

Australian government sets course for militarism and war

by Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
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The Howard government's decision to boost the Australian army to the highest level since the end of the Vietnam War signifies an unending commitment to US wars of aggression around the world, coupled with an escalation of neo-colonial military interventions by Australian forces throughout the Asia-Pacific region.

Prime Minister Howard announced that over the next decade an additional \$10 billion will be spent to recruit another 2,600 infantry troops—on top of the 1,500 increase announced last December—bringing the total increase to 20 percent. In addition, another half a billion dollars will go toward almost doubling the Australian Federal Police (AFP) “international deployment group” to 1,200. For the first time, the force will include a heavily-armed, 150-strong riot squad for “emergency responses to law and order issues and stabilisation operations.”

The significance of the government's decision lies not so much in the size of the increase, important as this is, but in the political context within which it has been announced: the violent eruption of US militarism.

Five years on from September 11, 2001, the real character and purpose of the “war on terror” stands exposed. It is not about ensuring the protection of ordinary people from terrorism, but the pretext by which the United States is seeking to establish its global domination by military means.

The Howard government has entered this criminal “war” as a kind of grubby subcontractor, supplying the US with political, and, in some cases, crucial military assistance in regions such as Iraq and Afghanistan. In return, Canberra receives vital political and material support in its pursuit of Australian and US interests in the Asia-Pacific region.

Herein lie the disastrous implications of Howard's policy. Like a bushfire that generates its own spiralling momentum, the never-ending “war on terror” fuels ever more resentments, hostility and conflicts, which, sooner or later, will result in catastrophe.

If Australians face any greater threat of terrorist reprisals, full responsibility lies with the government. By its participation in the illegal activities of the Bush administration, it has become implicated in some of the worst war crimes since World War II, including torture and the slaughter of thousands of civilians in the indiscriminate bombing of Afghan and Iraqi towns and cities.

Twice in the twentieth century, the economic interests and imperialist ambitions of the major capitalist powers led to world war. In the first decade of the twenty-first, the outlines of a new imperialist conflict are becoming visible. In the Middle East, through to Central Asia and into the Pacific, the American ruling elite has embarked on a campaign to ensure its strategic domination and to grab control of valuable resources, especially oil. Having lost its relative economic superiority over its old rivals in Europe and Asia, and fearing the emergence of new ones—China, India, and Russia—the US is pursuing a relentless military agenda. Iraq has been invaded, Iran is being targeted, and, in the longer term, China is being designated as a “strategic rival.”

Encouraged by Washington, Japan's leadership has turned to

re-armament, the revival of wartime patriotism and anti-Chinese agitation. In response, the Chinese regime has begun modernising and expanding its military. Under conditions where all the major powers have a global reach, their interests collide in every corner of the world. The Asia-Pacific region is no exception.

In its latest intervention in East Timor, which led to the ousting of the prime minister, Mari Alkatiri, not the least of the Howard government's concerns has been to halt the growing influence of Portugal and China. At the same time, it has been determined to crush all opposition to its demands that Australia retain the whip hand in the exploitation of valuable oil and gas reserves.

The doctrine of “regime change” and neo-colonial occupation is to be extended from East Timor and the Solomon Islands throughout the region for an indefinite period. Announcing the troop increase, Howard said the reasons for a bigger army were “self-evident.” Australia, he declared, faced “ongoing and ... increasing instances of destabilised and failed states in our own region” and “in the next 10 or 20 years, Australia will face a number of situations equivalent or potentially more challenging than the Solomon Islands and East Timor.” He went on to assert the right to intervene in a “pre-emptive fashion”, specifically nominating PNG, Fiji and Vanuatu as targets.

While avoiding direct mention of the United States, Howard made clear that the military expansion had been planned in conjunction with Washington. “We are the biggest, wealthiest country in our immediate region. Quite properly, the rest of the world [read the US] will look to us to carry most of the burden. We can't do it without a larger army.”

The nature of the increase demonstrates the kind of operations being prepared. In Iraq and Afghanistan, the Australian military's major contribution to the US military has been the deployment of highly-trained and clandestine Special Air Services (SAS) killer squads, along with specialised intelligence and naval personnel.

In the Pacific region, the government has different forces in mind. In the words of a *Sydney Morning Herald* editorial welcoming Howard's announcement, “to break up rampaging mobs, you need well-trained boots on the ground.” And in language reminiscent of a Mafia boss organising “protection”, the editorial designated Papua New Guinea's “oil- and gas-rich Southern Highlands” as a potential trouble spot where the Port Moresby government “may soon seek Australia's help.”

Howard's plans will inevitably end in shipwreck. It is nothing short of delusional to imagine that the peoples of Papua New Guinea, East Timor, Fiji, Solomon Islands and other Pacific states will quietly submit to Australian political, economic and military domination. It will not be long before Australian troops start killing and being killed in dirty wars aimed at suppressing the resistance of local populations. The first signs of such conflicts have already appeared in the Solomon Islands, where anti-government rioting in April targetted the Australian-led RAMSI occupation.

Nevertheless, given the fulsome support for Australia's neo-colonial

operations by the entire political establishment—Labor, the Democrats and the Greens—along with complete backing from the media, Howard has rightly calculated that his latest decision will attract no criticism from these quarters, much less opposition.

The so-called “war on terror” has once again underscored the indissoluble connection between militarism abroad and stepped up attacks on democratic rights at home. In the past five years the Howard government has brought down no less than 37 new counter-terrorism laws—more than in any other country—an average of one new law every seven weeks.

The purpose of these laws is not to prevent terrorism—violent acts have always been outlawed in the criminal code—but to create a climate of fear and open the way for the steady erosion of basic legal and democratic rights.

No Australian soldiers have died fighting overseas since 1999. But as body bags start arriving home, intensifying already widespread antiwar sentiment, the government will respond by deepening its attacks on democratic rights and attempting to criminalise any opposition to Australian militarism on the grounds that it provides support to “enemy” combatants.

Nor can it be ruled out that the armed forces will be used to suppress domestic unrest. Significantly, the new army battalions will be based in two state capitals, Adelaide and Brisbane. Howard said Adelaide was chosen to bolster “the sense of involvement and commitment of the entire community in defence establishments”. All mainland capitals will house an infantry battalion, an SAS commando unit or a collection of barracks. Under laws rushed through parliament last year, these troops can be called out to deal with “domestic violence.”

The decision to boost the army will be accompanied by sustained government efforts to manipulate and condition public opinion into accepting a permanent state of war. Howard’s long campaign against what he calls “black arm-band” versions of Australian history—that is, any critical approach to the events of the past 200 years—is now being given material substance.

Advertising campaigns are being prepared, focussing on “traditional military values”, which Defence Minister Brendan Nelson has declared should be “celebrated.” This will augment Howard’s efforts to rehabilitate the US-led war in Vietnam, where 500 Australian soldiers lost their lives, and to glorify Australia’s involvement in World Wars I and II. At the same time, the government is applying pressure to state-run education departments to make compulsory the teaching of Australian history in order to ensure that students better appreciate the “enduring values of the national character.”

The government’s push towards the militarisation of Australian society is intimately bound up with the development of a deepening social polarisation. Like his counterparts around the world, Howard is using militarism and the “war on terror” to try to distract and disorient working people amid worsening social problems, the reversal of long-established working conditions and serious attacks on democratic rights.

During the 2001 election campaign, held in the wake of the 9/11 attack, Howard cynically whipped up fears about waves of refugees and potential terrorists to hold on to office. In 2004, the scare tactic was the threat of soaring home mortgage rates. Now, with interest rates on the rise, together with petrol prices and the cost of living, the government is desperately casting about for another means of diverting political disaffection. Thus the worn-out lies about “weapons of mass destruction”, “children overboard” and “keeping interest rates at record lows” are being replaced with new ones pointing to “regional insecurity” and “failed states” in preparation for a possible “khaki election” next year.

This never-ending series of lies and scare campaigns is not simply an electoral ploy. It expresses the inability of the political representatives of a decaying economic order to offer any solution to the widening social

inequality and desperate social problems caused by the dictates of global capital and the “free market”. Millions of people, especially the young, have found their hopes of decent education, secure jobs, affordable housing shattered by the policies of wage-cutting, privatisation, and user pays.

One of the government’s calculations is that it is precisely these conditions that will force more young people into joining the military. In fact, with a military budget of more than \$20 billion annually, a near doubling over the past decade, the federal government now spends more on the armed forces than it does on education.

The more the disasters of the Afghanistan and Iraq invasions have become apparent, the less the government has been able to attract new recruits. Inquiries have plunged by a third—from 150,000 to 100,000 a year—since 1999. Over the past five years, the government has spent \$500 million in recruitment and retention campaigns, only to see army numbers fall to 1,000 below the current requirement. Last year, recruitment targets fell short by 23 percent, while the rate of departures jumped by 50 percent.

