# Australia: Corporate exploitation of Anzac myth triggers a furore

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Woolworths, Australia's biggest supermarket chain, was forced to withdraw a major "Anzac Day"-linked advertising campaign this week, barely three hours after it went on-line.

The furore surrounding the company's sales campaign offers a revealing insight into the real character of the Australian government's four-year "celebration" of the centenary of World War I, in which hundreds of millions of dollars are being spent to glorify the war and promote militarism.

Accompanied by saturation coverage in the mass media, the official celebration is reaching a crescendo around this month's centenary of the involvement of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (Anzac) in the disastrous British and French-led invasion of Turkey's Gallipoli peninsula on April 25, 1915.

The Woolworths affair reveals a nervousness in ruling circles over anything that has the potential to provide an outlet for the widespread opposition that exists to this militarist extravaganza.

Woolworths' social media promotion featured its corporate logo alongside text saying, "Lest We Forget Anzac 1915–2015. Fresh in Our Memories." The slogan was an obvious play on the company's branding as "The Fresh Food People."

The web site invited people to pay homage to the soldiers who died by sending a photo of someone affected by war in order to create an image of them adorned with the "Fresh in Our Memories" theme.

Instead, the site became a focus for public disgust. Applying Woolworths' picture generator, users created memes on Twitter and Facebook to mock the campaign, uploading images that included a victim of US torture in Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison, Adolf Hitler, Prime Minister Tony Abbott and former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, rather than photos of veterans.

The backlash contained a range of responses. Comments generally denounced the blatant commercialisation of the centenary. "Trying to cash in on the memory of the Anzacs is possibly the trashiest thing I've seen in a very long time," one read.

Some people condemned the company for sullying the Anzac commemoration, and some expressed distaste at the "ghoulish" linkage of war remembrance with "fresh food" marketing.

Other posts, such as the Abu Ghraib torture image, pointed to hostility to the predatory wars and war crimes being perpetrated by Washington and its partners in Canberra. Another picture recalled Abbott's comment, while visiting Afghanistan in 2011, on the death of an Australian soldier, Lance Corporal Jared MacKinney, that "sometimes shit happens, doesn't it?" One posting showed bored primary school children being addressed in class, a reference to the constant indoctrination of young students with Anzac Day material.

Abbott's government felt compelled to intervene. Veterans Affairs Minister Michael Ronaldson said he told Woolworths to drop the ad campaign. "Under the *Protection of Word Anzac Act 1920*, permission for the use of the word 'Anzac' in any such material must be granted by the Australian Government," he stated.

Apart from rank hypocrisy—the government has approved about 300 such corporate promotions in the past year alone—the invocation of this extraordinary legislation underscores how much is at stake, politically and ideologically, for the ruling establishment in the Anzac legend.

First enacted in 1920, the Act and its regulations impose penalties of up to 12 months' jail or fines of up to $51,000 for companies or $10,200 for individuals that use the word "Anzac," or any word resembling it, for commercial or personal purposes without the minister's permission.

Leaders of the Labor Party, which was brought to office to conduct both World Wars I and II, were quick to back the government's action. Federal Labor parliamentarian Ed Husic criticised Woolworths for "trying to score brand points off" Anzac Day, while defending it as an otherwise great company.

The Greens, who for years postured as an anti-war party,

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unfurled their true nationalist and militarist colours. Senator Peter Whish-Wilson, a former banker and broker, demanded that the Veterans Affairs Minister crack down on other companies "misusing" the name Anzac, increase the penalties for breaching the law and extend the restrictions to cover the word Gallipoli.

These legal provisions were initially introduced, via wartime decrees, in 1916, just as the Anzac myth was being fashioned. By then, the horrors of the massive losses incurred at Gallipoli and in the trenches of France had begun to lay bare the barbaric character of the war.

Far from being unsullied by commercial motives, let alone about defending freedom and democracy, the war was fought over the super-profits derived from colonial empires and for global hegemony. The bloody sacrifice of the lives of thousands of soldiers was a measure of Australian imperialism's dependence on the British Empire for its wealth and own colonial aspirations in German New Guinea and throughout the Indo-Pacific region.

By 1920, when the restrictions were enshrined permanently by parliament in legislation, the working class opposition to the war, which in Australia had seen the defeat of two referenda for battlefield conscription, had been given conscious expression by growing support for the lead given by the Russian workers in their October 1917 revolution. It was only the socialist revolution that brought the brutal war to an end.

As part of the worldwide response by working people to the Russian Revolution, 1920 saw the formation of the Communist Party of Australia. As part of efforts to help counter the growth of socialist consciousness, Anzac Day was transformed from a day of mourning into a rallying point for patriotism, bound up with a mythology of a nation forged in bloody sacrifice.

A parliamentary library research publication records that: "Rituals such as dawn services and street marches were developed, and gradually the families of the dead became quite marginalised... In Melbourne during the late 1920s, women, including mothers of those killed, were banned from the dawn service because of their wailing."

The officer-dominated Returned Services League (RSL) organised the yearly marches. This week, the RSL was among those within the political establishment sounding an alarm that crass profiteering like Woolworths' could undermine the use of Anzac Day to drum up nationalism and militarism, and silence anti-war sentiment, as it served to do after World War I.

RSL national president Rear Admiral Ken Doolan warned against over-commercialising Anzac Day. "You're dealing with such sensitive issues," he said. In the same breath, Doolan praised Woolworths for financially supporting the RSL by selling Anzac badges and poppies.

The RSL's tie-up with Woolworths is just one of many government-approved corporate money-making ventures that sponsor the RSL and other official military support groups and charities. In reality, it is impossible to separate the promotion of militarism and national patriotism from the corporate money-making that is the ultimate source of the drive to war.

The Woolworths web site was itself a joint promotion with Camp Gallipoli, a government-backed foundation that is partnering with some of Australia's largest corporations to sell war memorabilia, along with tickets, costing $88 or $121 with food, to nationwide concerts and "sleep outs" on the night of April 24–25.

Other such ventures include Target's sale of an "official Anzac swag" for $250 as part of its promotion of Camp Gallipoli, the Victoria Bitter beer "Raise a Glass" advertising campaign, featuring former military chief Peter Cosgrove, now the governor-general, and the sale of "Anzac Mateship Coins" via the Murdoch tabloids around Australia.

As the Woolworth's campaign inadvertently began to reveal, there is widespread public opposition and disgust to the official "celebration" of militarism that finds no outlet in the media and political establishment.

The determination to allow nothing to puncture the Anzac Day myths was also behind the blatant act of political censorship by the Labor Party-controlled Burwood City Council in Sydney when it cancelled the hall booking made by the Socialist Equality Party for an April 26 public meeting, "Anzac Day, the glorification of militarism and the drive to World War III."

As in the 1920s, the official celebration of World War I is being exploited to stir up nationalism and militarism, to condition public opinion for new wars and to suppress the anti-war opposition in the working class, which is most consciously expressed by the SEP. Its meetings will expose the falsifications of history surrounding World War I and contribute to building a conscious anti-war movement of the working class on socialist and internationalist foundations.

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