Anti-AUKUS meeting in Sydney: Fake anti-war movement promotes right-wing militarists

Oscar Grenfell
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On Sunday, the Marrickville Peace Group held a meeting opposing the recent announcement by the federal Labor government of a $368 billion deal with the US and Britain to acquire nuclear-powered submarines. The agreement completes Australia's transformation into a frontline state of US-led plans for an aggressive war against China. It has provoked substantial shock and opposition.

But those genuinely seeking to fight war would have left the meeting scratching their heads. The event had nothing to do with the struggle against war, imperialism or its source, the crisis-ridden capitalist system. Instead, the platform, while expressing tactical differences with AUKUS, featured right-wing militarists, including one centrally involved in the illegal 2003 US invasion of Iraq.

Their positions dovetailed with those of a minority wing of the Australian ruling class. It has expressed concern over the consequences of Australian involvement in a full-blown war with China, from the standpoint of its impact on trade and the economic interests of big business.

This wing, moreover, is fearful that war will provoke major opposition from the working class, intersecting with intense social anger over the cost-of-living crisis and a deepening austerity offensive against social spending. To head off this development, it is peddling the delusion that Australia can adopt an "independent" foreign policy, and even sit out a US war with China.

The Marrickville meeting had the character of a launch event for a fake anti-war movement based on this political line. It was endorsed by the Independent and Peaceful Australia Network (IPAN), which has been at the forefront of calls for a more "independent" Australian policy and an even greater military build-up to prosecute Australian imperialism's interests elsewhere.

The meeting was attended by around 350 people. They included substantial contingents of the trade union bureaucracy, Labor and Greens members, old Stalinists and representatives of the various pseudo-left parties, such as Socialist Alliance and Solidarity.

All of these organisations have given their support to the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine. That is of particular note, because for American imperialism, the war in Eastern Europe, aimed at imposing a crippling defeat on the Russian military, is viewed as a prelude to war against China, the chief economic threat to the US.

The reactionary program advanced at the meeting was reflected in the speakers.

Advertising for the event noted that it was also being held to mark 20 years since the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. However, the organisers selected an individual who would have to be among the least appropriate in the entire world to address any anti-war gathering.

The event began with a near-35 minute presentation by retired US Colonel Lawrence Wilkerson. In 2003, Wilkerson was chief of staff to then US Secretary of State Colin Powell. In that capacity, Wilkerson drew up the infamous speech Powell delivered to the United Nations, alleging that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction as well as links to Al Qaeda. That address was the direct prelude to, and justification for, the criminal US invasion.

Wilkerson's remarks were in the form of an interview with the MC, Mary Kostakidis, a former television newsreader.

Wilkerson has gained an entré into the world of middle-class liberal and "left" politics by making limited criticisms of the Iraq War. Seeking to smooth over the bizarre incongruity of one of the Bush administration's propagandists for the Iraq invasion speaking at a supposedly anti-war meeting, Kostakidis felt obliged to ask Wilkerson about his record.

The answers showed that Wilkerson's criticisms do not run very deep at all. He is essentially an unrepentant war criminal who has never been held to account for his actions. Wilkerson defended his boss, Powell, and the Bush administration as a whole. It was the hapless victim of incorrect intelligence from the CIA.

Anyway, none of it mattered all that much, Wilkerson said, while claiming he was "not making excuses." Had Powell resigned, rather than promote the lies and launch the war, "it would have made no difference." At no point did Wilkerson express a hint of remorse about the hundreds of thousands of Iraqis killed in a war he helped to launch.

His retrospective, and highly limited criticisms of the invasion, centre on the fact that the quagmires in the Middle East and Central Asia weakened the position of American imperialism. The colonel, addressing an "anti-war" forum, bitterly lamented the fact that US "imperium" after World War II had eroded.

Wilkerson's positions on China are those of a "realist" wing of the American foreign policy establishment, associated with arch-war criminal Henry Kissinger. This layer states that the US must recognise the changed global situation. As Wilkerson stated, China has already surpassed the US economically. American imperialism, having lost every war it has fought over decades, moreover, would not be able to inflict a military defeat on Beijing.

Instead, Wilkerson, speaking in the peculiar jargon of the national security elite, declared that the US should seek a "condominium" with China. This would bring together "the world's two superpowers," in a globally unchallengeable alliance, he declared.

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These are reactionary fantasies of a longstanding representative of American imperialism. Never before in the history of world capitalism has the decline of a previously dominant imperialist power led to anything other than war. The struggle against world war involving nuclear-armed powers depends on the independent intervention of the working class, in a revolutionary struggle against capitalism.

