

Maritime Union of Australia backs US-led war drive against Russia

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In a statement published earlier this month, the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) called on the federal Liberal-National government to take “action” against Russia and its invasion of Ukraine through the imposition of sweeping shipping-related sanctions.

The statement can only be described as a militarist screed. The MUA is seeking to subordinate seafarers and port workers to the war drive of the US and its allies, including Australia. It is actively campaigning for the Australian government to deepen its involvement in a confrontation with Russia that threatens nuclear world war.

The WSWs has condemned the Russian invasion as a reactionary operation based upon nationalism that serves the interests of the Russian capitalist class. It can only sow divisions between Russian and Ukrainian workers and heighten the threat of a global military catastrophe.

The US and NATO have instigated this war and are exploiting it to step up long-standing plans for a direct conflict with Russia aimed at establishing American capitalism’s hegemony over the geo-strategically crucial Eurasian landmass.

NATO has expanded eastwards for the past three decades, encircling Russia with advanced US missile systems. Washington orchestrated a coup against a democratically-elected Ukrainian government in 2014, because of its ties to Moscow. Over the ensuing eight years, the US has transformed Ukraine into a garrison state on Russia’s borders, providing a flood of weaponry to its right-wing government and to fascist militia groups.

In the months leading up to the invasion, the Biden administration stepped up plans to directly integrate Ukraine into NATO and dismissed Putin’s demands for a “security guarantee,” deliberately provoking the invasion.

None of this is mentioned in the MUA statement. The words “United States” and “NATO” do not appear. The MUA acts as though 30 years of unending US-led wars, all of which Australia has joined without serious opposition from the unions, simply did not occur. The ravages of American imperialism, backed by Australian imperialism, in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria are buried, as is the open planning in Washington and Canberra for wars against Russia and China to ensure US dominance.

Instead, the MUA statement blames everything on “Russian imperial aggression” in language indistinguishable from the war propaganda being pumped out every day by Western governments and the official media.

The measures advocated by the MUA are those associated with war. It calls for Morrison to place a national embargo on “all Russian registered ships or vessels or those which are majority-owned or controlled by Russian businesses or individuals or which may be carrying a predominantly Russian cargo.”

In the weeks since the statement appeared, the Australian government, with the full support of Labor and the unions, has imposed an expanding set of sanctions on Russian concerns, politicians and business people. It has dispatched two shipments of weapons to the Ukrainian state and its

associated far-right paramilitaries and has used the same wartime language against Russia employed by the MUA.

The union statement hails the fact that the “two largest shipping companies in the world,” Maersk Line and Mediterranean Shipping Company, have “both suspended container shipping to Russia.” The shipping lines promoted by the MUA are at the forefront of a continuous assault on workers’ jobs, wages and conditions.

The MUA is collaborating with its counterparts around the world to impose these business demands and to divide maritime workers along national lines. The union is similarly coordinating its anti-Russian campaign with unions in Britain, the Netherlands and other imperialist centres which are also agitating for sanctions and embargoes. Paddy Crumlin, the MUA national secretary, has been the president of the International Transport Workers’ Federation since 2010.

All of the unions involved are seeking to cover their militarist policies with weasel words of concern for civilians and vague references to the need for a “diplomatic solution.” The economic warfare being cheered on by the unions, however, will deepen a social crisis in Russia, Ukraine and all over the world by creating immense economic dislocation and driving up inflation. The purpose of the sanctions is to provoke a massive crisis in Moscow that results in regime change. The measures are thus directed at preventing any diplomatic solution.

In the case of the MUA, the union asserts that its anti-Russian positions are the continuation of previous “peace and international justice campaigns.” In a handful of sentences, the union provides a potted history spanning back to the 1930s.

In reality, the experiences referenced by the MUA demonstrate that the union and its predecessors have always bitterly opposed the fight for a genuine, socialist and internationalist opposition to imperialist war. Instead, the maritime unions have sought to subordinate the instinctive anti-war sentiments of workers, first to the foreign policy needs of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union and since the dissolution of the USSR, directly to Australian imperialism.

1. The MUA states “it was the 1938 Dalfram dispute that saw waterfront labourers refuse to load pig iron bound for Japan during the Second Sino-Japanese War in what was to become the build up to World War II.”

That campaign was led by the Waterside Workers Federation (WWF), which was controlled by the Communist Party of Australia (CPA). By 1938, the CPA had been a Stalinist organisation for over a decade, and slavishly implemented the dictates of the Soviet bureaucracy.

Stalinism advanced the interests of that bureaucracy, which emerged on the basis of the isolation and material backwardness of the Soviet Union. It repudiated the socialist and internationalist perspective that animated the 1917 Russian Revolution and the fight for world socialism, instead advancing the nationalist and anti-Marxist program of “socialism in one country.”

In the decade prior to 1938, the Communist parties internationally were

repeatedly purged as they were transformed from parties fighting for socialist revolution to adjuncts of the foreign policy needs of the Soviet bureaucracy.

In 1938, the Stalinists based themselves on the perspective of the “popular front” under which the Soviet bureaucracy and the Communist parties subordinated the working class to the “democratic” imperialist powers including the US, Britain and Australia. This went hand in hand with the Moscow show trials and the mass murder of Trotskyists and socialist opponents and the suppression of revolutionary struggles everywhere else.

It was in this context that the CPA and the WWF agitated for the ban on pig iron being sent to Japan. While cynically appealing to widespread opposition in the working class to Japan’s brutal war on the Chinese masses, the call for a ban was in line with the Soviet bureaucracy’s support for a struggle by the “democratic” powers against Japan and Germany.

This aligned the CPA and the WWF with the most hawkish sections of the Australian ruling elite who were demanding that Australia accelerate preparations for war with Japan. The aim was to ensure Australian imperialist interests in the Pacific in league with British imperialism, and subsequently with US imperialism.

The thoroughly opportunistic character of the ban was revealed the following year. In August 1939, the infamous Stalin-Hitler non-aggression pact was signed.

The Communist parties, including the CPA, changed their position 180 degrees overnight. They dispensed with previous condemnations of Hitler and the Japanese militarist regime, and instead denounced Britain and the US as the principal imperialist aggressors. This policy gave the greenlight for the Nazi invasion of Poland, the opening shot of World War II, and created immense confusion in the international working class.

2. The MUA hails the “service and sacrifice” enforced by the maritime unions in World War II. “One in eight Australian merchant seafarers lost their lives in service to the nation,” it declares.

The Stalinist alliance with Germany allowed the Nazi regime to prepare its longstanding plans for an assault on the Soviet Union, which it regarded as its chief enemy. When that invasion occurred in June 1941, the CPA and its international counterparts did another about-face. In line with the new Soviet alliance with the US and Britain, the Communist parties became the most vociferous advocates of the imperialist war effort.

The Stalinist leaders of the WWF and the Seamens’ Union of Australia (SUA) joined industry-commissions established by the Labor government of John Curtin. These were tasked with enforcing a ban on all industrial action and ensuring maximum war production, including through attacks on workers’ conditions.

The Stalinists hysterically denounced the Australian Trotskyists who fought for an independent movement of the working class against the imperialist war and insisted that the threat of fascism could only be countered by the abolition of capitalism and the establishment of workers’ power. The Stalinists branded this revolutionary policy, grounded on the struggle waged by Vladimir Lenin, Leon Trotsky and the Bolsheviks during World War I, as support for fascism, and carried out physical attacks on the Trotskyists.

3. The MUA statement declares, “Our union stood up for the sovereign rights of Vietnam.”

The US invasion and bombardment of Vietnam provoked mass opposition in Australia and internationally. This coincided with and deepened a broader radicalisation of the working class, which resulted in a wave of revolutionary struggles around the world between 1968 and 1975.

In 1968, mass protests erupted against the Stalinist regime in Czechoslovakia. The Soviet bureaucracy responded with an invasion. Widespread opposition to this brutal operation produced a crisis within the Communist parties, including in Australia.

The CPA split as a result in 1971. A majority sought to distance itself from the invasion and the most egregious crimes of the Soviet bureaucracy, while maintaining the Stalinist program of socialism in one country. A minority established the Socialist Party of Australia (SPA), which won Moscow’s patronage and openly backed every aspect of Soviet policy. Leading figures in the WWF and the SUA went with the SPA.

In the midst of the Cold War the Soviet bureaucracy viewed the war in Vietnam as a bargaining chip which could be used to try and establish better terms with US imperialism. Above all, the bureaucracy did everything in its power to prevent the war from sparking revolutionary struggles internationally that would have threatened its position, including within the Soviet Union.

In line with these aims the Stalinist parties internationally advanced Popular Front-style policies, subordinating the struggle against the war to supposedly progressive sections of the capitalist class and its political establishment. In Australia, the SPA, along with the CPA, sought to corral anti-war sentiment into a pacifist movement based on appeals for a negotiated settlement to the war.

The SPA and its unions cultivated illusions in the left-wing of the Labor Party as the vehicle for such a settlement. Labor, however, supported the war effort. The criticisms made of the war by certain “left” Labor figures, such as Jim Cairns, were aimed at containing the anti-war sentiment and were of an entirely tactical character. The left Laborites condemned the war, not as an imperialist assault on an oppressed country, but as an “unwinnable” venture, while defending the US-Australia alliance, the right-wing Labor leadership and the prosecution of Australian imperialist interests.

