Broken Nation: A glimpse of Australian anti-war sentiment in World War I

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6 November 2014

Joan Beaumont's historical work, *Broken Nation: Australia in the Great War*, was published in February, as the political and media establishment was gearing up its four-year deluge of war propaganda to glorify Australian participation in World War I.

This campaign's aim is to prevent any critical examination of the real causes of WWI, and to promote the same kind of poisonous nationalism and militarism in order to send working class youth to fight and die in a new war in the interests of the corporate elite.

Many academics, historians and artists have loyally signed up for this campaign. In the lead-up to this year's WWI centenary, a series of books appeared celebrating every aspect of Australian participation in the war. This includes erstwhile "left" critics, such as journalist Mike Carlton, whose book *First Victory*, on the sinking of the German raider Emden, is a travesty of historical writing (see: "A crude celebration of Australian militarism").

In April, Beaumont, a historian from the Australian National University, criticised the use of the war celebrations to promote militarism. "All commemoration tells us more about the present, than it does the past," she said. "All commemoration is inherently political."

"This was very obvious during the Iraq intervention of 2003, when the then-prime minister John Howard made it difficult to criticise the war because it was suggested you would thereby be criticising those who chose to serve," she said. "Our tradition is very much about honouring the volunteer soldier. With that goes a silencing of debate about the reasons that those soldiers are being deployed, and that is a concern to a number of commentators."

As part of her book, Beaumont traced the history of WWI celebrations in Australia in the 20th century, noting that most were initiated more than 70 years after the war, by the Hawke-Keating Labor governments of 1983–1996 and the Howard Liberal government of 1996–2007. A conscious attempt was made to revive the "Anzac Legend" and associated traditions of militarism, which were widely rejected after World War II, particularly during the Vietnam War, which provoked mass protests.

In all the books, films, television mini-series, parliamentary speeches and stage-managed "public events" for the WWI centenary celebrations, the anti-war opposition in the working class at the time has been completely buried. The omission is not accidental. Any examination of the deepening class tensions within Australian society would undermine the lie, constantly repeated, that Australia's participation in WWI had universal support and was carried out in the interests of "the nation."

It is therefore significant—and to Beaumont's credit—that her latest book lifts the lid, albeit within definite limits, on the anti-war opposition.

In 1914, many Australian workers, like their European counterparts, were initially swept up in the short-lived euphoria of nationalism promoted by the ruling classes as a means for dividing workers and sending a generation to kill and be killed. Responsibility for this lay with the leaders of Social Democracy and the Second International. In August 1914 they betrayed their previous pledges to oppose any European war, and became the most nationalist proponents of the war effort of their own imperialist bourgeoisies.

As Beaumont's book makes clear, the Australian Labor Party, steeped in the xenophobic nostrums of White Australia, was at the forefront of the war drive. On the war's eve, Labor leader Andrew Fisher declared that Australia would defend the British Empire "to our last man and last shilling."

With all the official parties—as well as the trade union leaderships—supporting the war, opposition found expression in growing support for the militant syndicalist International Workers of the World (IWW). According to Beaumont, by 1916, the IWW's membership was approximately 2,000 nationally, while its public meetings, featuring speakers denouncing the war, were attended by as many as 10,000.

The ruling class was deeply fearful of the development of an anti-war movement. Among the Labor government's first acts following its election in September 1914 was to introduce a raft of anti-democratic legislation, including the *War Precautions Act*. This made it an offence to encourage disloyalty or hostility to the British Empire, or spread information likely to disrupt the recruiting, training and discipline of Australian forces.

In September 1916, a frame-up was organised around suspicious fires that broke out in Sydney and 12 IWW leaders were arrested, convicted and imprisoned on fraudulent charges of forgery, treason, felony, conspiracy and arson. On December 16, Labor Prime Minister Billy Hughes introduced legislation that outlawed the organisation itself.

Anti-war sentiment in the working class was also expressed, indirectly at least, in the defeat of two referenda on military conscription put forward by the Hughes government, in October 1916 and December 1917. The second was defeated by a larger majority than the first, in defiance of a concerted propaganda

campaign by the state and media.

Beaumont notes that Hughes initially planned to publish the results of votes of soldiers at the front before other people cast their ballots, expecting an overwhelming show of support for conscription among soldiers. He was compelled to abandon this scheme, however, when their votes revealed only a small majority in favour. Beaumont cites one estimate that soldiers who had experienced the war on the Western Front voted three to one against conscription.

