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Dear Comrades,

In your recent open letter to Socialist Alternative you state that “We have been encouraged to hear that the leadership of Socialist Alternative now envisages the possibility of fusing with Solidarity at some time in the future.” Does this indicate that you are interested in opening up discussions between the leaderships of our respective organisations to explore the possibilities of genuine unity?

The existence of two competing organisations that stand in the tradition of international socialism weakens both our organisations and the socialist left more generally in Australia. For this reason alone a serious exploration of the possibility of forming a unified organisation makes sense.

However, it is not simply a question of both Solidarity and Socialist Alternative sharing a common political tradition. On the major political issues of the last decade or more – opposition to Australia’s imperialist intervention in East Timor, opposition to the “war on terror”, opposition to Islamophobia, our analysis of the current economic crisis, our analysis of the ALP as a bourgeois workers party, our analysis of the struggle for Palestinian liberation, our analysis of Chavez in Venezuela and so on – we have shared a broadly similar approach. This is reflected most recently in our quite similar assessments of the outcome of the federal elections which are in stark contrast to the political analysis put forward, for example, by the likes of *Green Left Weekly*.

Significant differences between our two organisations have existed and continue to exist over questions of perspectives and party building and around a range of tactical and organisational issues. We are not for sweeping these questions under the carpet as they are very important for building a revolutionary organisation in Australia on a sound basis. But we are for exploring through a process of discussion whether these differences can be clarified and resolved or at least accommodated within the one organisation.

We don’t believe that moves towards a genuine unity will be simple and straight forward and we are definitely not for rushing the process. A unity that is not soundly based and consequently quickly falls apart or descends into factional warfare within a supposedly united organisation would be utterly counterproductive. However these considerations should not hold us back from making a serious attempt to explore the possibilities of a genuine unity.

If you are interested in opening up discussions on the possibility of unity we would suggest that as a first step a preliminary meeting be held between representatives of the leaderships of both organisations some time within the next few weeks at a time and place convenient for you.

Yours Comradely

Mick Armstrong

On behalf of the National Executive of Socialist Alternative

Dear Comrades,

Thanks for your recent letter suggesting the possibility of meetings between our two organisations. We take the issue of building greater unity on the left very seriously. That there are two groups sharing a common international socialist tradition is something we should work to overcome.

Until your most recent letter, however, we had no formal indication that Socialist Alternative may have made any actual reappraisal of Solidarity. As recently as July your letter to us offered this political assessment of Solidarity, “By the late 2000s Solidarity/ISO had moved noticeably to the right. This is reflected in the abandonment of socialist in the title of their group; the fact that their members argue it is sectarian to sell a socialist publication or have socialist stalls; their softness on the ALP on the one hand and their handing out of how-to-vote cards for the Greens on the other; and their failure to work as open socialists in campaigns.”

Does your letter indicate a break with this and past assessments of Solidarity as “movementist” and “anti-Leninist”—comments that are still bandied about by some of your members? We would appreciate the opportunity to consider any correspondence or documents outlining your current views.

Your proposal for discussions between our groups might have been considered a little more genuine if it had been accompanied with some re-assessment of your recent attack on Solidarity and the Refugee Action Coalition at the time of Gillard’s announcement of her East Timor Solution.

As for a timetable for discussions between our two organizations, while we do not rule out future discussions, we question whether there is a basis for discussions in the near future. Perhaps you could clarify the nature of your own reconsiderations of Solidarity and your own political practice and more concretely suggest what you think would be the starting point for discussions.

That our groups share some common theoretical positions is well understood. This theoretical position of socialism from below has of course meant some similarities regarding issues of Australian imperialism, etc that cannot be lightly disregarded.

However, this doesn’t mean that the “significant differences” (as you put it), over perspectives, and party building and a range of organisational and tactical issues can be disregarded either. These differences can be at least as significant as theoretical differences and reflect on the *kind* of party that we seek to build.

The art of politics lies in being able to concretely apply the theory. As Duncan Hallas explains in “Towards a revolutionary socialist party” (<http://www.marxists.de/party/hallas/party.htm>), “The job of socialists is to connect their theory and aims with the problems and experiences of militants in such a way as to achieve a synthesis that is both a practical guide to action and a springboard for further advance.”

