

To: Socialist Alternative

Dear Comrades,

Thanks for your recent letters.

### **The question of unity**

You wrongly conclude that Solidarity has a “negative attitude to the idea of unity”. However as much as we all might like there to be a united left organisation, this is not done by wishful thinking or by simply declaring that we are “for unity”. It is one thing to abstractly declare that you are for unity, quite another to make the practical efforts to constructively collaborate that are needed to achieve it.

Our own recent history indicates that we are very open to pursuing unity among socialists where there is a basis for it. As you will know, Solidarity was formed by the fusion of three IST groups—the International Socialist Organisation, the Socialist Action Group and the previous Solidarity.

This unity was achieved by a long process of the three groups working together, resulting in political reappraisals and a convergence of perspectives and political outlook that laid the basis for productive discussions and subsequent fusion.

In any case, your claim to have “always been for unity” doesn’t sit easily with your past history. There has been no indication of any reflection on your own practices that led to the split of SAG and other comrades from Socialist Alternative in 2004. There was no subsequent approach to them to seek re-unification. There was no approach to the former Solidarity members that left the ISO in 2003. There was no approach to the ISO, SAG or Solidarity when the fusion process began three years later in 2007/08.

Indeed, Socialist Alternative adopted a wholly sneering and dismissive attitude to all three organisations and then to the fused Solidarity until very recently. At the time of Israel’s bombing of Gaza, in January 2009, you published a letter attacking Brisbane Solidarity comrades as racist—over a tactical disagreement about when to hold the next pro-Palestinian rally. You followed this up this year with your gratuitous attack on the Refugee Action Coalition and Solidarity.

### **Political practice is not a secondary issue**

Unfortunately, your letter dismissed the concerns we raised regarding Socialist Alternative’s practice as being “tactical and secondary organisational differences”. This is a serious misreading. Rather than being secondary considerations, the points we raised go to the substantial issue of your abstract propagandism and the systemic sectarian political approach that goes along with it.

We outlined some of them in previous letters: the sectarian party-building practices at APEC of calling separate meetings and caucuses counter-posed to the movement convergences, through to abstaining from a national education rally in Sydney because it was being led by Labor students, to your abstention in the recent federal elections and your more recently adopted sectarian attitude towards The Greens.

You have ignored these questions and chosen instead the issue of our respective attitudes to the Labor government as the issue around which the two groups could begin discussion.

### **Abstract propagandism and sectarianism**

But for us the issue of your orientation during the elections—to both The Greens and Labor—was symptomatic of a general sectarian approach which led to you holding your day school on the day of the election itself. Similarly, a far more significant question than a tactical difference over Labor is involved when your Sydney students abstain from a Labor-led education rights march.

From your reply, it seems that you regard these issues as trivial. But the concern with sectarianism has been ABC for

Marxists since the *Communist Manifesto*, when Marx warned that Communists, "...have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole."

Writing in the 1930s, Trotsky warned against elevating the interests of the party above and in counter-position to the workers movement, "The period of existence as a Marxist circle invariably grafts habits of an abstract approach to the problems of the workers' movement. He who is unable to step in time over the confines of this circumscribed existence becomes transformed into a conservative sectarian... In his opinion, the working class should put aside its less important matters, and assemble in solid rank around his rostrum. Then the task would be solved." (Quoted in Duncan Hallas; <http://www.marxists.org/archive/hallas/works/1985/04/sectar.htm>)

Grasping this basic question would seem to be fundamental to whether or not there is a basis for further discussions.

### **A political conception of unity**

The issues you raised with the historical examples about left unity initiatives reveal that your understanding is organisational rather than political.

The uniting of groups to form the Communist Party of Australia was a step forward, not because of "unity" per se, but because for a period of time (despite the confusion introduced later by Stalinism) there was an organisation that was able to play a significant role in the strikes of the late 1920s, building the unemployed workers' groups and rebuilding the unions as Australia began to move out of the Depression.

Neither was formation of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) the straightforward process you present. In Sydney there was an immediate split between two groups with quite different political approaches that both claimed to be the official Communist Party. It was another two years before they united—and only under pressure from the Communist International, which had enormous prestige in the international revolutionary movement.

Central to the small groups that formed the CPA was a concrete commitment to the class struggle. It was this commitment that was decisive for uniting the party. It was in the course of joint work and discussion that some of the sectarianism to Labor that was evident among the founding groups was sorted out.

Similarly, you do not seem to have grasped the fundamentals of the situation for the British International Socialists in the late 1960s. In such a period of rising student and worker struggles, it was hardly the attitude of revolutionaries to the British Labour Party that was an issue. Nor was it simply an abstract question of "left unity". The issue was whether or not the points of political theory that separated the groups (state capitalism for example) were more important than building the student and worker movements. This appeal was, in any case, not so much directed to other left organisations, as to an audience in the wider movement looking to revolutionary politics.

The approach of building the movement as widely as possible was connected to a serious debate inside the International Socialists in 1968 about the very basis of revolutionary organisation that saw three national conferences held that year, after which a Leninist model of party building was adopted.

Your focus on organisational issues such as the duplication of effort and resources in producing separate publications completely ignores the important question of the distinction in the political content of our two magazines.

Your stated concern that having two groups with "the same core politics discredits both groups" also reflects how out of touch you are with perceptions on the left. Most people do not know that the core politics of our groups are the same. It is not "state capitalism" or our analysis of the Labor Party as a bourgeois-workers party that matters to people—we are judged by what we do with that analysis.

