

# Australia's Anzac Day and the glorification of militarism and war

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To any outside observer, the extraordinary promotion of militarism and patriotism in Australia surrounding today's commemoration of the centenary of Anzac Day must appear bizarre, even insane. Dawn services and military parades are being held across the country. Most shops are shut until 1pm. The media has gone into overdrive, with the state-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation providing continuous Anzac coverage from early morning to early evening and Anzac Day featured prominently on every newspaper front page.

The focus is the involvement of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corp (Anzac) troops in the Anglo-French attempt during World War I to invade the Gallipoli Peninsula in modern-day Turkey, beginning on April 25, 1915. From every standpoint, the Gallipoli campaign was a disaster, in which hundreds of thousands of soldiers on both sides were killed or wounded. After eight months, the troops were forced to withdraw in the face of determined Turkish resistance having achieved none of their objectives.

Yet more than a half billion dollars in government and corporate sponsorship has been lavished on the WWI commemorations, even as big business demands deeper cutbacks to public education, health and welfare services. Planned out years in advance under Labor and Coalition governments, every level of government (federal, state and local), every section of the media and every institution—educational, sporting, cultural and artistic—has been enlisted.

Anzac Day itself is shrouded in historical mystification and lies. The quasi-religious atmosphere that has been cultivated is summed up in the editorial in today's *Australian*, which proclaims: "Today is our national day of mourning and transcendence, of tribute and kinship ... The sacrifice and heroism, if not the

folklore, that emerged during the forlorn [Gallipoli] campaign ... is the wellspring of our national identity. A new country had been tested in battle in the terrain and azure seas of classical mythology."

The Anzac Day juggernaut is a very deliberate attempt to inculcate patriotism, especially among young people, and overwhelm anti-war sentiment in preparation for new and more terrible wars. World War I was not fought for the defence of freedom and the "fight against tyranny," as the *Australian* would have it, but was a bloody struggle by the imperialist powers, great and small, over empire, colonies and profits at the cost of millions of lives. The same fundamental contradictions of capitalism that gave rise to both World I and World War II in the 20th century are driving sharpening geo-political tensions and the dangers of a third world war today.

Anzac Day has not always had its present status. As the *Australian* acknowledges, 50 years ago, that is, amid the mass protests against the Vietnam War, "Gallipoli and Anzac Day did not command such overwhelming public attention; their quasi-religious aspects were in neglectful abeyance ... Anzac Day was reviled by some as merely a piss-up or a pageant of warmongering." The editorial pays tribute to Labor Prime Minister Bob Hawke who, in 1990, made the first of what has since become an annual pilgrimage of Australian leaders to Gallipoli, declaring that each generation has to breathe "new life back into the old story."

Contrary to the *Australian*, there was nothing spontaneous about the reinvention of Anzac Day and the revival of militarism. It has served definite ideological ends. Hawke's trip to Gallipoli came on the eve of the first Gulf war in 1990-91, to which the Australian Labor government was among the first to

commit military forces. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, US imperialism sought to use its overwhelming military might to establish its global dominance. The result has been a rising spiral of American military aggression and wars over the past quarter century, all with the support of Australian imperialism, and in many cases the active involvement of its military forces.

It is no accident that Australia is devoting sums of money to the “celebration” of World War I, that greatly exceed any other country. The Coalition government, like its Greens-backed Labor predecessor, has made the Australian armed forces and military bases a central component of the US “pivot to Asia” and its military build-up throughout the Indo-Pacific in preparation for war against China.

At the same time, there is a distinct nervousness in ruling circles over the widespread anti-war sentiment generated by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Among broad layers of the public, there has been a negative reaction to the excesses of Anzac Day, including among many who will attend today’s parades and ceremonies.

In his pamphlet *Militarism & Anti-Militarism*, German Marxist Karl Liebknecht, who courageously opposed World War I, explained that militarism is “not only a means of defence and a weapon against the external enemy; it has a second task, which comes more and more into prominence with the sharpening of class contradictions and the growth of proletarian class-consciousness.

“[I]t has the task of protecting the prevailing social order, of supporting capitalism and all reaction against the struggle of the working class for freedom. Here militarism manifests itself as a pure tool in the hands of the ruling classes, designed to hinder the development of class-consciousness by its alliance with the police and the system of justice, with the school and church, and further to secure for a minority at any cost, even against the conscious will of the majority of the people, its dominant position in the state and its freedom to exploit.”

So it is today. The extraordinary outpouring of militarism and patriotism that is Anzac Day is aimed at preventing the development of a class-conscious movement of the working class against war and widening social inequality. Support for contemporary

wars and the corporate agenda of austerity across the political establishment goes hand in hand with the lack of criticism of the reactionary Anzac Day campaign.

The Socialist Equality Party’s meetings tomorrow entitled “Anzac Day, the glorification of war and the drive to World War III” will be the only ones drawing out the real implications of the official “celebrations” of World War I for the working class. The efforts of Burwood City Council and the University of Sydney to try to prevent the SEP meetings from taking place must sound a warning to workers and youth of the anti-democratic methods that will be used in the future against any anti-war opposition.

We urge WSWs readers to take a political stand against this attack on democratic rights and against militarism and war by attending the SEP’s meetings in Sydney, Melbourne and Wellington.

We also call for your attendance at the international online May Day rally organised by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International which embodies the political struggle to build an international anti-war movement of the working class based on the principles of socialist internationalism.



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