

AFTER CHARLIE HEBDO, RACISTS ON THE RAMPAGE



STAND AGAINST ISLAMOPHOBIA

'Recognition' farce
as Abbott decimates
Aboriginal services

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SOLIDARITY: WHO ARE WE?

Solidarity is a socialist group with branches across Australia. We are opposed to the madness of capitalism, which is plunging us into global recession and misery at the same time as wrecking the planet's future. We are taking the first steps towards building an organisation that can help lead the fight for an alternative system based on mass democratic planning, in the interests of human need not profit.

As a crucial part of this, we are committed to building social movements and the wider left, through throwing ourselves into struggles for social justice, against racism and to strengthen the confidence of rank and file unionists.

Solidarity is a member of the International Socialist Tendency. Visit our web site at www.solidarity.net.au/about-us for more information on what we stand for.

SOLIDARITY MEETINGS AND BRANCHES

Sydney

The invasion of Aboriginal Sydney
6.30pm Thursday 29 January

The myth of humanitarian intervention
6.30pm Thursday 5 February

Sydney Solidarity meets 6.30pm every Thursday at Brown St Hall, Brown St, Newtown
For more information contact: Erima on 0432 221 516
sydney@solidarity.net.au

Melbourne

We are not Charlie: Stand against Islamophobia
6pm Wednesday 28 January

Melbourne Solidarity meets 6pm every Wednesday New International Bookshop, Trades Hall, 54 Victoria St Carlton
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Things they say

Every time someone sneezes overseas we have to stand up to make a comment. We have identified where we stand on all these issues ... it's like a broken record.

Lebanese Muslim Association President Samier Dandan, when asked for comment on the terrorist attacks in Paris

The only man, really man, there was the man with the gun... Usually men try to protect the women and it seems that the men were looking after their own, saving their own skin.

Fred Nile

The same blunders that killed Julia Gillard.

Even Andrew Bolt, News Limited tabloid pro-Abbott hack, is critical of the government

A year of achievement.

Abbott isn't getting the message if he think 2014 was a good year

Don't believe everything you read. It's going to be a great year for Australia

We're not sure what sport Joe Hockey follows, but he surely couldn't have been talking about the government

I don't go bananas and I didn't go bananas

Foreign Minister Julie Bishop on reports she "went bananas" at Abbott

My shots saved several Americans, whose lives were clearly worth more than that woman's twisted soul... Savage, despicable evil. That's what we were fighting in Iraq. That's why a lot of people, myself included, called the enemy "savages".

Chris Kyle, the real "American Sniper" depicted in the new movie of the same name

Here's another reality: when the economy slows down and things get tough, the rich or better off among us sell a beach house, divest some shares or cancel overseas travel plans.

Amanda Vanstone explains the difference between rich and poor. Sure does sound tough

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Gay references airbrushed from *Pride* film cover

PRIDE, THE critically acclaimed film that details the true story of solidarity between gays and lesbians and striking miners in the 1984-85 strike, is out on DVD in the US. Shockingly, the film has had all references to homosexuality removed from the DVD cover. The synopsis on the back cover rebrands the “Lesbian and Gays Support the Miners” campaign group as a “group of London-based activists” and a banner reading “Lesbians and gays support the miners” has been airbrushed. The film received an R rating in the US, despite only being rated M in Australia and the UK.

Beggars swept under the rug in Perth

BEGGARS HAVE been banned from Fremantle’s “cappuccino strip”, a popular tourist area, keeping the destitute out of sight and out of mind. The local council is enforcing the ban through making beggars register to prove they are homeless, and then limiting their begging to certain areas.

Only nine people have been registered as “legitimately homeless” since August last year. Yet St Patrick’s Community Support Centre, which helps the homeless in Fremantle, had to turn away 272 people looking for assistance last year. It reports that families are the fastest growing homeless demographic.

Tasmania makes it a crime to insult business

NEW ANTI-DEFAMATION laws proposed by the Tasmanian Liberal government would allow companies to sue individuals for defamation. Under existing federal libel laws companies can already sue for “injurious falsehood”, but only if they can prove that claims made about their business had a financial impact.

Under the new laws they will only need to show damage to the company’s reputation. This will massively increase the scope for businesses to use punitive lawsuits against activists, unions and journalists. Media union Federal Secretary Chris Warren said, “It will have the impact of killing freedom of speech.”

Liberal MP blinded by anti-Muslim bias



Luke Simpkins trumpets his achievement on Facebook

FEDERAL LIBERAL MP Luke Simpkins has been seeing things. He has drawn ridicule after going public about “Islamic Shahada symbols” that apparently appeared in his suburban electorate in the North of Perth.

He boasted on social media about his crusade to get the so-called “Islamic symbols” painted over after they appeared on a bridge.

He said, “Last week I noticed black disks (sic) that appeared to be Shahada symbols. Thanks to the Transport Minister and his adviser for getting them painted over quickly after my call”.

But they were actually stickers promoting “Speakeasy”, a bi-monthly music night at a local nightclub. As one contribution on Simpkins’ Facebook page put it, “Speakeasy is a Shahada symbol? Wow, You sir are a complete idiot”.

Prince Andrew implicated in sex slavery

PRINCE ANDREW, the second son of Queen Elizabeth II, has been named in a high profile sex-slavery lawsuit filed against billionaire American financier Jeffrey Epstein.

