

The Platypus Affiliated Society: A pro-imperialist trap for students and young people

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19 December 2024

In recent months at the University of Melbourne, one of Australia's leading universities, a pseudo-left group named the Platypus Affiliated Society has established a presence on campus and was reportedly successful in forming a student club.

Platypus, founded in 2006, is an international grouping that operates on university campuses, with chapters largely in the United States. It organises "Marxist reading groups" and public forums for a student audience.

On October 13, Platypus wrote a letter to the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) club at the University of Melbourne—the youth wing of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), the world Trotskyist movement.

The letter informed the IYSSE that Platypus was planning to start a club at the university and would hold its Inaugural General Meeting (IGM) later that week. An IGM at the University of Melbourne is required to have an attendance of 20 students who are club members.

In their letter, Platypus asked whether the IYSSE would assist their IGM by sending its members to attend and asking them to sign up as Platypus club members. This was framed as part of their broader aim to "foster inter-Left dialogue on campus."

The IYSSE declined this request because it has fundamental and irreconcilable political differences with Platypus. To put it bluntly, Platypus is a right-wing, pro-war organisation, with absolutely nothing to do with Marxism or socialism.

A political exposure of Platypus is important, because it functions as a catchment area. It seeks to draw in students and youth interested in socialist and Marxist politics through discussion forums, which in fact serve as a gathering point for various anti-working class tendencies of the affluent upper middle class.

The fundamentally reactionary character of this operation is glaringly evident in Platypus' position on the Israeli genocide in Gaza.

The Gaza genocide

On October 7, Platypus marked the one-year anniversary of the genocide by publishing an article promoting Israeli propaganda and hysterically denouncing Hamas. The piece, titled "Means and ends in Gaza: A note on the morality of the October 7 massacre," published in the *Platypus Review*, focuses its attention exclusively on the violence committed amid the Hamas operation.

It describes the events multiple times as a "pogrom" against Jews and refers to the "Jew-hating character of the violence." Taking a leaf out of the Zionist regime's propaganda playbook, the use of these terms is unmistakably intended to link October 7 to the crimes of Nazi Germany.

Additionally, the article promotes lurid and unsubstantiated allegations

of "rape, gang rape, rape of corpses" and "murder of children and infants." It repeats official Israeli claims that Hamas is hiding in "tunnel networks" and using civilians as "human shields." In the year since the October 7 operation, the claims of rape and of mass killings of infants have been discredited as imperialist propaganda, but Platypus repeats them as fact.

Socialists oppose Hamas from the left, noting that its bourgeois-nationalist program and links to regional capitalist regimes render it incapable of securing the liberation of the Palestinians and charting a course forward. The position of Platypus is diametrically opposed. In line with the racist propaganda of the Zionist regime, it presents the Hamas fighters, who are engaged in a battle with imperialism, as irrational barbarians. The clear aim is to delegitimise any fight against the Zionist regime, by covering up the fundamental distinction between Israel as a colonial outpost of imperialism and the Palestinians as a historically oppressed people.

The Platypus commemoration is, in substance, no different from the hypocritical moral outcries that flooded the corporate media on the October 7 anniversary, defending Israel's atrocities to the hilt and comparing Hamas' attack to the Holocaust. It treats October 7 as an isolated act of barbarism, making reference to neither the historical context nor to the US-backed Israeli war of extermination unleashed in its aftermath.

That such a piece was published a year after the beginning of the genocide, with tens or even hundreds of thousands of Palestinians murdered, brands Platypus as a group that is supporting a 21st-century Holocaust as it takes place.

That has included a modern-day equivalent of Holocaust denial, with Platypus founder Chris Cutrone having ridiculed claims of a genocide in February, declaring it was "not at all clear" that ethnic cleansing was "the current Israeli intent." Cutrone made those statements months after Israeli leaders had repeatedly declared their aim is to cleanse Gaza of Palestinians.

