

Open letter to Socialist Alternative members:

Refugees are welcome, ridiculous slanders are not

The recent attacks by Socialist Alternative on RAC and Ian Rintoul, made in an article posted publicly on Socialist Alternative's website, "Left capitulates to Gillard on refugees", are so self-serving and transparently false that they can only be described as wilful distortion.

We have reprinted the Sydney RAC press release at the end of this leaflet so that Socialist Alternative comrades can judge for themselves whether in fact there is any capitulation to Gillard.

The fact that the press release is titled "Labor Must Abandon Off-shore processing" or that the central paragraph begins with "Gillard's solution is nothing more than a version of the Pacific Solution," makes it clear that it completely rejects the 'East Timor solution'.

The other claim—that Ian has fallen into the trap of advising the government on how to stop the boats—is dishonestly justified by a single phrase, taken out of context.

The Socialist Alternative article claims, "in a press release for Sydney Refugee Action Coalition Rintoul wrote: 'Gillard's East Timor solution will fail for the same reasons that Howard's Pacific Solution failed.' The only possible way this could be interpreted in the current context is that it failed to stop the boats."

The actual paragraph in the press release reads: "Gillard's East Timor solution will fail for the same reasons that Howard's Pacific Solution failed. Third re-settlement countries are not going to accept refugees that are so obviously Australia's responsibility. It is also highly unlikely that East Timor's government would be willing to adopt Australia's abusive model of detention." These are the only comments on whether the East Timor solution will work in the press release. The claim that the press release suggests Gillard's policy will fail because it will not stop the boats is a disgraceful fabrication.

If Socialist Alternative members had been involved in RAC last year at the time of the Merak boat crisis they would know that there was a real discussion with Labor for Refugees and other sections of the refugee movement precisely about why the refugee campaign should not accept any concession to Rudd's efforts to stop the boats using the Indonesian solution.

Partly as a result of RAC taking a firm line in this discussion, the response of groups including Labor for Refugees, Amnesty and others to Gillard's 'East Timor solution' has been much better, resisting any idea that the campaign needs to help stop the boats this time. RAC and Ian's position and track record over the issue of 'stopping the boats' is clear.

It is tragic, then, that on the basis of such an absurd article that Socialist Alternative comrades have been campaigning in various states to discredit the press release and slander Ian Rintoul.

The attack is even more bewildering considering that Socialist Alternative comrades have been attending Sydney RAC meetings and the content of any press release could have been discussed in a comradely way at a meeting.

If they were seriously concerned that RAC's name had been compromised, why was Socialist Alternative more concerned to point score than correct the public record with a RAC letter to the SMH editor perhaps?

There is a problem with the response of Malcolm Fraser, Julian Burnside and the Refugee Council, who have suspended criticism of Gillard's proposal. But this is hardly a "left capitulation", and to tar Ian and RAC with the same brush is blatantly malicious.

So what motivates Socialist Alternative to produce such a ridiculous article?

It is a tried and true method for sectarian groups to try to establish their own revolutionary credentials and to motivate members or harden them up, by differentiating themselves from this or that left opponent.

It usually derives from their own lack of involvement or influence that the only way they have of bolstering belief in their own self-importance is to set up a real or invented difference to "prove" their superior position.

The old Socialist Labour League used to run article and after article about various alleged sell-outs by the misleaders of the Communist Party or the trade union bureaucracy. The Spartacist League continues the fine tradition, still rehashing deliberate distortions of political debates about the Korean War to prove their simon-pure credentials as defenders of real socialism.

There have been previous examples of sectarian behaviour by Socialist Alternative. Perhaps the most notorious example was at the anti-Bush demonstrations at APEC in 2007, when Socialist Alternative called its own post-demo meeting in direct competition with the post-rally convergence called by the Stop Bush Coalition—the campaign group with which Socialist Alternative claimed to be involved.

At Sydney University last year, Socialist Alternative members first tried to disrupt an education rally and then noisily abstained from marching because the protest was being run by student "Labor left betrayers".

