

Anzac Day celebrations in Australia aimed at suppressing anti-war sentiment

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Anzac Day celebrations on Monday underscored the connection between the glorification of Australian involvement in the imperialist wars of the 20th century and the current preparations for new wars. Politicians and media commentators invoked the “Anzac Spirit” to promote Australia’s participation in the US-led wars in Iraq and Syria, and Canberra’s neo-colonial military occupations of East Timor in 1999 and 2006, amid mounting tensions in the Asia-Pacific region and internationally.

Anzac Day officially marks the landing of Australian and New Zealand troops at Gallipoli on April 25, 1915 as part of the catastrophic invasion of Turkey by Allied forces during World War I. Over the past three decades, it has become the central focus of attempts by the political establishment to undermine mass opposition to war and promote Australian nationalism and pro-war sentiment.

This year’s events were held in the midst of a four-year “celebration” of the centenary of World War I, funded to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars by both state and federal governments. Last year, to mark the centenary of the Gallipoli landing, the Australian population was subjected to an unprecedented barrage of pro-war events, television programs and commemorations, particularly targeting school students and young people.

In his Anzac Day speech in Canberra, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull declared that Anzac Day commemorated, “those men and women who 100 years ago and ever since and today put their lives on the line to keep us safe, free and defend the interests of Australia and the values of democracy, freedom and the rule of law which we share and for which we stand.” He specifically hailed Australian troops in the criminal invasions of Afghanistan, including SAS Special

Forces—who have been implicated in war crimes, including assassinations and the mutilation of corpses—as exemplars of these values.

Turnbull went on to emphasise that Australia and its allies, including Turkey, confronted a “war fought both abroad and at home and in every dimension” in the conflict with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The bogus character of this “war on terror” has been underscored by the fact that Turkey is a central backer of Islamist militias in Syria who are being backed by the US as part of its regime-change operation against the Bashar Al-Assad government—Russia’s main ally in the Middle-East.

Significantly, US Secretary of State John Kerry, sent greetings to the Canberra dawn service. “The United States is proud to partner with Australia and New Zealand in continuing the legacy of Anzac,” he wrote. As well as highlighting Australian involvement in the new US-led war in the Middle East, Kerry noted: “In the Asia Pacific, our three countries are working and training together to ensure regional stability.”

Far from ensuring “stability,” the US is engaged in an escalating military build-up throughout the region as part of its “pivot to Asia” against China. Leading figures within the Pentagon have been pressing for further “freedom of navigation” military incursions into Chinese-claimed territory in the South China Sea—provocations that could lead to open conflict between nuclear-armed powers. The Pentagon is also placing mounting pressure on the Turnbull government to conduct “freedom of navigation” operations of its own.

Media commentaries hailed the presence of young people at the Anzac Day marches, many of whom were dragooned into attending by their schools, which have been key targets of the government’s “celebration” of

World War I. Former army officer John Bale called for greater efforts to link the current generation of youth to “those that ... fought in the same tradition of that Anzac tradition.” In an implicit acknowledgement of the widespread anti-war sentiment, he warned of “commemoration fatigue,” saying “if we don't do that very quickly, the opportunity will slide.”

As with the centenary campaign as a whole, Monday's official events and commentaries were aimed at mythologising Australia's role in World War I to foster a pro-war climate. No mention was made in the eulogies and speeches of the mass opposition to war that found powerful expression one hundred years ago.

After major Allied losses at Gallipoli, the number of new volunteers plunged from 36,500 in July 1915, to around 9,900 in October. It was the scale of anti-war sentiment that prompted Labor Party prime minister, Billy Hughes to move for the introduction of conscription. In response, many workers formed an anti-conscription movement, holding mass meetings and strikes against the war in Sydney, Melbourne, Broken Hill and elsewhere.

In the course of 1916, this movement grew as casualties mounted on the Western Front. Between July and September, some 23,000 Australians died in the Battle of Pozieres, fought between German and Allied troops. In the Battle of the Somme, an estimated one million Allied and German soldiers were killed between July 1916 and November 1916.

In August 1916, more than 100,000 people attended an anti-conscription meeting in Sydney that had been called by a number of organisations, including parties describing themselves as socialist. This number amounted to one-sixth of the city's population. In October, Hughes' conscription referendum was defeated. This social upheaval was part of an international upsurge of the working class against the war, which reached its high point in the Russian Revolution of October 1917, the event that played the central role in ending the global conflict.

One hundred years later, the advanced preparations for an even more catastrophic global conflagration poses the necessity for workers and young people to build an international anti-war movement aimed at abolishing the source of war, the capitalist nation-state system. Workers, students and young people who agree with this perspective should register immediately for,

and participate in, the International May Day Online Rally, called by the International Committee of the Fourth International and the *World Socialist Web Site*.



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