

The political significance of the WikiLeaks revelations

Nick Beams

23 December 2010

The following report was delivered by Nick Beams, SEP (Australia) national secretary to SEP public meetings in Melbourne and Sydney on December 20 and 21. Socialist Equality Party national organiser James Cogan's report can be read here.

The extraordinary measures being undertaken against WikiLeaks and its founder Julian Assange by the United States and other imperialist governments around the world point to the profound political significance of what the US cables have revealed.

The past decade has been replete with important political experiences that have left their mark on mass consciousness. It began with the theft of an election in the United States in 2000. Then followed the still-unexplained events of September 2001, the invasion of Afghanistan and, in 2003, the war against Iraq, launched on the basis of the lie that the Iraqi regime possessed “weapons of mass destruction.”

The WikiLeaks' release has sent a shockwave around the world because the real nature of so-called diplomacy is being revealed.

It recalls the reverberations that accompanied an earlier release of diplomatic secrets—that carried out by Leon Trotsky as People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs in the Soviet government that came to power in the Russian Revolution of November 1917.

In a statement accompanying the release of the documents from the files of the tsarist government, Trotsky wrote: “Secret diplomacy is a necessary tool for a propertied minority which is compelled to deceive the majority in order to subject it to its interests. Imperialism, with its dark plans of conquest and its robber alliances and deals, developed the system of secret diplomacy to the highest level. The struggle against imperialism, which is exhausting and destroying the peoples of Europe, is at the same time a struggle against capitalist diplomacy, which has cause enough to fear the light of day. The Russian people, and the peoples of Europe and the whole world, should learn the documentary truth about the plans forged in secret by the financiers and industrialists together with their parliamentary and diplomatic agents. The peoples of Europe have paid for the right to this truth with countless sacrifices and universal economic desolation.”

These words, written more than 90 years ago, resonate so powerfully today because, as the WikiLeaks documents make clear, the same imperialist intrigues against the world's people are still being carried out. The documents of the tsarist regime were released in the midst of World War I, exposing the real nature of that war. Today's release of documents comes as we enter the second decade of the unending “war on terror” and as preparations for war against China are under active discussion in imperialist military and political circles.

In one of his first comments on the WikiLeaks revelations, Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd spoke for all imperialist governments when he insisted on the necessity for secret diplomacy. His remarks are worth quoting in full:

‘I don't believe anyone has profited from what has happened with the

unauthorised release of classified information. You see diplomacy is necessary. Diplomacy is done in secret because diplomacy seeks to solve problems for which there are no other public solutions. Therefore what is at stake here is the essence of how we deal with international problems; the machinery through which we deal with international problems—the mechanism through which we deal with international problems, in the language in which we deal with international problems. And when this is all put into the public domain, it's a problem for all of us to combine our efforts to deal with some of our fundamental challenges. Therefore we in Australia condemn the release of this material. It helps nobody. In fact it is a real problem for us all.’

What are some of the issues for which there are no public solutions, and which create a “real problem for us all” if secret discussions on them are released?

Hillary Clinton's orders to US diplomats to obtain password information, biometric details and the credit numbers of UN representatives certainly fall into this category. The gathering of such information, which is a criminal offence, is being carried out for the purposes of blackmail. Such information is extremely useful ... a UN diplomat can be quietly informed that if he or she does not vote in a certain way, then certain potentially embarrassing information, obtained through access to credit card and other details, might find its way into the public arena.

And it certainly creates a “real problem for us all” when the remarks of then Labor leader Kim Beazley to the US embassy in September 2006 are released. According to the cable: “The government, and Foreign Minister Downer in particular, had badly misstated the facts, Beazley charged, when Downer claimed in August of 2004 in Beijing that a conflict between the U.S. and China over Taiwan would not necessarily trigger Australia's ANZUS obligations to aid the U.S. In the event of a war between the United States and China, Australia would have absolutely no alternative but to line up militarily beside the U.S., Beazley said. Otherwise, the alliance would be effectively dead and buried, something Australia could never afford to see happen.”

In the same conversation in which he committed Australia to a US-led war against China, Beazley insisted the Labor Party supported military involvement in Afghanistan and “would continue to do so until Hell freezes over.”

