Report to meeting on Australia's anti-democratic electoral laws

Mounting pressure on China to abandon its zero-COVID policy

Peter Symonds
16 November 2021

The following is a report delivered by Peter Symonds,the national editor of the WSWS in Australia, to a meeting of electoral members of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) on November 14. The meeting was one of a series being held by the SEP as it campaigns against anti-democratic new electoral laws that have trebled the number of members required to achieve the party registration needed to have the party's name placed on election ballot papers.

1. We have in these meetings been discussing the murderous policy of "herd immunity" and "living with the virus" that has now been adopted by virtually every country in the world. The results have been devastating.

The pandemic continues to ravage the world. The total number of confirmed cases is now over 250 million and the total number of deaths is more than 5 million—a terrible toll that finds its parallels only in the tragedies of major wars.

In those countries that have championed herd immunity, the figures are horrendous.

In the United Kingdom, according to the latest update on November 13 from the World Health Organisation, there were 42,401 new cases in the previous 24 hours. The total number of cases was nearly nine and a half million, and the total death toll was over 142,000.

In the United States, there were nearly 88,000 new infections in the previous 24 hours. Total cases were well over 46 million, and total deaths were over 750,000 and rapidly heading toward 800,000.

2. All of this is now accepted by governments and the media as the "new normal" and immense pressure is being exerted for people to do the same. We are seeing it here with the ending of restrictions in every state, the opening of schools, of borders, both state and national, regardless of the deadly consequences.

China stands out as the great exception. Rigorous public health measures, including wholesale testing and contact tracing, lockdowns and other restrictions, now supplemented by mass vaccinations, not only suppressed the initial outbreak last year in Wuhan but have limited the outbreaks that have occurred since then. All of those have resulted from infections being brought into China from outside.

The latest World Health Organisation (WHO) statistics for November 13 are a stark contrast with the rest of the world.

In the previous 24 hours, there were just 110 new cases in China. The cases were quite widespread but there is a serious effort to contain and suppress them. All of this is in marked contrast to the rest of the world. In the same 24 hours here in Australia, with a population that is tiny compared to China, there were 1,589 cases.

Overall, there have been just over 127,000 cases in China and about 5,700 deaths. The vast majority of these took place in the first few months of last year when Chinese authorities were struggling to deal with the outbreak in Wuhan of what was then an unknown respiratory disease. They rapidly identified the cause, and worked out measures to treat, contain and suppress it. And they made that information available to the WHO and the world.

Amid all the talk in the media that it is impossible to eliminate COVID-19, the experience in China demonstrates the opposite. Elimination is possible, but only if carried out on a co-ordinated international basis.

The SEP and the International Committee of the Fourth International have very fundamental political differences with the Chinese Communist Party that go to the heart of the struggle of the Trotskyist movement against Stalinism. It is not the place here to go into the complex history of the three revolutions in China and the evolution of the regime that emerged after the Third Chinese Revolution in 1949.

It is enough to say that the legacy of those huge social and political upheavals does live on, principally in the sentiments of masses of ordinary people who take the issue of the priority of social needs, including the welfare of the population amid the pandemic, over private profit very seriously. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership, which faces an enormous social and economic crisis, is thus under pressure to take this seriously as well and its handling of the pandemic has widespread popular support.

3. What has begun, however, is a rising drumbeat of demands in the US and international media for China to abandon its elimination strategy. It is particularly marked in the financial press—the *Wall Street Journal*, *Bloomberg* and here in the *Australian Financial Review*.

A comment in the *Financial Times* by the columnist Gideon Rachman, for example, is entitled "China's self-isolation is a global concern." Its underline, "Beijing's zero-Covid policy is damaging international business and global governance," speaks volumes about the hypocrisy, criminal indifference to suffering and death, and underlying motives of the ruling elites for whom Rachman speaks.

What Rachman writes is very revealing. He declares: "When much of the globe was in lockdown, the extreme nature of China's measures seemed less remarkable. But as most of the world returns to something close to normality, China's self-isolation is increasingly anomalous."

There are many things that can be said this statement, but the central thrust of what is being argued is that China must accept what has now been imposed by the ruling classes around the world. "Something close to normality" means ending the public health measures necessary to protect the population and prevent deaths in the interests of profit. The daily toll of cases and lives lost, increasingly including children, is what must be accepted in China.

Rachman is highly indignant over what he describes as the "worst control-freak tendencies of the Communist party," citing the case of "more than 30,000 people who were locked inside Disneyland Shanghai

© World Socialist Web Site

and tested, after the discovery of a single case of Covid."

The CCP regime has indeed a vast police-state apparatus, which it uses, above all, to suppress the working class. And there may indeed be cases of bureaucratic overkill in dealing with outbreaks of COVID-19, but this was not one of them. As we all know, the Delta strain is highly infectious and thus spreads very rapidly with deadly consequences, even in highly vaccinated populations.

All public health measures are in a sense bureaucratic. This is what is seized upon by the extreme rightwing to demand the abolition of such measures—all in the name of individual rights, including, that means, the right to infect others.

