

Australia: Sam Wainwright (Socialist Alliance): 'Ruling class support for the US war drive on China fundamentally shapes Australian politics today'

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Sam Wainwright is a Socialist Alliance national co-convenor and active in the Stop AUKUS WA coalition, which is campaigning in Western Australia against the Australia-Britain-United States military pact. In this interview with Federico Fuentes for LINKS International Journal of Socialist Renewal, Wainwright discusses the state of United States global hegemony, Australia's contradictory position of a mid-sized imperialist power which is allied with US interests but has China as its main trading partner, and prospects for working-class solidarity across borders.

After the Cold War's end, global politics seemed dominated by wars seeking to reinforce US imperialism's dominance. More recently, however, a shift appears to be taking place — though not a definitive one as evidenced by the US-backed Israeli war on Gaza. While the US has been forced to withdraw from Afghanistan, we have seen China's economic rise, Russia's Ukraine invasion and smaller nations, such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia, flexing military power beyond their borders. In general terms, how do you understand the current dynamics at play within the global imperialist system?

Western imperialism, with the US at its centre, still dominates the world. This domination is maintained through economic subjugation and war. However, US hegemony is declining. This is shown by the emergence of capitalist states pursuing their own interests in contradiction and sometimes outright conflict with the West. While the economies of these states are sometimes more industrialised than most of the "Global South", their labour productivity still lags behind the economies of the imperialist heartland. In the past we might have described these states (and their economies) as "semi-peripheral". This assumes a subordinate relationship with the US. This was never true of the current Chinese state due to its origins in the 1949 revolution, but it did apply to Turkey, Saudi Arabia and some other Gulf states.

Furthermore, in countries described as part of the Global South, such as India and Indonesia, we see the emergence of an independent capitalist class that controls the state in its own interests. These capitalists still have to operate within a world economy, in which Western corporations remain dominant, but they are clearly not the simple comprador bourgeoisie they were 100 years ago. The determination with which the Narendra Modi government in India has joined with the West in seeking to encircle China militarily while continuing to trade with Russia, is an example of this phenomenon. So too are the refusal of Gulf states, including even Saudi Arabia, to sanction Russia on the urging of the US, and the very assertive and independent positioning of Turkey's Erdogan regime.

Growing tensions between the US and China in the region are of great concern. What, in your opinion, is behind US military strategy in the region? Conversely, how do you view China's role in the conflict and its actions towards the US and regional neighbours?

The US is determined to block China's growth, both economically and militarily. This is the main driver of the escalation in tension. Whether China could actually catch up to the West — not just in certain sectors, but across its whole economy — is an interesting question by itself. It is hard to see it happening via a capitalist economy without a huge intensification in the exploitation of the Global South and the Earth's life systems, or conflict with Western capitalism — or both.

While the US and Australian governments, together with the capitalist media in these countries, constantly hypes up Chinese aggression, China's response is fundamentally defensive. China is the one being encircled by US military bases, alliances and missile systems. However, in its determination to break out of this encirclement and preserve access to its maritime trade routes, it has long ridden roughshod over its near neighbours in the South China Sea.

Australia is clearly siding with the US in this conflict, for example by signing up to AUKUS. Why is this the case, particularly given Australia's trade connections with China. More generally, how do you view Australia's role in the region?

Shared global military interventions and projects of the Anglo-imperialist powers under US leadership, such as the Iraq invasion or Five Eyes intelligence alliance, do not just flow from a shared culture — although that is part of it — but from overlapping economic interests. The US and Britain are the biggest source of foreign direct investment in Australia and the biggest destinations for foreign direct investment by Australian capitalists. When former Australian Prime Minister John Howard described Australia as the Deputy Sheriff in the Asia-Pacific, he accurately described its place in the region and its relation to its near neighbours.

For Australian capitalism there is a particular contradiction in joining this aggressive push to "contain" China, given it is Australia's largest trading partner for both imports and exports. Australian capitalism constitutes a mid-sized imperialist power in its own right. It could instead adopt a relatively neutral position and seek trade with China and the US on its own terms. This is the position advocated by former Labor prime minister Paul Keating. How many big capitalists and senior policymakers share this view, I don't know. However, it seems clear that a decisive majority have fallen in behind the US plan. This has been accompanied by a call to reduce the country's reliance on trade with China, though it is not clear how successful this will be.

Australian capitalists want the best of both worlds: to join the US in blocking China's development — by force if necessary — while continuing to trade with China. China has recently reduced some of its tariffs on Australian imports, but the contradiction has surely not been resolved.

How have these global dynamics impacted politics and peace activism in Australia? Have there been significant debates among progressive and anti-war forces over how to respond to the current US-China tensions? What about the situations of Ukraine and Taiwan? What stance has Socialist Alliance taken on these issues?

The decision of the Australian ruling class and its political servants to embrace the US war drive against China fundamentally shapes Australian politics today. Opposing it is a primary strategic task for socialists in this country. The AUKUS plan to produce nuclear-powered submarines in conjunction with the US and Britain is coupled with the US-Australia Force Posture Agreement. The latter is Australia's contribution to the US "Pivot to Asia" that began under President Barack Obama. Among many things, it allows for a significant increase in interoperability of Australian and US

armed forces, unimpeded US access to and use of Australian bases, B-52 bombers carrying nuclear warheads to be based on Australian soil, and for US military intelligence personnel to be embedded within Australia's defence intelligence organisations.

The announcement of the AUKUS deal was preceded by a concerted media scare campaign about a supposed threat from China. The notion that China has an interest in sabotaging its trade with Australia, let alone has the means to invade, is absurd. Consequently, the China threat narrative rests a lot on the fear that China might invade Taiwan and the authoritarian surveillance features of the Chinese state. The Socialist Alliance believes that the US and its allies are the primary aggressors responsible for the rising military tensions. If anything, it is almost as if the US is trying to provoke China to launch military action against Taiwan. However, that does not diminish our belief that the Taiwanese people have a right to self-determination and that any attempt by China to forcibly annex Taiwan would be a terrible mistake.

Like everywhere, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been disorienting and divisive for the left. The Socialist Alliance opposed Russia's invasion from the outset and still does. In grappling with the issue, we have tried to avoid what I would describe as two common simplifications or forms of crude reductionism. The first is to oppose Russia's invasion but ignore the obvious fact that Western governments are not supporting Ukraine because they care about international law or the Ukrainian people. Clearly they wanted to inflict a humiliating defeat on Russia and break up its ability to play an independent role in world affairs. They hope that [Russian president Vladimir] Putin and his entourage will be replaced with a leadership that completely subordinates the Russian state and economy to Western interests.

The second mistake is to reduce the invasion to a proxy war between NATO and Russia, in which the aspirations of the Ukrainian people are swept aside as non-existent or of secondary importance. The most extreme expression of this view positions Russia as a standard bearer for the Global South, even if imperfect and admittedly not representing any kind of socialist project. To think that the Russian invasion has advanced the material and political position of the working people of Ukraine, Russia or the Global South is completely wrong. Furthermore, it has given governments in the West a basis to promote significant increases in military expenditure and a more aggressive posture.

A [statement](#) released by a group of South-East Asian left parties in June 2022 raised the need to “promote and advance progressive regional peace initiatives as building blocks toward a common security policy to foster a more peaceful and cooperative global order, especially for the Asia-Pacific region.” What kind of peace initiatives do you think could help achieve this aim?

In Australia it has to start with opposing AUKUS, the Force Posture Agreement and the entire military alliance with the US. Unlike our South East Asian neighbours, who are caught between demands to side with either the US or China, pushing back against our own government's belligerence has to be our primary target. We should also aim to rekindle a sense of working class internationalism. Our job is to help Australian workers realise that our immediate enemies are our own ruling class, not working people in other countries.

Regionally, we need civil society peace initiatives that emphasise the need for cooperation and that build understanding and a sense of common humanity across borders. In doing so, we should emphasise that humanity will not be able to confront the existential threat posed by runaway global warming while pouring resources into a new Cold War. Instead of further militarising the region, we need to push our governments to fund programs that develop people-to-people solidarity, something Cuba has done in the South Pacific with medical training.

While the erosion of US dominance is something to be welcomed, the space being left open in this emerging “multipolar world” is often being filled by right-wing authoritarian regimes. How should the left view prospects for a multipolar world?

While we might have seen a relative decline in US hegemony, it remains the preeminent imperialist power on the planet. In that sense it remains the greatest enemy of human freedom and for much of the world’s population it continues to play a key role in blocking their peaceful development. Any weakening of US hegemony that gives more space for revolutionary or transformative movements for change to advance without being immediately crushed or undermined by US interference is a good thing. However, capitalist multipolarity by itself does not guarantee such advances.

The immediate enemy of Russian workers are the Russian capitalists and the Putin regime. For Ukrainian workers, it is Russia’s invasion. For Iranian workers, it is their own repressive government. We can not subordinate the interests of left and progressive movements in countries where the local ruling class is in conflict with the US to the “greater good” of capitalist multipolarity. The pro-capitalist ruling regimes in such countries are every bit as cynical, violent and self-serving as Western imperialism, even if they are not as powerful. It would be a fundamental and strategic error to deny solidarity to the Russian democracy movement, independent unions in China or the Iranian women’s movement in order to weaken Western imperialism. In the longer term this would have the opposite effect and would weaken the left everywhere.

We have seen a range of local struggles and movements emerge that do not necessarily have the US as their principal enemies: in Ukraine and Taiwan, but also in Myanmar and Rojava. Do you see any chances of building bridges between such struggles, and those for example of Palestine or leftist movements in Latin America, taking into consideration that these movements have different great powers as their principal enemy and may seek support from other powers? Is it possible to advance a position of non-alignment with any of the competing blocs (neutrality) without abandoning solidarity? In sum, what should a 21st internationalism that is anti-imperialist and anti-fascist look like?

Given the historic weakness of the left and the currently unfavourable balance of forces, it is hard to see such bridges being built in the short term. Cuba, still besieged by the US blockade and fighting for its survival, is necessarily going to be reserved in criticising Russia. Similarly, it is no surprise that some on the left in Latin America are reflexively sympathetic to Russia because of their experience of US intervention. Likewise, democracy movements in places such as Myanmar, Iran and Hong Kong inevitably include pro-Western elements or people with illusions in the intentions of Western powers. For the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, it is the violence of the Turkish state that poses the immediate existential threat, not helped by the fact that both the US and Russia are happy to throw this revolutionary democratic project to the wolves in order to court Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who in turn seems very happy to play them off against each other.

Palestine further exposes the very contradiction of capitalist multipolarity. Saudi Arabia, which refused US requests to increase oil production in order to hurt Russian oil revenues and recently joined BRICS [the Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa bloc], was also on the cusp of normalising relations with Israel and has continued to sell oil to it despite the genocide in Gaza. Israel itself has rebuffed requests to sell arms to Ukraine, preferring to maintain good relations with Russia.

From this swirling mess of contradictions and naked self-interest by capitalist regimes, the only durable and dependable force is working class solidarity across borders, regardless of whether or not the local ruling class is tightly aligned with US imperialism. This may be hard to imagine now, but socialists need to patiently and persistently advance this approach in argument and practice. In

any case, change may come more quickly than we expect.

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