Australian imperialism, East Timor and the role of the DSP

Nick Beams
21 July 2006

Below we are publishing the report delivered by Nick Beams, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) and a member of the International Editorial Board of the WSWS, to public meetings in Sydney and Melbourne on July 11 and 18, 2006, entitled "The truth about East Timor: Why Australia's military intervention should be opposed". (See Public meetings oppose Australia's intervention into East Timor*).*

The events in East Timor are the outcome of a campaign for "regime change", orchestrated by the Australian government, not just over the past few months, but stretching back years. In fact, the latest intervention is a continuation of what was conducted by Australian troops in 1999.

In order to understand what has taken place it is necessary to ground these events in their global context.

When the Soviet Union and the Stalinist regimes of Eastern Europe collapsed at the beginning of the 1990s, it signified not just the end of the so-called Cold War, but the beginning of a new era in world politics. A decade and half on, the outlines of this new era have clearly emerged. Far from entering a new age of peace and democracy, the world is being ravaged by deepening conflicts among the capitalist great powers for markets, resources and spheres of influence.

That is the significance of the Iraq war, the conflicts in North-East Asia, the deepening antagonisms between Russia and the US, the concerns over China's push for energy sources and the dispute over Iran's nuclear capacities, to name but a few.

The framework of these conflicts was set out almost immediately following the collapse of the USSR. In 1992, the Pentagon produced a strategy document which insisted that the fundamental goal of US foreign policy had to be to ensure that no single power or group of powers was in a position to challenge the US militarily, or threaten its global dominance.

The character of this new era in world politics was also spelled out at the conference in November 1991, organised by the International Committee of the Fourth International in Berlin against imperialist war and colonialism.

The manifesto produced for that conference pointed out that the period opened up by the post-war retreat of the European powers from their colonial possessions and the granting of formal independence—hailed by all manner of opportunists as signifying a fundamental change in the nature of world capitalism—had come to an end. The escalating military activities by the major powers—the Malvinas War in 1982, the series of military actions of the US in the 1980s and the 1990-91 Iraq war—signified "the return by imperialism to its traditional methods of asserting its interests in the oppressed countries."

How true that warning turned out to be.

The 1999 Kosovo war against Serbia saw the tearing up of all the precepts upon which international relations had operated in the post-war period. The basis of those relations had been the recognition of national sovereignty. That was no longer applicable. In a major speech in April 1999 as the bombing campaign against Serbia was getting under way, British Prime Minister Tony Blair outlined the new doctrine.

In the era of globalisation, he insisted, the international community, that is, the major capitalist powers, had a right to intervene and violate national sovereignty, even through military means, where it was considered necessary. This doctrine was rightly dubbed "ethical imperialism". It was the late 20th century equivalent of the clarion call, issued at the end of the 19th for the major capitalist powers to take up the "white man's burden" as they established colonies around the world.

The Kosovo war was significant in a number of respects, not least because it was undertaken without sanction from the United Nations. This was a sure sign that, in the post Cold War, the legal sanctions which had supposedly governed international relations in another era were becoming too constricting.

But even "ethical imperialism" was not sufficient. A new casus belli was needed. And following September 11, 2001 it was advanced: the global war on terror. The invasion of Iraq marked the abandonment of even the pretence of legality. The waging of "aggressive war"—the basis of all the charges laid against the Nazis in the Nuremberg Trials—has become the central doctrine of the dominant imperialist power, the United States, sanctioned by the "international community" which, through the United Nations, legitimised the invasion and occupation of Iraq.

Australia, Portugal and East Timor

Let us now examine what has occurred in Timor within this overall framework. After the events of the early 1990s—the Gulf War and the collapse of the Soviet Union—every capitalist power recognised that times had changed, and that colonialism, in one form or another, was coming back. It was time to get active. Portugal was no exception. Having become a member of the European Union, it was able to walk the world stage with greater vigour than the period which followed the collapse of the fascist regime in 1974 and the winning of independence by its colonies.

Portugal's old colony of East Timor attracted considerable interest, particularly because of the discovery of oil and gas resources within its territorial waters. But another power held the upper hand—Australia.

