

Australia: Anzac Day and the official silence about anti-war opposition in WWI

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Last week Australians were subjected to the annual Anzac Day glorification of militarism and war by the government and corporate media. Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and Labor Party opposition leader Bill Shorten “remembered” military veterans—living and dead—while using the occasion to pledge their loyalty to the US-Australia military alliance and their commitment to current and future wars.

Anzac Day venerates the first military combat by Australian and New Zealand troops during World War I as part of the British-led invasion of Gallipoli in Turkey in April 1915. The incursion—a military disaster in which more than 130,000 troops were killed on all sides, including 8,000 young Australians and about 2,700 New Zealanders killed—is proclaimed as the “birth of the nation” and regarded as the touchstone of patriotic loyalty.

Australian authorities are spending just over \$500 million to celebrate the 100th anniversary of WWI and the glorification of a century of Australian involvement in military conflicts. The clear message is that everyone, young and old, should follow the example of those who died in combat and be prepared to “sacrifice” for the nation.

Notwithstanding the multi-million dollar four-year promotion of this nationalist and militarist propaganda, there is no widespread popular support for war.

In fact, attendances at last week’s military marches, which were held against the backdrop of escalating US war threats against North Korea and Washington’s recent military assaults on Syria and Afghanistan, were the lowest since the WWI centenary began. Thousands of workers and youth are beginning to realise that Canberra is locked into Washington’s reckless military aggression and that war between nuclear armed powers is a real and present danger.

Uneasy about this deep-seated and growing anti-war sentiment, particularly among young people, official government statements on this year’s Anzac Day and the blanket media coverage said as little as possible about what actually happened on the war front in 1917. And no mention was made of the political issues that gripped Australia in that year.

Nothing was said about the growing opposition to the war in every country as the unimaginable battle-field slaughter dragged on and working-class struggles erupted against the poverty and attacks on democratic rights produced by the war.

Moreover, there was a deafening silence about the impact on the Australian population of the 1917 February Revolution, which ended the Tsarist autocracy, and the October Revolution that overthrew capitalism in Russia nine months later.

The years 1916 and 1917 are rightly known as “The Great Slaughter,” because of the deaths of hundreds of thousands of troops on all sides of the conflict.

After the disaster at Gallipoli, most of the Australian and New Zealand troops were dispatched to Europe’s Western Front, where millions of soldiers were bogged down in rat-infested trenches, subjected to constant artillery bombardment and ordered to make futile and suicidal charges against enemy lines.

In the Battle of Verdun, for example, which began in early 1916 and continued for over 300 days, almost 800,000 French and German soldiers were killed or wounded—about 70,000 casualties per month—with no real military gains by any of the combatants.

On July 19, 1916, more than 5,500 Australian troops were killed or wounded at Fromelles, in Australia’s first major involvement on the Western Front. This bloodbath was followed by others—at Pozzières and Mouquet Farm—with 8,000 Australian soldiers sent to their deaths between late July and September 1916.

Commenting on the slaughter at Pozzières, Australian military historian Charles Bean wrote: “The men were simply turned in there as into some ghastly giant mincing machine. They have to stay there while shell after huge shell descends with a shriek close beside them ... each shrieking tearing crash bringing a promise to each man—instantaneous—I will tear you into ghastly wounds—I will rend your flesh and pulp an arm or a leg—fling you half a gaping quivering man (like those that you see smashed around you one by one) to lie there rotting and blackening like all the things you saw by the awful roadside, or in that sickening dusty crater.”

While the Western Front battlelines largely remained unchanged throughout 1917, the human carnage continued unabated, as thousands were killed and wounded on a daily basis.

Australian troops were involved in the two British-led battles for Bullecourt, and in the Third Battle of Ypres during 1917, at the cost of almost 50,000 casualties and no real strategic gains.

In total, over 22,000 Australian troops died on the Western Front in 1917, the highest casualty rate in Australian military history, and from a country with just under five million people.

The year 1917, however, saw rising anger and opposition to the death, destruction and hellish conditions facing the troops, with mutinies and riots among Allied forces, including British, Australian and New Zealand soldiers. The largest of these involved French troops, who, in early May at Chemin des Dames, began disobeying orders to attack their German counterparts. The revolt spread like wildfire, and, by the end of the month, involved 21 divisions and tens of thousands of soldiers.

Inspired by the February Revolution, some French units established

“soldiers’ councils” and began raising demands for an ending of the war. French authorities brutally crushed the rebellion, arresting tens of thousands, court-martialling 23,000, executing several key figures and suppressing all news of the mutinies.

The massive loss of life during 1916–17 greatly depleted the various national armies and saw generals and politicians demanding more and more recruits.