And then there is the discussion of Rudd with newly appointed US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on March 24, 2009. Rudd, calling himself a “brutal realist on China”, argued for “integrating” China into the international community, while “also preparing to deploy force if everything goes wrong.” In other words if China did not accept the geopolitical framework deemed necessary by the US—that is what integration into the international community means—then war would result.

The list goes on and on. The content of these discussions, conducted in secret behind the backs of the world's people, is exactly as Trotsky described it ... the “dark plans of conquest ... robber alliances and deals.”

Let me turn now to the broader questions raised by the WikiLeaks revelations and the keen interest with which they are being read and followed by people around the world. One young woman noted at a Sydney demonstration in support of Assange: “George Orwell said, ‘In a time of universal deceit, telling the truth becomes a revolutionary act.’ And we do live in a time of universal deceit.”

She is right. But this universal deceit is not simply the product of individuals. It is the outcome of a social system.

In politics, as Trotsky explained, the lie serves as a function of the class structure of society: “The oppressors erect the lie into a system of befuddling the masses in order to maintain their rule. ... Revolution explodes the social lie. Revolution speaks the truth. Revolution begins by giving things and social relationships their real names.”

And we can say conversely, the desire for truth, the demand for truth and the deep-felt appreciation of the receipt of truth signify the onset of a new period of social revolution.

It is not just in the sphere of diplomacy and in relations among the imperialist powers that the lie performs an essential social and political function. Lies and mystification are built into the very structure of capitalist economy and society. The whole of Marx’s analysis, above all in *Capital*, is devoted to revealing the real social relationships that lie behind, but which are concealed by, the everyday “realities” or appearance-forms of capitalism.

The scientific perspective of Marxism is concerned, above all, with tearing away the veils behind which social relations are concealed, and laying bare the truth of capitalist society and its class structure and, on that basis, building a revolutionary movement to overthrow it.

The extent to which the scientific analysis of Marxism can be grasped by broad masses, and made the basis of their political strivings and struggles, depends on the development of objective conditions that make it possible for millions to grasp what could not be seen or understood previously.

The deepening crisis of world capitalism, into which the WikiLeaks cables are providing an important insight, is creating the objective conditions where the social, economic and political relationships, covered over by mystifications and lies for decades, can now be laid bare.

Consider the last 30 years. In the 1980s, former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher advanced the slogan of the ruling elites—“there is no alternative”. It even acquired an acronym—“TINA”. There was no possible alternative to the dominance of the “market” and the financial and political interests it served. Calls for social reform were met with the cry: there is no money. Growing social inequality was not the outcome of the structure of class society and its economy, but the fault of the individual and his or her failings.

But when the global financial crisis hit with the collapse of Lehman Brothers in September 2008, there was no shortage of money to bail out the banks and finance houses. It has been estimated that the total amount handed over to them is equivalent to around one quarter of global GDP. The US Federal Reserve alone made available to banks and finance companies a total of \$3,000 billion without any legislation coming before Congress. As a comment in the *Financial Times* noted: “Wall Street institutions that now walk tall again survived only because the taxpayers saved them.” Goldman Sachs turned to the Fed for finance on 84 occasions and Morgan Stanley 212 times.

Another political fiction concerns the role of the state. How many gallons of ink have been used in an attempt to refute Marx’s analysis that the executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the bourgeoisie as a whole. But what has the test of historical events revealed?

As the global financial crisis broke, governments and central banks in every country acted exactly as Marx had analysed, when they took on to their books the worthless toxic assets of the banks and financial

institutions. Today, under the demands of the financial markets, these governments organise the destruction of what remains of the social welfare system, in order to provide the resources to repay the debts incurred by the banks’ often criminal and semi-criminal activities.

Liberal political philosophy has always taken issue with the Marxist conception that, in the final analysis, the state consists of bodies of armed men to enforce the dictatorship of capital. “Not at all!”, the academics, journalists and other pundits insist. “This is just another Marxist crudity!”

The state, they tell us, is based on the rule of laws, operating within the framework of parliamentary democracy. But the truth of Marxist analysis is being verified every day as the army and police are mobilised against students and workers in Spain, Greece, Britain and other countries across Europe protesting and demonstrating against the austerity budgets dictated by financial markets.