In 1989 the Australian Labor government signed the so-called Timor Gap Treaty. Under this treaty Australia formally recognised Indonesia's incorporation of the province following its invasion of 1975 in return for gaining control of the oil and gas resources located under the Timor Sea. The deal, as the Labor foreign minister Gareth Evans remarked at the time, was worth "zillions" of dollars.

By 1991 Portugal was taking an active interest in the region. It launched proceedings against Australia in the World Court, charging that the treaty was illegal, that it damaged the material interests of Portugal and East Timor and abrogated the rights of the East Timorese people. Having ruled East Timor as a colony for some 400 years, Portugal had now, it seemed,

© World Socialist Web Site

been converted to the principle of self-determination.

This is the background to the Australian intervention in 1999. The East Asian economic crisis of 1997-98, and the measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund, undermined the Suharto dictatorship in Indonesia. Australia was left in a difficult position. The danger was that the collapse of the Indonesian regime—Australia's closest ally for almost a quarter of a century—would bring some form of independence for East Timor, which would put into question the Timor Gap Treaty and open the way for other powers, particularly Portugal, to intervene.

This was why, having supported the Indonesian dictatorship's 25-year oppression of East Timor, which resulted in the deaths of up to 200,000 people, the Australian government moved to play the central role in the military intervention of September-October 1999. It required some assistance, however, which duly came in the form of a diktat from US president Clinton that unless Indonesia agreed to the intervention, the US would organise to "crash" the Indonesian economy.

The mobilisation of the middle class radicals

But Australian intervention required more than the power of the United States. Important political resources had to be mobilised as well.

In carrying out military interventions and wars, every capitalist power must take account of the sentiments and opinions of the broad mass of the population. Not to be guided by public opinion, but rather to create and manipulate it for its own ends.

No government can reveal the underlying, material motives for war—that would generate too much opposition. Consequently, it must undertake a series of ideological preparations, as important, if not more so, than the military ones. Two broad methods can be identified:

1) A scare campaign such as that deployed by the US in launching the war against Iraq, with the bogus claims of weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons or

2) The assertion that military intervention is necessary in the pursuit of a humanitarian goal.

In order to conduct the necessary ideological campaign, the media has to play a central role—to promote the scare campaign, as in the case of Iraq, or to generate the climate for intervention on humanitarian grounds. But, in and of itself, media support is not enough. Political resources have to be mobilised, and here the role of the various middle class radical groups and "lefts" is decisive.

Consider the case of Kosovo in 1999 and the involvement of German imperialism. Given the historical record of Nazi imperialism, and the role of German imperialism in general in south-eastern Europe, military intervention in the Balkans was somewhat problematic for the German government.

It was left to the one-time "street fighter" and radical Joschka Fischer, the foreign minister in the Schröder government, to come up with a solution. Fischer concluded there was no point trying to cover up the record of the Nazis.

On the contrary, the solution to the problem was to point to this record as the chief motivating factor for military action against Serbia. Accordingly, German intervention was necessary, Fischer claimed, in order to prevent another Auschwitz. Who, more than Germany, had responsibility for taking action against alleged ethnic cleansing?

In Australia, the country's involvement in the Vietnam War, coupled with the general hostility to overseas military action which formed its political legacy, made military intervention in East Timor problematic.

Accordingly, the various radical groups, along with the Greens, Democrats and others, asserted that Australia needed to dispatch troops in order to defend the Timorese people against the Indonesian-backed militias.

Like the alchemists of old who promised to turn lead into gold, the radicals insisted that, notwithstanding Australia's support for the Indonesian oppression of East Timor over the previous quarter century, the government of Prime Minister Howard could be forced to act against its own interests and secure a "humanitarian" solution and a "massive victory" for the East Timorese people.

However, far from it being forced on an "unwilling Howard," as claimed by the Democratic Socialist Party and *Green Left Weekly*, military intervention in East Timor opened the way for the implementation of a new agenda by Australian imperialism. As the *Australian Financial Review* noted at the time, after Vietnam there had been a "domestic taboo" on the discussion of Australian military intervention in the region. Now, thanks to the radicals, the taboo had been lifted.