Above all, the Stalinists sought to prevent the fight against war from merging with a mounting wages movement of the working class in a struggle against capitalism and its political representatives. Collaborating with Labor, the Stalinist unions sought to limit each wages dispute to a single industry, while excluding political issues, above all the war. Within the anti-war movement, they tried to block a turn by radicalised students to the working class on the basis of pacifist and protest politics.

The national-reformist politics of the Stalinists and their counterparts internationally played a central role in the defeat of the upheavals of the late 1960s and the first half of the 1970s. This allowed the ruling class to regroup and to go on an offensive against the jobs, wages and conditions of the working class.

In Australia, the agenda of economic deregulation, the destruction of whole sections of industry and an assault on wages and conditions was enforced by the Hawke and Keating Labor governments of the 1980s and 1990s and the trade unions.

This was part of an international phenomenon. Amid the globalisation of production, the old social-democratic, Stalinist and trade union organisations dispensed with their earlier program of national-reformism which was no longer viable under conditions of internationally-mobile capital, scouring the world for the cheapest labour costs.

These organisations either collapsed, or took their nationalist and pro-capitalist program to its logical conclusion, becoming the enforcers of a continuous onslaught on working-class conditions aimed at ensuring that their “own” national industries remained competitive in the world market.

This process resulted in the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. The CPA capitulated to the “socialism is dead” euphoria in the political and media establishment and dissolved itself. The SPA took on the name and maintained a significant influence in the maritime unions.

On the waterfront, the MUA, formed through a merger of the WWF and the SUA in 1993, launched a naked collaboration with the port and seafaring corporations that has resulted in the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs throughout the sector. This domestic policy, which amounts to a union-enforced war against the working class, went hand in

hand with open alignment with Australian imperialist war abroad.

4. The MUA boasts that “the maritime support by Australian seafaring members of the MUA for the East Timorese was recognised as strategically significant by General Sir Peter Cosgrove.”

This is a reference to bans imposed by the MUA on the loading of cargo bound for Indonesia in the late 1990s. The character of the bans is demonstrated by the praise from Cosgrove, a top Australian military figure who was commander of the International Force for East Timor in 1999.

It was under Cosgrove’s task force that Australian troops were dispatched to East Timor by the Howard Liberal-National government in 1999. The deployment was legitimised based on false claims of protecting civilians from Indonesian atrocities, even though the killings had already concluded by the time troops arrived. In reality, the Australian intervention was an attempt to secure control over Timor’s significant oil deposits and to ensure that a newly-independent government would be beholden to Canberra.

As has since been revealed, after independence, Australian intelligence agencies illegally bugged meetings of the East Timorese government as they conspired to ensure that Australian companies gained access to the oil reserves. In 2006, Australia would play a key role in a blatant regime-change operation. Both developments summed up the neo-colonial character of the 1999 invasion.

The East Timor intervention was supported by an entire milieu of ex-lefts, trade unions and Stalinists, who had dispensed with any, even nominal, opposition to imperialism. They represented the interests of a privileged upper middle-class whose wealth was based on the stock market boom and the predatory operations of the imperialist powers.

The *Australian Financial Review*, one of the preeminent mouthpieces of the corporate elite, hailed the political shift of this layer at the time of the East Timor war as a crucial blow to the “domestic taboo on discussion of military intervention in the region” following the Vietnam war.

In the decades since, the unions and the Stalinists, together with the pseudo-lefts, have only moved further to the right, enforcing unprecedented attacks on port workers and the working class more broadly, and openly aligning with imperialist war.

As a result of a continuous union-company offensive the maritime workforce is a fraction of what it was in the early 1980s. A key turning point came in 1998, when the MUA shut down a months-long strike by Patrick port workers in Sydney and signed a sell-out deal for the elimination of 650 jobs, almost half the company’s workforce. Every agreement struck by the union in the 25 years since has included cuts to jobs and/or a further elimination of conditions. Casual labour accounts for 50 percent of the positions that remain.

Mirroring this domestic policy, the union has vociferously backed Australia’s alignment with the US war drive against China and has demanded that the maritime sector be recognised as a key battleground in the confrontation with Beijing.

The union, like its counterparts, is not a workers’ organisation in any sense of the term. Advancing the interests of a privileged bureaucracy, it fully supports the ruling elite’s program of war abroad and war at home. Workers in the maritime union and more broadly must break with the unions and their nationalist program, including its Stalinist variant. The alternative is the fight for the unity of the international working class in a struggle against imperialist war and the onslaught on working-class jobs, wages and conditions.

Such a struggle requires a socialist and internationalist perspective directed against the source of military conflict and the austerity offensive, the capitalist profit system.





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