And in this country, the proscriptions of the Labor government’s Fair Work Australia legislation, which outlaw virtually all industrial activity in defence of jobs, wages and conditions, are being enforced by a series of highly-organised police attacks.

Likewise, the claim that justice somehow rises above class interest is being refuted every day in the persecution of Julian Assange by judicial authorities acting under pressure from the US government.

Anyone who believes that the measures against Assange are being determined by legal considerations will no doubt be welcoming Santa Claus as he comes down the chimney on Friday night.

Great historical lies are also being exposed. One of the greatest of all is that the Russian Revolution was some kind of criminal conspiracy which crushed the bud of Russian liberal democracy just as it was about to bloom. The Cold War liberals insisted, year in, year out, that democracy would flourish in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe if only capitalism were restored. Twenty years ago their wish was fulfilled. What has been the outcome? Russia is ruled by the criminal Putin regime, which functions as a kind of Mafia, while in Hungary, to name just one Eastern European country, Jews once again live in fear of the rise of anti-Semitic parties.

One of the most significant political realities laid bare by the WikiLeaks cables is the extent to which the United States and its agencies are involved in every aspect of Australian political life. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that Australia is a virtual US client state. The chief conduits for this state of affairs are the Australian Labor Party and the trade union bureaucracy.

All those involved in the ousting of Rudd in the June 23-24 coup were in regular contact and discussion with US embassy officials. One of the key figures, the right-wing NSW Senator Mark Arbib, was a “protected” contact who had been involved with US officials from the time he began his rise to prominence through the ranks of NSW Labor. The former CIA operative Philip Agee in his book on the workings of the CIA, *Inside the Company*, distinguished between operatives and agents. Operatives were people who were directly employed by the CIA. Agents were those who reported to it and acted in its interests. Arbib was, in that sense, an agent of the American state.

When his role was revealed, one of his mentors, the former NSW right wing ALP bureaucrat and Labor senator Stephen Loosley, insisted there was nothing unusual or untoward in Arbib’s activities. There was regular discussion and contact between the Labor Party hierarchy and the US embassy. Loosley recalled informing the embassy in 1991 that Keating would replace Hawke as the leader of the Labor Party and as prime minister.

Loosley made clear that what Arbib was doing had been going on for decades. Arbib did not have to initiate contact with the embassy. He was integrated into an already existing network.

The existence of this network is widely known in journalistic circles. As *The Australian* journalist Paul Kelly put it: “The tradition of political

intimacy between the ALP right wing and the US has passed to a new generation; witness Chris Bowen, Stephen Conroy, Bill Shorten and Arbib, each of them increasingly wired in to US networks.” [*The Australian*, December 10, 2010]

In other words, the revelations about Arbib and others are only the contemporary exposure of a deep-going historical relationship. Let us probe its origins, and examine the key political issues it raises.

The fundamental role of the Labor Party, and social democracy in general, is not, as we know, to fight to mobilise the working class for the overthrow of capitalist society. Rather, its central task is to subordinate the working class to capitalist rule.

The social democrats recognise, above all else, the bourgeoisie as the master of the fate of society. But relations within the bourgeoisie of any given country, and between different components of the bourgeoisie internationally, change as a result of historical developments. These changes find their expression in the orientation of social democracy.

Writing in the 1920s on the situation in Europe, Trotsky made an important analysis of this question. The social democrats in Europe had become quite critical of their “own” bourgeoisie, he noted. How was this to be explained? It was not the result of some oppositional sentiment among their leaders, all of whom had played the key role in betraying the upsurge of the European working class that followed the Russian revolution, but reflected the changed position of the European bourgeoisie itself.

With the rise of American imperialism in the immediate aftermath of World War I and its intervention into what were previously European affairs, a new master had entered the house. The social democrats, Trotsky explained, now recognised that they had to adapt themselves to the “master of the masters”, that is, to American imperialism.

Historical developments in Australia took a slightly different course. The Australian bourgeoisie defined its interests and privileges within the framework of the British Empire and its attitude was reflected in the position of the Labor Party. On the eve of World War I, the Labor Party leader Andrew Fisher declared that a Labor government would be committed to the defence of the British empire to the “last man and the last shilling.”