Like your concern about duplication of effort producing separate magazines, your focus on the size of a fused group also reflects your organisational approach. Of course, an effective group of 300 would be a considerable advantage over a group of 100.

But the question of credibility and influence is a question of political quality, not a quantitative one. As the ISO learnt in the 1980s, it is quite possible for a sect to grow. But such growth proves nothing about the organisation's capacity to

lead struggles and build the left.

The truth is that where Socialist Alternative is biggest, the movements are weakest. This is not surprising given that your approach to movement building still seems to depend on what Socialist Alternative can get out of it—based on the narrow criteria of selling magazines, pulling people to your own meetings and whether anyone can be recruited.

What people do see, when they compare Socialist Alternative and Solidarity, is the very different approach Solidarity has to constructively working in campaigns and the unions and its commitment to comradely discussion and debate.

### **Political practice to build the movements**

We had hoped that your internal announcement that Socialist Alternative would consider fusion with Solidarity in the future was an indication of a break from the hostility directed to Solidarity and a reflection that you had reconsidered at least aspects of your propagandism.

The possibility of moving towards greater collaboration doesn't come from rhetorical announcements, but from political experience that results in a practical convergence of perspectives.

Crucial to fusion of the ISO and Socialist Action in the late 1980s was the protracted discussion and re-assessment inside the ISO of the mistakes made by the leadership of the ISO that led to the split in the first place. This involved a thorough re-assessment (and repudiation) of the propagandism and highly internalised regime that characterised the IS in the 1980s.

This was our experience too with the ISO/SAG/Solidarity fusion. It required an assessment of past mistakes and the development of a shared practice and perspective. But to date there is little commonality in the respective political approaches of Solidarity and Socialist Alternative.

Neither is there an indication of any such reconsideration on your part nor evidence that our two groups have developed similar approaches in movement and party building. The idea that cadre can be built through an internally driven routine was rejected by the united ISO in 1990, but Socialist Alternative seems to have adopted just such a flawed approach (see for example, <http://www.solidarity.net.au/pdf/Politicalpractice.pdf>).

Socialist Alternative members were ordered out of the Refugee Action Coalition in 2004; not returning until 2009, when it was thought there would be opportunities once it had become “an issue” again. There is no commitment to actually building campaign groups with a life of their own, extending their influence in the unions or society more generally; nor is there any consideration given to raising politics in the campaign. Your approach is almost entirely organisational and driven by the “opportunities for the group” as you see it. Campaign groups are used as conveniences to call rallies.

Socialist Alternative members' involvement in campaign groups remains a highly orchestrated affair. In MAIC, the anti-Intervention group in Melbourne, Socialist Alternative members have been bureaucratically shuffled, not in response to the needs of the campaign, but according to the perceived interests of your organisation and to ensure “less reliable” comrades are kept in line. Four more comrades showed up to the MAIC meeting to ensure the numbers for the decision pushed by Socialist Alternative to advertise the website of socialist groups are advertised on the MAIC web site. (Tellingly such advertising is regarded as unacceptable on the Equal Love web site.)

At Sydney University, your involvement in the Climate Action Collective and Anti-Racism Collective has amounted to various comrades shifting in and out of collective meetings to keep an eye on possible contacts, while showing no commitment to doing any of the political work of the collectives. At times, in Sydney and elsewhere, collective stalls or public meetings are treated as competition or a threat, with Socialist Alternative comrades standing in front of collective stalls, even directing people away from them to Socialist Alternative stalls.

Such behaviour does nothing for your standing on the left, for the development of the campaigns, or for the development of your membership.

While you say that you think the differences that exist between Solidarity and Socialist Alternative could be resolved

within one organisation, your recent history suggests otherwise. Your reputation for intolerance towards contacts and members with dissenting views makes it difficult to believe that Socialist Alternative has the kind of tolerant, democratic internal regime that could allow our differences to be resolved in one group.

### **Re-assessment and unity**

Goodwill is a pre-requisite to any possibility of unity, but that ingredient is still in short supply when Socialist Alternative members maintain a high degree of day to day hostility to Solidarity members and leading Socialist Alternative members are telling people that the left would be better off if Solidarity didn't exist.

In our last letter we requested any documents or correspondence that indicate a shift in your approach to the key issues we raised. But your response has avoided those substantive issues: your assessment of Solidarity's political practice; the need to break with the propagandism and sectarianism that has characterised the left and Socialist Alternative's practice; the importance of engaging constructively with the movements and your orientation during the recent elections.

Without your willingness to discuss or re-assess your past practice, any formal discussions between our groups are going to be rehearsals of fixed positions more likely to entrench positions than shift them. No discussion about Labor is about to overcome the differences that remain so apparent in our political work.

If the leadership of Socialist Alternative is unable or unwilling to address the concerns we have raised, we appeal to the members of Socialist Alternative to begin the discussion that is needed inside your organisation.

Perhaps then we will see the convergence in our perspectives that may lay the basis for future constructive discussion.

Given the scale of the general crisis that afflicts global capitalism, Labor's crisis, The Greens' political dilemma and the urgency of so many issues, there is an obvious need to build socialist organisation in Australia.

Stronger socialist organisation should mean stronger and more influential campaign work. Solidarity is committed to constructively working in the unions, on campus, and in the climate, refugee, anti-Intervention and other campaigns. It is that work alongside unionists, activists, members of The Greens, and Labor supporters, that we believe we can lay the basis for the growth and fusions to build the larger socialist organisation that is unquestionably needed.

Comradely yours,

Solidarity National Committee  
6/12/10