

Australian government calls for air strikes on Gaddafi forces

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Australian Foreign Minister and former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has placed the Gillard Labor government at the forefront of agitation by the Western powers for military action against Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi. The barely concealed aim of any imperialist intervention would be to ensure Gaddafi's replacement by a regime subservient to American and other great power interests.

Speaking in Israel yesterday, Rudd again demanded that the United Nations Security Council impose a "no-fly zone" over Libya. This would mean deploying US and NATO warplanes to attack the Libyan air force and prevent it carrying out operations against the anti-Gaddafi opposition in the east and west of the country. "The time for a no-fly zone has come," he declared. "The international community must rise to this challenge, the UN Security Council must rise to this challenge and NATO must rise to this challenge."

Rudd has left no doubt that the Australian position is that NATO should take action unilaterally if a resolution in the UN were vetoed by Russia or China—using as a precedent the NATO no-fly zone enforced against Iraq from 1991 until the US-led invasion in 2003.

During an interview with Australian television last week, Rudd brushed aside the concerns raised by US Defense Secretary Robert Gates that a no-fly zone would require attacks on Libya's ground-based air defence systems. The "bottom line," Rudd declared, "is that the Gaddafi regime is not finished".

Speaking on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "Lateline" program, Rudd did not rule out the prospect that Australian aircraft would be deployed as a part of any operation. He dodged the question by noting Australia's

distance from North Africa and asserting that NATO was the "first place that people would look" for the air power to enforce a no-fly zone.

Rudd is essentially functioning as a mouthpiece for the Obama administration, which has been anxious for its European allies to play the leading role in any attack on Libya, due to the deep popular hatred of American imperialism throughout the Middle East.

The purpose of deploying US or European air power would be to dramatically alter the military balance of forces in the civil war that is developing between Gaddafi loyalists, who still control the capital Tripoli, and the self-proclaimed National Libyan Council, which is based in the eastern city of Benghazi and headed by Gaddafi's former justice minister Mustafa Abdel Jalil.

Jalil, a thoroughly pro-imperialist figure, has called for the enforcement of a no-fly zone that would result in the destruction of the Libyan air force. With air superiority, his forces would be able to carry out their plan for an assault on Tripoli and the removal of the regime. Any government he headed would move to suppress the rebellion among Libya's workers and poor, and protect the vast oil and gas interests of major US and European transnational energy companies.

Rudd has based his calls for imperialist intervention on the demagogic allegation that Gaddafi is using his air force to attack the civilian population. Last Monday, in an address to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, Rudd went as far as to compare the bombing of rebel-held positions in Libya with the fascist bombing of the Spanish town of Guernica by German and Italian planes in 1937.

"Guernica," Rudd declared, "is known throughout the

world for the bombing of the civilian population. We have seen evidence of that in Libya. Let us not simply stand idly by while similar atrocities are committed again.”

The position of Rudd and the Australian government is hypocritical in the extreme. Australia was one of only a handful of countries that contributed troops to the illegal US-led invasions of Afghanistan in October 2001 and Iraq in March 2003. The occupations of both countries have led to hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths, including thousands who have been killed by indiscriminate US aerial bombardments. Gaddafi has even invoked the savage US bombing of the Iraqi city of Fallujah in 2004 as a model for his regime’s attacks on Benghazi and other opposition-held towns.

Suffice to say, the Labor Party in Australia has never raised a single concern over human rights and international law in regard to the criminal actions of the US government and military. Instead, while Rudd agitates over Libya, Prime Minister Julia Gillard is currently conducting a high-profile visit to Washington to deepen the strategic and military cooperation between the United States and Australia, primarily directed against the rising influence of China in the Asia-Pacific region.

While protecting US interests and those of Australian-based corporations in the Middle East is the main concern of the Australian government, an element in Rudd’s posturing and rhetoric is his attempt to repair his personal standing with the US ruling elite.

Rudd became prime minister in September 2007, when the Labor Party won office from the conservative government of John Howard. He continued Howard’s full support for US militarism and the fraudulent “war on terrorism”. Australian forces were only withdrawn from Iraq in 2008 when they were no longer required, while troop numbers were increased in Afghanistan.

Rudd subsequently fell out of favour with the Obama White House, however, due to his reluctance to commit even greater forces to Afghanistan and his hesitation to fully align Australia with the increasingly aggressive US stance toward China. Rudd instead advocated the establishment of regional forums that could try to bring about some type of “power-sharing” arrangement between Washington and Beijing.

Rudd was ousted in June last year in a political coup orchestrated by Labor’s factional leaders. The US was intimately involved. WikiLeaks cables have revealed the extent of American animosity toward Rudd’s foreign policies and also the intimate relations between the main coup organisers in the Labor Party and the US embassy.

The coup occurred just hours after Rudd’s defence minister John Faulkner had announced that Australian forces would pull out of Afghanistan within two to four years. Gillard, in stark contrast, has publicly stated that Australian troops would remain in Central Asia until the “end of the decade at least”.

Immediately following the coup, Rudd travelled to Washington to complain over his demise, but in the words of an unnamed US diplomat was told to “just suck it up”. Rudd has clearly taken the advice. Along with the rest of the Labor Party, he is prepared to serve as the advocate for a US imperialist agenda.

Labor’s stance is so transparently neo-colonial it has even provoked reservations from Alexander Downer, the foreign minister in the Howard government. In office, Downer endlessly parroted the lies about “weapons of mass destruction” to justify the Iraq war. This week, writing in the *Adelaide Advertiser*, he warned that US and European air strikes would more than likely trigger opposition among the Libyan people, because such an operation would be seen as “just a bunch of aggressive foreigners who look as though they are after Libya’s oil”. Instead, Downer suggested, neighbouring Arab states should be prevailed upon to intervene on behalf of the great powers.



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