

Australia: At Port Kembla protest, unions and pseudo-left set a nationalist trap for anti-war sentiment

Martin Scott
12 May 2023

Workers, young people and local residents marched in the streets of Port Kembla last Saturday, protesting the federal Labor government's plans to transform the port into a nuclear submarine base.

Port Kembla, located in an outer suburb of Wollongong, 100 kilometres south of Sydney, was identified in March 2022 as one of three potential locations for an east coast submarine base, along with Newcastle and Brisbane. A year later, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation reported that the south coast port had emerged as the "strongly favoured option."

More than 2,000 people participated, including union and pseudo-left delegations from Sydney as well as residents of the surrounding Illawarra region. But any workers and young people attending the rally seeking a perspective through which they can advance a fight against war will have been left sorely disappointed.

The speakers at the rally sought to promote illusions that Australia's preparations for war against China can be prevented by applying pressure to the same Labor government that is carrying out the military buildup.

This is a deliberate trap for anti-war sentiment, laid by representatives of the union bureaucracy, the pseudo-left and the Greens, which all support the Labor government and the interests of Australian and US imperialism.

The event was not aimed at building a genuine anti-war movement, but at blocking any such fight.

The unions had held their main May Day events, with large demonstrations around the country, the previous weekend, with speakers careful to keep AUKUS and war squarely off the agenda. The location and timing of the Port Kembla event was engineered to limit the basis of opposition to nuclear submarines to a narrow, local audience and outlook.

Underscoring this provincial orientation, South Coast Labour Council (SCLC) secretary Arthur Rorris declared "They want to conscript our region into their war machine

but we will not have a bar of it."

But, even within the SCLC, there are open voices in support of the militarisation. In February, the Australian Workers Union (AWU) refused to pass a resolution opposing a nuclear submarine base at Port Kembla. The AWU leadership is now promoting the AUKUS deal as a win for workers, claiming it will "boost our security, our economy, and Australian jobs" and "make Australia stronger and safer."

The SCLC, a peak body representing unions on the New South Wales (NSW) south coast, organised the rally in collaboration with Wollongong Against War and Nukes (WAWAN), which is closely associated with the pseudo-left Socialist Alliance.

Alexander Brown of WAWAN claimed the organisation had "already had some important victories," based on the Labor government's assertion that "no decision would be made on a base until at least after the next election."

Brown raised these supposed victories as evidence that protest politics and appeals to the Labor government are all that is required. On this basis, he called on the audience to demand that the government "tear up the AUKUS agreement and commit to an independent and peaceful foreign policy." This is a fantasy and a diversion on both counts.

Why would the Labor government, fresh from announcing the \$368 billion nuclear submarine expenditure, "tear up the AUKUS agreement"? In fact, the March announcement was just the latest affirmation of the federal government's total commitment to the war plans of US imperialism.

Even before the count was complete in last year's federal election, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese rushed to the Quad summit in Japan to pledge Australia's services at the vanguard of a US-led war against China. Foreign Affairs Minister Penny Wong slipped immediately into the role of regional enforcer, visiting every Pacific island nation to line them up in preparation for the coming conflict.

These actions are not a matter of the individual attitudes of Albanese and Wong. They reflect the complete integration of the Australian state and military apparatus into the US war machine.

The conception that Australia could simply elect to remain neutral in a war between the US and China, which would certainly envelop the Indo-Pacific, if not the world, is a utopian dream promoted to trap workers and prevent any genuine opposition to war.

Like previous “anti-AUKUS” events, the purpose of the rally was to divert anti-war sentiment behind a section of the political establishment that has expressed a limited tactical disagreement with the Labor government’s war plans.

Not a single word was spoken about the current US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, demonstrating that the rally’s organisers and speakers, and the political organisations and unions they represent, agree with the broader war aims of Australian and US imperialism.

Socialist Alliance has hailed the efforts of US and European imperialism to inflict a massive military defeat against Russia, falsely claiming that the conflict is a fight for Ukrainian “sovereignty” and “democracy.”

In March 2022, the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) called on the Liberal-National federal government to take “action” against Russia by imposing sanctions on international shipping. Under the guise of opposing the Putin regime’s reactionary invasion of Ukraine, the MUA actively lobbied the Australian government to step up its involvement in the US-NATO war.

The opposition of these layers to AUKUS has nothing to do with the devastating consequences a war against China would have for the working class in China, Australia and throughout the region. Instead, they are concerned about the implications for Australian capitalism of a war against the nation’s major trading partner.

This orientation to big business took on an especially parochial form at the Port Kembla rally. Greens senator David Shoebridge warned “while ever the threat of a nuclear submarine base is hanging over Port Kembla, the amazing future that Port Kembla can have with a green energy revolution is being stifled.”

In other words, Shoebridge’s concern is that the plans of major energy corporations to transform the Illawarra region into a highly profitable “renewable energy zone” may be thwarted.

The MUA has advanced a similar position, warning in February that a nuclear submarine base at the port would “scare off investor interest in renewable energy” and be “incompatible” with “expanded shipping activity.”

Electrical Trades Union (ETU) secretary Allen Hicks said: “I guarantee you we will work with the community in

Illawarra to make sure that a submarine base is not built in Port Kembla and under my watch it won’t be built with ETU labour.”

Shoebridge declared that the federal government “won’t win” if it proceeds with a plan to establish an AUKUS base at Port Kembla, because it had “picked a union town.”

But what is the reality of Port Kembla’s history as a “union town”? Over the past four decades, the union apparatus, in close collaboration with Labor, has overseen the destruction of tens of thousands of steelworkers’ jobs in the region. Time and again, the unions have rammed through sell-out deals, insisting that workers sacrifice pay and conditions to protect the “international competitiveness” and profits of the plant’s corporate owners.

Maritime and logistics workers at the port itself have likewise faced a decades-long assault, facilitated and enforced by the unions. The cumulative legacy of this is a social crisis in the region, characterised by endemic youth unemployment and poverty.

Workers and young people cannot look to the unions as a means of opposing war. These organisations do not represent the interests of workers, but those of corporations and governments. They will enforce the war agenda of Australian imperialism, just as they have enforced decades of cuts to jobs, wages and conditions.

Events such as Saturday’s rally reflect the reactionary nationalist politics of the unions, pseudo-left organisations and the Greens. They are aimed at sowing confusion among workers and young people, covering over the fact that war is a direct product of the capitalist nation-state system and diverting opposition to war in plaintive appeals to the parliamentary parties.

The struggle against war can only be fought on the basis of an international and socialist movement of the working class, the great revolutionary force in society. The basis for this exists in the rapidly developing class struggle in Australia and around the world, as governments impose harsh austerity measures to pay for their ever-growing war budgets.

The development of such a movement requires a fight to expose the pro-imperialist charlatans who seek to derail genuine anti-war sentiment and shackle workers and young people to sections of the ruling elite.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact