

Ten years since the US-backed coup against Australian Labor PM

By Mike Head
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Today marks a decade since a cabal of Labor Party and trade union powerbrokers, acting on behalf of the US embassy, carried out what amounted to a backroom, inner-party coup to remove Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and install his deputy, Julia Gillard, as his replacement.

In all the media coverage of the 10th anniversary, there is not so much as a hint of the fact that the chief instigator was Washington, relying on its “protected sources” inside the Labor and union apparatus.

Gillard suddenly announced a leadership challenge on the night of June 23, 2010, and Rudd was gone by the next day. Knowing that the numbers—and other forces—were stacked against him, Rudd did not even contest the ballot inside Labor’s parliamentary caucus, so Gillard was declared elected unopposed.

Millions of working people were profoundly shocked by the anti-democratic operation. Literally overnight, a handful of factional warlords engineered Rudd’s ouster, entirely behind the backs of the population. The intervention came less than three years after Rudd had taken office through the landslide defeat of the hated Howard Liberal-National Coalition government.

Just days later, in a statement issued on June 28, 2010, the Socialist Equality Party drew attention to the far-reaching political implications of what had happened. The SEP explained: “[T]he coup has demonstrated that so-called parliamentary democracy does not represent the interests of the people, but is a screen for the operations of corporate and financial interests that are the real wielders of political power. Furthermore, it has underscored that the Labor Party has no connection whatsoever with the broad mass of working people, but is the political instrument of these same interests.”

The SEP was alone in warning that the coup revealed the kind of dictatorial methods to which the ruling elite was turning as a result of the mounting US confrontation with China, aggravated by the global financial crisis of 2008-09—then the deepest economic breakdown since the 1930s.

The SEP explained that since establishing its global dominance in World War II, US imperialism had intervened repeatedly in Australia during periods of political and economic turmoil. This had been demonstrated most significantly in the Canberra Coup that ousted the Labor government of Gough Whitlam in November 1975. The statement warned that, as in 1975, the highest levels of the state apparatus and the American CIA “were either directly involved in, or at least had knowledge of, the ousting of Rudd.”

Less than six months later, this analysis was confirmed in the most graphic fashion. Secret US diplomatic cables published by WikiLeaks in December 2010 revealed that “protected sources” of the US embassy were pivotal figures in Gillard’s elevation. For months, key coup plotters, including senators Mark Arbib and David Feeney, and Australian Workers Union (AWU) chief Paul Howes, secretly provided the US embassy with regular updates on internal government discussions and divisions within the leadership.

As early as June 2008, the American ambassador identified Gillard as

the “front-runner” to replace Rudd. In October 2009—eight months before the coup—Arbib informed American officials of emerging leadership tensions. Arbib, a key apparatchik in Labor’s then powerful New South Wales right-wing faction, reportedly made several requests to US officials that his identity as an informant be “protected.”

While media reports at the time highlighted Arbib’s role as a “secret US source,” the WikiLeaks cables showed that the relationship between Washington and the Labor and trade unions apparatuses went much deeper. This political machine serves as a conduit for Washington’s agenda. In fact, the documents revealed the extent to which US governments determine who will hold senior government posts, including the office of prime minister.

Rudd was fully committed to the US military alliance, as Labor has been since World War II. But the cables showed that the Obama administration had become increasingly hostile to Rudd’s unwanted diplomatic initiatives, launched without reference to Washington, to ease rising tensions between the US and China, on whose markets Australian big business depended heavily.

Rudd had proposed an Asia-Pacific Community, attempting to mediate the escalating strategic rivalry between the US and China, and opposed the formation of a Quadrilateral military alliance between the US, India, Japan and Australia, aimed against China.

Gillard, who had cultivated her pro-US credentials through Australia-US and Australia-Israel leadership forums, was literally selected by the US embassy as a reliable replacement to Rudd. In her first public appearance after knifing Rudd, she demonstrated her devotion to Washington by posing for a photo op with the US ambassador, flanked by US and Australian flags. She soon had a phone call with Obama, who had previously twice postponed a planned visit to Australia under Rudd.

