

Withdraw all Australian military forces from Syria and the Middle East!

The Socialist Equality Party
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The Socialist Equality Party condemns the Australian government's decision last week to expand Australia's military involvement in the US-led war in the Middle East by joining Washington and other allies in bombing Syria.

Australia, along with the US, is now engaged in a criminal war in Syria that lacks even the pretence of legality used to justify its military operations in Iraq, where Washington's client regime dutifully provided a formal request for assistance. Waging an unprovoked war of aggression was the chief crime for which the German Nazi leaders were tried and convicted at Nuremberg after World War II.

Once again the decision to go to war has been taken anti-democratically behind the backs of the Australian population. No discussion or vote has taken place in parliament; the opposition Labor Party has simply extended its bipartisan support to the Liberal-National Coalition government. The Greens, while raising a perfunctory call for "debate" and questioning the legality and effectiveness of the bombing, do not oppose the war as such and have quickly resumed their habitual silence.

No sooner did the government give its green light than Australian air operations began over Syria. Defence Minister Kevin Andrews boasted that the country's war planes this week carried out their first strikes against Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) targets in Syria and that operations were "on an almost daily basis." The five FA-18 fighter bombers have already carried out hundreds of sorties in Iraq over the past year.

In one of his first pronouncements after ousting Tony Abbott in an inner party coup on September 14, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull raised the banner of the fraudulent "war on terror" and hailed the Australian military in the Middle East for "putting themselves in harm's way to stop the spread of a violent ideology."

In a bid to exploit the outpouring of public sympathy over the refugee exodus from Syria, the government is also absurdly suggesting that the bombing raids will help the Syrian people. "We're obviously hoping to make Syria safer and stop the persecution of millions of people there as ISIS advances," assistant treasurer Josh Frydenberg declared this week.

In reality, the immense tragedy that has engulfed the Syrian and Iraqi people is a direct consequence of more than two decades of wars and interventions in the Middle East by US imperialism and its accomplices, including successive Australian governments, which share responsibility both for the current refugee disaster and

the emergence of ISIS and other reactionary Islamist militias.

The Labor government of Prime Minister Bob Hawke was among the first in the world to join the US in the Gulf War of 1990–91 to invade Iraq. At that time, the US intervened, not to defend "little Kuwait," as both Washington and Canberra claimed, but to secure US hegemony throughout the oil rich region. The war left the country divided by no-fly zones, and, after a decade of punitive UN sanctions, in economic ruin. The infant mortality rate doubled within that period, due to malnutrition and lack of medicines.

In 2003, the Coalition government of Prime Minister John Howard was one of a handful that joined the "coalition of the willing," led by the US, to invade and occupy Iraq on the basis of the lie that former President Saddam Hussein was hiding weapons of mass destruction that were a threat to the world. What followed was the carrying out of sociocide—the destruction of an entire society. Up to a million people died, with many more injured and maimed during the occupation. The initial "shock and awe" bombing campaign levelled much of the country's vital infrastructure—electricity, sewerage, schools, hospitals. The majority of those who survived, in what had been a modern, secular and highly cultured society, were internally displaced, forced to flee and seek asylum elsewhere, or reduced to unemployment, and abject poverty.

Confronted with armed resistance to its occupation, the US deliberately fomented sectarian conflict between Sunnis and Shiites to divide the insurgency. The Sunni extremist Al Qaeda in Iraq, also known as Islamic State of Iraq, emerged as a militia in the civil war against Washington's Shiite-dominated regime. The fratricidal conflict has since spilled over into other areas of the Middle East with devastating results.

To prevent the spread of the Egyptian revolution of 2011, the US, with the backing of the Labor government in Australia, exploited emerging opposition to the regimes in Libya and Syria to foment civil wars that have now left both those countries in ruins as well. The cynicism and hypocrisy of the "war on terror" is highlighted by the fact that the US had no compunction in utilising Al Qaeda-linked militias as its proxies.

Al Qaeda in Iraq sent its fighters into Syria in 2011 to form the al-Nusra Front, which grew rapidly, courtesy of the funding and arms it received from American allies in the Gulf states. The merger of the two organisations in 2013, which led to the formation of ISIS, provoked a lengthy conflict with the top Al Qaeda leadership in

Pakistan and the severing of ties in 2014. It was only when heavily-armed ISIS fighters from Syria crossed back into Iraq last year and seized the city of Mosul that the US intervened militarily in both Iraq and Syria. Its primary aim was to bolster its puppet government in Baghdad and develop its regime-change operation against Assad in Damascus.