Wilkerson's completely ahistorical and deluded positions were repeated, in various forms, by all other speakers.

Wilkerson was followed by Bob Carr, a lifelong leader of the Labor Party right. Documents published by WikiLeaks revealed that Carr first became a secret informant for the US embassy, i.e., the CIA, in the mid-1970s.

In a rambling address, consisting largely of self-aggrandizing anecdotes, Carr warned that security sources had told him that Australia and the US would be defeated if they went to war with China over Taiwan. Such a conflict, moreover, would have catastrophic consequences for Australian trade and business interests.

Carr gave a potted history of the development of Australia's role in the US-led conflict with China. Sometime in 2017, he was reading the newspapers and speaking to official contacts, and it dawned on him that the then Liberal-National Coalition was adopting an increasingly bellicose stance towards China. It was also, to Carr's wonderment, backing aggressive US actions against Beijing.

Carr's fairy-tale history lesson left a great deal out, especially relating to his own role. In fact, it was the Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard that in 2011 signed on to the US "pivot to Asia," a vast military build-up throughout the region in preparation for war against China. In 2012, Gillard appointed Carr to be her foreign minister. In that position, he presided over the stationing of US marines in Darwin, planning for US military aircraft rotating through Northern Australia and greater naval cooperation.

In other words, Carr was directly responsible for Australia's central role in the developing confrontation with China. His current disagreements are completely tactical, entirely accept the framework of the US-Australia alliance and the aggressive prosecution of Australian imperialist interests.

The next speaker, former diplomat turned pacifist Alison Broinowski, noted that 20 years ago those in attendance had marched against the invasion of Iraq. She did not explain why they were now fawning over a Bush administration official who helped launch that war.

Broinowski promoted war powers legislation, which would require parliamentary approval for Australian participation in a war. All of the parliamentary parties, however, are pro-war, meaning that Broinowski's proposal is little more than a rubber stamp for military conflict.

It was left to the final speaker, federal Greens MP David Shoebridge, to try and provide a left gloss on a meeting primarily addressed by militarists and former government officials. Shoebridge condemned the billions being diverted to AUKUS and the nuclear-powered submarines, noting that the spending would be accompanied by cuts to health, education and other social services.

He warned of the catastrophe that a war with China would represent. But as with all the other speakers, his remarks were saturated in nationalism, reflecting the interests of Australian imperialism itself. The ever-greater integration of the Australian military into the US war machine was "damaging to our national interests," Shoebridge warned.

The meeting was structured to avoid any democratic discussion from the floor, despite the promise of a question-and-answer session being prominent in advertising. The organisers and Kostakidis were well aware of the shaky anti-war credentials of their panel.

After speeches that lasted almost two hours, Kostakidis declared there was time for just three questions.

This reporter attempted to speak, noting that the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party have consistently defended Julian Assange and opposed the drive to war. I stated: "We say very clearly that the fight for Assange's freedom and the fight against war requires an independent political movement of the working class. Workers are hostile to war, they have a deep going commitment to democratic rights, and they're being propelled into struggle all over the world by the crisis of capitalism.

"The perspective of this meeting is very different. It's an appeal to sections of the political establishment and the ruling elite to see sense and turn away from war because of its impacts." I began to note that it was precisely this perspective that had derailed the mass movement against the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

At this, layers of the audience began shouting their displeasure. When I raised Wilkerson's responsibility for the invasion, and asked why the organisers were promoting a war criminal, Kostakidis adopted a pose of confusion. She could not hear what was being said.

I attempted to ask the same question in relation to Carr. Shoebridge jumped to the defence of the Labor leader, declaring, "We're here to build a peace movement. We have to reach across the political aisle for allies." Shoebridge did not explain how warmongers would build a "peace movement."

In concluding the meeting, Kostakidis fawningly declared: "I would like to give my personal thanks to Bob Carr for being here, and to say that his is a very important voice."

This is a movement that has nothing to do with the fight against war. Through its speakers, it is a state-connected outfit, intensely hostile to the socialist perspective needed to prevent a nuclear catastrophe. Its purpose is to divert opposition into appeals to the powers-that-be and promote the interests of Australian imperialism. If a war with China began, those such as Carr and Wilkerson would support it, as would their followers.

Contact the SEP:
Phone: (02) 8218 3222
Email: sep@sep.org.au
Facebook: SocialistEqualityPartyAustralia
Twitter: @SEP_Australia
Instagram: socialistequalityparty_au
TikTok: @sep_australia

Authorised by Cheryl Crisp for the Socialist Equality Party, Suite 906, 185 Elizabeth Street, Sydney, NSW, 2000.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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