These episodes cannot be simply characterised as temporary lapses in judgment, they have come to represent a more systematic pattern of political behaviour.

Printing the article may be a new low for Socialist Alternative but unfortunately it doesn't surprise anyone. For too long, Socialist Alternative has adhered to a 'downturn propaganda perspective' in which intervention in building even small campaigns and struggles, learning alongside others, is ruled out. Instead, the group builds around its own internal routine of meetings and street sales.

It looks to recruit individuals new to politics and involve them in an internal routine, rather than committing to the far more demanding but necessary role of being involved alongside others in the struggle to actually change the world. Indeed new members are discouraged from participating in struggles in the real world. Such a propaganda routine is not only self-limiting, it is self-defeating. Learning how to work constructively alongside others and to creatively apply a Marxist understanding to the challenges of building

campaigns is crucial to developing people's ability to lead in the real world.

Hence the difficulties Socialist Alternative comrades have when they do attend campaign meetings. Rather than being able to creatively respond to developments in campaigns, Socialist Alternative's contribution is often reduced to one-dimensional application of slogans or simply to push for rallies. At a recent Sydney RAC meeting, Socialist Alternative told us that the central concern for RAC was not to educate people who didn't agree but to mobilise those who agreed with RAC.

But mobilise to do what? They need to be armed with facts and arguments to allow them to convince those they work with. How does a campaign actually develop and grow if does not attempt to reach new layers of people, educate those who do not agree or develop the understanding of those who are already involved? Revolutionaries cannot be made in a test tube.

Involvement in campaigns

Despite it being one of the larger far left organisations in Australia, Socialist Alternative is not known for its commitment to building the social movements. More often its reputation is for abstention from campaigns, usually justified by an argument that this or that campaign is 'not worth it' – a judgement based solely on whether Socialist Alternative can recruit out of it, not in terms of its importance to the wider left or the political situation.

So, Socialist Alternative's participation in the refugee campaign has been patchy at best. After some early involvement (particularly by two Melbourne comrades) it instructed all its members to withdraw from the campaign in 2005. It was only after the incidents surrounding the Tamil boat at Merak in October 2009 that Socialist Alternative members re-appeared at RAC meetings. Past history would suggest that the involvement will again likely be short-lived.

It reveals much about Socialist Alternative's methodology that while it claims racism is the issue in the refugee movement, the leadership is arguing that comrades active fighting anti-Aboriginal racism in the NT anti-Intervention campaign should withdraw from the campaign. This has been explicitly argued on the basis that the campaign is not providing enough recruits. Never mind fighting the anti-Aboriginal racism then.

Socialist Alternative members argue that they are involved in other campaigns like Students for Palestine, but this is essentially a front group. It is brought out and dusted off to be used as a recruiting tool. It is not a grouping that seeks to build an ongoing campaign with a life of its own, or to influence and develop relationships with other groupings within the solidarity movement.

Instead Socialist Alternative relies on organisational methods such as mobilising members and contacts in poster runs to pretend it is playing some role building campaigns or influencing events. Recently RAC members in Sydney were told the success of World Refugee Day rally in Melbourne could be attributed to Socialist Alternative pasting up 30,000 posters. Far more significant however, but completely relegated in importance by Socialist Alternative, is the political work of developing the campaign itself, building a broader refugee coalition, mobilising

other support groups and broad left organisations—all of which requires a campaign working to foster long-term relationships and influence with a wider constituency. This kind of work requires a commitment to building genuine campaign groupings with a life and influence of their own.

Yet far from showing such a commitment to the refugee campaign, at the Brisbane and Sydney World Refugee Day rallies, Socialist Alternative went around the crowd trying to get people to leave the rally before it ended in order to attend a pre-arranged Socialist Alternative meeting. In Sydney, the Socialist Alternative co-chair, Diane Fieldes, even left early, presumably also to go to the Socialist Alternative meeting. Socialist Alternative's concern to build rallies is not a concern to recruit activists to organising meetings or to build movements that can shift public opinion and fight to change government policy. For Socialist Alternative, rallies are more or less recruitment opportunities for Socialist Alternative.

This kind of approach cannot develop a membership that is able to engage with the complexities of real politics. Instead you get the reductionist sloganeering that has characterised the current intervention into RAC. Similarly, in STICS in Sydney, Socialist Alternative members argued that anti-intervention material should not refer to the Racial Discrimination Act because it's "too confusing".

There have been some small signs of Socialist Alternative shifting to a more outward perspective in recent times. We had been encouraged to hear that the leadership of Socialist Alternative now envisages the possibility of fusing with Solidarity at some time in the future.

But uprooting ingrained sectarian attitudes requires a sustained campaign of internal discussion and conscious commitment.

Perhaps the online article was another lapse of judgement for a group feeling its way in the refugee campaign, in which case we look forward to it being quickly corrected. But it is just possible that the attack on the RAC press release indicates something more systemic in Socialist Alternative's practice and that the time is long overdue for Socialist Alternative members to begin the discussion and conscious effort required to uproot it.

We appeal to Socialist Alternative members to initiate a discussion of whatever political rationale led to the publication of such a misconceived article. More mistakes like this article will leave Socialist Alternative even more isolated and make it even harder for it to become a constructive part of campaigns and of the wider left.

It can't have escaped your notice that Gillard and Abbott have combined in an assault to drive back refugee rights and cultivate racism and xenophobia in the community. The last thing that's needed is imagined differences getting in the way of building the strongest possible refugee campaign to fight them back.

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Further documents covering issues on the left can be found on our website at

www.solidarity.net.au/left-debates

Still waiting for the Australian Solution: Labor must abandon Off-Shore Processing. Gillard compromises independent refugee assessment

Refugee Action Coalition Media Release July 7, 2010

Refugee groups have condemned Julia Gillard's new direction for the processing of asylum seekers. Nothing in her speech addressed the immediate issues of the rights of asylum seekers languishing in detention in Australia. And her announcement of a regional processing centre in East Timor is another attempt by an Australian Prime Minister to avoid Australia meeting its obligations under the Refugee Convention by leaning on an impoverished regional neighbour.

"Hundreds of children are in detention. Thousands of asylum seekers remain in detention in Christmas Island, Darwin and Curtin. They are already becoming 'factories for mental illness' as the suicide and self harm incidents become weekly if not daily events," said Ian Rintoul, spokesperson for the Refugee Action Coalition.

"Even worse perhaps, was Gillard's attempt to further subvert the already questionable independence of off-shore processing, by declaring that it is highly likely that future Sri Lankan and Afghan refugee claims will be rejected."

Gillard's announcement that she would seek to create a regional processing centre in East Timor is another attempt by an Australian Prime Minister to avoid Australia meeting its obligations under the Refugee Convention.

"Gillard's 'East Timor solution' is nothing more than a version of the Pacific Solution. It is the final step

that commits a Gillard Labor government to the full suite of Howard's anti-refugee policies – mandatory detention, off-shore processing and now the East Timor solution," said Ian Rintoul, spokesperson for the Refugee Action Coalition.

"Julia Gillard's announcement has taken refugee policy backwards, not forward. We are now back to Howard. Rather than raising the level of debate, she resorted to using the same dog whistle to xenophobia, demonising refugees by linking border protection and people smuggling to asylum seekers.

"Gillard's East Timor solution will fail for the same reasons that Howard's Pacific Solution failed. Third re-settlement countries are not going to accept refugees that are so obviously Australia's responsibility.

"It is also highly unlikely that East Timor's government would be willing to adopt Australia's abusive model of detention.

"While ending the visa freeze on processing Sri Lankan asylum claims is welcome, hundreds of Tamils have been waiting for up to a year and longer for answers to their visa claims. And her speech was peppered with threats of deportation.

"Julia Gillard has dished up a proposal that is focussed on the federal election, aimed at competing with Tony Abbott to be 'tough on asylum seekers'. We are still waiting for an Australian humanitarian solution for refugees," said Rintoul.

Taken from refugeeactioncoalitionsydney.wordpress.com