Rachman expresses no outrage at the fact that the British government, indeed the entire political establishment, allows the virus to run rampant in the United Kingdom, with deaths continuing in the hundreds every week. This is the "new normal." In the United States, more people die each week from COVID-19 than have died overall in China.

The economic and political factors driving the "open up" campaign

4. Why is there this vicious campaign to demand that China open up? There are two main reasons—the first economic, and the second political.

Rachman blurts out the first when he declares: "The effects on international business are already apparent. China continues to trade and invest with the outside world. But business ties are fraying. Foreign chambers of commerce in China report that international executives are leaving the country and not being replaced. Hong Kong's role as a global business centre has taken a battering."

In a world economy built on the globalisation of production, any restrictions or the shutting down of any industry or any country affects supply chains around the world, impacting on profits and the stability of the financial system. The disruption is particularly great when it comes to China—the world's largest manufacturer.

Articles have also appeared in the financial press complaining about the disruption of supply chains in South East Asia where countries like Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia and Vietnam have succumbed to pressure to end public health measures. The fact that an open campaign is underway to force China to open up also indicates that the sudden dropping of restrictions here not only came from big business in Australia but also internationally.

The second political reason is bound up with the developing public opposition in the working class around the world to the sacrifice of the health and lives of working people in the pursuit of profits. The ruling classes cannot tolerate any exception—especially one so large and obvious as China—to the mantra that it is impossible to eliminate COVID-19 and everyone has to learn to live with it, and one should add, die with it.

Will Beijing will bow to this pressure? That depends over several factors, above all on what the working class in China and internationally does.

China is not a socialist or communist country. The Chinese Communist Party's claim that it is presiding over socialism with Chinese characteristics is absurd. After more than four decades of capitalist restoration, it is the capitalist market that dominates over every aspect of life and the economy in China. Undoubtedly, there is pressure on the regime from domestic big business as well as international finance capital.

But there is also the potential for the eruption of widespread opposition among Chinese workers if they are forced back to work in unsafe conditions and their children forced back into unsafe schools. The Chinese Communist Party is well aware that it is sitting on top of a social time bomb and to date has maintained its strict elimination policy—at least within its borders. Its nationalist outlook means it is incapable of making any broad appeal to the one social force that could fight for it on a world scale—the international working class.

5. The open attack in the international media on China's COVID-19 policy is part of a far broader US-led confrontation with China over the past decade—first under Obama then Trump and now Biden.

It is beyond the scope of this report to deal in any great detail with the reckless US efforts to undermine China diplomatically and economically, and to engage in a huge military build-up throughout the Asian region. This includes that strengthening of military alliances, strategic partnerships and basing arrangements in preparation for what would be a disastrous war between the world's two largest economies, both nuclear-armed.

The latest is the AUKUS agreement involving the US, Britain and Australia that, among other things, will provide nuclear-powered submarines to Australia. As former Prime Minister Paul Keating, one of a tiny handful of critics, pointed out this week, these submarines only have one purpose—to assist the US in a war with China by confining its navy to China's coastline.

The Biden administration has not only continued the aggressive, anti-China policies of the Trump administration but further intensified them on all fronts—the hypocritical denunciations of China over human rights issues, trade war measures and punitive economic measures against Chinese corporations such as Huawei, as well as provocative military operations in areas close to the Chinese mainland.

To touch very briefly on one of the most dangerous signs of the accelerating war drive, the Biden administration is recklessly inflaming tensions over Taiwan—arguably the most dangerous flashpoint in Asia. While accusing China of plotting aggression against Taiwan, the US is actively undermining the One China policy that was the basis of the diplomatic relations with China established in 1979. The willingness of Washington to sacrifice diplomatic relations is a sure indication that it is preparing for war.

And the time frame is short. The top US general—chairman of the joint chiefs of staff Mark Milley—recently put it in a very roundabout way: he didn't expect war with China over Taiwan in the next two years. In other words, after two years—all bets are off!

The US-led drive to war is not simply a product of bad individuals or policies, but is rooted in the capitalist system itself, and its division of the world into competing nation states. US imperialism regards China and its massive economic expansion as the chief threat to the dominant position that it established in global capitalism after World War II. The US is prepared to use all means, including military, to arrest its historic decline and subordinate China to its economic and strategic interests. Anyone who believes that the potentially catastrophic effects of such a war will deter the ruling class should ponder the fact that they have already been willing to sacrifice millions of lives in the COVID-19 pandemic in the pursuit of profit.

6. The pandemic, the rising danger of war and other deeply troubling problems confronting humanity, such as climate change, are fuelling a radicalisation of workers and young people internationally. The solution to these crises is not to be found in futile appeals to the powers that be, but in the development of a unified revolutionary movement of the working class to put an end to the bankrupt and outmoded system of capitalism.

The electoral laws that we are campaigning against are just one element of the efforts to prevent above all a genuine socialist perspective from being enunciated. I would urge everyone here to redouble their efforts to sign up electoral members to the Socialist Equality Party and to seriously consider, if you are not already, applying to become full SEP members.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site