US military bases in Australia: The role of Pine Gap

James Cogan—SEP candidate for the Senate in South Australia
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The Socialist Equality Party is centrally raising in its 2013 election campaign the necessity for the working class in Australia and internationally to oppose the preparations being made by US imperialism, with the backing of the Gillard Labor government, for war against China. Behind the backs of the population, Labor has offered up Darwin as a base for a US Marine task force, airfields and training ranges in northern Australia for more extensive use by American long-range bombers, and ports in Perth and elsewhere for expanded visits by US warships and nuclear-armed submarines. The Australian armed forces are being structured at every level to function as a direct adjunct of US operations in the region.

The purpose of the stepped-up military activity and basing arrangements are surrounded in secrecy, misinformation and outright lies—including the claim by Defence Minister Stephen Smith that "there are no US bases in Australia." In fact, the new facilities being opened up represent an expansion of the US military's longstanding use of Australia, facilitated by successive Labor and Liberal-led governments since World War II, for some of its most critical bases in the world.

Chief among them is what is known as Joint Defence Facility Pine Gap, which was established in central Australia near the town of Alice Springs in 1970. Pine Gap is one of three major satellite tracking stations operated by US intelligence agencies and military. The others are located in Colorado and Britain.

The tightly-secured base consists of 14 large satellite radomes—popularly known as "the golf balls"—which shield satellite receiving antennas, as well as 12 external antennas. It has a staff of between 800 and 1,000, the majority of whom are American.

Every day, agents of the US National Security Agency, the Central Intelligence Agency, the intelligence branches of the US Air Force, Army, Navy and Marine Corp, as well as Australia's intelligence agencies, process vast amounts of data that is transmitted to Pine Gap by US spy satellites as they pass over the Middle East, Central Asia, the Indian Ocean, China and South East Asia and the Pacific Ocean.

Under legislation enacted by the Labor government in 2009, in response to court challenges to existing laws banning public access to the facility, it is a crime punishable by up to seven years' imprisonment to enter its perimeters, or to acquire "a photograph, sketch, plan, model, article, note or other document of, or relating to" Pine Gap. The base is the only part of Australian air space subjected to a Flight 180 prohibition, meaning it is a criminal offence to fly an aircraft above it below 18,000 feet.

Pine Gap's primary functions include intercepting an array of communications signals, including the transmissions sent to non-US satellites, and monitoring for missile launches and nuclear activity. According to David Rosenberg, a NSA officer who worked there from 1990 to 2008 and wrote a carefully vetted book, *Inside Pine Gap*, about his experiences, the base focuses its attention on "various 'hot spots' of military interest." He described its critical role in the planning and conduct of the 1991 Gulf War on Iraq. He worked as part of teams trying to identify Somali insurgents fighting against the US invasion in 1993, monitoring the communications of the Yugoslav government and military before and during the 1999 US-led war in the Balkans, and operations to locate Osama bin Laden.

Rosenberg's book leaves little doubt that Pine Gap was vital in the illegal US invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001 and 2003. It would have served as a key facility identifying targets to be bombed

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and people to be assassinated by ground-based death squads. It would also be pivotal to ongoing operations against Afghan insurgents and identifying the targets for US drone missile strikes in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Yemen.

Given its location in Asia, Pine Gap is certainly central to the new "hot spot" of US military interest—the communications of China's government and military, and the locations of its nuclear and conventional armed forces and command centres. The Obama administration's pivot to Asia is bound up with preparations for a confrontation and war with China to prevent Beijing emerging as a potential challenge to US dominance in the region. More and more recklessly, the US is seeking to reverse its historic decline by using its military might to maintain is global dominance.

The US military's AirSea Battle strategy involves planning and deploying forces in readiness for devastating strikes against Chinese command and communications centres, alongside a blockade of China's critical trade routes by naval and air forces, including those operating from northern Australia. The result is the steady build-up of tensions between the US and China. Any outbreak of open hostilities would not remain at a conventional level, but would almost certainly escalate into the catastrophic use of nuclear weapons, including against key US military targets in Australia.

Pine Gap is strategically located to receive US spy satellite information on China. In late 2009, as US military strategy was shifting to a focus on China, a short statement was released by the Australian Defence department announcing that the base's "antenna farm" was going to be "upgraded." The upgrade is scheduled to be completed in 2014. The purpose and cost of the expansion has never been made public.

The working class has the right to know: is the US government and military, aided by the Australian state and intelligence agencies, using the base at Pine Gap to prepare target lists for both conventional and nuclear strikes in China? What role in US war preparations are the other US bases and training facilities in Australia playing?

The US war preparations against China will not be stopped through protests and appeals to the Obama administration or the Gillard government, but through the development of a broad, international anti-war movement of the working class fighting to abolish the root cause of militarism and war—the capitalist profit system. The truth about Pine Gap will be revealed through the establishment of a workers' government based on socialist policies that repudiates the US alliance, closes down the US military bases and dismantles the entire military apparatus of the Australian state.

I urge workers and youth across Australia and around the world to support the SEP election campaign, which is part of the fight by the International Committee of the Fourth International to give the widespread opposition internationally to the growing dangers of war a powerful voice and win the working class to the perspective of world socialism.

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