



**WORKERS
PARTY**

New Zealand's role in the occupation of **Afghanistan**

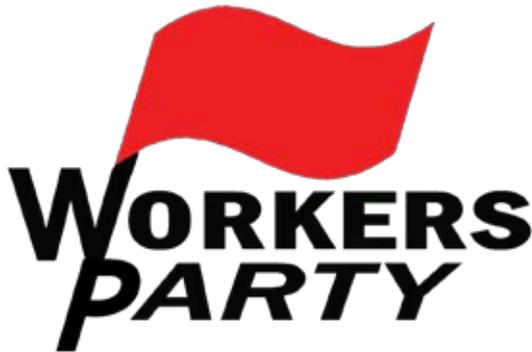


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**A Workers Party Pamphlet
By John Edmundson**

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The Situation so far

ON 10 AUGUST 2009, Prime Minister John Key announced that the SAS (Special Air Service) would return to Afghanistan. This announcement had been predicted for some time so came as no surprise.

The troops are being deployed in three rotations over 18 months and the full deployment involves 70 soldiers over that time period. At the same time, over that 18 months the NZ Army's Provincial Reconstruction Team – NZ's major commitment to the war – are being gradually reduced and eventually withdrawn, their work to be replaced by civilian work on agricul-



NZ SAS soldiers on patrol

ture, health and education. But the SAS deployment may in fact last much longer. The war in Afghanistan is going badly for the US-led coalition and few military people or civilian analysts are prepared to go public with an estimate of how much longer it could go on. A time frame as short as 18 months seems unlikely and if the war continues for years, there will be further requests for extensions to the troop commitment. With the Obama administration massively expanding the war effort, not just through increased troop numbers in Afghanistan, but an increasing involvement in Pakistan also, the war could well drag on for years. Analysts cited in a *Washington Post* story (9 August 2009) are talking about at least another decade, and a cost likely to eclipse that of the war in Iraq, both in US casualties and the all-important US dollars, hardly improbable considering that the country is much larger, more rugged, and has a larger population than



Afghan villagers picking over rubble: "Reconstruction" must seem a sick joke

Iraq, a population that feels it has nothing to lose by resisting Western intervention.

According to Key, "New Zealand has a direct and vital interest in supporting international efforts to eradicate terrorism and promote peace and stability". In

imperialist terms promoting peace must involve sending soldiers to the opposite side of the world to engage in war. Stability is produced by militarily invading and occupying another people's country and subjugating those people – all in the interests of democracy of course. There is no doubt that Afghanistan is in a mess right now, but that mess is as much the result of previous US meddling as it is the fault of "terrorists", be they Al Qaeda, the Taliban, or anyone else, even leaving aside the fact that both Al Qaeda and the Taliban are largely the product of US foreign policy anyway.

Key continued, "This deployment follows the decisions by the previous Labour government to deploy the SAS to Afghanistan on three separate occasions." He is certainly right about that – this is not about a warmongering National government behaving badly while the Labour Party keep the flag of peace bravely flying. In attempting to rebuild a strong anti-imperialist anti-war movement in New Zealand, it will be crucial that there is a strong voice reminding people of the Labour Party's complicity – in fact their responsibility – for New Zealand's involvement in this war.

The New Zealand Government, a Labour/Alliance coalition at the time, was one of the first in the world to vote "unconditional support" for George W. Bush's "war on terror" in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Prime Minister Helen Clark and the Labour-led government were unwavering in their support for the war effort. While talking of peace, legality and reconstruction in relation to Iraq, the SAS were doing what they do best in Afghanistan - destroying the lives of desperately poor Afghans, and participating in the killing of many of them.