"The calls for action in Timor are ironic because many of those who fostered the climate in which the army was run down were the loudest in demanding Australia intervene there. This call to arms has, for the first time in decades, given broad legitimacy to the proposition that Australia should be able to intervene militarily outside its territory."

In other words, the campaign of the various radical groups opened the way for Australia to play the role of "deputy sheriff" for the US in the Pacific region as well as advancing its own interests. Since the initial intervention in Timor, we have seen military-police deployment to the Solomon Islands, police sent to Papua New Guinea and now the second military intervention to ensure regime change in East Timor.

Let us review the record of the DSP (now the Democratic Socialist Perspective) in the latest intervention.

On May 19, as the Howard government moved warships towards East Timor, the DSP issued a statement entitled "No Australian gunboat diplomacy towards East Timor!". It concluded as follows: "We oppose Canberra's neo-colonial meddling in East Timor. Any attempts by the Australian ruling class to intervene—militarily or politically—under the guise of 'restoring order' should be opposed by all progressive people."

But, it seems, not for very long. On May 31, with Australian forces now actually in Dili, the *Green Left Weekly* published two articles which justified the intervention on precisely those grounds. An article by Jon Lamb quoted the secretary of the Socialist Party of Timor, who claimed that "the presence of the international forces was important in restoring calm."

But it was left to Max Lane, a member of the DSP national executive, to provide the level of sophistry needed to give a "left" twist to a political line that justified support for the Howard government's military intervention.

Lane began his article, entitled "Solidarity with the Timorese people" with a warning that the Australian government was eager to meet the "request" for an intervention force in order to facilitate "its ongoing theft of East Timor's oil and gas". Moreover, it would be used to "justify Australian imperialism's interventionist foreign policy in the region, a strategy that involves the Australian military, police and financial advisors interfering in the running of a number of Australia's small, poor neighbours in the interests of Australian business and at the expense of the people of those nations." Reasons enough, one might have thought, to denounce the intervention and demand the withdrawal of all Australian troops.

But these observations were immediately followed by the claim that: "The general East Timorese population and the full spectrum of political forces support the presence of the international troops in East Timor." An amazing assertion given that two weeks later, DSP leader Peter Boyle was to write on the party's web site that the situation in Timor was "complicated, murky and changing day-by-day" and that there was great difficulty in getting information out of the country and even in finding out

© World Socialist Web Site

what was going on in the next suburb. But, despite these communication problems, Lane was able to ascertain that the military intervention was supported by the mass of the population. What a happy coincidence of "public opinion" and the interests of Australian imperialism!

Even if the arrival of Australian troops were supported by the Timorese people, the responsibility of genuine socialists was not to determine their policy according to so-called "public opinion" but to explain to the masses the political situation, cut through the lies and disinformation campaigns that form an inseparable component of all imperialist politics—above all, during wars and military interventions—and to advance an independent socialist perspective.

Two weeks after Lane's article, Boyle posted a comment on the DSP's discussion site, entitled "What is the DSP's position on the Timor-Leste crisis?" He had to somehow square the political circle: that is, establish how socialists could support the struggle of the East Timorese people and at the same time refuse to demand the withdrawal of Australian troops.

Boyle recalled that when the Australian government had pre-positioned military forces off the coast, the DSP had "condemned what appeared to be an intimidatory exercise held during a congress of the ruling Fretilin party." But there appears to have been a miraculous transformation, of the kind usually only found in the church, because once the troops actually landed, they enjoyed the "full support of the political spectrum in the country."

Accordingly, the "DSP is not campaigning for 'troops out' at this stage" even though, as Boyle acknowledged, "Australian imperialism's purpose in this intervention is to maintain order in the region in its role as regional 'sheriff' to the major imperialist powers, defending the general interests of imperialism and capitalism as well as the direct interests of Australian business in the region."

That being the case, it means that the DSP is nothing less than the political accomplice of Australian imperialism.

