

Oppose Australia's neo-colonial occupation of East Timor

Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
1 June 2006

The Socialist Equality Party unequivocally opposes the Howard government's military intervention into the tiny neighbouring state of East Timor. The dispatch of heavily-armed troops, backed by armoured vehicles, warships and attack helicopters, is a naked act of neo-colonial bullying and aggression aimed at protecting the economic and strategic interests of Australian imperialism in the Asia Pacific region.

The 1,300 troops have already occupied the East Timorese capital of Dili and supplanted the country's fractured security forces. Transferring methods honed in the occupation of Iraq, the Australian military has imposed what amounts to martial law. Soldiers have broad powers to arrest and detain indefinitely anyone, without reference to the East Timor authorities.

Canberra has barely disguised the fact that it wants Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri replaced by someone more amenable to its interests. Australian Prime Minister Howard has publicly declared that East Timor "has not been well-governed". An editorial in Murdoch's *Australian* on May 30 demonised Alkatiri as unpopular, arrogant, corrupt and a Marxist, blamed him for the country's factional infighting and violence, and bluntly called for a new prime minister to be installed.

Despite the fact that the Australian troops were nominally "invited" in by the Alkatiri government, Howard has refused to back it against armed rebels, under the fraudulent guise of "neutrality". Behind the scenes, Australia has tacitly supported the efforts by East Timor's President Xanana Gusmao to sideline Alkatiri by declaring "a state of siege" and attempting to assume full control of the security forces. As far as Canberra is concerned it is not a question of if, but when, Alkatiri will be replaced.

Alkatiri is certainly no Marxist. Nor does he represent the aspirations and interests of ordinary East Timorese any more than his rivals among the tiny ruling elite in Dili that has governed since formal independence in 2002. But in the eyes of the Australian government, Alkatiri's cardinal sin is that he refused to immediately buckle to Canberra's demands in negotiations over the Timor Sea's huge oil and gas deposits. At the same time, he has been seeking economic and political support from other quarters, particularly the former colonial power, Portugal.

Far from helping the East Timorese people, the Howard government's military intervention has, from the outset, been driven by Australian concerns about the encroachment into East Timor of its European and Asian rivals, particularly since the UN presence on the island began winding down. Political tensions markedly sharpened in March after Alkatiri sacked nearly 600 soldiers for striking over pay and conditions. On April 28, pro-government police fired on a protest of "rebel" soldiers and unemployed youth in Dili, killing at least six people and injuring many more.

A key role in stoking up factional conflict within the East Timorese security forces was played by a shadowy figure, Major Alfredo Reinado, a former exile in Australia and trainee at its national defence academy, who emerged as the "rebel leader". As clashes intensified between pro-government and "rebel" forces, the Howard government, with the backing

of the Bush administration, seized on the unfolding conflict to dispatch two warships and troops on May 12 to the Timor Sea. The Alkatiri government was not even informed.

Canberra's aim was both to prevent the intervention of other powers, especially Portugal, which was considering sending paramilitary police to assist the East Timor government, and to put pressure on a congress of the ruling Fretilin party from May 17 to 19, where a challenge was being mounted to the Alkatiri leadership.

When the leadership challenge collapsed, Australian preparations went into high gear. On May 24, under pressure from Canberra, as well as from Gusmao and Foreign Minister Jose Ramos Horta, Alkatiri finally agreed to support a formal invitation to Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Portugal to dispatch troops.

On May 25, without even waiting for final agreement on the scope and rules of engagement, Howard ordered the military deployment to go "full steam ahead". Within days, the full complement of Australian troops, as well as advance units from Malaysia and New Zealand, were on the ground. Warships were anchored in Dili harbour and Black Hawk helicopters were patrolling the skies overhead.

The sham of "independence"

The military occupation of East Timor exposes the absurdity of all the effusive, self-serving claims made in 1999 that the "independence" of the half island from Indonesia would usher in a new period of peace, prosperity and democracy for the East Timorese. In the era of globalised production, the tiny statelet could never be "independent" from the various global and regional powers or the major corporations and international financial institutions, such as the World Bank and the IMF.

In the wake of the Suharto dictatorship's invasion of the former Portuguese colony in 1975, the East Timorese people waged a courageous struggle against Indonesian repression that cost an estimated 200,000 lives. However, the perspective of "independence", promoted by East Timorese leaders like Gusmao and championed by middle class radicals in Australia and internationally, proved to be a political dead-end. It blocked a joint struggle by working people in East Timor and the Indonesian working class against the military junta in Jakarta and in 1999 played directly into the hands of Australia and Portugal as they competed for domination and influence in the region.

Successive Australian governments, Coalition and Labor, backed Suharto's takeover in 1975 and, in 1978, in exchange for control over the Timor Sea oil and gas, Australia became the first country in the world to officially recognise Indonesia's annexation of East Timor. Even after the fall of Suharto in 1998, the Howard government continued to back Jakarta's efforts to resist demands for a referendum in East Timor.