It is not only Palestinian resistance that is targeted by Platypus. In its October 7 anniversary piece, the group tars the masses of workers and young people who have opposed the atrocities, including in the US and the other imperialist centres, as dupes who are associating themselves with "antisemitism," "reactionary Islamism," "misogyny" and "fascist morality."

That is a slander and a justification for the police-state crackdown that has been waged against opposition to the genocide, by the Biden administration in the US and affiliated imperialist governments internationally. It is a signal that Platypus will join with the incoming Trump administration in an even more frenzied attack on anti-war opposition.

The positions of Platypus are so openly pro-imperialist and right-wing, it is no exaggeration to say that they could have come from the US State Department itself or the Australian Labor government.

Platypus and the Iraq war

Platypus' views on Gaza are not an aberration, but are consistent with its founding program. Platypus was created in 2006 in direct opposition to the mass international protests against the Iraq war.

The criminal invasion of Iraq by US imperialism in 2003, justified on the basis of brazen lies, provoked massive anger worldwide among workers and youth. It sparked what was to that point the largest global protest movement in history, involving millions.

The Bush administration launched the Iraq war on bogus claims that the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein possessed "weapons of mass destruction." The neo-colonial war resulted in the death of more than 1 million people and the destruction of an entire society. It was broadly understood by masses of people as a "war for oil," an effort by Washington to establish its hegemony in the Middle East and seize control of its resources. The chaos caused by the US occupation persists to this day.

Platypus began its life defending US imperialism's war of aggression as a war against "reactionary Islamism" and denouncing the anti-war movement it sparked. For them, the war was achieving the "democratisation of Iraq" against "Baathist tyranny."

Platypus was originated by a group of students at the University of Chicago studying under academic Moishe Postone, a key ideological figure propagating the pro-imperialist justification of the Iraq war on the campuses. When opposition to the Iraq invasion erupted, Postone denounced protesters for their "fetishised 'anti-imperialist' position."

Postone also accused protesters of adapting to the "antisemitism" of Arab ruling elites. His writings draw comparisons between Nazism, which he describes as a variety of anti-capitalism, and "left antisemitism." In a 2010 interview with *Workers' Liberty*, Postone dismissed the struggle against the state of Israel as "reactionary" and presented the colonial project of Zionism as legitimate "Jewish self-determination." *Workers' Liberty* is a pro-Zionist publication, which explicitly defends the existence of the Israeli state and also supported the US occupation of Iraq.

Postone sought to provide a "left" veneer to the standard line used to defend the imperialist Israeli state. He claimed that opposition to the crimes of the Zionist regime, even if voiced by explicit opponents of antisemitism, is a veiled expression of anti-Jewish bigotry. This argument, which has been promoted incessantly over the past year, has served as a justification for criminalising any opposition to Israel, above all from workers, young people and the socialist left.

In a 2008 article, Cutrone ridiculed claims that the US invasion was illegal and criminal, or that underlying economic interests were a motive for the war. He wrote, "At base, the US did not invade and occupy Iraq to steal its oil, or for any other venal or nefarious reason." For Cutrone, the invasion was an acceptable response to "actions of [Iraq's] indisputably horrifically oppressive rulers."

He even contrasted US imperialism favourably to the anti-war movement, which he linked with support for Saddam Hussein's regime. Against the "irresponsible" protesters, "the Bush administration's invasion and occupation of Iraq was an eminently responsible act."

The conflation of opposition to the war with support for Hussein was a fraud. Millions of protesters were on the streets, not because they supported the Iraqi regime, but because they correctly recognised this as a criminal war for oil. The ICFI and the *World Socialist Web Site* opposed the bankrupt bourgeois-nationalist regime of Hussein, but explained that the fundamental issue was the world's preeminent imperialist power was seeking neo-colonial control over a historically oppressed nation, which

had to be opposed.

By aligning itself with the administration of George W. Bush, Platypus stood on the right-wing of bourgeois politics. It mirrored the propaganda of the US State Department and the intelligence agencies. Its reiteration of Washington's lies of "war for democracy" could be used to justify any imperialist operation.

