

Australia's school system increasingly integrated into war drive

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The federal Labor government earlier this year announced an extension of the School Pathways Program, which encourages high school students to pursue careers with weapons manufacturers.

The AUKUS (Australia-UK-US) alliance has already driven significant changes to the education sector in Australia, initially focussed on the universities. The government's Universities Accord, released earlier this year, had as its central agenda the further restructuring of universities to meet national priorities, namely the profit demands of the corporate elite and the government's preparations for war.

Courses are being tailored to industry needs as universities have become increasingly tied to the military-industrial academic complex, including via multi-million-dollar research and development deals with the world's largest arms manufacturers, such as Lockheed Martin and BAE Systems.

That is one component of Australia's transformation into a frontline state for the US-led plans for conflict with China, which is viewed as the chief economic threat to the hegemony of American imperialism. Australia has been involved for more than a decade, under successive governments, but this agenda has been qualitatively escalated under the current Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese.

One expression of that is the increasing promotion of militarism in primary and secondary schools. The corralling of students into defence industry careers is now the open aim of the Labor administration. The influence of major weapons manufacturers and the Department of Defence on curriculum, in particular STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) curriculum, is designed to ensure a pipeline of students ready and willing to contribute to the war effort.

In the government's Defence Industry Development Strategy paper, released earlier this year, several strategies were outlined to "inspire early learners and primary students across the country to continue to engage with STEM opportunities, while encouraging secondary students to pursue vocational and tertiary STEM studies."

The strategy document stated: "Meeting the pace of technological change as approaches to warfare evolve is critical to secure our nation." One of its key action items was to "enhance the Schools Pathways Program by developing new

intergovernmental agreements to support critical defence industry skills pathways in South Australia and Western Australia."

Announcing the relaunch of the Schools Pathways Program in August, the South Australian state Labor government declared, "The Schools Pathways Program provides practical career awareness activities for secondary school students and creates links between schools and defence industry. Students will gain defence industry experience through projects, industry visits, presentations and challenges. Students will connect with mentors and networks of highly skilled defence industry professionals."

The \$5.2 million program is being rolled out in a number of schools in South Australia and Western Australia, particularly in high schools catering to lower socio-economic areas of Adelaide and Perth. The program is designed to promote careers within the so-called defence industry by offering information about career opportunities as well as providing access to military-connected work experience and mentoring.

The Schools Pathways Program is partnered with a number of weapons manufacturers including SAAB, Lockheed Martin, Raytheon and BAE Systems, as well as the Defence Science and Technology Group (DSTG). It includes activities to be undertaken throughout the high school years for students aged 12 to 18, and a range of state and national STEM activities. The DSTG operates under the Department of Defence and is responsible for applying advances in science and technology to defence.

The Department of Defence announced in September an additional \$11 million to further extend the schools' program through a competitive grant project. Defence Minister Pat Conroy said, "The launch of this grant opportunity is yet another example of delivering on the Defence Industry Development Strategy, supporting a resilient, competitive and innovative Australian sovereign defence industrial base, and a future Defence industry workforce to support our national security."

A similar program is running in schools in the Hunter Region in New South Wales. This connects local high schools to defence industries in the region, including Boeing, Lockheed Martin, BAE Systems and Thales. The website for the program

states, “Facilitating formal partnerships between Hunter Defence Industry and high schools, the ME Program has a strong focus on development STEM skills in students from years 7 to 12 in readiness for the jobs that industry requires, while ensuring Defence Industry has access to a talent pool with relevant skills.”

The ME program has been further developed into an accredited school course for students in Years 9 and 10 in NSW called iSTEM. According to the curriculum, “students will learn to design and use electronic circuits and systems including microcontrollers, perform experiments using a range of electronic devices to solve real STEM based problems and describe a range of technologies used in satellites, rockets and space communication.”

Another action item in the defence industry strategy document is “outreach.” As the document stated, “Defence will develop a longer-term communication and engagement plan, working with Australian industry to create awareness of the strong career opportunities in defence industry.” The report highlighted one government-sponsored initiative that “aims to build confidence and capacity in primary school educators, enabling them to bring STEM into their classrooms and highlight the breadth of engineering career paths available to their students.”

Weapons manufacturers are deeply embedded into STEM outreach programs in schools. For example, in 2022, the Medical Association for Prevention of War released a report *Minors and Missiles—Weapons Companies in Schools*, which documented 35 programs associated with weapons manufacturers including BAE Systems, Raytheon and Lockheed Martin.

However, what the Defence Industry strategy makes clear is that the Australian government is an active partner in this infiltration into education. One example of these outreach programs is Beacon, funded by BAE Systems, with activities targeting children as young as 4. Part of the program includes a visit by BAE engineers, who answer questions about careers in engineering. When the program was launched, BAE Systems said that Beacon’s goal was “to raise awareness of future career pathways.” The program is being expanded into 80 schools in South Australia over the next two years.

That many of the programs are targeting regional and low socio-economic areas of the country is akin to economic conscription. Public schools especially in poorer communities and rural and regional Australia have been starved of funds for decades. Lack of resources, infrastructure and expertise means that teachers will jump at the chance of support. Many of the programs mentioned include free professional development for teachers, as well as access to teaching resources.

The various STEM fields are scenes of significant technological and scientific developments, such as artificial intelligence, which could be used to improve the social conditions and lives of working people. Their innovative

character, moreover, makes them attractive to youth. Under capitalism though, everything is subordinated to the profit interests of the ruling elite, which are advanced by exploitation at home and militarism and war abroad.

The hijacking of STEM education by the ruling elite for its war agenda is evident at every level of education, and this is not merely an Australian phenomenon. This has been accompanied by the militarisation of the curriculum underway for more than a decade. In 2014, the federal government circulated a range of curriculum resources and educational activities to Australian primary schools in a promotion of militarism and patriotism. The resources were deliberately aimed at miseducation, to inculcate in children an uncritical attitude towards war.

With funding pressures pushing universities and schools to align with government agendas, educators opposing war are facing increased victimisation, silencing and even dismissal. These attacks on free speech and democratic rights are intensifying amid the ongoing Gaza genocide, the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine and plans for a catastrophic conflict with China.

The attacks on public education are part of a shift by the world’s ruling elite as it prepares for dictatorship at home and war abroad. And this means every aspect of society must be integrated into the war effort, from the schools and universities to the economy and all workplaces.

This can only be fought through the development of an anti-war movement of the working class based on a socialist perspective. We urge educators, students and parents to get in contact with the Committee for Public Education and the Socialist Equality Party to join the fight against imperialist war.

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