Virginia Roberts, who was 17 at the time, alleges the abuse took place in New York, London and on Epstein’s private island in the Caribbean.

It provides an insight into the world of the rich and powerful, and how they can flout the laws that apply to the rest of us.

Court documents claim that, in addition to Prince Andrew, “Epstein also trafficked Jane Doe 3 [Virginia Roberts] for sexual purposes to many other powerful men.” They included “numerous prominent American politicians, powerful business executives, foreign presidents, a well known prime minister and other world leaders.”

A previous FBI investigation identified at least 40 young women Epstein had potentially abused. Three were questioned under oath but refused to answer.

Court papers allege that they were “threatened and intimidated” by Epstein, and that he also paid for their lawyers.

As part of a secret plea deal, Epstein was convicted of one charge of soliciting sex with a 14 year old, and served just 13 months in jail.

Research and writing by Adam Adelpour

Send suggestions for INSIDE THE SYSTEM to solidarity@solidarity.net.au

The best of friends

LIBERAL FOREIGN Affairs Minister Julie Bishop has revealed how she and Kevin Rudd became the best of friends.

While they had been in touch since observing Zimbabwe’s election together in 2002, she told Fairfax that Labor’s leadership woes cemented a “much closer friendship”.

She said that “Through some of the really difficult times for him, I would go around and see him, he would come around and see me, we talked a lot about foreign policy. We talked a lot of about different approaches, I ran ideas past him”.

It shows how hollow Labor’s claim to stand for “working people” as against the Liberals, the traditional party of the bosses, really is. In a sickening illustration of the collaboration across the political elite Bishop revealed, “We rarely disagreed on things”.

Man with terminal illness told to look for work

A MAN with a terminal illness has been forced to spend what’s left of his short life jumping through hoops at Centrelink and job-search centres. On Christmas Eve, 33-year-old John Grayson was informed that he had a stage three malignant brain tumour, but since he is currently physically “fit for work” he doesn’t qualify for the Disability Support Pension.

In theory people with a terminal illnesses should get the pension but his extremely rare form of tumour doesn’t qualify. As a result he’s stuck making weekly visits to employment agencies and reporting on job searches.

As he put it, “[Newstart appointments] are very time costly, which I have so little of. I’d much rather be visiting friends and relatives before I die”.

EDITORIAL

As Abbott threatens more cuts, it's time to revive the fightback

ABBOTT'S NEW year has got off to a bad start. His "plan B" to attack Medicare is already in tatters after the government was forced to dump a key plank that could have seen doctor's visits cost \$20.

GPs, the public, unions, Labor and then a majority of cross-bench Senators all voiced their opposition to cutting the Medicare rebate for consultations less than ten minutes long.

After the Victorian Liberals loss in December after one term, a one term Tony looks much more possible. A big swing against Campbell Newman in Queensland on 31 January will be a major setback for Abbott.

Abbott has tried to use the Martin Place hostage crisis and now the terror attacks in Paris to beat up fear about terrorism and build his credibility as the "strong man" most able to keep "us" safe. So far, it hasn't worked. Both Morgan and Essential polls in January showed Bill Shorten ahead of Abbott as preferred prime minister.

But the Charlie Hebdo killings have bolstered Islamophobia, with many stooping to defend the racist magazine in the name of free speech. In Australia, the racists crawled out from under their rocks demanding the right to publish racist articles in Australia.

In France the mainstream political parties quickly combined to channel the shock over the killings into a "national unity" march led by world leaders; an assortment of hypocrites responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands in the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, linking arms with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, the butcher of Gaza.

Those leaders have fanned the flames of Islamophobia. The "free press" in the West has given any amount of space for Islamophobes to push claims that there is something fundamental about Islam itself that encourages terrorism, tarring all Muslims with the brush of extremism.

Abbott's war-mongering, his fear-mongering and his anti-terror laws will have to be actively fought.

No turning back on budget

Abbott and Treasurer Joe Hockey have signaled that they will be trying to avoid too many unpopular policies in their next budget. But they can't help themselves.

The \$7 Medicare co-payment was heading for defeat in the Senate. So



Above: Reviving the campaigns against Abbott's cuts and budget attacks will be vital if we are to stop him getting away with more

Abbott unveiled a "plan B" in December, replacing the \$7 co-payment with... a \$5 co-payment.

Worse, the government picked a fight with GPs by trying to cut payments for "ten minute medicine". When new Health Minister Sussan Ley was forced to ditch the change she still insisted that "a modest co-payment" was still on the table.

Just before Christmas, Abbott's university deregulation plans were defeated in the Senate. But Education Minister Pyne immediately re-introduced another version into Parliament, and has pledged to put it back to the Senate in February. And the government went ahead with \$8 million of TV, print and radio ads to keep promoting the changes nobody wants.

Abbott has also set the scene to push for an increase in the GST.

Bust the budget attacks

We can't just rely on falling polls. If Abbott is going to be beaten, there will need to be a fight.

We need to revive the campaigns against his budget attacks, especially over student fees and Medicare. Abbott is still dangerous every day he remains in office. In late November the government cut \$254 million out of the ABC. In late December housing and homelessness services were defunded as part of \$240 million of cuts to social services. Health funding cuts to the states over the next four years total \$1.8 billion.

.....
Abbott is still dangerous every day he remains in office

A stronger union response is vital. The CPSU has the chance to wage an industrial fight against Abbott, something everyone should support. The union has begun work bans, but public sector-wide strike action would put real pressure on Abbott and win wide support.

