Australian World War I "celebration" buries history of mass anti-war opposition

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The centrepiece of the Australian government's multi-million dollar World War I centenary is Anzac Day, the annual April 25 public holiday commemorating Australia and New Zealand's involvement in the British-led invasion of Turkey at Gallipoli in 1915. The disastrous military defeat, which saw the death over 8,000 young Australians and about 2,700 New Zealanders, is officially proclaimed as "the birth of the nation."

One of the primary lies being promoted by the saturation media campaign "celebrating" Anzac Day is that Australia as a nation was unified and unwavering in its backing for the imperialist war. Consciously omitted from all the Anzac events—TV mini-series, press commentaries, lectures and official propaganda—is any reference to the mass opposition that emerged in the working class in Australia, and around the world, to the imperialist bloodbath.

This historical lie serves a definite contemporary purpose. The entire mind-numbing Anzac Day extravaganza is aimed at whipping up Australian nationalism and militarism to condition public opinion for new wars. The last thing that the political establishment wants is for workers and youth to start drawing revolutionary conclusions from the experiences of the working class during and after World War I.

Like their counterparts internationally, Australian workers were initially caught up in the patriotic fervour and disoriented by the political betrayal of the Second International, in particular the German and French social democrats who backed their own imperialist ruling classes and voted for war credits in August 1914.

The Australian Labor Party, a national reformist and pro-imperialist party built by the trade unions in the late 19th century had governed federally in 1908–09 and 1910–13 and in the country's states before the war. When war broke out on August 4, 1914, Australia was in the midst of a federal election. Labor leader Andrew Fisher declared that his party was totally committed to defence of the British Empire and would do so until "the last man and the last shilling."

War was "one of the great realities of life," Labor's election manifesto stated. "Our interests and our very existence are bound up with those of the Empire. In time of war half measures are worse than none."

The Australian ruling classes came to the defence of the British Empire to realise their own long-held imperialist ambitions to take over German colonial territories in the South West Pacific.

Socialist groupings and formations to the left of Labor were shocked by the betrayal of the Second International. The Australian Socialist Party (ASP), for example, initially rejected news reports of the Second International's betrayal as lies.

The revolutionary syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), which had built up support among layers of militant workers and disaffected Labor supporters, denounced the war and held meetings and demonstrations. The conflict, it insisted, was a product of the capitalist system.

The August 10 edition of the IWW's *Direct Action* declared that the war would only produce "death, starvation, poverty and untold misery" for the working class. For the capitalists, it continued, the military conflict would bring "gold, stained with the blood of millions, riotous luxury, banquets of jubilation over the graves of their dupes and slaves."

The IWW attacked the Labor government and the media for promoting militarism and "war fever" and called for strike action to halt the imperialist conflict. "Make class before country your motto," it stated. As the war dead increased and government and employer attacks on democratic rights and living standards intensified, these militant appeals won increasing support in the working class.

Anti-conscription movement

The IWW was at the forefront of the mass anti-conscription movement that emerged in 1916 against dragooning workers into the slaughter taking place in Europe. The IWW had already played a prominent role in the pre-war struggles against domestic conscription—that is, compulsory military training—and the opposition in 1915 to a military census, both introduced by Labor governments.

As news of the Gallipoli disaster reached Australia, the number of military volunteers plunged dramatically—from 36,500 new recruits in July 1915 to just over 9,900 in October. Under pressure from Britain to provide more cannon fodder, Labor Prime Minister Billy Hughes, a former trade union bureaucrat, called for conscription for overseas service and announced a national referendum on the issue for October 1916.

The announcement provoked sharp opposition in the working class, which was already being forced to bear the economic brunt of the war. The IWW and other anti-war organisations established the Anti-Conscription League, first in New South Wales and Victoria, and then other states. The Australian Peace Alliance was formed in Melbourne and a No-Conscription Fellowship, consisting of young men of military age who refused to serve in the war.

The anti-conscription campaign was politically diverse. It included pacifists, feminists and opponents of British colonial rule in Ireland. The brutal suppression by British troops of the 1916 Easter uprising in Ireland provoked considerable opposition in Australia.

The substantial anti-conscription sentiment also made itself felt within the Labor Party and unions. They continued to support the war, but some officials opposed conscription, often on a narrow nationalist and racist basis—that it would open the door for cheap "foreign" labour. While giving voice to the mounting resentment about war profiteers, the Labor apparatus was determined to prevent the opposition to conscription from spilling over into a conscious opposition to war.

The anti-conscription movement won wide support. In May 1916, the Victorian Trades Hall held a national congress opposing conscription. In September, a month before the referendum, the unions held another anti-

conscription congress, accompanied by strikes in Melbourne, Sydney, Broken Hill and other cities. Over 50,000 workers stopped work in Melbourne and attended a rally at Yarra Bank, one of numerous mass meetings, protests and debates in the lead-up to the referendum.

A meeting in Sydney's Domain in August addressed by the IWW, the NSW Trades and Labor Council, the Australian Freedom League and the Australian Socialist Party, attracted over 100,000 people, or one-sixth of Sydney's population.

State repression

Such was the opposition inside the Labor Party that Hughes failed to win majority support from the party's Victorian, NSW and Queensland branches. He and the NSW premier William Holman were expelled from the state branch in September, a month before the referendum.

Hughes and Holman turned on the IWW in an attempt to silence all anti-war opposition and win the conscription referendum. Using the War Precautions Act, Hughes unleashed an onslaught against the IWW. Members of the organisation, he declared, were violent saboteurs who had to be crushed.