The centrality of Australia to the US preparations for war against China became apparent in November 2011, when Obama announced his “pivot to Asia” in the Australian parliament, rather than the White House. During the visit, Gillard and Obama signed an agreement to station American Marines in Darwin and allow greater US access to other military bases, placing the Australian population on the front line of any conflict with China.

Gillard’s government also sanctioned the expansion of the major US spying and weapons-targeting base at Pine Gap, agreed to the US military’s increased use of Australian ports and airbases, and stepped up Australia’s role in the US-led top-level “Five Eyes” global surveillance network, which monitors the communications and online activities of millions of people worldwide.

Rudd’s removal marked a turning point. US imperialism, via the Obama administration, sent a blunt message: there was no longer any room for equivocation by the Australian ruling elite. Regardless of which party was in office, it had to line up unconditionally behind the US conflict with China, no matter what the consequences for the loss of its massive export markets in China.

This has been a bipartisan policy ever since, with each government, both Labor and Liberal-National, placing the Australian population ever more on the front line of a potentially catastrophic war fought with nuclear weapons.

Gillard and the turn to austerity

Domestically, Gillard proved that she was a ruthless servant of the major corporations and banks. She swiftly abandoned a proposed resources tax, at the behest of the mining giants. In her first speech as prime minister, she promised to eliminate the multi-billion budget deficits incurred by Rudd's government to prop up business during the 2008-09 global financial crisis and deliver a budget surplus by 2013—necessitating huge spending cuts.

Gillard pointedly credited “Labor giants Bob Hawke and Paul Keating as the architects of the prosperity of modern Australia”, and “John Howard and Peter Costello for continuing these reforms.” In other words, she pledged to deepen the offensive launched by the Hawke-Keating Labor governments that had partnered with the trade unions from 1983 to 1996 to smash up workers' conditions and restructure the economy in the interests of the financial elite.

Gillard's government presided in Australia over the shift that was taking place internationally from stimulus to austerity, as the financial elite insisted that the working class pay the price for the huge bailouts of the banks and corporations following the 2008-09 meltdown. During 2012-13, her final year in office, federal government spending fell by a record 3.2 percent in real terms, with education and health the hardest hit.

This offensive continued despite the public hostility to Gillard's coup and her policies, which led to Labor's near-defeat at the October 2010 election. Gillard clung to office by forming a minority government—the first since 1940—propped up by the Greens. Among Labor's cruelest cuts that included to tertiary education, health and other social spending was an attack on single parents.

Gillard's government-imposed welfare “reforms” that moved thousands of single mothers off parenting payments and onto the dole, cutting their payments by \$60 to \$100 week. This severely affecting working-class women, plunging them further into poverty, in an attempt to coerce them into low-paid work.

As a progeny of Labor's “Left” faction, Gillard's specialty was putting a progressive gloss on regressive measures. Under the banner of an “education revolution,” she inflicted rote-learning NAPLAN testing on school teachers and students, and slashed university funding. In the name of rectifying the often shocking treatment of disabled people, she introduced a disability insurance scheme that privatised services, mostly resulting in even worse outcomes. Her “Fair Work Australia” laws prohibited nearly all strikes and cemented the role of the trade unions as industrial police forces.

To attempt to divert the rising discontent, Gillard resorted to trying to whip up nationalism and anti-immigrant and anti-refugee sentiment. Her Greens-backed government cut immigration and reinstated the reviled “Pacific Solution,” initiated by the Howard Coalition government, which condemned thousands of asylum seekers to indefinite detention in squalid camps in Papua New Guinea and Nauru.

Gillard's promotion of anti-immigrant poison was aimed at serving as Labor's main ideological mechanism for implementing deeply unpopular budget cuts and pro-business economic “reforms.” Immigrants and refugees were blamed for the lack of jobs, affordable housing, decent transport, health and education infrastructure, to divert from the real cause of these problems—the private profit system itself.

On every level, Gillard paved the way for the return of the Liberal-National Coalition, whose succession of leaders—Tony Abbott, Malcolm Turnbull and Scott Morrison—have each sought to deepen her social spending cuts. Yet none have yet succeeded in matching her record as the cutter-in-chief.