In 1917, the February Revolution in Russia, overturning centuries of despotic tsarist rule, provided an immense impetus to anti-war and revolutionary sentiments in the working class around the world, including in Australia.

The class tensions in Australia were most sharply expressed in August 1917 when a general strike erupted in New South Wales. Within five weeks of tramway workers downing tools, 69,000 workers had struck, including coal miners, waterside workers, painters and dockers, railway workers, meatworkers, sugar mill workers, carters and drivers. The number of working days lost in 1917 was the highest of any year during the war. It was surpassed only in 1919, as workers began to return from the front.

The book provides a picture of the tense class relations. Since 1914, food prices in Melbourne had risen by 28.2 percent. Large marches of women took place, including an August 1917 protest in Melbourne by an estimated 15,000 people. As described by Beaumont, the women "chanted 'We want food and fair play,' sang 'The Red Flag' and cheered their leaders as they denounced profiteers and those who allowed children to starve while exporting food for high prices. They also turned to violence, smashing windows in the city streets and pelting the police with gravel. The police, in turn, broke up demonstrations with batons or mounted charges."

Beaumont writes: "On two nights in September, the city and inner suburbs of Melbourne erupted in more window smashing ... Enraged by these 'evil disposed and seditious persons,' the city authorities banned public meetings and organised a force of volunteer constables to roam the streets with batons." Reflecting the fears in the ruling elite, the governor-general declared in August that "Australia was in the same boat of Russia."

However, having described the situation, Beaumont insists that the government's concerns were ultimately unfounded. The author claims that the repression of the IWW reflected Hughes' "paranoia." The broader aims and impact of the IWW's persecution are not explored. In a book of over 550 pages, three or four pages are devoted to the IWW.

In reality, Hughes, a former trade union official, was a highly conscious representative of the ruling classes, which were justifiably afraid of the development of anti-war and revolutionary sentiments.

Those concerns were amplified following the October Revolution of 1917. The Russian working class, led by the Bolshevik Party, overthrew the capitalist provisional government of Alexander Kerensky and took political power. In the midst of the war, millions of workers, soldiers and the oppressed internationally, including in Australia, looked to the Russian Revolution as a beacon of hope and an example to be followed.

According to one source, on the Sunday following the proclamation of Soviet power in Russia, at least 20 meetings were held in the parks and street corners of Sydney to discuss the revolution. Beaumont herself notes that the NSW Labor Council passed a resolution congratulating "the people of that country on their efforts to abolish despotic power and class privilege" and urging "workers of other lands where similar conditions exist to follow their example with the same magnificent courage and determination." The resolution no doubt reflected widespread popular sentiment among workers at the time, as well as, it should be noted, the insistence of the labour bureaucracy that "similar conditions" did not exist in Australia.

Nonetheless, Beaumont makes no serious examination of the impact of the Russian Revolution and rules out any possibility of social revolution in Australia. Her outlook is summed up in the book's preface: "Whatever the terrible cost, the majority of Australians supported the war, believing that the cause for which their men were fighting was just ... [D]espite the fact that Australians were profoundly divided on the questions of military conscription and the equity of the sacrifices being demanded of them, the will to continue the war survived ... In addition, although there was a rising level of violence in political life and the working class was radicalised by the experience of the war, Australians did not opt for revolution."

In reality, it was the Australian ruling class that was determined to wage the war until the bitter end, imposing enormous hardships on the working class. The fact that Australian workers did not immediately take the Russian road was the product of many factors, not least the lack of a revolutionary leadership in the working class, none of which Beaumont examines.

But what the war demonstrated was that in the space of just a few years, the mythology of Australia as the workingman's paradise where class distinctions did not apply, democracy prevailed and everyone could enjoy a high standard of living, was seriously undermined. The war did not result in a socialist revolution but it did give rise to a revolutionary socialist current that led to formation of the Communist Party of Australia in 1920, notwithstanding its subsequent degeneration under the impact of Stalinism.

Caught up in the maelstrom of international events that demonstrated the bankruptcy of capitalism, the most class-conscious sections of the working class in Australia, as around the world, turned toward socialist internationalism—and will do so again, amid the current relentless drive to war.