It's clear Abbott will keep pushing. Deregulation was only defeated in the Senate, last time, with the unreliable votes of Jacqui Lambie, Nick Xenophon and the Palmer United Party.

Xenophon, for example, has ruled out voting for deregulation but says he would support other fee increases.

Every student needs to help build the National Day of Action on 25 March. Students need to hit the lectures, gates and lunch halls to make sure everyone knows that the deregulation threat is real.

The plans for nationwide "March in March" rallies on 21 and 22 March will be another focus to mobilise against every aspect of Abbott's agenda—on uni fees, Medicare and refugees. We need union contingents on these rallies.

A union national day of protest against Medicare in February was put on hold when Abbott backed off his latest attack. But with Medicare still in Abbott's sights, a major union rally closer to the budget would keep up the pressure.

We can't wait two more years to bury Abbott. In 2015, we need to fight for free education, free universal healthcare and to free the refugees.

Abbott and world leaders are hypocrites on free speech

By James Supple

FOLLOWING THE attacks in Paris Tony Abbott and other leaders pledged to stand up in defence of freedom of speech. This is gross hypocrisy.

Our rulers have no qualms about brushing aside freedom of speech when it suits their interests.

Despite all the talk of “French republican values”, last year France became the only country in the world to ban Palestinian demonstrations during the war on Gaza. In the two weeks after the Charlie Hebdo killings over 80 people were prosecuted for “defending terrorism”, often for offhand remarks on public transport or social media. They included not just anti-semitic comedian Dieudonné M’bala M’bala but dozens of ordinary people including a 14-year-old.

Fifty world leaders united in the spectacle of a “march for peace and freedom” in Paris headed by French President Francois Hollande.

Sickeningly, the marchers in Paris included Israel’s Benjamin Netanyahu, responsible for the deaths of over 2200 Palestinians in Gaza last year. They included 17 journalists, after Israel deliberately bombed five separate media outlets.

The US too, represented by its ambassador, killed two Reuters journalists in Iraq in 2007, exposed on film by WikiLeaks. Alongside them was the Egypt’s foreign minister, whose 30,000 political prisoners include Australian journalist Peter Grete and two others from Al Jazeera.

Here in Australia, the government’s latest anti-terror laws, passed late last year, threaten journalists who report on “special intelligence operations” with up to ten years’ jail. Police have previously used anti-terrorism laws to raid Australian supporters of national liberation struggles, such as the Tamil Tigers and the Kurdish PKK.

Abbott has shown contempt for free speech through targeting the ABC, attempting to silence criticism of government policies and accusing it of being “unAustralian”. His secrecy over asylum seeker boats and contempt for media scrutiny has gone to extreme lengths.

In reality there is no genuine freedom of speech in our society.

The mainstream media has enormous power to determine what opinions are heard. Yet the bulk of it is controlled by big business and identi-



fies with their interests.

Australia has among the most concentrated media ownership in the world, with Rupert Murdoch alone controlling 70 per cent of the newspapers nation-wide. This means that right-wing commentators like Andrew Bolt and Tim Blair, whose views coincide with Murdoch’s, have enormous scope to promote their ideas. There are no comparable figures on the left with anything like this reach.

Even at more liberal outlets like the ABC, *The Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* trying to get supportive coverage of strikes or ideas judged to be outside the political mainstream is near impossible. Witness the vehemence with which even ABC interviewers feel they can attack those with unconventional views—Emma Alberici’s savaging of Hizb ut-Tahir’s Wassim Doureih on *Lateline* to such an extent that Abbott personally commended the interview, or her similar efforts when interviewing The Greens’ Christine Milne over asylum deaths at sea.

Racial Discrimination Act

Liberal Senators Cory Bernardi and Dean Smith used the events in Paris to call for the revival of changes to section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act, saying existing laws would stop Charlie Hebdo publishing its cartoons in Australia. But the Racial Discrimination Act (RDA) is not concerned with religious discrimination, and has a variety of free speech exemptions.

Australia’s hate speech laws are comparatively weak compared to France’s. Last July, far right politician

Above: The championing of Charlie Hebdo’s racist cartoons as a defence of free speech is a mistake

Anne-Sophie Leclère was sentenced to nine months’ imprisonment and fined 50,000 euros for Facebook comments comparing black Attorney-General Christiane Taubira to a monkey.

The attack on 18C is designed to give greater confidence to racists to abuse Muslims, Aboriginal people and immigrants, just like Attorney General George Brandis’s comment that “people do have a right to be bigots”.

The government has been happy to trample on the freedom of speech of its critics, but wants to give every encouragement to its supporters like Andrew Bolt and the hard right. That’s why the left should oppose the changes to the RDA.

Using the courts and legislation like the RDA are no way to fight racism. But socialists do not support untrammelled freedom of speech. What is said also has consequences in the real world. Few would defend the free speech of people to promote child abuse or violence against women.

Similarly, allowing hate speech for racist groups under the guise of free speech leads directly to an increase in verbal abuse and violent racist attacks. The rise of Pauline Hanson saw an increase in attacks on Asians and Aboriginal people, including a firebomb attack on an Asian business.

This is why the slogan “I am Charlie” and the desire amongst some to endorse its efforts to publish provocative and racist cartoons are a mistake.

The challenge is to build sufficient opposition that such racist and Islamophobic outbursts become unacceptable.

.....
The government’s latest anti-terror laws threaten journalists with up to ten years’ jail

Don't let Islamophobes exploit Charlie Hebdo killings

By James Supple

THE ATTACKS in Paris that left 17 people dead have caused shock all around the world. The actions of the three men who carried out the attacks are deplorable. But we can't let this be an excuse to further whip up racism against Muslims.

Tony Abbott, along with racists and the right-wing everywhere, have leapt on the attacks in France to do just that.

Abbott immediately seized on the attacks as "of a piece with what we saw in Martin Place".

But there is no comparison between Man Horan Monis, a single individual with a history of bizarre and attention grabbing actions, and the very deliberate attack in France, allegedly organised and directed by Al Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula.

Yet Abbott was keen to make the connection, using it to beat up fear by telling people, "we can expect more of this".

Many politicians stressed that not all Muslims were to blame for the attacks. But this has gone alongside countless declarations that Islam is a uniquely backward religion.

Fairfax's Paul Sheehan told us that, "A de facto world war is under way and it has everything to do with Islam", while News Limited's Rita Panahi claimed "there is tolerance, and sometimes even support, of repellent behaviour" within the wider Muslim community.

But when Anders Breivik killed 77 people in Norway in a series of terrorist attacks in 2011 no one demanded Christians disassociate themselves from the murders, despite his claims to be defending a "Christian Europe". The US State Department reported 399 terrorist attacks by extremist Jewish settlers against Palestinians in 2013, yet the Jewish religion was not blamed.

Firebombings, gunshot attacks and the dumping of pigs heads were among 16 separate Islamophobic incidents at mosques and places of worship in France within the first 48 hours after the *Charlie Hebdo* killings.

Sellouma, from France's New Anti-Capitalist Party, said, "There's a real sense of fear among Muslims, and anyone who might be taken for a Muslim. Muslims are being put on the



Above: Demonstration in France against the ban on the hijab in schools. The banner reads: Law against the veil or against Islam

spot to disassociate themselves from the attacks or be lumped in with the terrorists."

Behind the attacks

Abbott and other world leaders say the killings in France are an attack on freedom of speech.

But the context for the attacks is the wave of anti-Muslim racism worldwide, including in Europe, and over ten years of daily Western bombing, drone attacks and wars across the Middle East. These involve mass killing on a colossal scale and have generated deep anger across the Muslim world.

France itself remains a significant imperialist power, joining the war in Afghanistan, as well as the current bombing in Iraq. It currently has thousands of troops stationed in former French colonies in Africa.

Islamophobes, racists and fascists are on the offensive across Europe. In France the Nazi National Front is leading in opinion polls on the basis of racist and Islamophobic scapegoating. It now has 2000 local councillors and a dozen city mayors across France.

In Germany the Pegida movement has taken to the streets in large numbers against Muslims and immigrants.

Charlie Hebdo's cartoons have been described as satirical. But nothing can excuse its history of blatantly racist anti-Muslim images, which

were aimed at humiliating one of the most marginalised groups in France.

The horror of the killings should not hide the racism of the magazine. It is a disgrace that journalists, cartoonists and others are lending their support to help the magazine pump out any more racism.

The magazine fanned the flames of Islamophobia, in a country where this anti-Muslim racism is at its worst. Most French Muslims are immigrants from former French colonies like Algeria.

According to French journalist Nabila Ramdani, even today, "French-Algerian communities still live on impoverished housing estates, go to bad schools, and have few opportunities for social advancement. At best they get menial jobs, at worst they end up unemployed or in prison."

For ten years, Muslim women have been banned from wearing the Islamic headscarf, the hijab, in government schools. Opposition to Islamophobia in France has been exceptionally weak, with many even on the far left supporting measures like the headscarf ban.

It is no wonder many Muslims feel alienated and under attack. Of course this cannot justify the killings. But it does help explain them.

We must oppose efforts to use the tragic events in France and concern about freedom of speech to stir up more war-mongering, racism and Islamophobia.

.....
Abbott immediately seized on the attacks as "of a piece with what we saw in Martin Place"

Charlie Hebdo's racism explained

CHARLIE HEBDO is a strange combination—a left wing paper that's become notorious for its racist attacks on Muslims.

Its murdered editor, cartoonist Stephane “Charb” Charbonnier, considered himself a progressive, anti-establishment figure.

Yet the paper is steeped in a “republican” tradition that sees the state as progressive and everything from minority languages to religion as its enemy.

So it was disarmed when the racist right began focusing on cultural distinctions such as religion, instead of overt biological racism.

Charlie ridicules all religions, but contains far more Islamophobic content than just the images of the Prophet Muhammad.

It has repeated the far right's claim that Muhammad was a child abuser. It has run lurid strips mocking female “sex jihadists”.

Charlie ran a fawning interview with Dutch cartoonist Gregorius Nekschot in 2008. He was facing a storm of criticism for drawings such as a “Monument to the slavery of the white taxpayer”, which showed a chained white man straining under the weight of a black benefit claimant.

In 2013, former *Charlie Hebdo* journalist Olivier Cyran wrote an open letter explaining that an “Islamophobic neurosis gradually took over” the magazine after 9/11, as attacks on Muslims became more frequent.

