



The new Defence Bill is a step to authoritarianism

Fight for working people's rights

The Morrison government has introduced a dangerous new Bill to Parliament called Defence Legislation Amendment (Enhancement of Defence Force Response to Emergencies) Bill 2020. If passed, the Legislation will give authority to the Defence Minister to declare an “emergency” and call out Australian Defence Forces and police, including foreign troops and police, to deal with the undefined “emergency”. The Bill does not include any definition of what is an “emergency” or “other emergencies” and could be used to suppress people’s protests against economic austerity, unemployment, the climate crisis, and against imperialist wars. It could be used in industrial disputes against unions and workers taking industrial action for wages and conditions, for job security, economic livelihoods, for social justice and solidarity. The Bill allows the army and police, including foreign troops and police, to be exempt from civil and criminal liability. The parliamentary Labor Opposition is conspicuously silent.

Governments use army and police forces to enforce the power of the dominant economic and political class. It is no coincidence that the Defence Amendment Bill does not define “emergencies” but expands the powers of the ADF and police, including the use of foreign troops and police, and exemptions from civil and criminal liability. These changes are parallel to extensive increases of powers to police and intelligence agencies, including the recent ASIO Bill.

Under the cover of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the bushfires created by climate crisis, the government is rushing through these extraordinary attacks on people’s democratic rights which authorise the use of foreign troops and police against Australian people.

Previous use of armed forces against the people

- Occupation of Australia by British colonial armed forces. Colonial armed suppression of First Nations people resisting invasion and occupation
- 1854 - armed state suppression of the Eureka rebellion by British colonial soldiers and police
- 1894 - shearers’ strike
- 1949 – Chifley Labor government sends the army to crush the miners’ strike

- 1975 - “Stand by call out order to ADF” just before the sacking of the Whitlam government on 11 November.
- 1979 - in the aftermath of Hilton bombing
- 1988 - Hawke conscripts the RAAF and overseas pilots as strike breakers against striking Ansett Pilots
- Increasing powers and militarisation of police – recent extensions of powers to police and intelligence agencies, including extended powers to ASIO.

To protect the Australian people’s democratic rights, we call on the people, the government and all parliamentary parties to oppose the Defence Amendment Bill, specifically:

- Entirely remove the Clause authorising deployment of foreign troops and police during “emergencies”. The Bill gives authority to Minister of Defence to call on the 2,500 US marines stationed in Darwin, to be used during undefined “emergencies”, which could include public protests and industrial action. Clause 123AA(4) (b)
- Specifically define “emergencies” solely as natural disasters – such as bushfires, floods, hurricanes, earthquakes. Spirit of Eureka supports ADF assistance to local and regional community organisations co-ordinating responses to natural disasters. However, we believe that the Bill should explicitly state that the ADF and the Army Reserves will not be used against workers and communities during industrial action, social justice campaigns and environmental protests.
- Remove exemptions for army, foreign troops and police from civil and criminal liability.
- Remove Defence Minister’s authority to define and declare (solely in consultation with the PM) an “emergency”, call out the army and police, including foreign troops and police. Parliament should be given this authority.

Working people’s answer to attacks on our democratic rights is to organise collectively in our unions and communities and fight for our rights and liberties.

Tell your member of parliament to reject the Defence Legislation Amendment Bill.

“We swear by the Southern Cross to stand truly by each other and fight to defend our rights and liberties.”

Spirit of Eureka