Canberra only switched tack when it became evident that Portugal, with the backing of the European Union, had secured UN support for a referendum. This opened up the real possibility that an “independent” East Timor, under Portuguese tutelage, would not recognise Australian rights to oil and gas under its Timor Gap Treaty with Jakarta. With the assistance of the Clinton administration in Washington, the Howard government embarked on its largest overseas military mobilisation since the Vietnam War.

The intervention in September 1999 was part of the new era of militarism, fuelled by growing inter-imperialist rivalries, following the end of the Cold War and marked, in particular, by the first US-led Gulf War in 1990-91 against Iraq. Howard took his cue from the NATO war against Serbia just months earlier, in which US President Clinton and British Prime Minister Blair had unfurled the banner of “ethical imperialism” as the justification for trampling on the national sovereignty of the former Yugoslavia.

The US and its European allies used blatant lies about the mass murder and exodus of Kosovar Albanians to stampede public opinion behind a predatory war to excise the province of Kosovo from Serbia. In East Timor, the Howard government, with the backing of the Clinton administration and the fig leaf of UN support, exploited violence by Indonesian-backed militia following the independence referendum to justify sending troops under the fraudulent pretext of “protecting” the East Timorese.

The ability of Howard to posture as East Timor’s “liberator” was completely dependent on the enthusiastic support of the entire Australian political and media establishment, including the Labor Party and the Greens. As in the NATO war, it was the erstwhile middle class radicals, in particular the Democratic Socialist Party and its *Green Left Weekly*, who were the most vociferous cheerleaders for Australian military intervention into East Timor, organising “troops in” demonstrations to “pressure” Howard to carry out what his government had already decided to do.

The intervention also exposed the political bankruptcy of the Fretilin-led National Council of Timorese Resistance (CNRT). Its perspective was not to wage a struggle against imperialism, but to encourage the major powers to set up an “independent” capitalist state, which it would then run. At the height of the Indonesian militia violence in 1999, Gusmao ordered his Falintil guerrilla fighters to refrain from retaliating, thereby allowing the killings to proceed unimpeded. The CNRT leaders calculated that images of open civil war would repel the Western powers, whereas images of the killings of defenceless people and the destruction of their villages and towns, would help ensure Western intervention.

The UN sanctified the Australian-led military occupation and established its Transitional Administration for East Timor (UNTAET) with the powers of a colonial protectorate to run every aspect of East Timor’s affairs. UN administrator Sergio Vieira de Mello presided over stage-managed elections for a constituent assembly, won by Fretilin, and a farcical poll for the office of president, contested by Gusmao and one token opposition candidate. Fretilin quickly declared the assembly would form the government when independence was declared in 2002. Further elections were put off until 2007.

While it hypocritically deplores the current factional violence, the Howard government is directly responsible for the political and social crisis in East Timor. The Australian military intervention hoisted the present clique of political leaders to power. Howard joined in all the hosannas of praise at the independence ceremony in 2002 for the “first nation of the new millennium and the world’s newest democracy”. Over the past five years, for all its expressions of concern about the welfare of the East Timorese, Canberra, like other donor countries, has provided nothing but a pittance in aid to what remains one of the world’s most impoverished nations.

The Howard government’s overriding concern has been to secure the

lion’s share of the Timor Sea oil and gas. Under international boundary law, which Australia has refused to recognise, East Timor was entitled to the majority of the seabed resources. Even before the formal independence celebrations, the Australian government flew prime minister-elect Alkatiri to Canberra to pressure him into signing a border treaty ceding the bulk of the seabed resources to Australia. It deliberately dragged out subsequent negotiations, knowing full well that the cash-strapped East Timor could not afford to wait.

Last year, Canberra eventually bullied Dili into delaying any final settlement on the maritime boundary for 50 to 60 years and to a deal sharing out the oil and gas fields that greatly disadvantages East Timor. Known oil and gas reserves under the Timor Sea are estimated to be worth at least \$US30 billion. Two thirds of the reserves lie closer to East Timor than Australia and by international law should belong to Dili. Under the final deal, revenues from the largest field, Greater Sunrise, will be split 50-50, even though 80 percent should fall to East Timor. Even as the talks have dragged on, Canberra pocketed \$1 billion royalties and taxes over six years from the Laminaria-Corallina field while Dili received nothing, although the area lies entirely in East Timorese waters—if international law were applied.

It is no surprise that acute social tensions exist in East Timor. They have been manipulated by unscrupulous leaders and produced clashes between “easterners” and “westerners”. Starved of aid and cheated out of oil and gas revenues, the East Timorese government has only been able to raise annual revenues of around \$50 million, a sum that is completely inadequate to deal with any of the immense economic and social problems confronting the population. The eruption of gangs of unemployed youth on the streets of Dili, looting and carrying out vendettas against their rivals, is the outcome of the policies, not only of Gusmao, Horta and Alkatiri, but of Howard and his ministers.

Australia as regional hegemon

There are already signs that the Howard government is preparing to transform the present military intervention into a more permanent neo-colonial occupation of East Timor. The Australian media is speculating that troops will remain at least until next year’s election. Foreign Minister Alexander Downer told Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) radio on May 29 that without the Australian military intervention “East Timor does run the risk of becoming a failed state.”

In the wake of the 1999 invasion, Howard infamously suggested that Australia would function as the “deputy sheriff” for the US in the Asia Pacific area. Following outrage from regional leaders, he backed away from his remarks, but has never resiled from the underlying strategy: as a second or third-order power, Australia can only counter its rivals and protect its interests in the region with backing from the United States. Canberra’s support for the Bush administration’s bogus “war on terror” and its participation in the illegal US-led occupation of Iraq in 2003 was aimed precisely at securing ongoing US backing for its own neo-colonial adventures closer to home.

Within months of the Iraq invasion, the Howard government branded the Solomon Islands “a failed state”, wildly claiming it was becoming a haven for international criminals, drug runners and terrorists, and launched its own “preemptive” operation. In July 2003, an Australian-led taskforce of soldiers, police and officials landed in Honiara. The Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomons Islands (RAMSI) took control of all the main levers of power in the small Pacific Island state, with the intention of remaining for at least a decade. Just weeks before the latest East Timor intervention, the Howard government dispatched more than

300 soldiers and police to the Solomons to prop up RAMSI, amid growing local opposition and hostility to the Australian occupation.

While trying to maintain the illusion that Australia “respects” East Timor’s national sovereignty, Howard has already indicated that a RAMSI-style operation is under consideration. When asked on ABC television on May 28 about a similar long-term Australian presence in Dili, he said: “I do not rule anything out”.

Australia’s interventions in the Solomons and East Timor are a sign of sharpening inter-imperialist rivalries in the region. Howard’s response to growing economic and strategic challenges in what he has termed “our backyard” is to establish military garrisons throughout the “arc of instability” to the north of Australia. On May 25, in his speech to parliament on the East Timor intervention, the prime minister emphasised that “Australia has a vital national interest in the promotion and maintenance of stability in our region.”

In a comment entitled “A display of power” in Murdoch’s *Australian* on May 31, editor-at-large Paul Kelly bluntly declared that Australia had to assume the role of hegemon, not only in East Timor, but throughout the region. Sweeping aside Howard’s pretence of “neutrality,” he pointed out that Canberra was already determining political affairs in East Timor and would have to play a similar role in other countries.

“In that sense Australia is operating as a regional power or a potential hegemon that shapes security and political outcomes. This language is unpalatable to many. Yet it is the reality. It is new experimental territory for Australia. We are evolving into a regional power and discovering the risks and dividends in the exercise of that power. We have taken complete charge of law and order in East Timor and its domestic power struggle is conducted against the backdrop of our unstated pressure,” he stated.

Kelly’s comment is part of a broader discussion within ruling circles to prepare for further military interventions throughout the Asia Pacific. Paul Dibb, a former top defence official, wrote in the *Australian* on May 16: “As a senior defence colleague said to me recently, the arc of instability ‘is sure as hell arcing’. The outlooks for East Timor, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu and Fiji, let alone the prospects of instability in Indonesia’s Papua province, are far from reassuring. We have long recognised that no one else is going to look after our interests in this part of the world. As John Howard observes, it is our responsibility to take the lead and other people—including our US ally—expect that we should do so.”

This eruption of Australian militarism holds great dangers, not only for working people in East Timor, the Solomons and the rest of the region, but also for Australian workers, who will inevitably be forced to bear the burdens of these military adventures. The dispatch of Australian contingents to the Middle East, Central Asia and the Pacific is being accompanied by an unprecedented assault on long-established democratic and civil rights. The establishment of colonial outposts throughout the Asian Pacific region is seeing the transformation of Australia into a police state aimed, above all, at suppressing any opposition at home to government policies. Workers in Australia and internationally must oppose the Howard government’s predatory plans and demand the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all foreign troops and police from East Timor and the Solomons.

East Timorese workers, villagers and young people must draw definite political conclusions from their experiences of the past seven years. Under the domination of the major powers and global capital, “independence” has produced nothing but deepening social misery and attacks on basic democratic rights. The divisive logic of separatism can be seen in the fratricidal conflicts that have broken out in the streets of Dili. The sole progressive solution is a political struggle to unify the masses of East Timor with their class brothers and sisters in neighbouring Indonesia, Australia and throughout the region and the world, on the basis of a socialist program. Only by ending the domination of global capital and

imperialism can the much-needed resources be made available to end the terrible poverty that afflicts the vast majority of people in these countries.



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