

Australian government hopes recession will produce military “recruitment bonanza”

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The *Australian* newspaper carried a front-page article on January 6 expressing satisfaction that rising unemployment could spur youth and displaced skilled workers to sign up to the military, providing a "recruitment bonanza" for the Australian Defence Force (ADF).

It should come as no surprise that Murdoch's Australian flagship newspaper applauds the possibility that the wholesale destruction of jobs will effectively produce economic conscription.

The *Australian* has been in the forefront of championing Australian participation in the US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the military incursions in East Timor and the Solomon Islands, all of which the Rudd Labor government has continued since the landslide defeat of the Howard government in November 2007.

Citing the latest enlistment figures, the article declared: "It is hoped that an influx of recruits will signal the end of one of the most prolonged and damaging recruitment crisis in the history of the ADF." It welcomed "the first tentative signs that the economic slowdown is luring more young people to sign up to a life in the military".

During the three months to December 1, ADF job applications jumped by almost 20 percent compared with the same period 12 months earlier. The increases were 27 percent for the air force, 22 percent for the navy and 15 percent for the army. Overall, 6,136 applications were received in the three months, compared to 5,197 for the corresponding period in 2007.

Significantly, the last three months of 2008 saw the onset of mounting job losses as the global economic crisis began to bite. Layoffs spread from the financial sector into the auto industry, manufacturing, services and mining, are impacting on working families already suffering debt and mortgage

stress.

According to the latest official statistics, the number of unemployed workers topped 500,000 in December for the first time since 2006, and financial institutions, including JPMorgan, have warned that the total could double to one million by the end of 2010.

During December the number of full-time jobs fell by 43,900, extending a four-month decline. The unemployment rate climbed to 4.5 percent, and would have risen further but for an increase in the number of people pushed into part-time employment, working fewer than 35 hours a week. In addition, about 85,000 people dropped out of the workforce.

The *Australian* expressed the hope that the worsening slump would assist the military to reverse its serious recruitment crisis, noting that the "military traditionally recruits strongly during economic downturns".

The Rudd government is making similar calculations. Defence Minister Joel Fitzgibbon said this week the ADF had about 53,000 personnel but was still 4,000 short of its immediate target. There is no doubt the single biggest challenge facing the Australian Defence Force in the coming decade is our people and skills shortage, he told the ABC. We're going to have to continue to work very hard to reach the targets... There is an expectation with a weakening labour market people will look for greater security in the Australian Defence Force."

The Labor government has been taking extraordinary measures to try to boost enlistment in order to meet the targets set by the Howard government for a 20 percent expansion of the armed forces by 2016.

In September, Fitzgibbon announced \$6 million in retention bonuses to air force personnel, including \$30,000 each to about 150 air-traffic controllers to stay an extra year. A bonus of \$20,000 was offered to electricians, plumbers and carpenters who committed to two extra years.

The navy, which has been able to crew only three of its six Collins-class submarines, recently offered submariners \$60,000 to serve for an extra 18 months. General service sailors were offered \$24,000. The navy also gave most of its sailors an extended two-month holiday over Christmas, in response both to a shortage of staff and in a drive to attract and retain sailors.

In the army, soldiers from non-technical trades nearing the end of their service have been offered \$25,000 to retrain as metalworkers and avionics technicians. Some technicians have also been offered a bonus of up to \$25,000 to serve another two years.

The ADF's inability to fill its recruitment quotas and to retain trained personnel reflects deep-going opposition among broad sections of youth and working people to Australia's involvement in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and revulsion over the escalating level of US-led militarism.

Between 1999 and 2006, enlistment inquiries plunged by a third—from 150,000 to 100,000 a year, despite the Howard government spending \$500 million in recruitment and retention campaigns.

Many young people who signed up for ADF service did not do so out of military zeal but to gain access to trade training because apprenticeships and other forms of training have become increasingly difficult to obtain. On completing their service in the ADF, significant numbers left immediately to take up civilian jobs. The military's separation rate—the rate at which people quit the military—has fallen over the past three months, but is still above the target of 10 percent.

With unemployment rising, the ADF is now hoping to fulfil the government's plan to increase numbers by around 5,000 to a total of 57,000 by 2016. This would allow the creation of two extra battalions and provide the air force and navy with sufficient crews for their new planes and ships.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd last year declared that the government "would spend what is necessary to develop a strong, flexible and well-equipped Defence Force to serve Australian interests over the next quarter century". His government has already signed off on the purchase of 100 Lockheed Martin F-35 Joint-Strike Fighters, scheduled for delivery between 2013 and 2020, with a total price tag of at least \$15 billion.

In its first budget, last May, the Labor government continued Howard's diversion of funds from social to military spending. It imposed a 3.25 percent "efficiency dividend" on every other government department, but announced that military spending would be boosted by 4 percent in real terms each year for the next four years. The budget also allocated funds to keep more than 3,000 troops overseas, primarily in Afghanistan, Iraq, East Timor and the Solomon Islands.

No less than the Howard government, the Rudd government is firmly committed to participating in US-led wars, which seek to bolster American interests in the Middle East and Central Asia. At the same time, with Washington's backing, Labor is continuing to use troops to pursue Australian neo-colonial interventions in the Asia-Pacific region.

In the pages of the *Australian* and elsewhere, calls have been made already for the Rudd government to quickly answer any request from the incoming Obama administration for more combat troops to join the escalating war in Afghanistan. (See "Eighth Australian soldier dies in Afghanistan amid calls to boost troop numbers")

The fact that the *Australian* and the Rudd government expect soaring unemployment to "lure more young people to sign up to a life in the military" is a further warning that as capitalism descends deeper into economic turmoil and mass unemployment, it has no alternative to offer the working class but militarism and war.



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