

No Australian gunboat diplomacy towards East Timor!

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The following statement was issued by the Democratic Socialist Perspective (DSP) on May 19.

In 1999, following the pro-independence vote at the UN-supervised ballot in East Timor, the Indonesian military and its hired militia thugs went on a killing spree. The DSP, which has a long history of involvement in the campaign for East Timorese self-determination, strongly supported the call for a UN force to enter East Timor to stop the slaughter, as demanded by the overwhelming mass of Timorese.

Tens of thousands of people rallied in Melbourne and Sydney to force the Howard government to act against its own immediate interest - its cosy relationship with the Indonesian military and political elites. The UN mission also supervised the withdrawal of the Indonesian troops, and was then stationed along the border with Indonesian-controlled West Timor.

The latest unrest in East Timor started in March when Falintil independence fighters were sacked from the East Timor Defence Force (FDTL). Then, on April 28, former independence fighters held a protest in Dili that was violently dispersed by East Timorese police and army units. Official estimates put the April 28 death toll at around five, but East Timorese activists believe the number to be greater because of the excessive force deployed by police and the FDTL.

In the second week of May, after what many Timorese believed were sensational media exaggerations of the violence in Dili, the Australian government offered to send troops to East Timor. To date, the East Timorese government has not accepted the offer. Nevertheless, Canberra has sent two warships, the *Manoora* and the *Kanimbla*, to be on standby in the Torres Straits in case of further trouble. On May 15, defence minister Brendan Nelson hinted that troops were on board.

This is gunboat diplomacy, and should be rejected by all those who support self-determination for the poverty-stricken nation. The DSP does not support providing military assistance to the East Timorese state to help repress its own people.

The Australian government acts as local sheriff for imperialism in this part of the world. Australian capitalism has plundered the region and systematically interferes in the political life of the small and impoverished nations of the South Pacific. That's why it sent extra troops to help prop up the corrupt Solomon Islands government, why it has sent police to PNG, and why it is also threatening to send in troops to Bougainville following a spate of attacks against police posts there.

East Timor faces severe social and economic problems. According to the UN's 2005 Human Development Report, East Timor's GDP per capita is ranked 162 out of 177 countries. Labor and Coalition governments' support for Indonesia's occupation, in which more than 200,000 East Timorese died, and Canberra's more recent success at stealing East Timor's oil and gas have contributed to this state of affairs.

But despite winning formal independence in 1999 and forcing the withdrawal of the Indonesian military, the country remains at the mercy of international capital.

Since 1999, Canberra has continued to facilitate the corporate plunder of East Timor's natural resources and pressure its government to capitulate to Canberra's dictates. This has been most clearly shown by the theft of the Timor Sea's natural gas, with the Keating Labor government first attempting to enforce an agreement brokered with the Suharto dictatorship and then the Howard government bullying East Timor to accept a compromise that deprives it of its legally entitled resources.

The DSP opposes any Australian military involvement in the repression of the people of East Timor. Australia's corporate rulers are keen to make sure that the island is "open for business". But ironically, the neoliberal policies that Canberra helps foist onto Third World nations are those that lead to events such as the protest and killings on April 28.

The DSP wholeheartedly supports the struggles by the East Timorese for social justice, just as it did from the beginning of the Australian government-supported Indonesian invasion and occupation of the country in 1975.

We recognise that within the bounds of imperialist globalisation there can be no fundamental solutions to the problems faced by Third World nations without challenging capitalist rule. For real social justice in East Timor, we remain committed to challenging Australia's continuing imperialist domination over Timor's natural resources. For a start, we demand that Australia cease the theft of Timor's oil.

We oppose Canberra's neo-colonial meddling in East Timor. Any attempts by the Australian ruling class to intervene - militarily or politically - under the guise of "restoring order" should be opposed by all progressive people.

P.S.

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