Indeed, in their defence of the Iraq war, Platypus essentially dispensed with any pretence of adhering to a Marxist analysis of imperialism. In place of the imperialist program of a recolonisation of entire countries to extract and seize resources and markets, in the interests of the banks and major corporations, Platypus posited an essentially beneficent Washington, doing its best to spread peace and democracy down the barrel of a gun.

This political line both encouraged and dovetailed with the shift of a whole layer of the middle-class pseudo-left into the camp of imperialism. Groups around the world masquerading as "socialist" supported the US military in its wars against Libya and Syria in 2011, as well as being the most vocal proponents of the US proxy war against Russia in Ukraine.

Platypus' defence of the Iraq war and the Gaza genocide, two of the greatest crimes of the 21st century, reveal the true character of the organisation, behind its phoney "Marxist" phrase-mongering. Its genesis as a pro-imperialist tendency underlies its attempts to draw together the various pseudo-left tendencies, which are also siding with imperialism against the working class.

Platypus promotes the Frankfurt School

In a 2022 account of his political development, Cutrone cites Postone, Theodor Adorno, and the Spartacist League as his "principal teachers in Marxism." Postone is the inspiration for the group's openly pro-imperialist politics, while Adorno provides a theoretical justification for its rejection of the fundamentals of Marxism.

As with every question, Platypus seeks to veil its rotten politics with deliberately opaque and sometimes self-contradictory academic phraseology. But the group's hostility to the Marxist assessment of the revolutionary role of the working class is made clear by its insistence that the work of the Frankfurt School is central to the "reconstruction of the Marxian left." Platypus promotes Adorno as a Marxist in the tradition of such classic figures as Marx, Engels, Lenin, Luxemburg, and Trotsky.

This is a blatant falsification of the Frankfurt School academics and their real attitude towards Marxism. They expressed moods within the middle-class intelligentsia in the 1930s, who, formerly attracted to socialism, were demoralised by the rise of Nazism and rejected the prospects of socialism and even human progress altogether.

Against Marx, Adorno argued that the development of society's productive forces did not create the conditions for social revolution, but instead strengthened the rule of the capitalist class over an impotent working class. In their work, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), Adorno and his collaborator Max Horkheimer claimed: "The powerlessness of the workers is not merely a ruse of the rulers, but the logical consequence of industrial society."

This thoroughly anti-Marxist perspective reflected the pessimism of broad layers of the middle class, who rejected the basic conception of classical Marxism: The working class is the revolutionary social force capable of ending capitalism and class rule. For them, the events of the 1930s invalidated this conception for all time.

These ideas gained sway among petty-bourgeois intellectuals demoralised by the defeats of the German working class suffered between 1918 and 1933. For Adorno and Horkheimer, these defeats were not due

to the betrayal of workers by their political leadership—that is, the Social Democrats and the Stalinists. Instead, they demonstrated the non-revolutionary character of the working class.

The Frankfurt School, which continues to exert considerable influence on “left” academia, is a source of inspiration for Platypus precisely because of this hostility to the working class. Adorno and company were the most articulate theoreticians of a political rejection of the proletariat. Platypus’ posturing as “cultural critics” is shared by academic layers, heavily influenced by postmodernism, who not only agree it is pointless to turn to the working class, but are bitterly hostile to any attempt to build a political movement within it.

By promoting the Frankfurt School, Platypus is sowing confusion among students about genuine Marxism, as well as providing a pseudo-intellectual cover for their reactionary politics. Moreover, the denial of the revolutionary role of the working class in capitalist society is the foundation of Platypus’ “left regroupment” agenda.”

Platypus and Spartacism

The third source of Platypus’ perspective listed by Cutrone is the Spartacist League, a group that epitomised the reactionary character of middle-class radicalism. Many of Platypus’ positions, including its calls for a “reconstitution of the left” based on opportunist manoeuvring, derive from this Pabloite organisation, which was formed in opposition to the ICFI, the world Trotskyist movement.

