

Australian Defence Strategic Review warns of military recruitment crisis

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The redacted and declassified version of the Australian Labor government's Defence Strategic Review (DSR), released on April 24, raised an alarm over the Australian military's "significant workforce challenges" with "recruitment and retention." Without elaborating or providing any details, it stated: "This is an acute issue for Defence and is reflective of broader national challenges."

Though vague and muted, this language points to growing concerns in Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's government and ruling circles as a whole about the difficulties they face in executing their plans to mobilise the entire population for war, and to recruit thousands of youth into the armed forces to fight and die in the interests of US and Australian capitalism.

The DSR signalled the biggest military buildup and shift in Australian military policy since World War II. From a post-Vietnam War official focus on defending the continent, it called for "impactful projection" across the Indo-Pacific region, placing the country at the forefront of US war preparations against China, which Washington regards as an existential threat to US global dominance.

The DSR openly targeted China and declared there was "the prospect of major conflict in the region that directly threatens our national interest." It promoted US allegations of Chinese "aggression" when in reality, it is the US and its closest allies, such as Australia, that are increasingly taking punitive economic measures against China, militarily encircling it and provoking a conflict over Taiwan, which has been internationally recognised for the past 50 years as part of China.

Clearly produced with the closest collaboration of the US Biden administration, the DSR is part of an escalation of militarisation by all the imperialist powers. Last year, Japan and Germany doubled their military budgets amid the escalating US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine and the preparations for war against China.

The report demanded a "whole-of-nation" approach, which means subordinating every aspect of society to the war effort. But the military confronts what Defence Minister

Richard Marles declared last November to be a "personnel crisis."

A Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide recently heard that, in the 12 months to May 2022, the Australian army lost 13 percent of its workforce (up from 10.9 percent the previous year), while the navy lost 9.3 percent (up from 6.8 percent), and the Royal Australian Air Force lost 8.7 percent (up from 6.9 percent).

The DSR detailed no answers to this crisis, but stated: "Policy, process, risk appetite and approaches to recruitment must change to increase the speed of recruitment from application to enlistment and recruitment. Recruitment time must be achieved in days, not months."

This means dramatically speeding up recruitment time frames and lowering the standards for recruits, particularly in terms of mental health and tolerance for battlefield violence and trauma ("risk appetite").

Already in January, Veterans Affairs and Defence Personnel Minister Matt Keogh said the recruitment process would be cut from about 300 days on average to no more than 100 days, and possibly shorter. He stated: "[W]e do not want to be losing people who find other opportunities while we are taking them through that recruitment process."

The former Liberal-National Coalition government under Scott Morrison declared in March 2022 that the permanent Australian Defence Force (ADF) workforce would be increased by 30 percent to almost 80,000 personnel by 2040.

As opposition leader at the time, Albanese supported the expansion, and declared that a Labor government would be better placed to implement it. Such an increase in the ADF's permanent workforce would require more than doubling the previous rate of recruitment, which saw ADF numbers increase by a little over 3,000 (about 5 percent) in the 10 years to 2021–22.

One aspect of the army's inability to recruit and retain is the psychological distress to which military service leads. The royal commission into military-related suicides was established in July 2021 in response to an Australian Institute of Health and Welfare report which found that

1,273 suicides had occurred between 2001 and 2019 among military personnel who had served at least one day since 1985. Of those, 211 were serving and 1,062 were veterans.

This is no doubt linked to the dehumanising and brutal conditions in which army personnel are made to serve. That includes participating in war crimes. According to the 2020 Brereton Report, the military is alleged to have engaged in war crimes in Afghanistan from 2005 to 2016, including murder, torture and abuse.

ADF Chief General Angus Campbell told the royal commission that the ADF had begun considering candidates with higher psychological risk profiles. “Given current economic circumstances and the low employment rate... the ADF’s risk appetite in recruiting has increased,” he testified.

Psychologist Dr Mary Frost told the *Guardian* in February that the results have been “catastrophic.” Recruits referred by the ADF came to her, sometimes after no more than 20 weeks of training, “sometimes suicidal, and desperately wanting out.”

Many young people are looking to alternative means of getting an education and carving out a life for themselves. Rural and regional centres have historically been a source of much of the ADF’s recruitment. But youth in these areas are often moving into urban centres looking for employment or education opportunities.

The DSR also called for the reintroduction of the Ready Reserve Scheme. The scheme was first introduced in October 1991 by Labor Prime Minister Bob Hawke. Its purpose was to have a reserve of fully-trained military recruits enter the civilian workforce or higher education, ready on short notice to deploy on military operations. The scheme was abolished in 1996 by the Coalition government of Prime Minister John Howard.

As well as possible employment and education prospects, the fall in recruits and retention reflects broad anti-war sentiment, particularly among youth, who do not want to be sacrificed in imperialist wars abroad.

This is an international phenomenon. In the year to October 2022, the UK Armed Forces dropped 3.3 percent, with a 29.8 percent reduction in applications to join the British military. New Zealand fell 12 percent short of its 2021 defence recruitment target. Canadian Brigadier-General Krista Brodie said last September that one in ten of the country’s 100,000 defence force positions were unfilled.

The German, Canadian and US defence forces are engaged in desperate efforts to recruit young people. The National Guard in the US state of Georgia is using mobile phone location data to target high school students with recruitment advertisements and military propaganda.

Last November, Universities Australia, representing the

university managements, urged the Albanese government to establish “internships” to funnel students—including international students from “strategic allies”—into the Australian military.

Sections of the ruling elite are openly discussing reinstating conscription. Last November, former Prime Minister Tony Abbott called for the introduction of mandatory national service for youth finishing high school.

A “Red Alert” series published in the *Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* in March declared that, in order to prepare for an imminent war against China, Australian society must break the “taboos” of conscription and nuclear weapons.

While pledging \$368 billion in March for the purchase of nuclear-powered submarines as part of the aggressive AUKUS military alliance with the US and the UK, Albanese’s government is deepening the decades-long assault on workers’ wages, and health, education and social services, amid the greatest cost-of-living crisis in generations.

The “recruitment crisis” underscores the fact that there is no mass support in the population for imperialist war. The key task is the transformation of this anti-war sentiment into an active fight against the entire capitalist nation-state system, which is the fundamental driver of imperialist conflict.

That is the perspective explained by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in its international meeting series, “The War in Ukraine and How to Stop it.” These meetings mark an important political development in the fight by the IYSSE to build a global anti-war movement that is rooted in the international working class and based upon a socialist perspective. This program was further elaborated at the International May Day Online Rally, which the IYSSE co-hosted. We urge all young people to fill out the form below to join the IYSSE.



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