

Australian military think tank strategises building “social licence” for war

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The Australian Strategic Policy Institute’s (ASPI) recent defence conference was part of a developing campaign to prepare the ground for conscription in Australia—to solve the ruling class’s “workforce” crisis by compelling a generation of workers and youth into war.

Its focus on “Mass Without Mass” and the “social licence for national defence” makes clear that the central strategic problem facing the military-political establishment is not technology or budgets, but the absence of a social base willing to fight and die for a US-led war drive, already underway against Iran and being escalated in preparation for conflict with China.

Under the federal Labor government, Australia’s role in the Iran war is that of an active co-belligerent. Defence Minister Richard Marles has confirmed an RAAF E-7A Wedgetail is operating out of the UAE, integrated into US-led command systems directing operations in the Gulf, while the Pine Gap facility near Alice Springs provides targeting and missile-tracking intelligence. Australian personnel and special forces are embedded in US and coalition headquarters, and the same apparatus is used to facilitate Israel’s genocide in Gaza.

The escalating US-led preparations for war with nuclear-armed China in the Indo-Pacific are driving a relentless increase in Australian military spending.

Yet there is mass hostility to war among the population, especially young people, as evidenced by regular large demonstrations against the Gaza genocide.

The ASPI defence conference in late June was organised to confront this contradiction between imperialist ambitions and the absence of a social base for war. Marketed under the theme “Securing the Region for Uncertainty,” the event convened senior political leaders, top military brass, defence industry executives and academics to discuss how to turn Australia into a permanently mobilised garrison state.

Alongside ASPI’s executive director Justin Bassi and defence strategist Mike Hughes were key Labor figures—Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Richard Marles, Defence Industry Minister Pat Conroy and South Australian Premier Peter Malinauskas—joined by Liberal Senator James Paterson, chiefs of the Army, Navy, Air Force and Joint Operations, and media figures from the *Australian Financial Review* and Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

One of the central sessions, “Mass Without Mass: Scaling Military Effect in the Future Force,” laid bare the class dilemma facing the ruling elite: how to generate military force without the bodies prepared to fight.

ASPI’s own analysis admits that “workforce” is now the single largest constraint on the Australian Defence Force (ADF). Recruitment and retention are in crisis, with official figures showing the ADF thousands below its authorised strength and failing to meet annual enlistment targets. Defence has acknowledged a shortfall of more than 4,000 personnel, and ASPI and other think tanks warn that, without drastic measures, the planned expansion of the force will remain on paper.

The discussion revealed concern about how far the state can rely on drones, autonomous systems, long-range missiles, cyber and space capabilities and tighter US integration to project lethal power while sidestepping the politically explosive issue of conscription.

The session, “The Social Licence for National Defence: The Role of Media and Public Debate”, approached the same problem ideologically.

Panellists openly debated whether current media coverage and public discussion are adequate to build legitimacy for escalating war, or whether a dangerous “gap” is opening between strategic realities and mass consciousness. In other words, they recognise that workers and youth do not support war with Iran, Russia or China, and that the state cannot simply declare

conscription without first saturating society with propaganda.

The presence of Marles and Malinauskas in such discussions underscores that the Labor Party is leading the project of manufacturing consent. South Australia, with its submarine and shipbuilding hubs, was promoted as a model “national defence endeavour,” where government, industry and Defence are fused into a single militarised complex tied to US war plans.

This is not the first time the Australian ruling class has confronted the problem of conscription in the face of popular opposition. During World War I, the Labor government of Billy Hughes attempted twice—in 1916 and 1917—to introduce compulsory military service through national referenda. On both occasions, the working class defeated conscription, despite an overwhelming campaign by the press, the churches and the employers.

The lesson for the bourgeoisie was clear: they cannot simply decree mass enlistment when millions are opposed. Any move towards conscription today, whether direct or disguised through “national service,” requires an extensive ideological offensive to break down resistance, sow nationalism and present sacrifice for imperialism as a civic duty. ASPI’s focus on “social licence” reflects those aims today.

The current recruitment crisis is already driving renewed talk of conscription.

Former Liberal prime minister Tony Abbott’s call for compulsory military service after high school, the “Red Alert” media campaign normalising war with China, along with former army chief Peter Leahy’s warnings in 2025 that conscription may be needed, all form part of a concerted effort to “prepare” public opinion.

A February article in the Murdoch News Corp-owned *Australian*, built around an interview with Vietnam veteran David Webster, presented his advocacy of mandatory military service as a model for today and recast Australia’s brutal intervention in Vietnam as a noble, necessary mission—whitewashing its colonial and criminal character to legitimise new wars.

International developments point to the same compulsions in other imperialist centres with the 2026 US National Defense Authorization Act’s move to automatic draft registration for young men, as well as Germany’s new military service law and NATO governments reviving conscription.

Militarisation is also being driven deep into the daily life of young people through schools, universities and digital platforms.

The launch of a new Army Cadet Unit at Blue Mountains Grammar School for children aged 12 to 18—marketed as building “leadership,” “resilience” and community service—typifies a broader expansion of programs across private and public schools designed to familiarise children with military discipline and normalise the presence of the armed forces in education.

At the university level, defence contracts have surged since 2024, with hundreds of millions of dollars now flowing into research partnerships, laboratories and defence-linked institutes, binding higher education to weapons development and strategic planning.

All of this is paid for by a vast transfer of social wealth into militarism.

The same government that is cutting the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), underfunding hospitals and schools, is pouring resources into missiles, bases, intelligence and the \$368-billion AUKUS submarine program.

The ASPI conference, the defence budget and the whole discussion of “social licence” for war expose the real question confronting workers and youth in Australia: will the ruling class drag society into a catastrophic imperialist conflict, or will the working class intervene consciously to stop it?

Stopping this drive to war requires more than appeals to parliament or pressure on the Labor Party, which is itself the chief instrument of Australian capitalism in imposing militarism and austerity.

It demands the building of a movement of the working class, independent of Labor, the unions, the Greens and all the institutions of the capitalist state, based on a socialist program to end the source of war: the profit system itself. Such a movement must organise to oppose every step towards conscription—ideological and military—reject the demand that workers sacrifice for “national defence,” and fight to expropriate the corporate and financial elite, redirecting society’s resources to human need, not war.



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