

Australian Socialist Alternative conference: In the service of imperialism

By our reporters
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Socialist Alternative's "Marxism 2017" conference, held in Melbourne from April 13-16, represented a milestone in the party's integration into the imperialist war drive of the United States and its allies, including Australia, against Russia and China.

The event was attended by a heterogeneous crowd of several hundred people—mainly university students and what comprises the Melbourne middle-class "left" milieu—attracted to Socialist Alternative's protest and identity politics. Over four days, more than 90 sessions were held on an eclectic array of topics, with no unified political analysis, aimed at attracting the largest number of people with multiple and divergent political interests and outlooks.

The conference was held against the backdrop of a qualitative escalation in the 25-year global war drive by the United States, backed by Canberra, aimed at offsetting its historic economic decline with military might. The eruption of US imperialism is now bringing the world to the brink of nuclear war. On April 6, the Trump administration launched cruise missile strikes against the Russian-backed Syrian government, dramatically heightening the danger of a clash between US and Russian military forces. In Asia, it has raised tensions to fever pitch by threatening pre-emptive war on North Korea, an ally of China. On April 13, the day of Socialist Alternative's opening session, Washington dropped the largest non-nuclear bomb in history on Afghanistan, in a clear warning to its rivals everywhere.

In the face of these events, the gathering issued a full-throated defence of US imperialism and explicitly denounced any fight to build an anti-war movement of the working class.

Speaking at one of the final and most well-attended panel sessions, entitled "Syria, the left and imperialism," Corey Oakley, editor of Socialist Alternative's *Redflag* web site and magazine, summed up the organisation's perspective: "In 2003, in the Iraq War, the last major war involving Australia, we had covers on our magazine which said 'smash American imperialism.' That was Socialist Alternative's line. That was the line of most of the left. The main thing was, America is an imperialist power that is seeking to dominate the Middle East, [and] it needs to be stopped ..."

Today, Oakley asserted, "the situation is very different." He bemoaned the fact that "on the broader left, there's still very much a mentality that the United States is in all circumstances the main enemy, and not to be trusted." This, he insisted was a "facile" and "childish" position.

The implication was clear: for Oakley and Socialist Alternative, US imperialism is *not* the main enemy, and it *is* to be trusted. This emerged most sharply when Oakley spoke on Syria, where the United States has been engaged in a six-year-long campaign to overthrow the

government of Bashar al-Assad through the funding, arming and training of right-wing Islamist forces by the CIA and regional states such as the Saudi monarchy and Turkey. Socialist Alternative fraudulently presents this proxy war operation, which is aimed at removing a key ally of Russia and Iran in the Middle East, as a progressive "revolution."

Oakley denounced as "nutjobs" and "conspiracy theorists" anyone who did not accept the Trump administration's allegations that Assad's regime had used chemical weapons in an attack on April 4—claims regurgitated by the international media without any evidence. These claims are nothing but a new version of the lies about "weapons of mass destruction" that prepared the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the regime change operation against Saddam Hussein. The Assad government, which had largely routed the US-backed "rebel" forces, had no reason to deploy such a weapon, knowing that it could be used to justify a direct military intervention. The US proxy forces, however, had every reason to carry out such an attack.

Oakley declared that any questioning of the State Department's assertions was a "despicable position" and a "slap in the face to the people of Syria ... It reflects something about the left. There's a whole living-in-2003 kind of mentality. In 2003, with the weapons of mass destruction, it wasn't like [only] some people on the left had a suspicion that there weren't WMD in Iraq. Everyone knew ... The United Nations said there wasn't weapons of mass destruction!" Today, however, the imperialist governments of the world insist that Assad used chemical weapons, and the international media repeat and magnify their pronouncements. Therefore, Socialist Alternative has no doubt that this is what happened. If the US State Department and the *New York Times* say it is true, then it must be!

Oakley denounced what he called the refusal "from the left in the west internationally ... to support the Syrian revolution," singling out the Stop the War Coalition (STWC) in Britain. The STWC has opposed British bombing in Syria, not from the standpoint of genuine opposition to imperialist war, but in line with a wing of the British ruling class that advocates distancing itself from Washington in favour of a more independent foreign policy. It has fraudulently called for the building of an anti-war movement, which it is seeking to channel behind the dead-end of the British Labour Party and its leader Jeremy Corbyn.

Oakley's statements were an attack on STWC from the right. He declared that even nominal opposition to imperialist war today is illegitimate. "The idea," he said, "that what socialists should do in the situation of imperialist conflict, is build an anti-war movement, is completely at odds with the history of the socialist movement. In 1914, [Vladimir] Lenin did not say at the outbreak of WWI, 'we need

to build an anti-war movement.’ What he said was [that] the war exposes the truth about capitalism, and the working class of all countries needs to unite against their rulers, rise up, and overthrow them.”

Oakley’s extraordinary comment turns reality on its head. Lenin’s perspective was based on the assessment that the fight against the first imperialist world war was not distinct from, but *inseparably connected to*, the revolutionary overthrow of world capitalism—the objective source of war. This is the perspective advanced today only by the International Committee of the Fourth International, which publishes the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Everything that Socialist Alternative says and writes on Syrian and world politics is aimed at providing a pseudo-left cover for the claim by US imperialism—repeated by the entire political and media establishment—that its actions are a defensive response to Russian intrigues and Chinese “expansionism.”

In December last year, Oakley penned an article in *Redflag* attacking the slogan of the great German revolutionary Karl Liebknecht used during WWI: “The main enemy is at home.” For Socialist Alternative, the “main enemy” is not in Canberra or in Washington—but in Damascus, Tehran, Moscow and Beijing.

That is why it characterises both Russia and China, and even Iran, as “imperialist” powers. This claim—which rips these countries out of their entire historical development and relation to the world capitalist economy—is aimed at politically delegitimizing any struggle by the working class against American imperialism’s efforts to assert its domination over the entire globe and, as part of that agenda, to subvert and carve up Russia and China. Oakley declared that in Syria, the “left” has to “oppose the imperialism of the US, of the Russians, of the Chinese,” as well as the “aggressive acts of the smaller powers” including “the Saudis in Yemen, the Iranians in Syria, and so on.”

Oakley’s session, which was hastily announced on the second last day of the conference, had the character of an attempt by the organisation to provide theoretical legitimacy to Socialist Alternative’s pro-imperialist position on Syria. It followed a report two days earlier by Michael Karadjis, a member of Socialist Alliance, in a session entitled, “A burning country: Syria, resistance and revolution.”

Karadjis has a particularly long and filthy record of promoting imperialist interventions under the banner of “human rights.” In 1999, he defended the US-backed Kosovo Liberation Army and its heroin trafficking operations during the imperialist bombing of Yugoslavia, and was a cheerleader for Australia’s neo-colonial intervention into East Timor the same year. Like Socialist Alternative he has been a virulent supporter of the right-wing Islamist terror groups in Syria and Libya. In July 2013, for example, he published an article defending the actions of a “rebel” commander in Syria shown on videotape eating the organs from a corpse, labelling this only “minor cannibalism.” He later penned an article, published in *Redflag*’s December 7, 2015 print edition, hailing the shooting down of a Russian jet by Turkey, a member of NATO, in November, 2015 as a “small victory for humanity.”

Karadjis’s blog is filled with such political depravities. An April 7 posting in response to Trump’s missile attack on Syria stated: “From the point of view of supporters of Syrian revolution, and of liberation of humanity in general, can I ask in all honesty, what is the big deal?” He made clear he effectively supported this criminal act, declaring that “at least this particular bombing hit the most appropriate target to

date.”

Central to Karadjis’ presentation was his attack on the US government for not sufficiently targeting the Assad regime (even characterising Syria as “imperialist”) or providing the proxy forces with advanced anti-aircraft weaponry to shoot down Russian and Syrian planes.

Socialist Alternative attempts to demarcate between what it calls the “democratic” revolutionaries in Syria, gathered under the so-called Free Syrian Army (FSA), from Islamist organisations such as the Al Nusra Front. In reality, the FSA publicly calls for US imperialist intervention in Syria, and French president Francois Hollande has publicly stated that France has been funding it since at least 2013.

Karadjis, however, openly admits that large sections of the FSA are part of Al Nusra. “Many rebels in the FSA ... joined the jihadist outfits, precisely because they had better arms. They did so without believing their ideology,” he stated. Karadjis also declared his solidarity with the Al Qaeda linked forces: “These are reactionary outfits, but their base, a lot of the ordinary people in them, are not necessarily reactionary. They need the money, they need the arms, they don’t get them, but the jihadists had better arms.”

This is a justification for supporting extreme right-wing and fascistic movements. Echoing Karadjis’ comments, Mick Armstrong, a longstanding “theoretician” of Socialist Alternative, declared that these reactionary outfits should be supported because “no genuine revolution starts out as this pure thing, that exactly agrees with all the ideology [and] all the attitudes of socialists.”

Socialist Alternative’s line-up with imperialism and its extreme right-wing agents is not a political aberration. The *World Socialist Web Site* defines this organisation—as well as its international counter-parts such as the International Socialist Organisation in America and the Left Party in Germany—as the “pseudo-left.” They represent privileged layers of the affluent middle class who are pro-imperialist and deeply hostile to the working class. In the last 25 years, these layers have grown wealthier, as global stock markets have sharply risen, and shifted even further to the right, dropping even their nominal opposition to imperialism in line with their material interests.

Speaking for all of them in August, 2012, Corey Oakley declared that it was time to put an end to “knee-jerk anti-imperialism.” Socialist Alternative’s latest conference demonstrates the full import of this statement. As the United States, backed by Australia, lurches ever more dangerously towards a catastrophic war against Russia and China, Socialist Alternative is advancing the arguments to line the working class up behind Australian and US imperialism. The urgent task of building an international socialist, anti-war movement of the working class requires the political exposure of this, and every other pseudo-left organisation.

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