The War Precautions Act, introduced by the Labor government in 1914, illegalised virtually any anti-war activity. It was an offence to encourage disloyalty or hostility to the British Empire or to spread information likely to disrupt the recruiting, training and discipline of Australian forces.

The attacks on the IWW culminated in the infamous arrest in September 1916 of twelve of its leaders in Sydney on fraudulent charges of forgery, treason, felony, conspiracy and arson. The IWW leaders, who were sentenced to between 5 and 15 years, were falsely accused of involvement in various fires in Sydney, which police claimed were in response to the jailing earlier that year of *Direct Action* editor Tom Barker for publishing anti-war material.

When the referendum was defeated in late October, Hughes and 24 other Labor MPs walked out of the federal government. Calling themselves the "Win the War" party, they formed a coalition government with the conservative parties, retaining Hughes as prime minister.

Blaming the IWW for the referendum defeat, Hughes introduced the Unlawful Associations Act and banned the organisation. Addressing parliament, he declared that the IWW "holds a dagger at the heart of society… As it seeks to destroy us, we must in self-defence destroy it."

Over the next months, more than 100 IWW members were arrested and jailed, scores were black-listed, and several leading foreign-born nationals were deported. The organisation was largely smashed.

The ruthless crackdown on the IWW and other anti-war opponents makes a mockery of the current propaganda campaign to promote Australian involvement in the war as the defence of "democracy and freedom."

The IWW attracted the support of many class conscious and courageous workers, but the limitations of its political program became evident in the strike movement that was to erupt in 1917. Its contempt for parliamentary politics became a rejection of all "political action," making no distinction between reformist and revolutionary politics. Its call for "one big union" and general strike action to overthrow capitalism assumed that the working class could somehow take power spontaneously. As the October 1917 Russian Revolution was to demonstrate, the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks under the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky was the product of a protracted and relentless political struggle against all those parties that in any way supported the war and capitalist rule.

In 1955, the American Trotskyist James P. Cannon summed up the political shortcomings of the IWW, of which he had been a member. "In truth, the IWW in its time of glory was neither a union nor a party in the full meaning of these terms, but something of both, with some parts missing. It was an uncompleted anticipation of a Bolshevik Party, lacking its rounded-out theory, and a projection of the revolutionary industrial unions of the future, minus the necessary mass membership."

The most revolutionary elements of the IWW, in both Australia and the United States, did what Cannon did. In the aftermath of the war, they joined the nascent Communist Parties formed as part of the Third International.

Mass strike action

The revolutionary upheavals in Russia in 1917 won extensive support in the working class in Australia and internationally. At public meetings and from within the unions and Labor Party, resolutions were passed supporting the Russian Revolution and calling for an end to Australian involvement in the war. The actions of Russian workers emboldened workers around the world to fight for their rights.

While the Australian government insisted everyone had to "share the burden," employers were making huge profits at the expense of the working class, with constant demands for longer hours and greater productivity. By 1917, the cost of living had soared by more than 30 percent, with meat prices climbing by 62 percent, while wages lagged well behind.

Strikes erupted in mining, the waterfront and other strategic industries. This reached a high point in the NSW rail and tramway strike of August 1917, in which more than 60,000 workers walked out following the introduction of an oppressive time-card system designed to boost productivity.

The federal and NSW governments denounced the striking workers. Acting NSW premier George Fuller said union officials were "extremists" who had "lost all sense of patriotism and responsibility" and were aiding "the enemies of civilisation."

In fact, rail and union officials were working desperately to prevent the strike. An official from the Loco Engine Drivers, Firemen and Cleaners Association told the government that the union's executive had spent hours attempting to dissipate "a spirit of unrest and discontent" among workers. The introduction of the new productivity system, he insisted, was "a spark that fell into a cauldron of seething discontent and industrial impatience."

The strike was quickly joined by almost 100,000 workers nationally—dockers, timber workers, seamen, miners, meatworkers and others in key industries across Australia. Protest marches and weekly mass rallies of up to 100,000 strikers and their families took place in Sydney and Melbourne. The NSW and Victorian governments and employers responded by mobilising thousands of strike-breakers.

The strike reflected not only opposition to deteriorating working and living conditions but the pent-up opposition among layers of the working class to a war being waged for the ruling classes. What the working class lacked, however, was a revolutionary party that would wage a political struggle against the Labor and union bureaucrats, who prepared to sell the strike out.

NSW rail and tramway unions made no attempt to stop the strike-breaking operations and sought to end the strike as quickly as possible. Union officials kept begging for an "independent tribunal" to investigate the time-card system, then completely capitulated to government and management and shut down the strike in September.

While thousands of other workers remained on strike in NSW and nationally, the strike movement was broken up and defeated. Hundreds of

strikers were victimised. Scab labour replaced not just rail and tram workers in NSW but strikers in coal mining, on the waterfront and in other strategic industries throughout the country.

Despite these defeats, anti-war sentiment continued to grow. Prime Minister Hughes called a second conscription referendum in December 1917, only to be defeated by an even bigger majority. Hughes then gave up trying to introduce conscription, but his government kept sending thousands of soldiers to their deaths. The war would eventually claim the lives of almost 62,000 young Australians and see 156,000 wounded, gassed or taken prisoner, out of a national population of just five million.

One hundred years on, the working class is confronting the very real dangers of another, even more catastrophic, world war as the US and other imperialist powers seek to shore up their economic and strategic interests at the expense of their rivals. The chief lesson of the barbaric slaughter of World War I is that the drive to war can be halted only through the overthrow of capitalism by the international working class. That requires, as the Russian Revolution demonstrated, the building of revolutionary parties in the working class to lead those struggles.

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