The new war is destabilising the entire Middle East and deepening the humanitarian crisis of the Iraqi and Syrian peoples. Over the past year, more than 6,000 coalition airstrikes, manned and unmanned, have rained down on the two countries. Operating under the cloak of military secrecy, the Pentagon routinely denies the bombing is causing civilian casualties. However, based on multiple sources, the *Airwars* web site conservatively estimates that Coalition air strikes have already killed between 575 and 772 civilians.

Driving the conflict is the deepening economic and political crisis of world capitalism, which is fuelling geo-political rivalries over markets, cheap labour and strategic advantage around the world. The reckless US military intervention in Syria threatens to provoke a war with Russia, which is determined to prop up its ally Assad. The Middle East is just one of the potential flashpoints that threaten to plunge the world into a nuclear holocaust.

The Australian government has now plunged deeper into this Middle Eastern cauldron, which has created a catastrophe of historic dimensions for the peoples of the region. But militarism and war, in alliance with US imperialism, is now the overarching policy of Australian imperialism, as it seeks to prosecute its own economic and strategic interests around the world. Bipartisan support in Canberra for the war in the Middle East is paralleled by the transformation of Australia into a central base of operations for the US military build-up in Asia, in preparation for conflict with China.

Under the banner of the “war of terror,” governments, Coalition and Labor, have launched a combined 15-year assault on basic democratic rights and legal norms, enacting anti-democratic measures against refugees, Aboriginal communities and people of Middle Eastern background that will increasingly be used against the working class as a whole. The entire society is being militarised, as the armed forces play an ever-greater role in civil affairs. The process is epitomised by the installation of former defence chief, General Peter Cosgrove, as head of state, and the current extraordinary four-year campaign, supported by the entire political and media establishment, to “celebrate” Australia’s involvement in World War I and condition the population, young people in particular, for new wars.

The question must be posed: why, given the enormous dangers confronting humanity, is there no anti-war movement? No protests against the bombing of Syria? In 2003, millions took to the streets around the world to denounce the criminal US invasion of Iraq in the largest international anti-war protest movement in history. In Australia, hundreds of thousands took part in demonstrations around the country. This widespread opposition, however, was channelled into the political dead-end of futile appeals to the United Nations and to the very governments that were waging the war.

Today, the parties and organisations that dominated those

protests, above all the pseudo-left organisations such as Socialist Alternative and Socialist Alliance in Australia, have abandoned their anti-war rhetoric and become propagandists and advocates for imperialist war—in 2011 for the NATO intervention in Libya to oust Muammar Gaddafi, and then in Syria.

Socialist Alternative’s Corey Oakley articulated the position of this milieu when he declared in 2012 that “knee jerk anti-imperialism” should now be abandoned. That is why the pseudo-lefts have been in the forefront of promoting and supporting Washington’s anti-Assad intervention in Syria. Their only criticism of the US and Australian bombing campaigns is they are not directly aimed against Assad and have not provided sufficient support to the so-called “revolutionaries” fighting his regime.

An article in Socialist Alliance’s *Green Left* bemoaned the fact that “the air war remains directed solely against ISIS,” and declared, “the biggest cause of death and displacement of civilians is bombing by the Assad regime.” The article complained that “following the US lead, [former prime minister] Abbott has ruled out direct military engagement against Assad.” For all its hollow displays of concern for refugees, Socialist Alliance is complicit in the regime-change operation that has produced the disaster.

The right-wing evolution of these organisations is rooted in profound social shifts. The pseudo-lefts are based on affluent layers of the upper middle class whose privileges and wealth are bound up with the parasitic activities of finance capital. Their class orientation and hostility to the working class have been expressed, not only in their support for US imperialism in the Middle East but in their backing for the Syriza government in Greece, which, under the guise of opposing austerity, came to power in January only to implement all the demands of the European banks for the imposition of ever harsher austerity measures onto Greek workers, pensioners and youth.

The only social force capable of waging a genuine struggle against war and of defending jobs, living standards and democratic rights, is the working class. It faces the urgent task of building an international anti-war movement that will unite workers of every country against imperialist war and the capitalist nation-state system, on the basis of the principles and program of socialist internationalism. That is the perspective of the International Committee of the Fourth International, and its Australian section, the Socialist Equality Party.

The SEP demands the immediate withdrawal of all Australian military forces from the Middle East, the repudiation of the US-Australia alliance and military agreements with other powers, and the closure of all US bases in Australia. Most importantly, we call on workers and youth to contact us, and join the fight to build the SEP as the revolutionary leadership of the working class.



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