Some of *Charlie's* notorious images were ill-advised attempts at irony. It attacked the fascist Front National for comparing black minister Christiane Taubira to a monkey—by drawing her as a monkey.

A caricature of pregnant “Boko Haram sex slaves” demanding child welfare was meant to skewer the right. But such jokes end up reinforcing racist stereotypes.

And they fit alongside an entirely non-ironic racism that has driven away many old left wing readers and attracted new right wing ones.

It continues to lampoon the government, the rich and the Front National. And nothing it has printed could justify last week's murders. But the violence can't erase the part it has played in the legitimisation of racism in France.

**By Dave Sewell
Socialist Worker UK**

After Victoria: Can Labor win Queensland?



By Mark Gillespie

THE QUEENSLAND LNP's decision to race to the polls in January is a very calculated bid to hang onto power. The polls only looked like getting worse for Campbell Newman. Unemployment remains high with the state losing 741 full-time jobs a month since the LNP came to power.

Newman has wanted as much distance as he could get from Abbott and the May federal budget. So Queensland is having its first January state election since 1913.

Polls have Labor in front, but it will be astonishing if Queensland Labor wins the election. Its 2012 defeat was historic.

But even winning 30 odd seats will be a dramatic blow to Abbott. And getting rid of Campbell Newman in own seat of Ashgrove will be a bonus!

Newman's smash and grab

Newman and the LNP's problems began almost immediately after winning in 2012. They appointed former Liberal Treasurer Peter Costello and paid him \$3300 a day to write a Commission of Audit report that would justify savage cuts to public services and jobs.

Newman had specifically promised public servants that they had “nothing to fear”, but he went on to sack 14,000 of them.

These attacks provoked outrage and large community protests. In Sep-

tember 2012, only five months after the election, the unions held a 10,000 strong work-day protest.

Rather than mobilising for strikes – teachers voted to take illegal strike action in 2013 - the union leaders steered the anger against Newman into a “long campaign” to get Labor re-elected.

Newman miscalculated on numerous issues. Newman is seen as an arrogant bully rather than a decisive leader, reminiscent of Joh Bjelke-Petersen, the notoriously conservative, developer-friendly, National Party Premier between 1968-1987.

Following a bikie brawl on the Gold Coast, Newman went on a law and order crusade, introducing draconian laws that were widely seen as over-the-top.

His attempt to bully public hospital doctors into accepting new contracts led to threats of mass resignations and was not popular with the public.

A bruising fight with Queensland's legal fraternity over installing judges regarded as LNP cronies and his attempt to hobble the Crime and Corruption Commission likewise backfired. So did his arrogant dismissal of threats to the Great Barrier Reef, saying “we are in the coal business”.

Newman attempted to soften his image after the LNP was thrashed in Stafford last July, acknowledging “mistakes”. But it didn't work.

Newman wants a mandate for a \$37 billion privatisation (branded as long-term leases) of power and ports.

Only six years ago, Labor had its own privatisation plan and lost the 2102 election because of it. Labor now says it is opposed to Newman privatisations. But its counter-plan to merge Energex, Powerlink and Ergon will cost jobs. Promising no forced redundancies is not good enough. Labor is also promising more teachers and smaller class sizes.

A determined union campaign could have beaten back Campbell Newman in 2012. The unions' energies since then have been directed into an electoral campaign picketing LNP offices and country cabinet meetings, and holding road-side protests to remind people of Newman's privatisation agenda.

Any substantial loss of seats for the LNP will be a blow against Abbott. But if the LNP government is returned on 31 January, it will be the unions' industrial power that will be needed to fight privatisation.

Above: Campbell Newman faces a huge electoral setback, and will struggle to hold his own seat

Abbott not giving up on co-payment plan

By Jean Parker

THE YEAR has opened with a deeply humiliating defeat for Abbott's health agenda. On 15 January brand new Health Minister Sussan Ley was forced to stop sunning herself on a cruise ship and front the media to announce that the \$20 rebate cut for short GP visits was now "off the table".

But both Abbott and Ley have reiterated their commitment to a co-payment, with Abbott still promising, "more price signals in the system".

The rebate cut was the first of three measures in Abbott's co-payment "plan B" announced in December.

This was to replace the original \$7 co-payment, dumped after a wave of opposition. Campaigning and public pressure through 2014 was sufficient to keep the populist Senators away from any compromises on Medicare.

But the "plan B" announced in December, described by Abbott as an "improvement", is actually worse than the original co-payment plan.

Rebate cut defeated

Initially the rebate cut, the first of three "plan B" measures, looked like it would go under the radar. Labor, which has stridently opposed the \$7 "GP tax", initially sounded positive.

The regulation changes, scheduled to take effect on 19 January, reduced the rebate for visits lasting six to ten minutes from \$37 to \$16 – a cut of \$21. The government claimed this would stop GPs churning through patients and end "six-minute medicine".

Doctors that bulk-billed, and were simply paid the government rebate, would have faced a large loss of income. GPs recognised that this would lead to increased co-payments—which GPs already have complete discretion to charge—and force GPs to stop bulk-billing.

The implications for out-of-pocket health costs could have been dramatic. The standard rate set by the doctor's association (the AMA) for a short visit is \$75. Many patients would have faced paying \$75 up-front and getting only \$16 back from Medicare—a \$60 real cost to check each earache or rash.

As the reality of this was grasped GPs began to revolt. The AMA's position hardened dramatically as members' outraged filtered through.