For example, you mention the similarities of our assessments of the recent election of the minority Gillard Labor government. However, it would seem to us your political stance in the recent federal election that Gillard and Abbott represented “two faces of the same agenda” was a serious mistake. Your coverage of Labor and the federal election seemed to be little more than opportunism.

On the one hand you suggest that Liberal and Labor have the same agenda – “there is little at stake”, you say. On the other, in your journal article critiquing The Greens, Ben Hillier ends with declaring The Greens, “...do not in any sense represent an alternative to the ALP.” In Socialist Alternative issue 157, you go to considerable lengths to say that the Greens do not deserve a vote from “leftwingers”. Yet, after all this, if you look hard enough, you advocate a first preference to either Labor or the Greens.

Of course, any group will make this or that mistake. None of us are infallible. But as we outlined in our previous letter, our concern is that the sectarianism demonstrated in the election is part of a pattern of sectarianism towards Labor (and The Greens) over the years. We have mentioned the very vocal abstention from the NDA in 2009 at Sydney University when Socialist Alternative students denounced the Labor students chairing the protest and refused to join the march and the attempt to form an anti-Labor student election ticket in 2009.

This year, alongside your propaganda, the abstention from the election in Melbourne took a particularly striking form—holding an internal educational on the very day of the election—elevating the internal agenda of the group above being actually involved alongside other people in the realpolitik of an election that could have brought the

Liberals to office. Socialist Alternative members declared they could not be involved with Melbourne Anti-Intervention Collective activity on the election day for instance because they would be attending the day school.

Socialist Alternative has adhered to the propagandism that characterised the ISO in the 80s and early 90s – a practice justified on the basis of insulating the membership from what was seen as a hostile outside world. This was an entirely incorrect perspective at the time and its inappropriateness has only been magnified over the years.

As Duncan Hallas also notes in “Towards a revolutionary socialist party”, while such isolation “can give a group considerable survival power in adverse conditions... it comes at the cost of stunting its potentiality for real development.” The crucial test is whether the organization is able to participate and lead in whatever struggles characterise the political period.

There are worrying signs that, despite your theoretical commitment to the working class, that your isolation and your perspectives have begun to have an impact on your political judgement and the ability to practically apply Marxist theory.

Socialist Alternative members in STICS (the Sydney anti-Intervention group) stridently opposed holding a union-backed lunchtime anti-Intervention rally in October on the grounds that a potentially bigger weekend rally would have more workers at it and that in any case it was through rallies that the campaign would influence union officials. The comrades seemed unable to grasp the significance of holding an event having both union endorsement, and commitment to bringing organised union contingents from CFMEU and MUA among others.

Tony Cliff notes the dangers of political isolation in Lenin Volume 1 (p 283), “When revolutionaries are isolated from any real support in the working class the conditions are ripe for ultra-leftism. The more isolated they are, the less they are open to correction from workers in struggle, and the greater the attraction of extreme slogans becomes.”

As we have outlined elsewhere, just as concerning is the way Socialist Alternative seem to regard campaigns as recruitment opportunities rather than opportunities to build socialist organisation in the process of actively building, even modest, struggles.

The unpalatable truth is that Socialist Alternative has a reputation on the left for its sectarianism and self-serving motivations in the movements. The group has even adopted political practices similar to the sectarian behaviour of the unlamented Socialist Labour League—denouncing all and sundry for their revolutionary failures, maintaining a highly orchestrated internal routine, disrupting the conversations and activities of other socialist groups.

We believe that Solidarity has been able to develop both a practice and perspective that has allowed the group to constructively participate and work with others in various campaigns while developing both the politics of the campaigns and of the group itself.

If your approach to Solidarity does indeed reflect a shift or re-assessment of our practice since your last letter and the way in which Socialist Alternative relates to the left and the movements, this could be the basis for discussions. This might include for instance any shift on your part over the following issues, which we see as important divergences between our respective groups:

- Your assessment of Solidarity's recent political practice;
- The need to break with the propagandism and sectarianism that has characterised the left for the last couple of decades, in particular the legacy of the ultra-sectarian method developed in the IS during the 1980s
- The importance of engaging with and constructively building real struggles and campaigns in collaboration with other groups and activists on the left
- Your orientation during the elections

We look forward to hearing your response on these issues.

Comradely yours,

National Committee, Solidarity