New Zealand troops currently in Afghanistan represent the longest wartime deployment in NZ's military history. In these changed times, where the media no longer feel comfortable celebrating the military exploits of the army and the prevailing ideology is one of "Nation Building", arrogant though that may sound, the army's role in the war is described in terms of reconstruction and rebuilding – a glorified

overseas aid project really. The little news that we receive about what is going on over in Afghanistan is generally limited to the “good works” New Zealand soldiers are engaged in in the building of schools, clearing of mines, training of locals to administer the new Afghanistan etc. No doubt a lot of that sort of work does go on, but it is not the most important aspect of NZ and wider Western intervention. New Zealand soldiers in Afghanistan are part of an occupying army, and a significant part of their role there is patrolling, just as any other occupying army does. It involves the occasional fire fight with insurgent forces. Recently it was reported that during an Afghan security forces’ operation to arrest a suspected Taliban leader, the outer perimeter security cordon for that mission was provided by the New Zealand Army. The main reason New Zealand can sell its troop deployment in Afghanistan to the NZ public as a more or less benevolent one – more Oxfam than Army – is that the NZ Army is deployed in Bamian Province, an area that has been relatively sheltered from the war, no thanks to the NZ Army Provincial Reconstruction Team.

The less well-publicised (at the time) aspect of the NZ Army’s involvement in Afghanistan was the deployment of the SAS. The SAS have traditionally been shielded from any publicity surrounding their deployment and their involvement in Afghanistan started in a similar way. While

this is primarily done for reasons of operational security, it has also served to protect the idea that NZ’s Army is a peace-loving one, a bunch of fresh-faced young things who travel the world building medical clinics, striking up friendships with the locals, playing with their kids, and generally having a fully taxpayer-funded OE with some useful Kiwi DIY thrown in to help the natives. What the SAS do is nothing like that. They

engage in assassinations, “paint” buildings with infrared targeting which is then used to home in a guided missile, and “snatch and grab” raids to take prisoners – such as those who were notoriously handed over to the US military and subsequently found themselves on the wrong end of a torture session. The NZ SAS are amongst the most elite of all soldiers in the world. They are good at their job and they have been sent back to Afghanistan to continue the task that was started in 2001.



Helen Clark satisfied the US while claiming the high moral ground at home

So what is that task really?

AFGHANISTAN WAS THE FIRST open campaign in what George W. Bush declared to be an open-ended “war on terror”. The new enemy of peace, security and the maximising of profits was “terrorism”, that vague, ill-defined and almost entirely subjective term that gets applied to any irregular armed group that the speaker happens not to agree with. In more recent times it has been increasingly applied to countries and their governments as well, as was the case with the Taliban government in Afghanistan, whose victory in that country’s civil war led indirectly to the current conflict. Waging this war, which Bush informed us could continue indefinitely, became the defining issue in deciding where a nation stood. We were either with the US or with the “terrorists”. That absurd statement found complete favour with the New Zealand government. When the attacks in New York on September 11 2001 occurred, acting Prime Minister and Alliance leader Jim Anderton stated:

We must see this attack not only as an attack on the United States, but as an attack on all civilised nations. It is imperative for all nations to work together to recover as quickly as possible from the attacks in order that terrorists know they cannot bring the world to its knees through these attacks. New Zealand is a small country and the United States is very large, but we will stand ready to offer help in any way we can (www.executive.govt.nz 12 September 2001).

Two days later, Prime Minister Clark reiterated her government’s position, declaring that “New Zealand condemns any form of terrorism. The attacks against the United States were attacks against all civilised nations. New Zealand is determined to do its bit,” and repeating the promise to “help in any way we can” (www.executive.govt.nz 14 September 2001). Less than a month later, on 8 October, Clark was cheerleading as the US commenced its devastating war on Afghanistan, describing the US attacks as inevitable:

Two weeks ago, President Bush delivered a clear and unequivocal message to the terrorists and to the Taleban, and any other government which harbours terrorists. The message was blunt: that they should hand them over Osama bin Laden and his terrorist network, or prepare to share their fate . . . New Zealand supports the United States’ determination to root out Al Qaeda and the other terrorist groups associated with it (www.executive.govt.nz).

Over two years into the quagmire, Clark was still upbeat: “The period ahead is crucial for the future peace and stability of Afghanistan and in the international effort against terrorism. New Zealand can make a real difference” (www.beehive.govt.nz 8 March 2004).