The post-war situation brought great shifts, and the rise of new imperialist powers. In the 1930s, the Fourth International explained that in the coming conflict between them, the Australian bourgeoisie would align itself with whichever imperialist power could best defend it against Japan. As soon as the Pacific War erupted with the bombing of Pearl Harbour on December 7, 1941, it was clear that such a task could not be carried out by Britain. The speed of the Japanese advance demonstrated that the British hold on what Whitehall called the “Far East” had collapsed.

In his New Year message at the end of 1941, Labor Prime Minister John Curtin announced his government’s new orientation: “Without any inhibitions of any kind, I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom.”

I doubt very much whether Kim Beazley has ever read Trotsky’s pamphlet *Europe and America*, which analyses the shifting allegiances of social democracy. But the former Labor leader provided a concise summary of Trotsky’s conclusions in his conversation with the US ambassador in September 2006.

The minutes of the discussion read: “Beazley reinforced Rudd’s comments on Labor’s historically strong support for the Alliance, recalling that the immediate post-war Menzies-led Liberal government had real concerns over Washington’s policies at the time, which it believed promoted destabilising decolonisation in Southeast Asia. Labor, by contrast, was guided by Prime Minister Curtin’s embrace of the United States during World War II as the region’s primary hope for a lasting postwar peace. ... Australians remained obsessed with the United

States, and followed Washington’s every move, perhaps to a fault.”

In other words, in the war and its immediate aftermath Labor embraced the new “master of masters”, US imperialism, while the Liberals under Menzies tended to align themselves with the fast declining British empire.

Now there is a new shift in the situation—the palpable crisis of US imperialism. Confronting its own weakening economic position and the rise of new rivals, it resorts to militarism and oppression, which it organises daily, behind the scenes. The great service of WikiLeaks is that it has brought some of these activities into the open.

The attack on WikiLeaks and the persecution of Julian Assange have rightly aroused the opposition of millions of people around the world. This is because the revelations have started to cast light on some of the bitter experiences of the past decade—the bogus “war on terror”, the lies used to launch the war on Iraq, the ever deepening attack on democratic rights, the enrichment of a tiny upper layer of society through what can only be described as criminal financial activities, the growth of social inequality, to name just a few.

There is a concern among widening layers of the population, especially among young people, that the truth must be brought out; that behind a web of lies, capitalist politicians, irrespective of their nominal political colouration, are implementing policies that threaten the very future of mankind.

These sentiments are entirely correct. But as yet, they lack a clear political perspective. That can only be developed by tackling the problem at its source, understanding that the dangers of war, the assault on democratic rights and the deepening social and economic disorders are all expressions of a breakdown of the capitalist order itself.

The fight for the truth and for democratic rights means a struggle to overthrow the social system that, by its very essence, is the source of lies and oppression. And it means a turn to the international working class, the only social force capable of overthrowing the imperialist order, and arming it with a revolutionary perspective and program.

The response of governments around the world to the attack on WikiLeaks and the persecution of Assange signifies that, within ruling circles, there is no constituency for the defence of democratic rights. How could there be, when every government is implementing attacks on the social position of the working class, while at the same time making preparations, behind the scenes, for military attacks against rival powers.

No one, I hasten to add, should believe that the opposition in this country from within leading media and political circles to the attack on WikiLeaks reflects the existence of some exceptional Australian commitment to democratic rights. The same media figures who signed the statement expressing concern over the attack on WikiLeaks, and declaring their commitment to a “free and fearless press”, all regurgitated the lies about “weapons of mass destruction.” Their over-riding concern is not the defence of democracy, but fears that Australia, which is ever more dependent on China, is being chained to the bloody chariot of American imperialism as it hurtles into war.

The defence of democratic rights is a class question. It must be based on a political movement of the working class. That means building a new mass revolutionary socialist party. There must be a complete break, not only with the Labor Party and the entire trade union apparatus—these utterly bought and paid for agencies of imperialism—but from all those pseudo-left organisations that seek to tie the working class, in one way or another, to these apparatuses.

The global financial crisis has revealed, in the economic sphere, that all the problems confronting the working class are international in scope. Now the WikiLeaks cables have underscored the same point in the political sphere.

The way forward lies in the building of a party which, in its program and orientation, fights for the international unification of the working class. That is the perspective of the International Committee of the Fourth

International, the world party of socialist revolution, and its Australian section, the Socialist Equality Party. We urge you to join its ranks.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact