

Australian election: Anti-AUKUS movement a trap for anti-Trump, anti-war sentiment

Morgan Peach, SEP candidate for the seat of Calwell
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The actions of the fascistic US administration of President Donald Trump, including his program of a massive trade war and of stepped-up militarism around the globe, are fuelling anxiety and opposition among ordinary people in Australia, as well as internationally.

Resolve polling last week found that an estimated 60 percent of the Australian population is hostile to Trump and what he represents. That polling also indicated that Trump's ascension had deepened already existing popular opposition to the AUKUS pact with the US and the UK, under which Australia is to acquire nuclear-powered submarines from America. A significant number of respondents linked this sentiment to fears of a US war with China.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is standing in the Australian federal elections to provide such anti-war sentiments with a perspective and program that represents the interests of the working class in this country and worldwide. Trump's policies are not those of an individual but are an expression of the bankruptcy of capitalism globally, which is once again creating the conditions for a catastrophic world war while reproducing all the barbarism of the 1930s, from economic crisis to mass poverty, fascism and dictatorship. Trump, in other words, is not the disease but one of its most malignant symptoms.

The fight to build a socialist, anti-war movement of the working class requires a struggle against political traps that seek to divert the anti-AUKUS, anti-Trump and anti-war sentiments of broad layers of the population back behind the political establishment, the Australian state and the capitalist system itself.

Since the US, UK, and Australian governments signed the AUKUS pact in 2021, a de facto anti-AUKUS movement has been cultivated, bringing together former leading representatives of the Labor and Liberal parties, sections of the Greens, the trade union bureaucracy, and the pseudo-left.

This tendency presents the AUKUS pact for nuclear-powered submarines as an aberration and a tactical error by Australian governments, rather than as one component of an eruption of imperialist militarism globally and of Australia's

role in it. The anti-AUKUS movement calls for the scrapping of the submarine deal, but has no opposition to war. Instead it proposes its own, slight variant of a military build-up.

It speaks, not for working people, but for a wing of the ruling elite. That wing is fearful of the implications of full-scale Australian participation in a US-led war against China, because China remains Australia's largest export market. This layer of the ruling class is also deeply concerned that a massive war would threaten social and political upheavals by the working class domestically.

It is no accident that the figureheads of the anti-AUKUS movement are some of the most right-wing, establishment and militarist politicians, including former Labor prime minister Paul Keating, former Labor foreign ministers Bob Carr and Gareth Evans. These are all figures who, during their time in office, were intimately involved in US-led wars and military preparations. So too was another anti-AUKUS figure, former Liberal Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull.

Turnbull has, over recent weeks, waged something of a campaign, calling for Australia to untether its foreign policy interests from those of the Trump administration. He is pitching to ruling class concerns over the destabilising consequences of Trump's trade war policies, against friends and foes alike, and the broader breakdown of the post-World War II order of which these actions are a part.

Last week, Turnbull held a conference to advance his calls for a more "independent" foreign policy and then delivered an address to the National Press Club.

Some of the speakers at Turnbull's conference pointed to the far-reaching and historic character of what is underway.

For instance, Dr Heather Smith, a top government bureaucrat and "security analyst" declared: "The fragmentation of the international economic system is now a fact. The post-Cold War order isn't collapsing; it has collapsed. The US is dismantling the foundations of its global hegemony, along with the norms and values that have underpinned the US-Australia relationship." Smith stated this was an irreversible process, which would not change

whatever occurred in Washington.

But what was her answer as a representative of the Australian state? It was that there must be an “urgent” discussion in the political elite over how to “position Australia” in this new “dog-eat-dog world.” That means an even greater military build-up than the one already underway, with defence spending already sitting at a record \$56 billion per year.

And that was Turnbull’s essential message in his National Press Club address. Making clear that his is not some conversion away from militarism, he framed his speech with a favourable outline of his government’s 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper, which had deepened an Australian military and strategic build-up directed against China, in league with the US.

Trump, Turnbull noted, was blowing up alliances that had been in place for decades. In these conditions, “Australian sovereignty, sovereign autonomy, has never been so important. And yet in recent years it has never been so diminished.” That was a reference to the ever deeper integration of the US and Australian militaries under the Albanese Labor government, including the stationing of advanced US strike capabilities in the north and west of the continent.

But Turnbull was explicit that he was proposing a recalibration of the alliance, not some sort of struggle against American militarism. He stated: “This does not mean that we will not have shared interests with the United States. A key one will be to encourage the US to remain engaged in our region - not as the dominant hegemon as it was thirty years ago, those days are passed, quite a while ago - but as a balancing force to China.”

The references to balance are a fantasy. All of the lessons of history demonstrate that a declining imperial hegemon does not sail into the night quietly, much less engage in an endless “balancing” act with its perceived rivals. The real outcome of such a process is war. By calling for the US to remain engaged in “the region,” Turnbull was demonstrating that when it comes down to it, he would back a US war against China.

The greater part of his speech was dedicated to warnings over the AUKUS submarine pact. But again, this was nothing to do with anti-war principles. Instead, he repeatedly stated that the submarines would likely never arrive, due to the limited capacity of the US naval shipbuilding sector. An American president would be compelled to divert the AUKUS subs to the US Navy, whatever their subjective intentions, Turnbull declared.

And so, Australia would have to start “making plans and acquisitions now,” for alternative submarines as well as other offensive capabilities. That is not an opposition to a

military build-up. In fact, it is a warning that AUKUS will not result in a real military build-up, and so a “plan B” is required.

The Greens have echoed the line of Turnbull. On the eve of the announcement of the election, they outlined their first costed military program, a \$4 billion plan to build intermediate and medium range missiles, as well as drones.

While Greens’ representatives presented these as “defensive” capabilities, missiles in the north of Australia, which could fire far into the Indo-Pacific, are of plainly aggressive character. They dovetail with the military expansion that has already taken place, directed against China.

The pseudo-left component of the anti-AUKUS movement is trailing in the wake of Turnbull and the Greens. Socialist Alliance, for instance, has called for Australian military spending to be halved. But that means that this fake-left party, which claims to be anti-war, accepts and supports annual military spending of at least \$28 billion!

In a period of war, such as that which we have entered, every pro-capitalist and nationalist political organisation lines up with their own state and military behind the “national interest.” That is the significance of the “strange bedfellows” that comprise the anti-AUKUS movement, ranging from Liberals, to Laborites, to Greens and even phoney socialists.

The only way that war can be fought is through a rejection of nationalism and a fight to unify the working class internationally. Australia is an imperialist power, with its own predatory ambitions, particularly in the South Pacific. The working class has no interest in such operations, which are inevitably combined with attacks on social spending, to pay for the war machine, and a crackdown on democratic rights, to suppress anti-war sentiments.

Instead, workers must unite with their class brothers and sisters internationally, who have the same fundamental interests, for a peaceful world, organised on the basis of social need, not corporate profit and the associated scramble for resources and markets. That means the fight against war and its manifestations is a fight for international socialism.

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