

The new anti-AUKUS Coalition in Australia: A nationalist trap for anti-war sentiment

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Last month, a recently formed organisation called the “anti-AUKUS Coalition” held demonstrations outside the offices of federal Australian MPs in several cities. The small rallies and the group behind them oppose AUKUS, the militarist pact between the US, Britain and Australia, directed against China.

Promotional material for the events suggested that they were anti-war. This was aimed at tapping into mounting concern and opposition among workers and young people over the rapidly escalating descent into a third world war, spearheaded by the US, along with all of the other imperialist powers, including Australia.

But the protests, and the broader coalition, have nothing to do with the fight to build a genuine anti-war movement. In fact its purpose is to block the development of such a movement, and to direct workers and young people behind a section of the political establishment, on the basis of nationalist calls for a more “independent” Australian foreign policy.

The sharpest expression of this fact is that the anti-AUKUS Coalition says nothing about the war that is already underway, the conflict in Ukraine. Some of its prominent constituents, including the pseudo-Left Socialist Alliance, have actively supported the US and NATO war effort in the conflict. They have cheered on the vast US-led intervention, which is aimed at inflicting a military defeat on Russia and clearing the way for war with China, fraudulently proclaiming it to be a fight for Ukrainian “sovereignty” and “democracy.”

The hostility of the organisation to AUKUS is of an entirely tactical character. The Coalition does not oppose war with China per se, but is fearful of its implications for Australian capitalism. This dovetails with the concerns voiced by a minority wing of the ruling class itself, which has warned that Australian participation in an all-out war would be economically devastating and would threaten social and political upheavals.

The anti-AUKUS Coalition does not oppose Australian imperialism, but calls for it to adopt a more “independent” foreign policy. The suggestion is that Australia could simply sit out a war with China, despite the fact that it would inevitably develop into a conflagration throughout the Indo-Pacific and likely the entire world. This position is a reactionary utopia that serves primarily as a trap for anti-war sentiment.

In the first instance, Australian participation in a US-led war with China is not something that would be discussed or debated in the event of conflict. The Australian state and military apparatus are completely integrated into the US war machine, meaning that such participation would be automatic.

More broadly, the Australian alignment with the US is not merely a matter of “mistaken policy” as the coalition asserts. Instead, as a middle order imperialist power, Australia has always aligned itself with the dominant imperialist power of the day, first Britain and then mid-way through World War II, the United States. The quid pro quo is that the US will support Australian imperialism’s predatory activities in the Pacific, in exchange for Australian participation in US-led wars and military

interventions around the world.

IPAN

To the extent that the coalition has a clear program, it is provided by the Independent and Peaceful Australia Network (IPAN.) That organisation held a “people’s inquiry” last year “Questioning Australia’s Involvement in US-led Wars and the Australia-United States alliance.”

The report from the inquiry was released last November. Its authors comprise representatives of the “radical” protest milieu that makes up the anti-AUKUS Coalition, together with figures who are in or on the periphery of the official political establishment.

They include Greg Barns, who has served as an advisor to the Liberal Party and was the head of the Republican Movement, as well as Dr Alison Broinowski, a former diplomat for the Australian government and Jeannie Rea, previously the head of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU). These are figures who have no relationship with the working class, except an antagonistic one. Rea, for instance, oversaw sweeping cuts to the jobs and conditions of academic staff. Barns had a decades-long association with the Liberals, a pro-war party of big business.

Significantly, the inquiry actively welcomed participation from prominent retired generals and other military figures who are favourably cited in the report. The extreme right were also welcomed with open arms. The Australian wing of the fascist LaRouche organisation made a submission, which is duly quoted in the report. Like the anti-AUKUS Coalition, it maintained a silence on the US-NATO war effort in Ukraine.

The report does not pretend to oppose war, imperialism or their source in the capitalist profit system. In fact, it is framed as advice to the government on how best to take forward the interests of Australian capitalism. Its foreword states: “the report importantly provides a series of recommendations proposing how Australia can chart a different international path in the future to that which we have travelled over the preceding seventy years. This, we argue, is a path that is more independent and that better serves the interests of the Australian nation and its people.”

A substantial component of the report is dedicated to promoting a refashioned Australian nationalism. It bolsters various forms of Aboriginal identity politics, which serve to divide the working class and promote the interests of a narrow indigenous elite that is ever more integrated into the structures of the corporate and financial establishment. This dovetails with the Labor government’s attempts to dress up its right-wing and militarist program with an indigenous Voice to parliament, which would further elevate this privileged Aboriginal layer while doing nothing to address the social crisis afflicting Aboriginal workers and young people.

IPAN’s focus on this issue is aimed at providing Australian imperialism with a more “humane” veneer. The report promotes purported “Australian values,” which are supposedly threatened by the alliance with the US and its military operations.

But what are those values? As an imperialist power, Australia has laid waste to the Pacific, subjugating its people and enforcing their poverty, for

the best part of a century. This included its colonial rule in Papua New Guinea, and more recently, military occupations in East Timor and the Solomon Islands. The Labor government and the ruling elite for which it speaks is currently bullying the various Pacific states to align with the US war drive against China, while also aggressively pushing the interests of the Australian gas and oil corporations.

IPAN says nothing about this sordid record, which continues to the present. Its program, in fact, aligns with calls for a greater promotion of Australian imperialist interests, especially in this region.

The theme of the report is spelled out in an early contribution. Through the US alliance, it complains that Australia has “forsaken our independence. Australia is fighting in and invariably losing wars in which we have no direct interest, and for which there is little popular support and even less moral justification. This has been at huge personal and financial costs that are detrimental to the interests of the Australian people.”

The inevitable conclusion is that if such wars were in the “national interest,” i.e., the interests of the banks and corporations, IPAN would support them. This is the antithesis of a principled opposition to all imperialist wars.

The report clearly represents a section of the Australian ruling class concerned about the impact of war with China. It warns that “concern is also expressed that our trade relationship with China, beneficial in terms of job generation and national income, has been harmed by our direct provocations on behalf of the United States.”

IPAN calls for military build-up

In its final sections, the report outlines a “vision,” that includes greater military spending. It states: “Australia should look to developing a self-reliant, self-funded, self-defence model with associated manufacturing capabilities, even if this costs more than our current close expensive integration with the US military.”

IPAN declares the aim of an “alternative defence policy” would be “to secure the nation against potential adversaries” on the basis of “armed neutrality.” New Zealand, another minor imperialist power that has lorded it over the Pacific for decades while participating in US-led wars around the world, is held up as a model.

None of this would be opposed even by the most hawkish sections of the military and intelligence establishment. Protecting “air and maritime approaches” is the bogus pretext under which the Labor government is conducting a massive military build-up in preparation for war with China. Such activities are invariably presented as “protective” and “defensive,” even when they have a clear offensive purpose.

The logic of this more “independent” foreign policy demands a greater outlay on defence and the military, in line with the most bellicose sections of the military establishment. This is acknowledged by IPAN, itself. Among the costs would be the acquisition of “long-range precision strike and sensor capabilities.” That is, medium-range or greater missile systems. Military expenditure is already well over half a trillion this decade, indicating the scale of the military build-up that IPAN is proposing.

Moreover, IPAN does not call for an end to the US alliance, but merely for its “renegotiation.” In other words, its conclusions go in the direction of a major military build-up, under the umbrella of the US alliance, but with greater weight given to the aggressive pursuit of Australia’s own imperialist interests.

IPAN is not building an anti-war movement, but a war movement. To the extent that it has criticisms of official military policy, they are of an entirely tactical character. The militarist character of the IPAN proposals brands all those promoting this organisation as adjuncts of Australian imperialism and opponents of the fight against war.

The entire anti-AUKUS Coalition is similarly pro-war. That includes the pseudo-left Socialist Alliance and the various corporatised unions that it is close to. In its coverage of IPAN, Socialist Alliance has favourably noted

nationalist calls by the unions for an expansion of domestic defence manufacturing, including in the construction of offensive weaponry, such as advanced submarines.

In other words, while openly backing the US-NATO war with Ukraine, Socialist Alliance tacitly endorses an Australian military build-up directed against China. Its specific function in bodies such as IPAN and the Coalition is to provide these right-wing policies with a fake-left gloss.

Socialist Alliance, in fact, has nothing to do with socialism or the fight against war. Like the pseudo-left internationally, it represents an affluent layer of the upper-middle class that has ever more openly backed imperialist wars and interventions. Socialist Alliance began this course in 1999 by leading a campaign for a predatory Australian imperialist intervention into East Timor. Over the past decade, the pseudo-left internationally has championed US regime-change operations in Syria and Libya, and now the confrontation with Russia in Ukraine.

An international tendency

The development of the anti-AUKUS Coalition and IPAN are part of an international tendency. In a number of countries, sections of the political establishment are developing movements that combine vague “anti-war” rhetoric, with a militarist policy, as well as calls for an alliance of the “right” and the “left.”

In the US, this tendency found expression in last month’s “Rage Against the War Machine” rally in Washington. While ostensibly opposing Washington’s involvement in the proxy war in Ukraine, the protest centrally involved extreme right-wing individuals from the Libertarian and Republican Parties. They fully support the build-up of the American military and its offensive operations around the world. They merely have tactical concerns over the immediate conflict in Ukraine.

Similarly in Germany, a section of the Left Party recently held a supposed anti-war rally in alliance with the fascistic Alternative for Germany and senior military figures. It criticised the proxy war in Ukraine from the standpoint that it is not sufficiently furthering the interests of German imperialism. Instead, the protest called for a more independent German foreign policy—a call which harkens back to the eruptions of German militarism last century, including the actions of the Nazi regime.

All of these movements are directed at sowing confusion among workers and young people, while advancing the interests of sections of the ruling elite. Above all, they are directed against the development of an understanding that war is a product of the capitalist nation-state system and can only be fought on the basis of an international and socialist movement of the working class.

Socialist alternative to war

The real basis for the building of such an anti-war movement has been spelled out by the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world party of which the Socialist Equality Party in Australia is a section.

In 2016, analysing the far-advanced tendencies toward a third world war, the International Committee of the Fourth International, in its statement “Socialism and the Fight Against War,” summarised the fundamental programmatic basis of a new anti-war movement. It wrote:

1. The struggle against war must be based on the working class, the great revolutionary force in society, uniting behind it all progressive elements in the population.

2. The new anti-war movement must be anti-capitalist and socialist, since there can be no serious struggle against war except in the fight to end the dictatorship of finance capital and the economic system that is the fundamental cause of militarism and war.

3. The new anti-war movement must therefore, of necessity, be completely and unequivocally independent of, and hostile to, all political parties and organisations of the capitalist class.

4. The new anti-war movement must, above all, be international, mobilising the vast power of the working class in a unified global struggle against imperialism.

The basis for such a movement exists in the rapid development of the class struggle around the world. The same contradictions that are propelling the imperialist powers towards war also provide the impulse of struggles by the working class that will acquire a revolutionary character.

But such a movement above all requires a clear political perspective and program. That can only be developed and fought for through a relentless struggle against the pro-imperialist pseudo-left and the various nationalist tendencies that seek to chain workers and young people to one or another section of the capitalist political establishment.

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