

Australia: Labor conference outlines pro-war agenda

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The Australian Labor Party conference held April 27-29 confirmed the opposition party's enthusiastic support for the US alliance and the so-called war on terror. Coming just days after Labor leader Kevin Rudd visited Washington and met with senior Pentagon and State Department officials, the conference rubber-stamped Labor's commitment to aggressively pursue the strategic and economic interests of the Australian corporate elite.

Criticisms of the Howard government's illegal interventions in the Middle East were based solely on tactical considerations. The last Labor conference, held in 2004, maintained a strict silence on the Iraq war. The deepening crisis in Iraq, however, has intensified infighting in ruling circles in both Washington and Canberra. Labor cynically calculates that it may be able to tap into the mass antiwar sentiment among ordinary people by posturing as a critic of the war, while simultaneously backing the ongoing US-led occupation and attacking Howard for not deploying sufficient troops to Afghanistan, East Timor, and the South Pacific.

In his opening address to the conference, Rudd referred to the "spectacular debacle of the Iraq war" as "the single greatest foreign policy disaster since Vietnam". This theme was expanded in a resolution which described the war as a "two billion dollar opportunity cost and massive distraction from dealing with security challenges in Australia's immediate region". The resolution concluded: "Australia should conduct a phased withdrawal of our combat forces currently deployed in Southern Iraq in consultation with the Iraqi government and our allies. Conference agrees that Australia should examine other options to assist Iraq with enhancing its security, economic reconstruction and aid needs."

Labor's attempt to present this as some sort of "antiwar" resolution was a complete fraud. About 500 of the 1,400 Australian personnel in Iraq are classified as "combat forces". Without any deadlines and in close

consultation with the Bush administration—so as not to disrupt the ongoing occupation, which Labor supports—a future Labor government will redeploy these 500 troops to Afghanistan and the South Pacific.

The party's nominal opposition to the 2003 invasion had nothing to do with the criminal nature of the attack, or the campaign of lies about weapons of mass destruction and Baghdad's alleged links with Al Qaeda—in which Labor participated. Instead, the party simply argued there should have been an explicit UN Security Council endorsement. Labor therefore also bears responsibility for the numerous atrocities that have followed—the torture regime at Abu Ghraib, the obliteration of Fallujah, and the Haditha massacre being only the most prominent—and the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians, killed either directly by occupying forces or through the sectarian civil war incited by the occupation authorities.

Labor's main criticism of the Howard government's participation in these crimes is that the US-led occupation has failed to achieve its objective—namely, to subdue the Iraqi people, exploit the country's oil wealth, and successfully advance the geo-strategic interests of US and Australian imperialism. Like the Democrats in the US, the ALP fully subscribes to this agenda—with certain tactical differences. And like the Democrats, Labor supported the findings of the Baker-Hamilton Iraq Study Group, which criticised aspects of Bush's "stay the course" rhetoric, called for intensified diplomatic efforts to resolve the Iraq crisis, and recommended making greater demands on the quisling Iraqi regime headed by Nouri al-Maliki.

Introducing the Iraq resolution to the Labor conference, Robert McClelland, the shadow minister for foreign affairs, stressed that the "phased withdrawal" of Australian combat troops would place pressure on the Iraqi puppet government to find a political solution to the civil war. "As Australian forces withdraw Iraqi forces will step up to fill the breach," he declared. "The message

here is loud and clear to the Iraqi leadership—take charge or lose power.”

In other words, far from being bound up with any opposition to the war, Labor regards an Australian troop redeployment as the means through which the occupying authorities’ aims can be achieved.

Speaking after McClelland, Labor “left” Peter Holding issued an extraordinary denunciation of the Australian people, claiming that while the Labor Party had opposed the war, the problem was that too many people believed Howard’s claims about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. This was nothing less than a rewriting of history. Hundreds of thousands of people attended the largest antiwar demonstrations in Australia’s history in February 2003, while Labor’s former foreign affairs spokesman, Kevin Rudd, issued numerous statements echoing the government’s claims about weapons of mass destruction. “Saddam Hussein possesses weapons of mass destruction—this is a matter of empirical fact,” he told the State Zionist Council of Victoria in October 2002.

The Labor Party is now playing a similar role in relation to Iran by backing the Bush administration’s pretexts for its increasingly aggressive stance. The party’s platform complained that “a major unintended consequence of the war in Iraq has been the emboldening of Iran” and claimed that the country’s nuclear program posed a grave threat to international security. Having expanded its naval presence in the Persian Gulf, the US is already menacing Iran with the threat of a military attack.

Conference delegates, including so-called “lefts”, unanimously endorsed Labor’s militarist and pro-war agenda. Australian Manufacturing Workers Union national president Julius Roe moved an amendment endorsing US aggression in Afghanistan as an effort to “secure peace and stability in the region”. In a pathetic effort to maintain the appearance of distance from the Bush administration, Roe also amended the platform to remove the phrase “war on terror” from the section describing the Afghanistan intervention.

Victorian delegate Jean McLean similarly attempted to provide a “humanitarian” cover for a series of statements outlining Labor’s plans to advance Australia’s domination of the South Pacific. The party has repeatedly attacked Howard from the right on this issue and called for more troops to be deployed in East Timor and the Solomon Islands. The conference also committed a Labor government to “the long-term objective of integrated regional structures and institutions”—in other words, extending Canberra’s direct control over the

impoverished Pacific states.

None of the Howard government’s operations in the region is aimed at advancing the well-being of ordinary people. On the contrary, they are driven by mounting great power rivalry for critical resources and strategic position—the same factors underlying the eruption of US militarism in the Middle East. Prime Minister Howard last year openly admitted that he was concerned about the influence of rivals such as China in Australia’s “special patch”.

The party’s platform endorsed Howard’s military intervention into East Timor in May last year, and backed a treaty signed in 2006 which codified Australia’s illegal plunder of the Greater Sunrise gas reserves in the Timor Sea. The Australian-dominated Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI), which has controlled the Solomons’ state apparatus since 2003, similarly received unanimous support. Unsurprisingly, nothing was said about the Howard government’s aggressive efforts to unseat the Solomons’ government, which has attempted to curtail RAMSI’s influence.

The 2007 Labor conference again demonstrated that the anti-war and anti-militarist sentiments of millions of working class Australians find no expression within the official two-party system. While the Howard government is rightfully despised for its criminal foreign policy record alongside the Bush administration, a Rudd Labor government will be no less ruthless in pursuing the international agenda of Australian imperialism.



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