New Zealand’s involvement is small, and does not directly involve such activities as bombing wedding parties or shooting men because they are “tall” and “bearded”, as some US forces have done. But the SAS’ infrared painting of buildings facilitates such attacks. It is part of the total war.

Strategic Significance

AFGHANISTAN HAS LONG BEEN an area of great strategic importance. It lies at the juncture of the old Silk Route leading East to West, and the routes leading North/South, giving access to the Indian Ocean. Britain fought three Afghan Wars without successfully gaining control of the country and was forced to give up its bid for direct rule. Afghanistan’s independence day, 19 August, marks the end of the Third Afghan War when Britain finally gave up trying to control the country. Modern Afghanistan had its border with British India (later Pakistan) established in 1893 along what became known as the Durand Line, designed, as was typical in that era, without the slightest regard for the requirements of the local people, in this case the Pashtun tribes. The border ignored tribal and migratory factors and instead followed the line able to be most easily defended by troops in British India. This in large part explains the presence of strong support in parts of North West Pakistan for the Afghan resistance. The mostly Pashtun people of Pakistan’s North West Frontier Province and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas are much more closely affiliated with people on the Afghan side of the border than they are with the rest of Pakistan.



Hamid Karzai: “The Mayor of Kabul”

For decades, Afghanistan was largely ignored by the rest of the world, but that all changed in 1973. The Afghan monarchy was overthrown in a coup and a subsequent coup in 1978 brought increasing Soviet influence. The pro-Soviet government of

President Mohammad Najibullah implemented sweeping land reforms and numerous measures to improve the status of women but they did so without taking the people with them. Especially in the countryside, there was resistance to the changes and armed opposition to the government broke out in the form of the Afghan Mujahideen militias. The government was unable to cope with the increasing unrest and requested Soviet intervention. The embroiling of the Soviet army in its own “Vietnam” was an opportunity too good to miss for the US, which began arming the conservative Islamic militias, including the as yet little known Osama bin Laden. In 1989, as the cost of the war, in both lives and materiel, became unsustainable for the Soviet Union, it pulled its last troops out. The poorly-resourced government could not survive indefinitely, falling in 1992. The various Mujahideen factions did not retain their unity beyond the collapse of the Najibullah government however and a chaotic period followed in which the various factions carved up the country and commenced shelling each other. With no faction able to assert dominance a power vacuum emerged.

Into that vacuum in 1997 stepped the Taliban. Unsullied by the civil war, and having come through the ranks in the refugee camps in Pakistan, the Taliban were seen as a fresh new group, who could unite many of the rival factions, especially those of Pashtun origin. They were welcomed by some amongst the war-weary Afghan population and made a rapid advance, but they were never able to gain complete control over the country. The warlords of the Northern Alliance and some others retained independence, leaving the Taliban in complete control of only about half to two thirds of the country, with uncertain allies in some other regions. The Taliban were continuously at war with the Western-funded forces of the Northern Alliance and they were attempting to administer a completely shattered country, which had yet to emerge from two decades of war, a war that often had less to do with the Afghan people themselves than with the interests of the Cold War rivals. The period in which the Taliban maintained its tenuous hold over the country was a mere four years. By the time of the September 11 attacks in New York and the October 2001 US-led invasion, Afghanistan had already been virtually destroyed. The Taliban was never a single monolithic organisation but instead a fragile alliance of often rival groups. It never really had an army, just a collection of militias. Every airfield and anti-aircraft gun was destroyed by missile fire before the bombing of Afghanistan began in early October 2001, less than a month after the 9/11 attacks. The US then left all the ground fighting to the militias of the Northern Alliance, with the result that only 12 coalition soldiers were killed in the invasion. Northern Alliance casualty numbers were never collected.

At the time that the invasion occurred, the West talked much about the human rights abuses of the Taliban regime, abuses that would be put right with the “liberation” of the country under the benevolent leadership of the United States’ Northern Alliance warlord allies and their hand-picked leadership. The anointed one was Hamid Karzai, a royalist, former anti-Soviet fundraiser and early supporter of the Taliban.

Karzai, dismissively referred to as the Mayor of Kabul due to his government's impotence outside the capital, is captive to the system that created him. He rose to power because his contacts in so many factions made him an acceptable choice for many of the warlords. But debts must be paid and Karzai brought many of the warlords into government. Their militias now stand either outside the government's own army and still active, or inside it but still semi-independent. Karzai's brothers have been accused of involvement in the opium trade.

The country is now estimated to be the poorest in the world. Of approximately 26 million people, about 20 million live below the poverty line. Five million are close to starvation. Unemployment officially stands at forty percent but is extremely difficult to estimate. For many lucky enough to have a job, it does not provide an adequate income. Yet some people are doing well. The Western directors of development projects earn US\$200-300,000 salaries, two hundred times those of the locals working in the bottom rungs of the organisations. Education is failing, with illiteracy amongst girls estimated at close to ninety percent. Afghan "democracy" is a corrupt sham. Karzai was originally elected by a "loya jirga", or tribal gathering, hand-picked by the Western powers and later returned in elections where he was the only candidate able to claim the endorsement of the massive Western military machine that occupies the country.

As it stands, it is estimated that more than seventy percent of Afghanistan is either completely or partially in insurgent hands. Conventional military defeat of the Western armies is not really possible given that the Afghan resistance is not a conventional army and has neither the means nor the wish to fight a conventional war. But defeat of the insurgency seems ever more unlikely also, as the population is increasingly hostile towards the occupying forces, leading to rising recruitment to the ranks of the resistance and an almost complete failure of the West to bring the much talked about benefits that they promised. Increasingly, it is opposition to the occupation and disillusionment with the lack of improvement in people's daily lives that is motivating people to join up, as much as religious fervour. The insurgency itself is not all Taliban but a mixture of groups opposed to the current occupation and in many cases also bitterly opposed to each other. Inevitably though, in a country like Afghanistan, it is through the existing religious movements such as the Taliban that that anger and opposition is channelled.

Electoral sham

THE ELECTIONS HELD ON 20 August 2009 did not really represent any hope of progress. The elections could never be "free and fair" when held under foreign military occupation. What if the population supports the resistance? They can't run because they have been branded "terrorists". The choices offered to the Afghan people

in all the elections since the invasion have been bankrolled either by the US, by religious groups, or by drug lords. The current parliament and Karzai's government is comprised largely of warlords and their allies. One exception, 35-year-old Malalai Joya has been assaulted and threatened with death by MPs for daring to challenge the power of the warlords. Despite having been elected to the parliament herself, she has no faith whatsoever in the elections being held under occupation. And to those who say that, bad though it is in Afghanistan, it would be worse still if the West simply up and left, she said "The struggle will be long and difficult, but the values of real democracy, human rights and women's rights will only be won by the Afghan people themselves." She continued:

I am very sorry to see governments putting the lives of their soldiers in danger in Afghanistan in the name of bringing democracy. In fact the soldiers are serving the strategic and regional interests of the White House and the consequences of their occupation so far have been devastating for my people. I believe that if the ordinary folk of Afghanistan and the Nato countries were able to vote, and express their wishes, this indefinite military occupation would come to an end and there would be a real chance for peace in Afghanistan. But today's election does nothing for that.

The vote that did take place was patchy at best. The estimated turnout was 5.5 million, down a third from the 8.1 million who voted in 2004. In some provinces, turnout was very low. Even in Kabul, according to the *Washington Post*, "some high schools used as polling places had received only a trickle of voters by midday, and election monitors sat idle for hours in some classrooms reserved for female voters". Complete results were not expected until mid-September and serious claims of electoral fraud were rife. By 3 September, the scheduled day for release of the results, there was nothing to report, but a new release date – 12 September. On that day, it was announced that the counting was still incomplete. No date for an announcement was given. Finally, a quarter of the total votes were rejected as suspect, three quarters of them being votes cast in favour of Hamid Karzai and on 20 October he was forced into a runoff poll against his chief rival, Abdullah Abdullah. However, just days before the 7 November election, Abdullah pulled out, declaring that a "transparent election is not possible". Widespread allegations of US interference in the election process have surfaced and the US has made clear its intention to restructure the Afghan political process. Karzai's star has begun to shine less brightly as he has attempted to assert a degree of independence from his US masters. There have been suggestions that the US had shifted its allegiance away from Karzai and that its preferred candidates were Abdullah Abdullah and another candidate, Ashraf Ghani.