Gillard and the persecution of Julian Assange

One of the most vicious and defining features of the Gillard government was its front line involvement in the US persecution of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, an Australian citizen. From late 2010, through WikiLeaks, Assange courageously made available a vast amount of information that exposed the scale of US war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the sordid diplomatic intrigues conducted by American embassies and consulates around the globe.

In response, the Obama administration and US intelligence agencies launched a vendetta to destroy WikiLeaks, blacken Assange's name and seek his extradition to be locked away for life on US Espionage Act charges. Gillard's government lined up completely with Washington and placed itself at the forefront of the attack on Assange and freedom of speech.

On December 2, 2010, Gillard declared: “I absolutely condemn the placement of this information on the WikiLeaks website. It's a grossly irresponsible thing to do, and an illegal thing to do.” Her government even launched a police investigation into whether it could charge and jail Assange under Australian law, only to reluctantly conclude that he had committed no crime.

Several days later, it became clear why Gillard was so vehement in her denunciation of Assange. Not only was she determined to stand unwaveringly with the US efforts to suppress and punish WikiLeaks for making available to the public incriminating truths about the wars, invasions, coups, plots, assassinations and anti-democratic conspiracies conducted by the US and its allies. She had her own vested interests at stake! Among the massive trove of US diplomatic cables, partly published by prominent newspapers in December 2010, were several hundred revealing the US hand in her own installation.

By 2013, as a result of Labor's brutal agenda, Gillard had become the most despised Labor leader in history—above all among Labor's former constituency, the working class. In a last-ditch bid to avoid an electoral wipeout, Labor's factional bosses reinstated Rudd as prime minister in June 2013, seeking to cynically exploit the widespread resentment to his removal. Rudd dutifully maintained all of Gillard's policies, including the unqualified commitment to Washington, but Labor was swept out of office at the September 2013 election, allowing the Coalition to return to power.

Contained in the continuing collapse of Labor's working class base, is four decades of mounting hostility among working people and youth to its anti-working class policies and pro-US militarism, beginning with the assault on social conditions waged by the Hawke-Keating governments and the trade unions from 1983 to 1996.

On the 10th anniversary of the coup, the Labor Party has been joined by feminist groups in celebrating it as an historic advance for women. During an online Labor Party fundraising event last weekend, billed as a “10 Year Celebration – Julia Gillard Prime Minister,” shadow minister Tanya Plibersek described Gillard's installation as “a significant achievement” and applauded the fact that Gillard now “hangs out” with people like Hillary Clinton.

Great store has been placed, once again, on Gillard's October 2012 “misogyny” speech, in which she accused Abbott, then the opposition leader, of sexism. What was not mentioned, however, was that on the very same day her government launched its assault on single mothers. This speaks volumes about the affluent layers on which both Labor and the feminist organisations rest. Gillard's speech, in fact, was a desperate effort to distract attention from her increasingly hated anti-working class record.

Today, more than ever, the real reasons for the 2010 coup are being suppressed by the ruling elite and its political servants, because they reveal too nakedly the agenda of war and austerity to which the entire political establishment is committed. Moreover, both the ruling

parties—Labor and the Coalition—are empty shells dominated by factional warlords and branch-stacking. The public health emergency and economic breakdown triggered by the global COVID-19 pandemic, combined with the Trump administration's frenzied escalation of Washington's economic and military confrontation with China, are creating a political crisis of capitalist rule that dwarfs the events of 2010.

Moreover, the anti-democratic ouster of an elected prime minister in 2010 must be a warning of the authoritarian measures to which it will turn as social and political unrest rises and erupts. Globally, from Trump to Morrison, governments are resorting to police-state and militarist methods. To answer this threat, the immense disquiet and disaffection of workers and youth must become a conscious movement against the entire capitalist order. A clear-sighted revolutionary leadership must be built in the working class to fight for the socialist transformation of the world in the interests of all, not the wealthy corporate elite. That is the perspective of the SEP.

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