

Australian Labor government spends \$4 billion on weapons in three weeks

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In Australia, the year has begun with an unprecedented flurry of spending on advanced weaponry. The Labor government is rushing to complete the country's transformation into a militarised outpost. This is in line with calls from Washington for Australia to function as the "tip of the spear" of its war drive against China.

Nurses and doctors, warning daily that the public hospital system is in its worst crisis ever, are told "there is no money" for healthcare. Teachers, pointing to the chronic dysfunction of the under-resourced public education system, are likewise given short shrift.

For workers more generally, the Labor government has provided virtually nothing by way of financial assistance amid the worst cost-of-living crisis in decades. Instead, Labor has proclaimed the need for working people to "make sacrifices." It has demanded pay rises far below inflation, while backing repeated interest rate hikes that have driven up mortgage and other housing payments.

But when it comes to the military, there is to all intents and purposes a blank cheque. Taken together, the Labor government has committed to at least \$4 billion in military spending over the past three weeks.

The announcements, for three major weapons upgrades, have been made quietly. The official media has reported them without critical comment on the vast resources being directed to the war machine, or the purpose of the spending.

The method is akin to a drip feed. The clear aim is to prevent the population from gaining any sense of the cumulative impact, both in terms of the massive spending and how central Australia is to the US war plans.

The latest spend was announced yesterday. For the first time since the Vietnam War, Australia will

purchase sea mines. As media commentary noted, these played a critical role in every maritime conflict of the 20th and even 19th centuries. Their purchase is a clear signal that the Labor government is preparing for an ocean war against a major state adversary.

The official statement declared that the purchase would provide "a significant deterrent to potential aggressors" amid rising tensions in the Indo-Pacific region. The only thing left out was to explicitly name China as the target, but that was clear to anyone who could read between the lines.

A statement said the government would shortly announce a contract with a European supplier of the mines, indicating that such a deal has been finalised behind the backs of the population. The cost has not been revealed, but a *Sydney Morning Herald* report indicated that it would be in the region of \$1 billion.

As with other recent military acquisitions, the government spoke of "protecting Australia's maritime approaches" with the mines.

There is, however, no power with a conceivable interest in a maritime campaign aimed at landing in the country's north, several thousand kilometres from Australia's main population and infrastructure centres. Such references are merely a thinly-veiled rehash of the racist warnings of a "yellow peril" coming from the north, which were central to the White Australia program upon which Australia was founded.

The argument that the mines would protect the approaches, even if they were under threat, is itself ludicrous. Media reports have indicated that the \$1 billion will fund a stock of mines in the hundreds, or at most the low thousands.

Peter Cronau, a former Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) journalist and now editor of *Declassified Australia*, noted on Twitter: "Protecting

34,000 kms of coastline takes a lot of sea mines—unless they're actually designed to be used in a future US military blockade of #China, to break China's economy."

Just as it has no interest in invading Australia, so too China has no reason to disrupt the key shipping lanes of the Pacific, on which it depends for the vast bulk of its raw materials and much of its trade.

Instead, plans for such a disruption have long been a key component of US preparations for war against China, aimed at re-asserting American imperialist hegemony in the region. In 2010, as it was beginning a major military buildup throughout the Indo-Pacific, the Pentagon formally adopted the doctrine of AirSea Battle. In addition to a massive bombardment of the Chinese mainland, it would involve a maritime blockade that Australia would play a central role in enforcing.

The same justification was used by Labor for its purchase of HIMARS missile systems, unveiled at the beginning of the year. As the WWS noted, the claim that the missiles would protect northern Australia was similarly absurd. With a current range of several hundred kilometres, they could do little more than fire rockets into Australia's empty coastal waters.

Commentary in strategic circles, including US and Australian government-funded think tanks pointed to the real purpose. They noted that the HIMARS are transportable, both by land and air, and foreshadowed their deployment to other countries in the region.

Australia has also co-funded a little reported project by Pentagon, aimed at expanding the range of HIMARS to up to a thousand kilometres. This would place them in the category of a medium-range missile system, further enabling offensive operations.

The government refused to say how much the US missile system would cost, but estimates have placed the bill at \$385 million.

The offensive character of the spend was indicated by the fact that the HIMARS acquisition was announced alongside the purchase of Naval Strike Missiles, which will be placed on Australia's warships as they conduct operations throughout the region.

On January 17, Labor announced it would purchase 40 Black Hawk helicopters, to replace the army's existing fleet. They will cost a staggering \$2.8 billion.

All the recent acquisitions point to advanced

preparations for naval warfare in the Indo-Pacific, in line with the AirSea Battle strategy.

This has been all but confirmed by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese. He told the ABC last week his government was ensuring that "making sure that every single dollar that's spent in defence is spent in the best possible way to support our national security... So, for example, a shift from where we were perhaps focused on land conflict in areas that we might or we mightn't need." In other words, toward maritime conflict.

This focus has coincided with an escalation of Labor's aggressive diplomatic interventions in the Pacific. Labor is seeking to block purported Chinese "influence," while pushing military agreements with Pacific states. It has already struck one such deal with Vanuatu, providing for extensive Australian military access to the island state, and is pressuring Papua New Guinea to sign a similar agreement.

No doubt, there are discussions about stationing Australia's new military hardware on, or in the vicinity of, these Pacific states—strategic locations that would play a crucial role in any war.

In 2011, the previous Labor government of Julia Gillard aligned Australia with the US "pivot to Asia," the vast military build-up in the region preparing for war against China. These war preparations were deepened by every succeeding Liberal-National government, within the framework laid down by Labor.

Now again, a Labor government is presiding over a qualitative leap in the militarisation of the country. The clear aim is to ready the country to play a central role in a US war with China. It is no longer a question of initial preparations, but of arming and equipping the defence forces for a potentially imminent conflict, the outlines and focus of which are already taking shape.

That underscores the need to build an anti-war movement to prevent such a catastrophe. That movement must be based on the international working class and youth, and can develop only through a political struggle against the Labor government and the capitalist system that it represents.



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