When the war broke out in 1914, Australian workers, like their counterparts in Europe, were caught up in a wave of patriotism and joined the military in large numbers. This was under conditions where most political parties of the working class, including the Labor Party in Australia, supported the war.

However, news of the death toll at Gallipoli and the Western Front saw a huge fall in military volunteers. In Australia, the numbers dropped from 165,912 new recruits in 1915, to 124,352 in 1916 and then plummeted to just 45,101 and 28,883 in 1917 and 1918 respectively.

Under pressure from Britain to provide more cannon fodder, Labor Prime Minister Billy Hughes called for conscription for overseas service. Hughes, who was expelled from the Labor Party over this demand, took the conscription issue to two national referenda—in October 1916 and December 1917. But Australians, including substantial numbers of soldiers on the frontlines, consistently rejected conscription—the second vote by a larger majority than the first.

While the anti-conscription campaign was not a politically homogenous movement—it involved socialists, members of the revolutionary syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), pacifists and Irish nationalists—it was an expression of the deepening anti-government sentiment and class tensions over a range of basic issues. Those opposing conscription participated in some of the largest mass rallies up to that point in Australia’s history.

Contrary to nationalist mythology and current government claims, the purpose of Australia’s involvement in the war was not to defend “democracy” and “freedom,” but to expand the territorial ambitions and profits of the Australian capitalist class. As domestic opposition mounted against the war and military conscription, the Australian government used the so-called War Precautions Act and other anti-democratic measures to crack down on dissenters.

Prime Minister Hughes and William Hollman, the New South Wales (NSW) state Labor premier, mobilised the state apparatus to try and crush the most militant anti-conscriptionists. Scores of IWW members were victimised and sacked in 1916. In Sydney, the organisation’s central leadership was jailed on frame-up charges of forgery, treason, felony, conspiracy and bogus claims that they were planning arson attacks on the city. Hughes told the Australian parliament that the IWW was holding “a dagger at the heart of society” and vowed to “destroy” the organisation.

In August 1917, four months before the second conscription referendum, an estimated 15,000 women marched in Melbourne in protest against rising food prices and war profiteering. By that year the cost of living had climbed by more than 30 percent on pre-war prices, while wages had been suppressed and productivity increased.

Although the police violently broke up the demonstrations, riots erupted in the city and continued over several nights. City authorities banned public meetings and mobilised volunteer police to patrol the streets. The governor-general, in a fearful reference to the February Revolution in Russia, declared that “Australia was in the same boat as Russia.”

In fact, the February Revolution, as it did all around the world, had a

galvanising political impact on the Australian working class, with resolutions carried at NSW and Victorian Labor Party conferences congratulating the Russian workers for overthrowing the autocracy. The NSW resolution explicitly blamed the war on the capitalist system, and declared that peace could only be accomplished by the “united efforts of the workers of all the countries involved.”

Strikes began erupting across the country—in mining, on the waterfront and in other strategic industries—over wages and working conditions in 1917. These reached a high point in early August, when 60,000 rail and tramway workers in NSW struck in protest against management speed-up demands.

The NSW government denounced the rail and tramway workers as “extremists,” who had “lost all sense of patriotism” and were aiding the “enemies of civilisation.”

However, the strikers, who were joined by about 100,000 other workers in a de-facto general strike across Australia, were betrayed by the tram and railway unions, which ended the strike on September 9, capitulating to all the demands of the government and state transport management.

While workers came forward to fight the war-time assault on living standards, increased exploitation and attacks on democratic rights, they were unable to defeat the government and employers, and challenge the entire profit system, because they lacked revolutionary leadership.

Although the most militant and politically advanced workers rejected the Labor Party, there was no party in Australia based on the program and perspective—developed by Lenin, Trotsky and the Bolsheviks—that led the Russian working class to power in the October Revolution.

Under the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky, the Russian working class opened a new chapter in world history. Based on the program of proletarian internationalism, and conceived as the opening shot of a world socialist revolution, the October Revolution radicalised workers in every country and sparked a wave of revolutionary struggles throughout Europe.

The central purpose of Australia’s WWI centenary celebrations is to saturate the population with militarism and patriotic propaganda in preparation for new imperialist wars. In line with this agenda, the ruling elite and all its political agencies do their utmost to downplay, distort and cover-up the real history of 1917 and, in particular, the lessons of the Russian Revolution, the most significant political event, not just of that year, but of the 20th century.

Workers and young people seeking to understand the class nature, causes and consequences of WWI, and how to prevent future and even bloodier catastrophes, need to study this key strategic experience of the international working class.



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