Pabloism emerged within the Fourth International in the aftermath of World War Two. It was based on a repudiation of Leon Trotsky’s perspective of building the Fourth International as the world party of socialist revolution through a relentless political fight against Stalinism, social democracy and every form of national opportunism.

Instead, Michel Pablo and his chief collaborator Ernest Mandel claimed that there was a “new world reality,” unforeseen by Trotsky, in which the Stalinists, social democrats and bourgeois nationalists in the colonial countries would be compelled by the weight of objective forces to lead the fight for socialism.

Pabloism was a pro-Stalinist tendency within the Fourth International, but its perspective went beyond an adaptation to the Stalinist bureaucracy, which had superficially been strengthened by developments at the conclusion of World War II. Pabloism was liquidationism all down the line, calling for the effective disbandment of the Fourth International and the transformation of its sections into pliant adjuncts of whatever anti-Trotskyist political tendency dominated the “mass movement.” It expressed the interests of a growing middle-class layer, cultivated by imperialism, and was an adaptation to the post-war boom of capitalism.

The ICFI was founded in 1953, to defend the Fourth International and the fundamental conceptions of Trotskyism upon which it was based, including internationalism and the fight for the political independence of the working class from Stalinism and every other anti-Marxist tendency. The Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in the US and its leader James P. Cannon played the decisive role in rallying Trotskyist forces to the ICFI, and preventing Pabloism’s destruction of the Trotskyist movement.

Underscoring the immense class pressures of the period, however, the SWP began to adopt the very Pabloite positions that it had fought against. In the late 1950s, it embarked upon a “regroupment” campaign with middle-class radicals within the US, including demoralised ex-Stalinists and liberals who did not even claim to be socialists. At the same time, it mooted a reunification with the Pabloites.

That reunification was consummated between 1961 and 1963. It was utterly unprincipled, based on a suppression of the issues that had led to

the split of 1953 and the formation of the ICFI.

The SWP latched onto the Cuban revolution to justify the reunification, presenting its bourgeois-nationalist Castroite leadership as “unconscious Marxists,” who had been compelled to begin the socialist transformation of society by the weight of objective events. That utterly impressionistic assessment, which deliberately ignored the lack of any independent involvement of the Cuban working class in the revolution, was a classic Pabloite rejection of the need to construct the Fourth International as the revolutionary leadership of the working class.

Two tendencies emerged with the SWP, opposing its reunification with the Pabloites. The American Committee for the Fourth International (ACFI), led by Tim Wohlforth, collaborated closely with the British Socialist Labour League of Gerry Healy, which led the fight to defend orthodox Trotskyism and prevent the destruction of the ICFI.

The other tendency, the Spartacist League, led by James Robertson, opposed elements of the SWP’s perspective, including its uncritical glorification of the Cuban Revolution. But the emphasis of the Spartacist League was on immediate tactical issues within the United States, not the global fight of the Trotskyist movement to defeat revisionism.

Both the ACFI and the Spartacist League were invited to the Third World Congress of the ICFI, held in London in 1966. Robertson, representing the Spartacists, made clear his hostility to the fight to build a revolutionary leadership based on a relentless fight against opportunism. In his remarks, Robertson stated:

“We take issue with the notion that the present crisis of capitalism is so sharp and deep that Trotskyist revisionism is needed to tame the workers, in a way comparable to the degeneration of the Second and Third Internationals. Such an erroneous estimation would have as its point of departure an enormous overestimation of our present significance, and would accordingly be disorienting.”

In reality, two years prior in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon), the opposite had already proven to be the case. In 1964, the bourgeois government of Madame Bandaranaike, facing a mass movement of the working class and an immense political crisis, brought the Pabloite Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) into the ruling coalition. The LSSP’s betrayal was the first time that a party claiming to be Trotskyist had entered a capitalist government. In doing so, it helped derail a massive strike movement and prop up tottering bourgeois rule on the island.

