At IYSSE (Australia) online lecture, Nick Beams exposes Socialist Alternative and the pseudo-left

By Oscar Grenfell
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At an online lecture organised by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality last Tuesday, leading WSWS writer Nick Beams exposed the bankrupt politics of Socialist Alternative and the pseudo-left, documenting their role in seeking to subordinate the working class to the capitalist political establishment amid growing social opposition.

The event was the third in a series of online lectures delivered by Beams under the title “Capitalism’s war on society: Why you need to fight for socialism.” The speaker stressed that the differentiation from the pseudo-left was not separate from the struggle for socialism, but was at the cutting edge of defining the independent interests and tasks of the working class.

The lecture was well-received by an audience of over 190 people. Participants included workers, students and young people from most Australian states and territories, along with international attendees from Sri Lanka, New Zealand, the Philippines and a number of other countries.

Beams began by explaining that the coronavirus pandemic had triggered “the greatest crisis of the capitalist system seen in our lifetimes,” opening up a period of political radicalisation and socialist revolution.

The decisive question, the speaker said, was arming the emerging movement of the international working class with the lessons of history and the socialist and internationalist program of the Trotskyist movement developed in a struggle against all forms of national-opportunism.

Beams explained that the “key issue is this: the working class cannot overthrow the bourgeoisie if it remains politically and ideologically subordinated to it.” This required a political offensive against all those tendencies that sought to prevent the working class from striking out on an independent path, including the pseudo-left.

This had been demonstrated by the experience of the 1917 Russian Revolution. The fight waged by Vladimir Lenin, Leon Trotsky and the Bolsheviks against the Mensheviks and other tendencies that supported the liberal Russian bourgeoisie played the decisive role in politically preparing the conquest of power by the working class.

The coming to office in Greece of Syriza, the “Coalition of the Radical Left,” in 2015 was a confirmation of the same truth in the negative. Syriza won elections by appealing to mass hostility to the austerity measures that had led to the collapse in support for PASOK, the country’s social democratic party.

Syriza immediately formed a coalition government with the Independent Greeks, an extreme right-wing nationalist formation. Within six weeks, it was imposing sweeping cuts to social services.

Socialist Alternative and the pseudo-left internationally had hailed Syriza as a model to be emulated. In May, 2015, Beams stated, Socialist Alternative had declared that “Syriza cannot be transformed into an austerity party,” even as it was clear that the organisation was committed to carrying out the demands of European finance capital.

Syriza’s betrayal, and Socialist Alternative’s support for it, were a product of the class character of both organisations, Beams explained.

This was also evident in Socialist Alternative’s support for US regime-change operations, including the CIA-instigated civil war in Syria. Leading Socialist Alternative member Corey Oakley had infamously declared in 2012 that it was necessary to end “knee-jerk anti-imperialism,” i.e., to dispense with opposition to the predatory wars waged by the major powers.

Hand in hand with its pro-imperialist standpoint, Socialist Alternative had refused to defend Julian Assange, the WikiLeaks publisher who is currently imprisoned in Britain and faces extradition to the US, where he would be jailed for life for exposing American war crimes.

In 2012, Socialist Alternative had lent succor to the attempts to frame Assange on bogus allegations of sexual misconduct. The organisation declared that he should go to

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Sweden, where the allegations were concocted, “to answer
the charges.” It is now clear that the warnings of WikiLeaks
and the WSWS that the attempt to extradite Assange to
Sweden was a pretext to carry out his forced rendition to the
US were entirely accurate. For years afterwards, the
organisation had not mentioned the WikiLeaks founder.

Only last year, following his illegal expulsion from the
Ecuadorian Embassy and arrest by British police, did
Socialist Alternative publish a handful of articles
condemning the attempt to railroad Assange to a US prison.
However, the organisation did not repudiate its previous
attack on him and boycotted all events held in his defence.

Beams explained that these positions were inextricably
tied to Socialist Alternative’s attempts to subordinate the
working class to Labor, a party of big business, and the
unions, which have suppressed every major social and
industrial struggle of the past four decades.

Pointing to the relevance of these issues in the present
coronavirus crisis, Beams noted that Socialist Alternative
had enthusiastically welcomed the installation of Sally
McManus as secretary of the Australian Council of Trade
Unions in 2017. A year later, Socialist Alternative wrote that
McManus’ ascension had been greeted as a “breath of fresh
air” by many unionists, declaring that she had struck a
defiant” tone in contrast to her “grey predecessors.”

McManus is currently collaborating with the
Liberal-National Coalition government on a daily basis, as it
responds to the pandemic by providing billions of dollars to
the major corporations that are laying off thousands of
workers.

Beams explained: “It is necessary to deal not only with the
McManuses of the world but even more importantly with
tendencies within the pseudo-left that work to prop them
up.”

He concluded by declaring: “The immune system of the
working class is developed above all through the theoretical
political struggle conducted by the revolutionary party,
basing itself on the great strategic lessons of struggle for
socialism going back more than a century.

“There is only one party which conducts such a struggle,
the SEP and the International Committee of the Fourth
International (ICFI). I urge that you apply to join it tonight.”

The lecture prompted a series of questions. One attendee
asked the SEP to elaborate on its role in the events
surrounding the coming to power of Syriza in Greece.

Beams explained that the WSWS and the ICFI had been
alone in warning that Syriza would inevitably betray the
working class, as a result of its history as an unprincipled
amalgamation of various Stalinist and reformist tendencies,
and its pro-capitalist program.

Others noted that Socialist Alternative occasionally
criticises union officials. Did this, some asked, invalidate
Beams’ analysis. In reply, he said that the pseudo-left
organisations would sometimes condemn the actions of
particular union bureaucrats. But they insisted that workers
had to remain trapped within these thoroughly corporatised
organisations.

All of them rejected the position of the ICFI, which was
that the globalisation of production had rendered the
nationalist and reformist program of the unions completely
bankrupt. The unions had been transformed into open
instruments of big business, necessitating the creation of
genuine organisations of struggle, including independent
rank and file committees.

Some participants asked why it was that Socialist
Alternative played the role that it did. Beams said that like
other pseudo-left organisations, they were descended from
groups that had broken from the Fourth International amid
the post-World War Two boom of global capitalism,
rejecting its insistence on the revolutionary role of the
working class.

The pseudo-left, Beams stated, spoke for affluent sections
of the upper middle-class in academia, the public sector and
the union officialdom, whose wealth had increased as a
result of soaring share values. They had a material stake in
defending the status quo by preventing the working class
from turning to a genuine socialist perspective, and sought
to advance their own interests through various forms of
identity politics based on gender, race and sexual
orientation.

Throughout the meeting, a small group of individuals,
clearly opposed to Beams’ exposure of Socialist
Alternative, sought to disrupt the event, playing music while
he was speaking and shouting incoherently. The
unsuccessful attempt to block the discussion underscored the
pseudo-lefts’ concern over the growing support won by the
SEP, and its inability to respond with substantive political
arguments.

Next Tuesday’s lecture will be on the role of identity
politics. The fifth meeting will feature an interview and
discussion with SEP (US) Presidential candidate Joseph
Kishore. The details will be posted on the WSWS and on
social media over the coming days.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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