most other parties don't—but that we are also actively part of the community.

Far from Socialist Alliance losing its attraction to the wider community should the DSP proposal go ahead, I think it will only help to enhance the attraction of Socialist Alliance as a unified left party campaigning for real change. ■

In answer to Phil Sandford and Tom Kirchler

By Melanie Sjoberg (Eastern Sydney branch)

[First published in Green Left Weekly Number 516.]

The discussion around left unity has left me wondering if some comrades think that we have to build the Socialist Alliance in a vacuum.

Phil Sandford (*Green Left Weekly* Number 515) suggests that Socialist Alliance must “develop as an organisation in its own right” and that means being cautious about the proposal from the Democratic Socialist Party and the offer to use the pages of *Green Left Weekly* and resources of the DSP to help build Socialist Alliance.

Does this mean that we should ignore the gains from decades of struggle by socialist activists? Do we start from scratch, rather than take advantage of what has been built up by the left in this country?

Tim Kirchler (*Green Left Weekly* Number 515) says the various groups “can't simply cast aside

differences” in the name of unity. Who has demanded this? Certainly not the DSP. In fact, I would suggest to comrades like Tim that the real challenge is to find the ways to extend political and theoretical discussion within Socialist Alliance branches so that its members have the opportunity to participate in developing the Socialist Alliance's political positions.

The reality is that revolutionary socialist groups, with a mixed bag of resources as well as theoretical positions, formed Socialist Alliance. We have been joined by more than one thousand others attracted to socialism or looking for an alternative. It would be a sorry contradiction if we did not use what assets the founding groups can contribute. What about viewing it as an exciting opportunity and throwing more energy into building Socialist Alliance? ■