Within the armed forces, long periods of deployment overseas are taking their toll, along with repeated “bastardisation” and suicide scandals in which rank-and-file troops have been subjected to inhuman abuse and brutalisation. A Defence Attitude Survey last year reported that only half of defence force personnel had confidence in senior officers.

In order to meet its new quotas, the government is lowering height, weight, health and age qualifications. It even wants recruits in their 50s, as well as asthmatics, the overweight and former illicit drug users. School cadets may also be used to boost teenage enlistments.

If these measures fail, there is already talk of re-introducing conscription. Earlier this year, former defence chief, Admiral Chris Barrie, called for compulsory national service. The current Chief of Navy, Vice-Admiral Russ Shalders, took up his call and Labor leader Kim Beazley has declared his support for a new form of national service.

The drive to war and the militarisation of society that accompanies it are not passing phenomena, but the surest signs of a deep-going crisis of the entire social order. They signify that the private profit system has become completely incompatible with the interests and aspirations of the vast majority of the world’s population.

That is why the struggle against militarism and war must tackle the root causes, which lie at the very heart of the capitalist economic order—production for profit and the nation state system. To do this, it must be based on a revolutionary internationalist perspective that aims at the replacement of the present social order with one grounded on the democratic utilisation of the world’s economic resources in the interests of ordinary working people.

This is the program advanced by the Socialist Equality Party. In opposition to the Howard government’s war drive, which aims to impose military-police states on the peoples of the Pacific region as it opens their economies to plunder by vast corporate concerns, we strive for the unification of the working masses of the entire region in a common struggle for their social and economic advance.

The necessity for such a political movement is underscored by the fact that the deeply-felt antiwar sentiments of the majority of Australians—exemplified in the largest ever protests against the invasion of Iraq—can find no expression within the political and media establishment.

To the extent that the Labor Party, the Democrats and the Greens offer any criticisms of Howard’s militarist agenda, they are purely tactical. The so-called “opposition” parties accuse the government of “overstretching” the military in Iraq, thereby reducing its capacity to intervene in Australia’s “sphere of influence”.

Labor’s Beazley, the most ardent militarist in the entire political establishment, made his outlook clear in a speech on August 10 to the

corporate foreign policy think-tank, the Lowy Institute. A Labor government, he insisted, deserved support in the next election because it would expand the military and intelligence agencies to “win the war on terror in our region.” Outlining his bellicose program, he declared: “I want troops in our region now.”

Far from opposing US militarism, Beazley put the Labor Party forward as its most reliable advocate. The Hawke government—in which, he noted, he served as Defence Minister—had cemented the alliance with the US by re-signing agreements on the US military bases in Central Australia. A Beazley government, he insisted, would make Australia indispensable to Washington, cementing its position as “the ally the United States needs.”

The Greens, who backed Australia’s interventions in East Timor and the Solomons, declared they opposed the new military expansion from the standpoint that resources should be concentrated in the immediate region rather than in Iraq and Afghanistan. As for the rapidly-disintegrating Democrats, deputy leader Andrew Bartlett merely issued a statement politely reminding the government that if it wanted to meet its recruitment targets, it would have to treat soldiers and ex-soldiers better.

The various radical organisations have nothing to offer except protests, which explicitly separate the fight against militarism and war from the struggle against the capitalist system itself. Their political perspective is centred on the bogus claim that the task is to pressure the government to change course. Moreover, the organic hostility of these organisations towards principled politics was amply demonstrated by their support for the Howard government’s invasion of East Timor in 1999—the opening salvo in its current neo-colonial agenda.

The struggle against militarism and war lies at the very centre of the Socialist Equality Party’s program. It will form a crucial component of the party’s intervention into next year’s federal election campaign. The SEP demands the immediate withdrawal of all Australian troops, police and military agencies from Iraq, Afghanistan and from the Asia-Pacific region. We demand the closure of all US military bases and spying facilities in Australia and the repudiation of the ANZUS alliance. We insist that the billions of dollars allocated to military spending be utilised to provide material aid throughout the region and contribute to the ending of poverty and preventable disease. We demand the lifting of all immigration restrictions to allow workers from throughout the region and internationally to live and work freely in Australia with full democratic and legal rights.

Opposition to the descent into militarism—a question of burning urgency for all young people—is not a matter of protest. Above all, it signifies the revival of the great principles and culture of socialist internationalism that have formed the basis for every major advance made by the working class throughout the past 150 years. We urge all those looking for a genuinely progressive alternative to militarism and war to join and build the Socialist Equality Party as the new mass party of the working class.

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