As the Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (US) later explained, “All that divides Marxism, theoretically and politically, from petty-bourgeois radicalism was summed up in this statement. In essence, Robertson denied the objective social and political significance of the conflict within the Fourth International. The lessons of Lenin’s struggle to build the Bolshevik Party in the struggle against revisionism, and, later, of Trotsky’s struggle against Stalinism and various forms of centrism, were ignored. The struggle against Pabloism within the Fourth International—so clearly connected to major political and social processes in the aftermath of World War II—was derided by Robertson as a subjectively motivated squabble between various individuals.”

Robertson’s denial of any objective significance to the conflicts within the Fourth International was a justification for the Spartacist League’s orientation to the very opportunist forces that had broken with Trotskyism. In opposition to the ICFI’s perspective of building a revolutionary leadership through a relentless fight against the Pabloites, who represented the pressures of imperialism and Stalinism, the Spartacists stated that the movement would be built through a process of “splits and fusions” with the opportunists.

Over the ensuing decades, it would advance the very perspective associated with Pabloism. The Spartacist League joined with the SWP in multiple provocations against the ICFI. It became a cheerleader of the Soviet bureaucracy, including as the Stalinists were carrying out the

liquidation of the Soviet Union, and continuously promoted the corporatised trade union bureaucracy as the unchallengeable leadership of the working class.

Platypus' declarations that the "left is dead" echo Robertson's rejection of the continuity of Trotskyism, expressed in the struggle of the ICFI against Pabloism. For Robertson, and now Platypus, the claim that the Fourth International was destroyed is a justification for all manner of opportunist manoeuvring with any and all political tendencies, regardless of their history or program. That is the significance of Platypus' calls for a "reconstitution of the left," based on a rejection of Marxism and support for imperialism.

In direct opposition to the Spartacist League, the ACFI expressed its support for the global struggle waged by the ICFI and in 1966 formed the Workers League. Based on the fight against Pabloism and oriented to the working class, it developed a powerful Trotskyist tendency, that is today the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in the US.

The renaissance of Marxism carried out by the ICFI over the past 40 years and expressed in documents that, if collected, would span dozens of volumes, the political development of its sections and the emergence of the *World Socialist Web Site* as the authoritative voice of revolutionary socialism, have refuted in practice the claims of Robertson and Platypus that the continuity of Marxism and Trotskyism was broken. The ICFI, basing itself on the heritage it has defended, is alone in fighting to build a revolutionary movement based on internationalism, the political independence of the working class and all the fundamental principles of Marxism, which are more relevant today than ever before.

Each of these achievements has testified to the immense power of the orthodox Trotskyism defended by the ICFI for more than 70 years, including under extremely difficult conditions.

For their part, tendencies such as the Spartacists, which based themselves on a rejection of this Trotskyist heritage, have either collapsed, or transformed into political instruments of imperialism. Their bankrupt positions are rooted in the interests of sections of the middle class that have grown affluent over the past 50 years, as the working class has suffered a massive assault on its social position. These tendencies, defending and advancing the privileges of this corrupt social layer, now form a last line of defence for the capitalist system, through their promotion of imperialist war and their attempts to chain workers to the political mechanisms of bourgeois rule, including the corporatised trade union bureaucracy and such formations as the British and Australian Labor parties and the Democrats in the US.

The completely divergent evolution of the ICFI from all those tendencies that broke from the Fourth International confirms the historical and political significance of the fight against Pabloism. The lessons of these struggles must be assimilated by students and youth now entering into politics, who should decisively reject the pseudo-left as the rotten and politically bankrupt pro-capitalist outfits that they are.

That must be part of a turn to the genuine socialist and revolutionary perspective advanced by the ICFI. We appeal to students to join the IYSSE and apply to become members of the SEP. Amid the historic breakdown of global capitalism, threatening world war and fascism, take up the fight for a socialist and internationalist perspective in the international working class!



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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