Above: Protests and pressure around Medicare held the Senate to opposing the \$7 GP co-payment

AMA head Brian Owler described it as a "wrecking ball", and the AMA began planning national rallies of GPs.

With the doctors leading the charge, momentum snowballed. The ACTU called a national day of action for Medicare in February. Labor announced its opposition to the plan and it became clear that the regulation would be struck down in the Senate. A revolt among Liberal back-benchers pushed Abbott into an embarrassing back-down.

Plan B

The other two changes are still on the table. The first effectively replaces the \$7 co-payment with a \$5 co-payment, by reducing the Medicare rebate by \$5. Pensioners, concession card holders and those under 16-years-old would be exempt. The government says the co-payment is optional—but the choice for doctors is to lose money or charge a co-payment.

In addition, the rate of all Medicare rebate payments will be frozen until 2018 (this includes rebates for optometrists, specialist doctors and allied health workers like physiotherapists). Shamefully the rebate was also frozen by Labor Health Minister Tanya Plibersek in 2012. Continuing the freeze until 2018 is forecast to save the government \$1.3 billion.

According to the Doctors' Reform Society this will cut \$3 from the rebate for each consultation by 2018, which would be on top of the \$5 cut designed to introduce a co-payment.

It was the extended freeze on the Medicare rebate that pushed bulk-

billing rates to a record low of 66 per cent under the Howard government, as more and more doctors shifted to setting their own fees.

The government's defeat over short-visits has forced Minister Ley to announce a new round of consultation with the medical sector.

This means the prospect of a "Plan C" compromise that, if the government has any tactical sense, will try to incorporate the AMA who are not opposed to a co-payment in principle.

The government continues to argue that Medicare is growing unsustainably, and that bulk-billing is not for everyone.

The government remains committed to ending the universal basis of Medicare and replacing it with a two-tiered system of user-pays for the majority, and sub-standard bulk-billing for the poor. Defeating this is essential for stopping the Americanisation of Australia's health system.

Our task is to ensure that Abbott's health crisis leads to a confident and organised movement that will fight to expand and fully fund public, genuinely accessible healthcare. The AMA rally and the ACTU day of action called for February have both been cancelled.

But it would be a huge mistake if the ACTU does not call serious protests at some point this year—perhaps around the May budget. Protests and union action can capitalise on the government's defeat and enshrine support for the full restoration and extension of Medicare.

The government continues to argue that Medicare is growing unsustainably, and that bulk-billing is not for everyone

By Tom Orsag,
CFMEU member

TONY ABBOTT'S union Royal Commission has recommended charges against a series of union officials from the CFMEU, AWU and HSU.

The allegations against former AWU officials are nothing new, with recommendations against Julia Gillard's one-time partner Bruce Wilson and accomplice Ralph Blewitt. A handful of former HSU officials are accused of falsely filling out workplace right of entry permit applications.

But the focus has been on the charges against construction union officials. Royal Commission Dyson Heydon has asked the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission to launch legal action against the union for a "secondary boycott" of concrete company Boral.

Secondary boycotts are a standard form of industrial pressure made illegal under anti-union laws. The bosses hate them because they are an effective way to win union demands. Heydon even recommended blackmail charges against CFMEU Victorian State Secretary John Setka over the issue.

NSW CFMEU Secretary Brian Parker is also facing charges for giving false evidence to the Royal Commission over a leak of information from industry super fund CBUS.

The Royal Commission has been set up to do a job on the unions. As CFMEU National Construction Secretary Dave Noonan said, "Counsel Assisting has asked the Commission to reject just about every piece of evidence brought by the union, and accept almost every allegation against it no matter how two-bit, unsubstantiated, or outlandish it might be."

The industrial action against Boral is designed to get major building company Grocon to agree to safety measures.

Bosses' stooges

Rod Sims, ACCC chair and a former company director himself, is a loyal attack dog for the building bosses.

He told the Fairfax press that, "If this sort of behaviour...is unchecked, then the damage potential is just enormous...damage to the productivity of construction sites across Melbourne, damage to Boral and damage to Boral's customers."

But what about the damage to

First charges as union Royal Commission does Abbott's dirty work



Above: An attack on the CFMEU is one of the central goals of Abbott's Royal Commission

safety and workers' lives if Grocon gets its way?

The Fairwork Building and Construction inspectorate (FWBCI), created by Labor, and now headed by Abbott appointee Nigel Hadgkiss, formerly of the anti-union ABCC, is also taking the CFMEU to court over the picket line at Grocon in August 2012.

The union has already been fined \$1.25 million for contempt of court, but Hadgkiss wants more.

The FWBCI is seeking "compensation" for Grocon and sub-contractors who lost money during the 16-day shutdown.

Yet strike pay for union members forced to stop work by builders' breaches of safety and conditions is deemed illegal.

In January, the FWBCI charged six ACT construction union officials, including Branch Secretary Dean Hall, with 32 breaches for entering construction sites without "entry permits".

Entry permits are restrictive anti-union devices designed to make it harder for unions to deal with safety concerns in a timely manner. Fines against individual officials are \$10,500 per breach and \$51,000 per breach for the union.

The ACT has one of the worst serious injury rates on construction sites in Australia, with four workers killed in 2011 and 2012.

The building bosses hate the fact that union members have the power to extract improved wages and safety conditions through strike action.

