

Small audiences mark Remembrance Day in Australia

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13 November 2014

Remembrance Day services—marking the time and date on which World War I formally ended in 1918—took place across Australia at 11am on November 11.

Under conditions in which the Australian political and media establishment is devoting vast resources to celebrating the centenary of WWI, it was striking how little effort was made to encourage participation. Even in the capital Canberra, where government and military bureaucrats bolstered the numbers, less than 4,000 people assembled at the Australian War Memorial. In the country's major cities, only several thousand people participated. In regional centres and towns, as few as 50 assembled.

The small turnouts underscored the reality that Remembrance Day is considered of secondary importance by the Australian ruling elite. The “Eleventh of the Eleventh” is allowed to pass each year with little fanfare and brief ceremonies at cenotaphs.

The main official war commemoration is Anzac Day on April 25, the anniversary of Australian troops landing on the Gallipoli peninsula in 1915, when they began killing and dying in their thousands in their first battle of the world war. Anzac Day is a national public holiday and ever greater social pressure is being brought to bear on people to uncritically attend dawn services and parades of veterans and troops. These are used by the establishment to glorify war, promote nationalism and generally attack the anti-militarist inclination of the majority of the population.

Neil Turner, the Returned Services League president in Yass, a town near Canberra, commented to his local newspaper that the anniversary of the end of the war “seems to have lost its significance among the public ... It's a shame but Anzac Day has sort of taken over everything really, certainly in Australia anyway.”

The indifference to Remembrance Day—and the veterans and dead it ostensibly is held to recall—was expressed in the treatment of Murray and Eric Maxton. The two brothers, aged 94 and 90, were recently awarded the French Legion of Honour for their service in World War II. Along with hundreds of other Australians, they were sent to serve in the British air force and were involved in the bombing of Germany throughout 1944.

The Australian government, upon learning of the honour bestowed by the French, hurriedly invited the brothers to a dinner in Canberra with Prime Minister Tony Abbott and British Prime Minister David Cameron this Friday. The two men, however, who live in Western Australia, were informed that they would need to pay for their own airfares and those of the carers they need to accompany them.

In widely reported remarks, Murray Maxton drily commented: “They paid our fare over there to the war, wherever we went in the war they paid our fare, but now we've won the war, they want to forget about us really.” The news of their treatment led to a rapid damage control operation, with airlines meeting government requests to provide free fares. Thousands of dollars in private donations flooded in to finance their trip.

Denied the overblown patriotism that accompanies the Anzac Day ceremonies, journalists covering Remembrance Day events for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) found “news” elsewhere. What emerged in the reports were insights into the terrible plight of young veterans who were sent to fight in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the anti-war sentiment that was expressed by people who turned out for the ceremonies.

In Darwin, the ABC interviewed Rhys Kelly, an

Afghan war veteran suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Kelly said: “I couldn’t leave the house. I had anger issues. I was hyper vigilant.... There are a lot of guys who have killed themselves—three times what we’ve lost overseas.”

Liam Haven, a veteran wounded by a roadside bomb in Iraq, told the ABC he was diagnosed with bipolar II disorder. “It is a mood disorder stemming from the trauma. It was more that I wasn’t prepared to deal with the fact that I could be damaged psychologically upon my arrival back in Australia. People were saying I was hero. I didn’t do anything ... There’s many men and women who are falling through the cracks and unfortunately taking their own lives.”

A woman who attended the service in Sydney, to honour her father-in-law, who fought in World War II, commented to the ABC: “I hope we never have this again. To have this ceremony is fantastic but let’s never send our troops overseas to be slaughtered again.”

Between 1914 and 1918, out of a population of barely five million, 417,000 young Australians joined the military, of whom 332,000 were sent to the killing fields of WWI. Some 61,000 lost their lives and 152,000 were wounded. It is estimated that many as 60,000 of the wounded died from their injuries within two years.

The widely-held attitude that the lives of an entire generation were squandered in World War I is vociferously opposed in the ruling class and the political establishment. The essential purpose of the celebrations underway of the centenary of WWI, which will be reach obscene dimensions next April with the 100th anniversary of the Gallipoli landing, is to glorify all wars involving Australia as necessary and cultivate a social base for militarism.

Former Prime Minister John Howard, whose government embroiled Australia in the illegal wars and occupations in Afghanistan and Iraq, used his Remembrance Day speech in Canberra to hail the sending of troops back to Iraq. In language that inadvertently pointed to the fact that the deployment in the Middle East will inevitably escalate, Howard lauded “our mission in Iraq and wherever it may ultimately lead.”

The general anti-war sentiment in the working class, and population more generally, cuts across such

attempts to justify the present wars being fought by Australian imperialism and the future ones being planned behind the backs of the people. It is therefore critical that the ruling elite’s efforts to undermine and eviscerate this sentiment be exposed and defeated by opponents of militarism.

The working class should recall that the central event that brought about the end of World War I was the Russian Revolution. It inspired an upsurge in the class struggles internationally, and helped propel the ruling classes to the negotiating table, out of fear that revolution would break out elsewhere.



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