

The Australian Labor Party and the war in Afghanistan

Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
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Today marks the eighth anniversary of the US invasion of Afghanistan. From the outset, this neo-colonial war has had the unconditional support of not only the former conservative government of John Howard, but the Australian Labor Party (ALP). Since its election in November 2007, the Rudd Labor government has escalated Australian military involvement. Just as Afghanistan is now referred to as Obama's war, so it has become Rudd's war.

For the Australian military, the war in Afghanistan has already become the longest and most costly conflict since Vietnam, and Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has made clear he intends to deploy troops there for at least another five years. Under the pretext of a "war on terrorism" Washington, with its allies, is attempting to establish an American client state and US military bases in the heart of Central Asia. No less than Iraq, the Afghanistan war is a predatory operation aimed at dominating a region replete with critical reserves of oil and gas. Using its military prowess, US imperialism is seeking to offset its protracted and historic decline relative to its major rivals in Europe and Japan and new challengers, such as China and Russia.

Labor's support for this criminal agenda enjoys the full backing of the political and media establishment, including those elements that expressed certain "reservations" about the Howard government's participation in Iraq.

The Australian media constantly repeats the lie that the Afghan war is a struggle against "terrorism" or a means of establishing "democracy". The so-called "left" and trade union delegates at this year's ALP conference unanimously endorsed a resolution stating "Labor will provide military support to Afghanistan". The anti-Howard online organisation GetUp!, which modeled itself on the anti-Bush MoveOn.org, does not mention the conflict as one of its ongoing "campaigns".

Within the Senate, Greens' leader Bob Brown has called for a debate on the deployment of Australian forces to Afghanistan. The Greens, however, have no differences in principle with the UN-endorsed occupation by American and NATO forces. Brown declared, for example, in August that he believed Australian troops were in Afghanistan to fight for "liberty, democracy and decency". His sole reason for advocating a withdrawal of Australian troops is

that that they should be deployed more directly in the "national interest", i.e., to further Canberra's neo-colonial operations in the South Pacific. The Victorian branch of the Greens demonstrated the organisation's essentially pro-war stance by refusing to endorse protests this weekend to mark the anniversary.

The support or silence over the Afghan war is all the more striking given the stance of the "lefts", unions, GetUp! and the Greens during the 2007 election. At that time, they argued that Rudd's pledge to withdraw the small number of Australian combat troops in Iraq was evidence that Labor represented an "anti-war" alternative to Howard.

Even more pernicious was the role played by the middle class protest organisations such as Socialist Alliance. These tendencies declared that while Labor was no less pro-war than Howard, its token differences over Iraq demonstrated it was a "lesser evil" and "more responsive" to mass pressure.

Labor's record, both in opposition and government, underscores the utterly dishonest nature of this campaign. The ALP is a committed defender of the US-Australia alliance and has made support for the war in Afghanistan a corner-stone of its foreign policy since 9/11. It actively advocated Australian military involvement following the initial invasion in 2001, condemned the Howard government for withdrawing troops in late 2002 and agitated for the redeployment of combat forces in 2005.

The Labor Party's differences with the Howard government over Iraq were purely tactical. It shared the view of a significant faction of the American political establishment, which feared the war in Iraq was undermining US interests and distracting attention from Afghanistan and Central Asia. In 2008, the Democratic Party chose Barack Obama—who was promoted by ex-lefts and liberals in the US and around the world as a "progressive"—to be the public advocate of this position.

Like Rudd, Obama was portrayed as "anti-war". His administration, however, has pursued the same essential agenda as that of Bush. The military suppression of armed resistance in Iraq, at the cost of over one million Iraqi lives, has enabled US imperialism to redirect forces to Afghanistan. Obama has already dispatched 21,000 additional troops and as many as 40,000 more

may be sent, adding to the 100,000 American and NATO personnel already in the country.

Since Obama came to power, Labor has marched in lockstep with the tactical shift in US foreign policy. It has increased the Australian military contribution in Afghanistan from 1,100 to 1,550, and if Rudd is asked by Obama to send even more troops, particularly for frontline combat operations when Dutch forces leave in mid-2010, there is no doubt that he will comply.

Special Air Service (SAS) troops and army commandos are already operating as death squads to hunt down and assassinate alleged insurgents in Afghan villages and towns. In numerous incidents, Afghan civilians have been killed or maimed. Other Australian forces are occupying the province of Uruzgan, where the population is overwhelmingly opposed to the foreign occupation.

Casualties are rising. In the nearly two years since Labor took office, eight Australian soldiers have been killed and dozens wounded, compared with three deaths in Afghanistan and two non-combat fatalities in Iraq in the preceding six years.

The ex-left organisations that promoted Labor as the “lesser evil” in 2007 bear political responsibility for this escalating Australian involvement in Afghanistan. Their campaign for the election of a Rudd government was a conscious effort to block the development of an independent political movement of the working class against both big business parties.

Labor’s support for the criminal wars of aggression being waged by Washington is a profound expression of the class interests that it serves—those of the Australian corporate and financial elite. Like Howard, Labor’s primary concern is preserving Australia’s postwar ANZUS alliance with the United States, which is pivotal to investment, trade and access to industrial and military technology.

Moreover, the alliance is central to Australian imperialism’s ability to maintain its position as a dominant regional power in the South Pacific, in the face of growing influence by China and other countries. The Australian troops who took control of East Timor in 1999 and the Solomon Islands in 2003 were, in the final analysis, only able to do so with US backing. In return, Washington requires Australian participation in its own wars of aggression.

Labor’s support for US militarism is matched by its domestic agenda. As the global economic crisis worsens, neo-colonial operations abroad go hand in hand with deepening attacks on the working class at home. Rudd is presiding over a wholesale assault on wages, working hours and conditions, and the further dismantling of public health, education and other essential social services. At the same time, his government has budgeted tens of billions of dollars to expand the armed forces to prepare for even bloodier wars in the future.

The same organisations that advocated Labor’s election now sense that opposition to the war in Afghanistan has reached unprecedented levels. Opinion polls show that the majority of the population opposes any involvement and more than two thirds reject sending any more troops.

The Socialist Alliance-dominated Stop the War Coalition is responding with another cynical campaign to prevent this opposition from becoming a conscious political repudiation of the Labor Party. Its demonstrations are aimed at sowing the illusion that protests can “pressure the Rudd government to bring the troops home”. They will provide a platform for a handful of union officials to offer demagogic criticisms of the war, while the trade union movement as a whole continues to support Labor’s foreign and domestic agenda.

Opponents of militarism must reject the futile protest politics behind the Afghanistan war anniversary demonstrations and draw the necessary conclusions from past experiences. In February and March 2003, the largest ever protests took place around the world, including in Australia, against the impending US invasion of Iraq. Those protests, however, were dominated by similarly fatal illusions: that the UN or France and Germany (all of which continue to back the war in Afghanistan) would stop the Bush administration’s criminal aggression.

Any genuine struggle against war involves a political fight to abolish its root cause—the capitalist profit system. Colonialism and inter-imperialist conflict are the inevitable outcome of an economic order based on private profit and the division of the world into competing nation states. In Australia, the precondition for a mass political movement against war is a political break with the Labor Party and its pro-capitalist program and the struggle to build a party of the working class based on socialist internationalism—the rational and harmonious reorganisation of the world economy to meet the interests of the mass of ordinary people, not the profits and privileges of a tiny minority. That is the perspective for which the Socialist Equality Party fights, along with its sister parties in the International Committee of the Fourth International around the world.



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