As Joanna Mather wrote in the *Financial Review*, "One of the things construction industry employers would dearly like the Royal Commission to do is break the 'business model' of unions." Or in other words, just break the unions full stop.

Given the forces arraigned against the union, the CFMEU officials should be calling mass meetings to counter the claims against it and plan industrial action to defend the union. But sadly no such steps are being taken.

Abbott and his building company mates don't want a corruption-free union but a tame-cat union. Their real concern is to weaken union power in the construction industry.

We need to stand against this union busting agenda and defend the CFMEU against Abbott's attack.

By John Passant

Tax avoidance: the rich get off scot free

THE ABBOTT government will soon release its tax reform discussion paper. Government backbenchers have been getting in early, floating ideas about expanding the GST to include fresh food, education and health spending. There have also been mutterings about increasing the rate.

The developed capitalist world crisis is beginning to hit Australia and this, coupled with the end of the mining boom, is reducing company tax collections. Increasing unemployment and wage growth below inflation are also cutting into salary and wage tax collections.

Expanding the GST and increasing its rate are one way to shift tax burdens even further onto workers and the poor.

There are alternatives. The United Voice commissioned Tax Justice Network report into tax avoidance by big business in Australia, *Who pays for our Common Wealth?*, has shone a light into very dark corners.

It has exposed big business in Australia for the tax leaners they really are. The report shows that “the effective tax rate of ASX 200 companies over the last decade is 23 per cent, below the statutory rate of 30 per cent.” Nearly one third have an average effective tax rate of 10 per cent or less.

This is in part due to tax avoidance. For example, 57 per cent of the top 200 ASX-listed companies have subsidiaries in tax havens.

Then there is the use by business of concessions in our tax laws, which result in forgoing over \$10 billion in revenue.

Take mining companies as an example. Fortescue Minerals Group has, according to the Australian Financial Review, paid no income tax in the last 18 years and, given accumulated losses, is unlikely to in the next few years. No wonder Twiggy Forrest can afford to be such a magnanimous philanthropist as his companies continue to plunder Aboriginal land. Media reports suggest Clive Palmer’s mining companies haven’t paid income tax in the last six years.

Former KPMG tax partner and current Commissioner of Taxation Chris Jordan has cut the number of ATO staff by 3000, about 12 per cent of the workforce. There are plans to cut staff numbers by another 2000.

On my conservative estimates of a one-to-five ratio between ATO expenditure and revenue collected at the



margins, these staff cuts will reduce revenue collection by \$2 billion. However insiders are suggesting that with the departure of so many experienced staff in key areas like compliance, the main beneficiaries of the staff cuts will be those big businesses avoiding tax.

Who pays for our Commonwealth Wealth pointed out companies parading as trusts to avoid income tax. Taxing trusts as companies is not an outrageous suggestion. The current Treasurer Joe Hockey suggested it in 2011.

There are other issues. Profit shifting across borders is rife, while the ATO has drastically reduced its international expertise.

Digital companies like Google can use tax treaties based on outdated 19th century concepts of physical presence to avoid billions in Australian tax. It may be that eventually the OECD and our treaties catch up with this, ten or twenty years after the event.

Neo-liberals argue that tax avoidance is good for the economy, “encouraging productive entrepreneurship by the top end of town”. The millions of Australians facing a \$5 GP co-payment, or \$100,000 University degrees, or public hospital, transport and education cuts might disagree.

In any event this tax trickle down approach is not true. Ireland’s low company tax rate and its role as a quasi-tax haven didn’t protect its economy from the global financial crisis. Its economy went into recession in 2008 and has yet to really emerge from it. Unemployment in September this year was over 11 per cent, and almost 25

Above: Corporate tax dodging is coming under increasing scrutiny

per cent for those under 25.

What can we do? We need a new program for taxing the rich and powerful. An effective minimum company tax system would raise billions.

A fee for the likes of Google and Apple operating in Australia based on turnover could recoup some of the income tax they avoid. A net wealth tax of just 1 per cent on the top 10 per cent of wealth holders would raise up to \$20 billion a year. Abolishing business income tax concessions has the potential to raise \$10 billion a year. Getting rid of superannuation concessions for the top 10 per cent of income earners could raise up to \$15 billion, if coupled with an attack on other rorts like negative gearing.

Taxing the rich beneficiaries of company tax avoidance could see for example those on income greater than \$300,000 (less than 1 per cent of income earners) taxed at 100 per cent on their income above that level, with steep levels introduced from over \$150,000. And more, not less, staff for the ATO to catch the tax avoiders is an absolute necessity.

The Labor and Liberal Parties, the parties of neo-liberalism, won’t fundamentally challenge the rich and powerful and their massive tax avoidance.

These big business tax leaners will continue to rort our tax system until we begin a real campaign to force them to pull their tax weight. John Passant is an independent socialist, a former Assistant Commissioner of Taxation and tax lecturer.

The report shows that “the effective tax rate of ASX 200 companies is 23 per cent, below the statutory rate of 30 per cent.”

Renewed US ties will strengthen Cuban move to the market

By Eliot Hoving

ON 17 December last year US President Obama and Cuban President Raul Castro announced a commitment to renew diplomatic relations between the US and Cuba.

The announcement follows 18 months of secret discussions and is a significant shift after 50 years of formal hostilities between the two countries.

To demonstrate commitment to turning a new leaf, prisoners on both sides were released and economic restrictions on travel, and financial transactions to Cuba were eased.