The dead-end of "national liberation"

I have spent some time examining the positions of the DSP because they provide an almost textbook lesson in the class nature of radical politics, which protests against what it considers to be the excesses of imperialism, even styles itself "socialist", but which opposes the fight for the political independence of the working class.

In his explanation of the crisis in East Timor, Boyle maintains that the break-up of the nation's armed forces, the police and the political leadership into warring factions is a "consequence of the demobilisation of the heroic national liberation movement that developed in the years under Indonesian occupation".

There was an alternative course, he claims, based on the mobilisation of the Timorese masses on a program of demands to meet their needs, but this was abandoned before 1999 as the leadership of the national liberation movement "opted to work within a bureaucratic state-building framework under the close supervision of the UN."

Accordingly, all factions in the conflict share responsibility for the crisis because "they were willing partners to imperialism in the attempted, but now failing, bureaucratic construction of a capitalist neo-colonial state."

But let us recall that the crucial step in this process was the UN-backed Australian-led military intervention in 1999, supported by all the radical groups on the basis that, whereas in the past, the rallying cry had been "troops out" now it had to be "troops in".

The real purpose of this intervention was not to secure the freedom of the East Timorese people, but to ensure the continued domination of the major capitalist powers over the island and its resources.

If, as Ferdinand LaSalle once put it, the constitution rests upon the cannon, then the foundations of the "neo-colonial state" in East Timor were very definitely laid by the Australian military intervention and subsequent period of UN rule.

However, the DSP campaigned for that intervention because, according to Boyle, it would "advance the national liberation struggle" and was "critical to the victory of the East Timorese national liberation movement. No two ways about it."

The bitter experience of the past seven years has proven just the opposite. The claim that "national liberation" and the establishment of a so-called independent state could bring freedom, democracy and social advancement to the Timorese people has proven to be a cruel illusion. This is not simply the fault of the individual leaders involved. It flows from the nature of the program of so-called national liberation itself.

More than 70 years ago, Leon Trotsky explained that the belated national movements of that time, in Africa and Asia, powerful as they were, would not see a renaissance of the national state. They could only go forward as a component of the world socialist revolution. The experience of the last 50 years, the so-called post-colonial epoch, has fully confirmed this analysis. In no case has the program of so-called national liberation led to genuine or lasting social advance.

Moreover "national independence" has been rendered even more anachronistic by the vast changes in world capitalism over the past 20 years. The globalisation of production, the integration of the productive forces of the world on a level never before attained, means all nationalist programs, based on the erection of still more barriers and borders, can only lead to ever deepening fratricidal conflicts.

The path to genuine freedom and democracy does not lie through separatism but depends on the unification of the working class and oppressed masses in the struggle for international socialism.

Time and again this perspective is greeted with the cry from the opportunists: All very well, but that is not realistic, because right now people are being killed, houses are burning and troops must go in to prevent it taking place. That was the call in 1999 and it is being repeated today. This so-called "realism," however, has only produced, and can only produce, one disaster after another. East Timor is just the latest example.

A realistic program can only be grounded on an objective, that is, scientific appraisal of the political situation.

What does such an appraisal reveal? That a decade and a half after the end of the Cold War, a new era of colonialism and inter-imperialist rivalry has erupted, a conflict which must eventually lead to war.

As the United States seeks to maintain its global hegemony through military means, all the old capitalist great powers, as well as some new ones, are entering the fray. Russia is seeking to re-establish itself as a world power; Japan is rewriting its post-war pacifist constitution as today it leads the charge for sanctions against North Korea and leading politicians call for a pre-emptive strike; China, as the fastest-growing economy in the world, is colliding with the interests of the US. The list goes on. And in this region, Australian imperialism is asserting its claim to its "own backyard" against its rivals.

Having been divided and redivided by two world wars in the 20th century in the struggle for markets, profits and resources, the world is to be divided again. Against this program of militarism, colonialism and war, the working class must advance its own independent socialist perspective for the reorganisation of the world to meet the needs of humanity. That is the wider significance of the political struggle that must be taken up against the Australian military intervention in Timor.

© World Socialist Web Site

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site