Taliban soldiers: The latest strategy – pay them to go home

The US campaign in Afghanistan was sold to the West as a championing of human rights, and particularly of women's rights. Yet conditions for women are virtually unchanged. Recently, the Karzai government passed a law allowing husbands to deprive their wives of food as punishment for refusing sex. Another recent law allowed "blood money" to

be paid to families as an alternative to facing court in rape cases, a law which could also, ironically, effectively legitimise prostitution. Speaking on the current situation in Afghanistan, British commentator and *Daily Telegraph* reporter Ben Farmer said of progress for women's rights, "The West seems to have back pedalled a bit on that" (Radio New Zealand National 29 January, 2010).

Afghanistan has been destroyed by years of war and imperialist meddling. Obama's proposed solution, to send more soldiers and attempt, via a troop surge, to eradicate the insurgency and bring peace and stability in sufficient quantities to allow the resumption of "business as usual", is doomed. But the means to extricate the troops is difficult. The likely outcome will be a negotiated peace, agreed with "moderate" Taliban leaders. What this will really mean is Taliban leaders the West was able to make a deal with. New Zealand soldiers in Afghanistan merely serve to prop up and legitimise this process.

New Zealand has no business participating in any process that dictates to the people of Afghanistan or anywhere else what type of government they are permitted to have. We should campaign to have NZ's soldiers withdrawn. We need to rebuild the anti-war movement in New Zealand so that the presence of New Zealand troops in imperialist missions abroad becomes completely untenable for the government.

New Zealand plays a role in international imperialism but it also has specific interests of its own. The deployment of troops to Afghanistan forms part of a wider trend in New Zealand intervention, with New Zealand having also become involved in intervention in East Timor, Tonga and the Solomons. It is in the interests of workers in New Zealand to demand the immediate withdrawal of all New Zealand troops abroad and to instead build links with the many progressive forces among people resisting imperialist intervention and occupation, not only in Afghanistan but around the world.

Why you should join the Workers Party

1. We are revolutionary socialists

WE ALL LIVE IN a capitalist society, which means that the working-class majority experience exploitation and poverty in order to guarantee profits and luxury for the ruling-class minority. The capitalists have many weapons at their disposal – not just the army, police, courts and prisons, but a system of ideas, developed over centuries, that shape people’s beliefs about what is normal, natural, and possible. These prevailing ideas tell us that we can do no more than tinker with the current system. However, the current economic crisis shows more clearly than ever that society must be radically reorganised if it is to serve the interests of the working-class majority. To challenge the entrenched power of the ruling class, workers cannot rely on parliament or parties like Labour, which support the existing system. We need to build a movement which can develop alternative, anti-capitalist ideas to create a revolution.

2. We support workers’ resistance

THE FUNDAMENTAL BASIS OF our politics is class struggle. For us, socialism – a society in which the means of producing wealth are owned collectively and run democratically for the benefit of everyone – can only come about when we, the people who produce the wealth, liberate ourselves from capitalist exploitation. The Workers Party does everything it can to support all workers’ struggles – from the smallest work stoppage to a full-on factory occupation – as these are the basic forms of resistance to capitalist rule. As workers start running their workplaces and industries on their own, they will start to ask, “Why can’t we run the whole country – and more?” We take inspiration from historical examples of workers’ control such as the Paris Commune and the Russian Revolution, and study their successes and failures.

3. We support trade union activism

BECAUSE WE BELIEVE THAT only the working class can create socialism, we are active in the basic organisations of the working class, the trade unions. Currently, unions are generally dominated by middle-class bureaucrats who see themselves as peacemakers between workers and bosses. We work towards transforming unions into strong, democratic, fighting organisations, controlled by their members. Such unions will mobilise workers for struggle in the workplace and society through strikes, workplace occupations and other forms of militant action. In an economic crisis they are more important than ever. We join in the struggle to extend the union movement to the majority of workers who are not yet organised, especially the campaigns by Unite Union to involve youth and workers who have insecure conditions. We stand with workers in struggle for better rights and conditions, and initiate discussion on revolutionary ideas through strike bulletins and electronic media.

