

Socialist Alternative joins pro-war witch-hunt of Australian academic

By Oscar Grenfell
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The Australian pseudo-left organisation Socialist Alternative last week joined a witch-hunt of University of Sydney academic Tim Anderson, spearheaded by the Liberal-National government and the corporate media, for his rejection of the claims used to justify the US bombing of a Syrian air base on April 7.

The article, written by Omar Hassan, was published in *Redflag* under the headline, “What’s wrong with Tim Anderson?” In what can only be described as an exercise in crude pro-war propaganda, Socialist Alternative declared that the official pretext for the Trump administration’s attack—that the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad deployed chemical weapons early last month—was “indisputable.”

In other words, it is illegitimate to even question the unproven assertions of the US military, the CIA and their mouthpieces in the corporate press, which served as the pretext for an illegal act of aggression against an impoverished and beleaguered Middle-Eastern country.

On the basis of this premise, Socialist Alternative uncritically echoed the venomous denunciations of Anderson published in the Murdoch-owned *Daily Telegraph*, and Fairfax Media’s *Sydney Morning Herald*. Those publications have labelled Anderson an “Assad-loving boffin” and a “sarin-gas bag” and have featured the comments of senior government ministers calling for him to be investigated or sacked.

Socialist Alternative explicitly solidarised itself with this filthy witch-hunt, declaring, “we have seen multiple articles in the mainstream media attacking Anderson and his pals ... they are valid in pointing out the many problems with his views ...”

Socialist Alternative’s article marks a new stage in the organisation’s integration into the US-led drive to war against Syria, which is part of Washington’s moves for confrontation with Russia and China. It is a warning that amid an explosion of militarism, threatening the eruption of a global conflagration, Socialist Alternative will function as a point-man for the government in vilifying and intimidating opponents of war.

Since 2011, Socialist Alternative has been among the most vociferous proponents of the US-instigated regime-change operation in Syria. It has hailed as “revolutionaries” the Islamist proxy forces that have been armed, funded and trained by the CIA and Washington’s regional allies, such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar. It has done everything it can to deny the well-documented role of the US in provoking the Syrian conflict.

At a conference last month, Socialist Alternative’s leading members spelt out the implications of their line. Corey Oakley, the editor of *Redflag*, denounced the position that American imperialism was “the main enemy, and not to be trusted.” Referencing the mass opposition to the criminal invasion of Iraq in 2003, Oakley condemned those he said had a “living-in-2003 kind of mentality.” He insisted it was illegitimate to call for the construction of an international anti-war movement of the working class.

Hassan’s article makes clear that these pro-war positions can be defended only on the basis of lies and slander. He began by declaring that anyone questioning the claim that Assad deployed chemical weapons was part of the “weird and wacky world of the far-right blogosphere.”

In provocative language best suited to right-wing tabloids, Hassan wrote: “They pulled out all stops: shocking headlines, capital letters, even the classic homoerotic picture of a topless Putin on a horse. The point of all this frantic activity? To cast as much doubt as possible on the indisputable fact that Bashar al-Assad had unleashed yet another barrage of chemical weapons on the Syrian people.”

In reality, there is no proof that Assad was responsible for the alleged April 4 chemical weapons attack in the town of Khan Sheikun, in southern Idlib province. Like the lies in the corporate press, Hassan’s article provides no evidence for this claim, nor does it suggest any motive for the Syrian regime to perpetrate such an attack.

As Anderson, and others, including the WSWs, have documented, the alleged attack occurred under conditions in which the US-backed opposition forces were being routed by government troops on several fronts. The chemical attack

provided the most hawkish sections of the US-military with the pretext for direct intervention. In other words, the CIA and its Islamist allies, unlike the Syrian government, had ample motive.

The attack occurred in an area controlled by Al-Nusra, Syria's Al-Qaeda affiliate. Thus, all the information regurgitated by the media, and organisations such as Socialist Alternative, comes solely from an avowed terrorist organisation.

Moreover, both the US and its allies have rejected calls by Syria and Russia for an independent investigation into the alleged attack. And neither Washington, nor its media mouthpieces, have explained how the Assad regime could have deployed chemical weapons, given that its arsenal was destroyed under the supervision of the US and international authorities more than two years ago.

All this is a closed book to Hassan. Instead, to bolster his case, he refers to a previous alleged chemical weapons attack in Ghouta, in August 2013, again asserting it was perpetrated by the government. In fact, Seymour Hersh, the renowned investigative journalist, published an exhaustive expose of that attack, documenting that, in all probability, it was carried out by Al-Qaeda linked forces, who received the gas from Washington's NATO partner, Turkey. As with last month's attack, the provocation in 2013 was used to call for stepped-up US intervention.

Hassan makes much of Anderson's support for the bourgeois-nationalist Assad regime. Speaking for a privileged ruling elite, the Russian-backed Assad government is organically incapable of making any appeal to the working class in Syria, throughout the region, or internationally, to mobilise against the US-led proxy war for regime-change. Assad has repeatedly signaled that he would, if permitted by Washington, reach an accommodation with the US and its allies.

Anderson, however, has not been targeted because of his bankrupt support for Assad, but because he is one of the few prominent academics to speak out against yet another US pretext for its imperialist intrigues against Syria, and the danger that it could provoke a confrontation between US imperialism and nuclear-armed Russia.

This was underscored two days after Hassan's piece appeared. A grubby *Sydney Morning Herald* article featured denunciations of Anderson for publicly criticising Anzac Day, the nationalist and militarist Australian holiday of April 25. Anderson posted a tweet with the Anzac refrain, "lest we forget," referencing Australia's role in the bombing of a Syrian army facility in September 2016, which killed at least 100 Syrian troops.

The article quoted Eric Abetz, a senior Liberal-National government senator, who labelled Anderson's tweet

"bizarre and highly inappropriate," and declared his comments showed "our higher education institutions are being overrun by radical ideological extremists." Such are the forces with which Socialist Alternative is aligned.

While Abetz's comments suggested Anderson should be run out of the university, Hassan's article implied that the academic and his supporters should be barred from refugee protests for opposing the wars in Syria and elsewhere, which have turned millions into desperate asylum-seekers.

Hassan did not so much as mention the Trump administration's cruise missile strikes on a Syrian airbase, occupied by Russian personnel and equipment, just days after the alleged chemical weapons attack. The bombardment of the airbase represented a major escalation in Washington's reckless confrontation with Russia. As the maxim goes, silence is consent.

Nor has Socialist Alternative written on the Trump administration's April 13 use of a Massive Ordnance Air Blast, the largest bomb dropped in combat since World War II, on Afghan villagers. US threats to initiate a nuclear conflict with North Korea have also largely passed without comment in *Redflag's* pages.

Socialist Alternative has embraced the war drive of the US and its allies, including Australia, in the Middle East. It will do the same as tensions and war dangers grow with China. Speaking for affluent layers of the upper middle class in academia, the top echelons of the public sector, and the union bureaucracy, the organisation instinctively identifies the selfish interests of its main constituency with the predatory wars for resources, markets and profits waged by the major imperialist powers.

The logical corollary of this class position is ruthless hostility to anti-war sentiment in general, and the fight to build an international anti-war movement of the working class in particular.

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