

# Public meetings oppose Australia's intervention into East Timor

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The Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* held public meetings in Sydney and Melbourne during the past week opposing the Howard government's military intervention in East Timor and calling for the immediate withdrawal of Australian troops from the tiny half-island. SEP national secretary Nick Beams, a member of the International Editorial Board of the WSWW addressed audiences in both capital cities.

Entitled "The truth about East Timor: why Australia's military intervention should be opposed" the meetings countered a unified campaign by the mass media and every political tendency—from left to right—supporting the Howard government's neo-colonial agenda. University students, and workers from Australia, Indonesia, East Timor, the Solomons and New Caledonia, were among those in attendance.

In Sydney, Beams was joined by fellow International Editorial Board member Peter Symonds, who exposed government claims that the deployment of more than 2,000 Australian troops was motivated by humanitarian concerns.

"Just as in the case of Iraq, these claims are false to the core. The Howard government has no more interest in the welfare of the East Timorese now than in 1999 when it used a similar pretext—the violence of pro-Indonesian militia—to justify sending in Australian troops.

"In the last six years, Australia has provided a pittance in aid to what is the poorest country in Asia and one of the poorest in the world. Moreover, Howard and his ministers have ignored international law and bullied the East Timorese government into handing Australia the largest share of an estimated \$30 billion worth of gas and oil reserves under the Timor Sea."

"The guiding principle of successive governments, Labor and Liberal, towards East Timor has all along been the economic and strategic interests of Australian imperialism."

Symonds reviewed the history of Australian imperialism in East Timor beginning with the Whitlam Labor government's tacit support for the Indonesian annexation in 1975. Subsequent Liberal and Labor governments had upheld the rule of the Indonesian military that produced between 100,000 and 200,000 deaths on the island. In return, the Suharto dictatorship entered negotiations with Australia over oil and gas in the Timor Sea signing the Timor Gap Treaty with the Hawke Labor government in 1989.

Australian policy only changed in 1999 after the collapse of the Suharto regime, with Howard deploying troops to East Timor to ensure Canberra's continued hold over lucrative oil and gas

reserves and forestalling attempts by rival powers such as Portugal to regain control over the island.

"In the subsequent seven years, inter-imperialist rivalries have sharpened. The Bush administration's "war on terrorism" was the excuse for the military occupation first of Afghanistan then of Iraq. The Howard government backed Washington not only to secure Australian interests in the Middle East but above all to ensure US support for its own pre-emptive actions closer to home." The Solomons, Symonds said, had already been placed under permanent occupation by Australia, and East Timor was next.

Symonds explained that Howard's actions had been "backed to the hilt by the entire political establishment including the Labor opposition, the Democrats and the Greens."

The Australian media had also worked as a direct accomplice of the Howard government, demonising East Timor's prime minister Mari Alkatiri as an "autocrat" and manufacturing a case for regime change—a coup—against a leader regarded as anathema to Australian interests.

Addressing audiences in both Sydney and Melbourne, SEP national secretary Nick Beams said it was necessary to place the Howard government's bid for regime change in East Timor in its global context. The collapse of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and the USSR signified not simply the ending of the Cold War but the opening of a new period of inter-imperialist rivalry as the major powers fought for control over strategic resources.

Capitalism was returning to its traditional methods of asserting control over the oppressed countries. The doctrines of "ethical imperialism" used in 1999 to justify war against Serbia, had given way since September 11 2001 and the global "war on terror" to methods of outright illegality on the part of the United States and its allies.

In conditioning public opinion for war, Beams examined the critical role that had been played by the ex-radical groups such as the Democratic Socialist Party in Australia. Like former German Greens leader Joschka Fischer, the DSP had dropped their former slogan of "troops out" and were now advocating, as they did in 1999, "troops in". The evolution of the DSP into the direct accomplice of imperialism was the logical outcome of middle class radicalism which opposes the only alternative to imperialism: the struggle for the political independence of the working class.