4. We support student-worker solidarity

ON CAMPUS AND IN schools, Workers Party members are actively trying to rebuild the radical student movement. We oppose fees, demand living grants for students, and fight for free speech. We encourage students to link their struggles with those of the working class. Workers ultimately pay most of the bill for education, even in a semi-private university system such as we have. Workers will be won to the idea of free education from kindergarten to university if they see students willing to support their struggles.

5. We have an internationalist perspective

WORKERS ALL OVER THE world have far more in common with one another than with the bosses of “their own” country. To fight effectively, workers in every country must support the struggles of workers in every other country. This is what we mean by internationalism. We are for open borders as the best way to unite the workers of the world. We have been involved in successful campaigns

to prevent the deportation of refugees and we urge the union movement to be migrant-worker friendly. We oppose the reactionary nationalism of campaigns like “Buy NZ-made”, and instead advocate protecting jobs through militant unionism.

6. We oppose imperialism

THE FIGHT AGAINST IMPERIALISM is a vital part of the fight against capitalism. Imperialism is the system whereby rich countries dominate poor ones. New Zealand is a junior partner in the world imperialist system. The Workers Party opposes any involvement in imperialist wars such as those being fought in Afghanistan and Iraq, even if the involvement is under the banner of so-called “peace-keeping”. We demand an immediate end to the interference in the affairs of Pacific Island nations by New Zealand and its ally Australia. We want an end to all involvement in imperialist military alliances and the dismantling of their spy bases. We try to identify the most politically progressive anti-imperialist groups to offer them our active support – for instance, our solidarity campaign for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

7. We fight oppression

WE ARE SERIOUS ABOUT actively fighting oppression based on nation, race, gender or sexuality – here and now, not just “after the revolution”. But we believe class is central to all such oppression, and therefore those struggles are linked to the broader class struggle. We support militant direct action by Maori for real equality; conversely, we see the Treaty process as a bureaucratic means to undercut such resistance and nurture a Maori middle class which will benefit very few.

8. We stand for freedom

WE BELIEVE THAT SOCIALISM means the maximum possible freedom for the many not the few. We directly challenge infringements on basic human rights such as the undemocratic use of trespass orders by universities and employers against activists and trade unionists. We have consistently opposed the so-called “terror raids” on left-wing and Maori activists dating from October 2007. We also practise what we preach in our own party, where members have the right to disagree and debate their differences,

provided they are involved in a basic level of party activity.

9. We hold capitalism responsible for the environmental crisis

THE CAPITALIST DRIVE FOR unlimited profit threatens to destroy the whole basis of life on Earth. In contrast to the capitalist parties (including the Green Party) who demand that workers reduce their living standards for the sake of the planet, we say that it is the capitalist system that must be challenged, since most environmental damage is a result of production, not consumption. We look to examples of working-class actions like the “green bans” initiated by New South Wales building labourers in the 1970s for inspiration on how workers can change the priorities of society.

10. We are building a revolutionary party

WE BELIEVE THAT THE working class and oppressed can only achieve liberation as a conscious project, based on ideas which are debated, tested against reality, and

constantly reviewed and improved. The working class can only learn from history – including previous workers’ struggles, victorious or defeated – through a conscious political movement which preserves these lessons. To create a mass socialist movement, workers who have already drawn revolutionary conclusions must organise together in a political organisation. This kind of party is still some way off in New Zealand. But we believe that Workers Party activists and our political ideas will be central to that movement of the future. Help us build it now! Our members and supporters in the trade unions, the student movement, and many other struggles organise together, on the basis of common ideas, as part of a concerted fight for a classless society without oppression or exploitation. If you agree with our basic ideas, join us. If you don’t, work with us, debate with us, and continue the discussion!

www.workersparty.org.nz

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