

Melbourne public meeting examines role of Australian imperialism in East Timor

Our reporters
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Students from East Timor and Australia, as well as academics, professionals and retired people, attended a public meeting in Melbourne on April 30 called to discuss the Australian government's latest moves to retain its grip over the vast oil and gas reserves in the Timor Sea.

Convened by the Institute of Post Colonial Studies, the meeting was titled, "Justice at Sea: the dispute between Australia and Timor-Leste."

Last December, the government conducted raids by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) to seize documents and block evidence by a former intelligence officer exposing an illegal bugging operation of Timor's cabinet room during negotiations on an oil and gas revenue sharing treaty in 2004. In March, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) effectively sanctioned the eavesdropping, refusing to order Canberra to hand back the sensitive documents.

The speakers at the meeting were Deborah Cummins, an Australian former aid worker in East Timor; Joao Noronha, a PhD student at Melbourne's Victoria University; and Michael Head, a law professor and WSWs correspondent.

Cummins spoke as a representative of the Timor Sea Justice Campaign, which appeals to the Australian government to give East Timor a "fair go" by establishing a maritime boundary between the two countries in accordance with international law. Such a border, halfway between the two coastlines, would give East Timor control over nearly all the undersea reserves.

Cummins stated that the dispute between the two countries was "not just about oil and gas but about sovereignty," reflecting the group's call for East Timor to become a truly "independent and sovereign nation."

Noronha referred to the wide gap between what was

promised to East Timorese people when independence was declared in 2002, and the poor living conditions and corruption that they face. He commented that oil revenues could be "either a blessing or a curse." Nevertheless, he defended the role of the East Timorese government, saying that it was doing its best to deliver a vision for the population.

In his remarks, Head drew out the long and sordid history of Australia's treatment of East Timor, and the bankruptcy of the East Timorese leadership's perspective of establishing a capitalist statelet on the half island.

Head said Canberra's policy could be summed up in two words: "oil and gas." The speaker traced this thread through Canberra's support for the Portuguese fascist regime's colonial rule until 1974, the Whitlam Labor government's encouragement of the 1975 invasion by General Suharto's Indonesian junta and the Howard Liberal government's 1999 military intervention to back the formation of the nominally independent state of East Timor.

In academic circles, Head commented, it had become unfashionable to refer to the word imperialism—at least when referring to the US and its allies—but this term accurately described Australian policy toward East Timor.

Head tackled the illusion that the 1999 intervention was motivated by a humanitarian concern for the plight of the Timorese people. "The sole purpose of the military deployment, headed by Major General Peter Cosgrove, was to secure and ensure Australian hegemony, as a junior partner of the United States, over the Timor Sea reserves and the strategically-located half island in the Indonesian archipelago."

The speaker indicted the role of pseudo-left groups, such as the Democratic Socialist Party, now named

Socialist Alliance, that held demonstrations demanding Australian intervention, and former anti-Vietnam War protesters like Bob Gould who switched from calling for “troops out” in Vietnam to “troops in” in Timor.

“As the *Australian Financial Review* noted at the time, the post-Vietnam war ‘domestic taboo’ on Australian military interventions in the region was lifted, with the assistance of people who previously opposed the Vietnam War.”

Turning to the current legal dispute, Head explained that the Dili government had accepted the ICJ ruling in the bugging case. That was because the East Timorese leadership’s aim was not to “fundamentally challenge Australia’s corporate and strategic interests, let alone those of its patron in Washington,” but to seek “a closed-door arbitrated settlement of the maritime dispute in The Hague.”

Head said this flowed from the underlying perspective of “self-determination” for East Timor, which “had nothing to do with a struggle against imperialism.” On the contrary, it was aimed at “winning the backing of one or other major power for the establishment of a separate state in which a native capitalist elite could operate as a junior partner.”

The speaker commented: “More than a decade later, the tiny country’s people remain among the most impoverished in the world. The country’s sovereign wealth fund now exceeds \$US15 billion, but the income has only benefitted a tiny elite in the capital Dili, conspicuous in their heavily-guarded mansions and luxury vehicles.”

Head concluded by pointing to a way forward: a unified struggle by working people in East Timor, Indonesia and internationally based on a socialist program aimed at overturning global capitalism.

During the discussion period, Head was asked whether the Timorese authorities had fully exhausted their legal options. In reply, he emphasised that no faith could be placed in the international courts and other UN bodies, which “shield the interests and operations of the major imperialist powers, particularly the US and its allies, while maintaining a facade of justice.” He pointed out that the ICJ judges absurdly declared that Australia’s “good faith” could be trusted not to exploit the documents stolen from East Timor.

Head also reiterated that the East Timorese leadership was not trying to overturn the corporate interests of US,

Australian, European or Japanese imperialism. Rather it wanted to use the legal proceedings as a bargaining chip to try to strike a more lucrative deal, just as Xanana Gusmão, now East Timor’s prime minister, had done by holding meetings with BHP executives in his Jakarta prison cell in 1998, offering favourable access to Timor’s oil and gas reserves.

After the meeting, the WSWS spoke with Elvis, an East Timorese student who has lived in Australia for a year. He said Head told the truth. Australia’s role in East Timor had always been “about economic interests,” Elvis noted, adding “wherever there is money, then there will be a conflict of interests.” Referring to the Australian military interventions in 1999 and 2006, he commented: “East Timor is poor, it is no threat to Australian security.”

Elvis said it was important to distinguish between the policy of the Australian government and the view of ordinary Australians. “We cannot attribute what is done by the Australian government to the Australian people. I believe that what has been done is the Australian foreign policy—and there is a distinction there. There are many Australians who actually support East Timor.”



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