Beams concluded by drawing out the lessons from the failure of East Timorese "independence" to offer any way forward for the masses. In the era of globalisation there could be no solution for

working people based on the establishment of new national states. Such an outcome, as East Timor demonstrated, would only pave the way for more disasters. The only path to genuine freedom and democracy lay in the unification of the international working class in the struggle for socialism.

In Sydney a member of the Democratic Party in East Timor spoke in the discussion that followed the main reports. He agreed that moves were being organised against the government in the period leading up to Australia's military intervention and recognised the hand of Australia at work, but added that the problem in East Timor was Fretilin's inability to solve the economic problems of the country.

Beams said the question went to the heart of the issues being discussed. He said the illusion was held out by the leaders of Fretilin that the establishment of a national state would provide the basis to advance the condition of the masses. The same position had been advanced by the LTTE in Sri Lanka and had guided the PLO in the Middle East. This perspective had produced a disaster with growing joblessness and poverty. Right-wing forces such as the Catholic Church and militias were seeking to exploit this social disaster to further their own reactionary agenda.

"We have to ask, 'what is the source of the problem?' In this era of massive advances in science, technology and the development of human productivity on an unprecedented scale, is it impossible to feed, clothe and house the world's population in decency? No it is not."

Beams stressed that the program of national economic development was a fiction. "The real power doesn't lie within the national state arena. The biggest states in the world, like the smallest, are dominated by the same global banks and transnational corporations." The failure to provide for the masses of East Timor was a process being repeated the world over, creating the objective basis for the development of a unified struggle by working people for the perspective of international socialism.

Other questions concerned the fight for a socialist perspective. How would the *World Socialist Web Site* reach people "on the ground" in an oppressed country like East Timor, asked a university student. Beams pointed out that readers of the WSWS could be found in the most seemingly remote parts of the world, but he raised the issue was not really one of communication—it was the clarification of political perspective. "Clarity, analysis, political understanding, that's what's lacking and what we are seeking to provide in the development of the *World Socialist Web Site*."

In Melbourne, questions ranged from the attitude of the capitalist powers to the break-up of Indonesia, the plans of the Bush Administration for Iraq, why illusions were being promoted in Venezuela's Hugo Chavez and the historical role of Napoleon Bonaparte.

Adam, a government regulator, spoke to the WSWS after the meeting in Melbourne. "I found the meeting very informative. I found that the clarification of Australia's role in the 1990s was interesting. I didn't know that Portugal was a rival of Australia and how these things prior to the 1999 intervention had developed.

"I have had an argument with a friend about what Australia has

done with the Solomon Islands. I was asked what possible business interests exist in such a small country. I did some research on the WSWS and found out about the existence of gold as well as logging companies that are there. But I found out tonight about the resorts they can build and the communal land that Australia opposes."

Joshua, a 24-year-old former nursing student from Newcastle attended the meeting in Sydney. "The troops have been sent purely for the oil in the Timor Sea. That's all they've ever been interested in and that's why they supported the Indonesian takeover in the first place. It's ludicrous to think that 2,000 troops have been sent to protect the people over there. It's total standover tactics and it's really a message that if you don't kow-tow to our demands there'll be consequences down the road. It's a message to China and Portugal that 'They're our resources. Back off.'"

Joshua said there was an attempt by the government and media to appeal to people's emotions and this was supported by groups like the DSP who argued, "'yes, it's militarism, but the troops are needed to protect people now' It's like pulling at the heart strings, but it conceals the real causes for the government's actions."

Malinda, a law student, decided to attend after hearing Peter Symonds speak about the meeting on a local radio station. "I came to the meeting to become more politically aware about what is happening in East Timor. I was a bit cynical about the official version of events and I thought there might be other reasons for Australia's intervention, other agendas. I had heard that Australia had dealt unjustly with East Timor in negotiating oil and gas treaties but until tonight's meeting I was unaware of the extent to which it is happening. The speakers at the meeting explained in a way that I thought was realistic, the reasons for Australia's involvement there. They explained what is actually going on. There are other agendas also behind the war in Iraq. It's not only about nuclear weapons and terrorism, it's also about oil."



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