

Building unity and a stronger left

The announcement of the proposed merger between Socialist Alternative and the Revolutionary Socialist Party has triggered some discussion about the prospects for unity on the far left.

In the context of a rightward-moving Labor government, and the threat of an Abbott Liberal government in power after the next federal election—not to mention the global crisis of capitalism—there is a pressing need for a stronger left. Public sector workers and students across the country are receiving a taste of the austerity policies gripping Europe, and job losses are, again, starting to mount.

We face government attacks on refugees, Muslims and Aboriginal people and the threat of climate change and increased “natural disasters”. A more united left could be a stronger force for building grassroots movements for change as well as helping to increase the support for socialist ideas within the working class.

But taking unity seriously also involves recognising that the existing differences on the left, in terms of political theory and practical orientation, cannot simply be brushed aside or papered over.

There is a superficial attraction to the idea of merging organisations as a short cut to building a bigger organisation. Going from 250 to 275 members can seem a big jump when the far left is so small, but the political basis of any fusion is far more important than resulting size. Simply building a bigger sect does not mean any greater influence of socialist ideas in the movements or the working class—far from it.

Solidarity has shown by its own practice that we are committed to building greater unity where there is a real basis for it. Our own organisation was formed in 2008 out of a merger between three existing groups in the International Socialist tradition: the International Socialist Organisation (ISO), Solidarity and the Socialist Action Group.

But this was only possible as a result of an extended period of joint work, discussion and reappraisal of previously held positions. The possibility of talks leading to our merger came from the recognition that there was a practical convergence in our approaches to both building campaigns and movements and to building a revolutionary socialist organisation.

From our perspective, there are important challenges that any organisation on the revolutionary left in Australia must face up to. Foremost among them are the problems of propagandism and sectarianism, for instance an approach that measures the value of struggles by what the group can get out of it.

Socialist Alternative and the Revolutionary Socialist Party insist they are united by their intention to build a cadre organisation. But cadre can't be built in isolation from the day-to-day struggles of workers and the movements.

The response of much of the far left to the difficult decades following the upturn in struggle in the 1960s and 1970s was to retreat into a routine of socialist propaganda, rather than recognising the importance of continuing to find ways to intervene in the wider left (such as the unions, the Labor Party and more recently The Greens) and to constructively building broad-based campaigns and social movements.

Solidarity has attempted, within our own limited resources, to take union work and the building of political campaigns seriously, with modest union work as well as work around the NT Intervention, refugee rights, climate change and on university campuses. It is primarily through such political interventions that socialist activists learn how to argue their politics and lead struggles in the real world.

Conscious effort and goodwill are necessary to ensure that self-interest does not get in the way of working together to fight around issues of immediate concern to the class. Too often, the left has put differences over their analysis of Cuba or whether or not Stalinist Russia was state capitalist or a degenerated workers' state in the way of this.

Having said that, we also recognise that theoretical positions are important in determining such things as an understanding of the trade union bureaucracy, the state, maintaining a consistent anti-imperialist stance, and the potential of the revolutions transforming the Middle East.

Our experience is that, along with practical campaigning, engaging with and intervening in ideological debates both generally and on the left is a crucial part of developing revolutionary socialist activists.

In the past, without practical convergence and an openness to reassessing previously held positions, attempts to unite the existing left groups in Australia have ended badly. It is too easy to see uniting the left as a short cut to size and influence rather than recognising that it is political practice that is key to effective socialist organisation.

A touchstone for a sound basis for regrouping the revolutionary left must be its attitude to the wider task of relating to the crisis of Labor and the task of winning reformist workers. The Labor Party is increasingly divorced from its working class base, yet it retains the electoral allegiance of significant sections of the class. Although it remains ambivalent about how much it is an explicitly left party, The Greens have increasingly occupied the political space vacated by the Labor left.

The original Socialist Alliance is one example of a failed unity project. It began in 2001 as an electoral alliance that united virtually the entire far left, including the International Socialist Organisation (ISO) and the Democratic Socialist Party (DSP) as well as at least five smaller socialist groups. It foundered, not least because despite the united organisational form there were markedly different motivations for unity. The DSP, in particular, saw the Alliance as the beginning of a multi-tendency party and despite being an “Alliance” in name, there was no convergence in political practice. By 2006 all the other participating groups except the DSP had withdrawn from, or ceased to be active in, the Socialist Alliance.

Solidarity hopes that the merger between the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) and Socialist Alternative can contribute towards strengthening social movements and campaigns, and lay the basis for a stronger socialist left in Australia.

But there are obviously large obstacles to overcome. Last year, Socialist Alternative attempted to shout down a pro-refugee Labor speaker at a lobby of the Labor Party’s national conference. A slightly larger fused organisation committed to the same sectarian politics that produced that incident is not going to build a more influential left.

Nor is it clear what political re-appraisal the two groups have undergone to lead them towards fusing. Prior to the regroupment discussions the two groups attached great importance to their respective theoretical differences. The RSP thought that Socialist Alternative’s politics on Cuba and Chavez in Venezuela demonstrated “the utter bankruptcy” of Socialist Alternative’s dogmatic “state capitalist theory.”¹

Similarly in an exchange with the ISO, in 2003, Socialist Alternative insisted that regroupment with the DSP was impossible, because, “We believe that regroupment is impossible *without* agreement on fundamental questions of political principle,”² referring to the political heritage of the International Socialist tradition (i.e. state capitalism and socialism from below).

Yet, Socialist Alternative now proposes that the fused organisation drop any reference to state capitalism in its statement of principles. Some more explanation of how the respective groups’ re-assessment of the basis of fusion would greatly assist an understanding of what principles underpin the fusion of the two groups.

For its part, Solidarity will continue to seek, and looks forward to, collaboration with all of the left in the struggles that, collectively, we face ahead. The possibilities of building a more united and effective left will be forged by patient discussion and cooperatively building those struggles.

Solidarity National Committee, December 2012

¹ “Why some socialists can’t see revolutions” *Direct Action* Issue 3, August 2008
www.directaction.org.au/issue3/why_some_socialists_cant_see_revolutions

² Letter to the ISO from Socialist Alternative, February 2003, <http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/22446/20040815-0000/www.sa.org.au/isoreply.pdf>