

The witch-hunt against Chinese influence in Australia

Peter Symonds
14 September 2016

The eruption of a concerted anti-Chinese campaign in the Australian media and political establishment, particularly over the past fortnight, directed at vilifying anyone not fully supportive of Washington's confrontational "pivot" against Beijing is a warning to workers, not only in Australia but internationally, of the advanced character of the US war drive in the Asia Pacific.

What began with the "exposure" of small payments by a Chinese businessman to opposition Labor Party frontbencher Sam Dastyari escalated last week into a full blown witch-hunt against any politician, business figure or organisation construed as questioning full support for the US military alliance or the increasingly shrill denunciations of Chinese "expansionism," especially in the South China Sea.

The most explicit diatribe was written by the *Sydney Morning Herald's* international editor, Peter Hartcher, who called for a "Four Pests Campaign," akin to that conducted by Mao Zedong, to eradicate "rats, flies mosquitoes and sparrows" and "defend against agents of foreign influence." In his sweeping vilification, Hartcher targeted "rats" such as Dastyari, "flies" or supposed unwitting dupes of Beijing, including former Labor Foreign Minister Bob Carr, and "mosquitoes" or businessmen allegedly beholden to China, such as billionaires Kerry Stokes and James Packer.

Hartcher's definition of "sparrows" or purveyors of Chinese influence encompassed not only Chinese-Australian organisations but placed a question mark over anyone of Chinese background—that is, the half million Australian residents born in China and 150,000 Chinese students in Australian universities, not to mention many more of Chinese descent. Such anti-Chinese hysteria serves to pave the way for extensive police raids and arrests in the event of war with China,

as took place with the mass internment in Australia of "enemy aliens" during the two world wars.

Those named by Hartcher are by no means hostile to the US and the American alliance but rather are concerned that a confrontational stance toward China will damage relations with the country, which is Australia's top trading partner and a source of significant investment.

The most sinister insinuation appeared in the *Australian Financial Review* last week, implying that Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, because of his business interests in China, was not trusted by Australian intelligence agencies. When President Barack Obama announced the "pivot" in the Australian parliament in 2011, Turnbull was somewhat critical of it and suggested an accommodation with China. Since becoming prime minister last September, he has toed the US line verbally on the South China Sea but not authorised a so-called freedom of navigation operation (FONOP) within the 12-nautical-mile territorial limits around Chinese islets.

Pressure from Washington for Canberra to conduct a provocative FONOP in the South China Sea has intensified following the July 2 federal election that Turnbull's Liberal-National Coalition won by the slenderest of margins. In its immediate aftermath, US Vice President Joe Biden visited Australia and stressed Washington's determination to remain the dominant Pacific power.

In a pointed warning to any equivocators, Biden stressed: "If I had to bet on which country is going to lead economically in the 21st century... I'd bet on the United States. But I'd put it another way: It's never a good bet to bet against the United States." A long line of visiting US admirals and generals had already made it publicly clear that Washington expected Turnbull to

send an Australian warship to challenge Chinese claims in the South China Sea.

Biden's visit was the signal for the anti-China campaign now underway to create the poisonous climate for a FONOP provocation that has the potential to trigger Chinese retaliation and escalate into open conflict. A spate of lurid and unsubstantiated stories has appeared about Chinese hacking, the dangers to "national security" of Chinese investment and the network of Chinese influence in Australia. Even though a contrite Dastyari admitted his "error" and resigned as a Labor spokesman, government ministers on Monday lined up during question time to denounce "Shanghai Sam."

"Chinese influence" pales into insignificance compared to the influence built up since World War II and wielded by the US throughout the Australian political establishment, the media, various think tanks, such as the US Studies Centre, and the state apparatus, especially the military and intelligence agencies. In 2010, a handful of Labor and union powerbrokers, later revealed as "protected sources" of the American embassy in Canberra, orchestrated an overnight inner party coup to oust Kevin Rudd as prime minister after he alienated the Obama administration by advocating a US accommodation to China.

It is this same pro-US apparatus that has sprung into action to brand as a Chinese fifth column those sections of the political and corporate elite who urge caution in becoming enmeshed in the American military build-up against China. The campaign, which also encourages anti-Chinese xenophobia, meets up with the needs of the ruling class to divert the huge social tensions generated by the widening gulf between rich and poor outward against a "foreign enemy."

Whereas in the United States and Europe it is currently Russia that is the target for vilification, in Australia it is China and for definite reasons. The ramping up of anti-China propaganda in Australia takes place amid mounting concerns in Washington that Obama's "pivot," aimed at subordinating China to American interests, has stalled. On the economic front, the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), which seeks to undermine Chinese influence in Asia, is unlikely to be ratified by the US Congress. Diplomatically, Obama was unable to press the recent East Asian Summit in Laos to confront China over the South China Sea.

As Biden declared during his visit, the US has no intention of relinquishing its position as the dominant Pacific power. It is now looking to Australia to step in and militarily challenge Chinese maritime claims in the South China Sea. Such a move would dramatically ratchet up tensions in the region, provide Washington with much-needed international support and, should Beijing react militarily, provide the pretext for the US to intervene more forcefully. Australian imperialism, which relies on US backing to prosecute its own interests in Asia and internationally, has provided military forces and political support to the US in virtually every predatory conflict since World War II—from the Korean and Vietnam wars to the latest US-led operations in the Middle East.

The ferocity with which longstanding political figures and wealthy businessmen are being vilified is a sign of the extreme geo-political tensions embroiling the entire region as the US and its allies prepare for war with China. It is also a measure of the fear in ruling circles of the widespread anti-war sentiment among workers and youth that will be unleashed as the war danger becomes more imminent.

The Australian working class, like its counterparts in China, Japan, the United States and the rest of the world, has no interest in a conflict between nuclear-armed powers. Its answer to the threat of war lies in the political fight being waged by the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) and its sister parties of the International Committee of the Fourth International to build an international anti-war movement to put an end to capitalism and its outmoded nation-state system, which is the root cause of war.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact