

Three years since the US-backed coup against Australian Labor PM

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Three years ago today, Australian prime minister Kevin Rudd was removed from office in an inner-Labor Party coup orchestrated, literally overnight, by a tiny cabal of union and party factional bosses. The anti-democratic ousting of an elected prime minister was carried out behind the backs of the Australian people, many of whom awoke on June 24, 2010 to find that Rudd was being replaced by Julia Gillard.

The underlying reasons for the conspiratorial coup have never been explained by anyone in the Australian media or political establishment, least of all by the conspirators themselves. The various justifications centre on completely secondary issues—Rudd’s autocratic leadership style, his poor ratings in the opinion polls, etc. The pseudo-left apologists for Labor, such as Socialist Alternative and Socialist Alliance, dismissed the event as a “storm in a teacup”, of no political consequence.

The Socialist Equality Party was alone in warning that the coup was bound up with the deepest global economic crisis since the 1930s, a fundamental sea-change in geo-politics and a deepening assault on the social position and democratic rights of the working class. An SEP statement explained, just four days after Rudd’s removal, that Australian capitalism had always been extremely sensitive to international geo-political shifts, demonstrated most significantly in the Canberra Coup that ousted the Labor government of Gough Whitlam in November 1975, in the midst of the last major global crisis of capitalism.

“Today, one of the central features of the geo-political situation is the increasing tension between the US and China, under conditions where Australia is economically dependent on China, but politically subordinated to the United States. Throughout the South Pacific and Southeast Asian region, the ‘China

factor’ is now a major factor in political affairs,” the SEP wrote. The statement warned that, as in 1975, the highest levels of the state apparatus and the American CIA “were either directly involved in, or at least had knowledge of, the ousting of Rudd”.

Three years on, the SEP’s warnings have been fully confirmed. WikiLeaks cables have documented the deepening hostility in the Obama administration to Rudd’s efforts to ease sharpening tensions between the US and China. They have also exposed the fact that the factional leaders who ousted the prime minister were “protected sources” of the US embassy in Canberra, and collaborated closely with Washington as they moved to install Gillard. While Rudd’s loyalty to the US alliance was never in doubt, his diplomatic initiatives, undertaken without consultation, cut across Obama’s aggressive drive to undermine and encircle China diplomatically, economically and strategically. From the outset, Gillard’s hallmark has been her slavish support for Obama’s foreign policy, from the Afghan war to the neo-colonial interventions in Libya and Syria and, above all, his “pivot to Asia”.

Obama’s “rebalancing” has changed the face of politics throughout Asia, dangerously heightening regional tensions, inflaming flashpoints such as the Korean Peninsula, and setting in motion an arms race as the US restructures and builds up its military forces in Asia.

Just weeks before Rudd was removed, Japanese prime minister Yukio Hatoyama, who had sought closer ties with China, resigned under pressure from Washington. Official Japanese politics is now dominated by right-wing nationalism, personified by the current prime minister, Shinzo Abe. South Korea is headed by President Park Geun-hye, who has fully backed Obama’s hardline stance against North Korea.

Encouraged by Obama, the Philippines and Vietnam have asserted their territorial claims in the South China Sea, heightening frictions with Beijing. The Burmese military-backed government, previously an international pariah, is now being hailed in Washington as “a developing democracy” after shifting its alignment from China towards the US.

The centrality of Australia to these US war preparations against China was underscored when Obama visited Canberra in November 2011, having previously called off two trips to the country when Rudd held office. In a highly unusual move, the US president formally announced his administration’s new strategic initiative—the pivot to Asia—not in the White House Rose Garden, or in the US Congress, but in an address to the Australian parliament. At the same time, he signed an agreement with Gillard to base US Marines in Darwin as part of broader access to Australian bases for American warships and aircraft, strengthening the Pentagon’s ability to mount a blockade of Chinese shipping through South East Asia in the event of conflict. The new Australian basing arrangements are just one aspect of US preparations for war with China. By 2020, 60 percent of the US navy and air force will be stationed in Asia.

The drive to war by the US, as it desperately seeks to offset its historic economic decline through military aggression against its rivals, goes hand in hand with a far-reaching onslaught on the social position of the international working class. Rudd was ousted as governments everywhere turned from bailouts and stimulus packages in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, to austerity. The trillions of dollars handed out to the banks and financial speculators to bail them out were to be paid for by the working class, through the slashing of jobs, wages and social spending. Gillard effectively axed a “super profits” tax proposed under Rudd on the giant mining corporations and, pledging to balance the budget, made deep inroads into social spending, including for the most vulnerable such as single parents and the unemployed.

In the three years since, Gillard has been unable to stem the widespread outrage felt in the working class towards her thoroughly anti-democratic installation. She has become the most reviled Labor leader in history—above all among the party’s old social constituency, the working class. The real reasons for

the 2010 coup have been suppressed—because they would reveal all too clearly the agenda of war and austerity to which the entire political establishment is committed. Contained in the popular hostility to Gillard is three decades of mounting anger, among ordinary working people and the youth, to Labor’s anti-working class policies, beginning with the open abandonment by the Hawke-Keating governments from 1983-96 of any, even nominal, commitment to progressive social reform.

The collapse of support for Labor has compounded the political crisis of the minority Gillard government. Gillard has faced two leadership challenges in little more than a year and Rudd’s backers are trying to mount another this week. There are growing fears within ruling circles that Labor will suffer a massive landslide defeat in the federal elections, due on September 14, which would fatally damage the two-party parliamentary system, on which the stability of capitalist rule in Australia has depended for well over a century.

The SEP is standing Senate candidates in five states in order to cut through the lies and falsifications of the official election campaign, and to mobilise the working class, in unity with workers throughout the Asian region, the US and internationally, against the agenda of war and social counterrevolution that will be pursued by whichever party forms government after the election. As the SEP warned three years ago, the 2010 coup demonstrated that such an agenda cannot be implemented democratically. Workers and young people throughout Australia and the Asian region must turn to the building of the SEP and the International Committee of the Fourth International as the revolutionary leadership required to lead the struggle for socialist internationalism, the only progressive alternative to war, austerity and dictatorship.

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