The US embassy will reopen in Havana and public diplomatic talks will continue.

US attacks on Cuba were a hallmark of the broader Cold War with the USSR through the second half of the 20th Century.

This conflict was framed as between “capitalism” and “communism”. In reality, it was a struggle between two imperialist powers, with USSR running a state capitalist economy that required global markets, alliances, and consistent economic growth to maintain competitive position, just the same as the US. In the years following the 1959 revolution, Cuba adopted this state capitalist model.

Initially, the Castro government had no “socialist” aspirations when it came to power. Fidel Castro personally visited America to meet with President Nixon to calm US businesses and politicians worried about the effect the revolution would have on their investments and influence in Cuba.

It was only later that the Castro government nationalised US based companies operating in Cuba and allied with the USSR. Social pressure from below, and a strategic gamble by the Castro government for domestic and regional power, influenced this decision.

Ever since, the US has attempted to disrupt and overthrow the Castro government, most famously in the unsuccessful 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba.

The US has repeatedly funded and initiated oppositional groups, terrorist attacks, and assassination attempts on Cuban state officials. Additionally, the US has imposed a strict economic blockade on Cuba since 1960, de-



Above: Cuba's economy has been in crisis since the collapse of its former sponsor, the USSR

signed to cripple the Cuban economy, with terrible outcomes for ordinary Cubans.

Blockade's failure

The failure for the blockade to overthrow the Castro government, even after the collapse of the USSR, is a key factor behind the recent changes. As US President Barack Obama explained in a televised address: “These 50 years have shown that isolation has not worked... It's time for a new approach”.

Indeed sections of the US ruling class have questioned the efficacy of the blockade since it began. *The Economist* recently re-published its 1960 commentary on Cuba, which argued at the time the “embargo may well have the opposite effect” of driving Cuba away from American influence into the hands of the USSR.

Arguments against the blockade have been winning out in US policy circles. Nowadays ending the blockade is the mainstream view of the US business press, and the official position of the US Chamber of Commerce and National Association of Manufacturers.

The Cuban government has started to turn towards market reform, opening its economy up to foreign investment. At the same time the US is more concerned with Asia, and emerging Latin American powers, such as Brazil and Venezuela.

Moreover, Obama is attempting to use the opening up of immigration to and from Cuba to placate criticisms of his hard-line immigration policies elsewhere.

In Cuba, the economy continues to stagnate. Economic growth was 1.2 per cent in 2014, whilst capital investment is half the Latin American average.

In 2013 the average real wage of state employees, still the majority of workers, was just 27 per cent of its 1989 level, before the collapse of the USSR.

The response of the Castro government has been to pursue market reforms indistinguishable from the neo-liberal policies of advanced capitalist economies.

The 2014 New Foreign Investment law seeks to attract \$2.5 billion a year of investment into the economy through a 15 per cent profit tax cut.

The easing of the US imposed blockade of Cuba will increase access to essential goods and ease pressures on Cuban living standards. However if the history of market reform in Vietnam and China is anything to go by, Cuba's one party state is likely to remain intact and market reform will see rising inequality and new attacks on workers.

The Cuban working class faces new challenges, but also new opportunities to fight for genuine socialism.

Nowadays ending the blockade is the mainstream view of the US business press

Can a Syriza victory end austerity in Greece?



By James Supple

GREECE'S SNAP election on 25 January will almost certainly see left-wing party Syriza take power. This would be an important victory against austerity—but there are immense challenges ahead.

Syriza has been leading in the polls for 14 months, a sign of Greece's move to the left after a wave of struggle against job cuts and austerity. Greek government debt grew to unsustainable levels when its banks collapsed in the economic crisis after 2008. The IMF and European Central Bank demanded savage austerity measures in return for a series of bailout loans since 2010.

There have been 270,000 lay-offs in the public sector—almost 30 per cent of the workforce. Wages have plummeted across the board by 30 per cent. Health spending has been slashed by 25 per cent and schools spending 30 per cent, with the closure of 1200 schools in the last three years.

These cutbacks have deepened the collapse of Greece's economy, with unemployment still at Depression-era levels of 26 per cent more than five years after its economy began shrinking.

Austerity has produced social devastation on an enormous scale, symbolised by a doubling in the number of suicides in 2010.

There are high hopes in Greece that a Syriza government will mean an end to all this.

Its support has surged as a result of its promise to end austerity, from less than 5 per cent of the vote in 2009 to first place with 26.5 per cent in last year's elections to the European parliament. The support of the two major parties has been shattered by their implementation of the austerity measures in government. The combined vote of Pasok, the equivalent of the Labor Party, and New Democracy has plunged from 77 per cent before the crisis to just 31 per cent in recent polls.

In response, as Greek socialist Panos Garganas explains, "The government has gone on the attack with a scare campaign, backed by the media. It has tried to paint a Syriza victory as economic catastrophe." It says that a Syriza victory would mean a Greek default on its debts. But people are not convinced by this any more.

Syriza's plans

Syriza says it will re-negotiate the debt with the EU, and demand that part of it be written off so that repayments become sustainable. It has called on the EU and the ECB to respect the Greek people's democratic wishes if it is elected.

But there is no reason to believe they will do so. Syriza will likely face a choice between agreeing to their de-

Above: Syriza leader Alex Tsipras is set to take power, but has moved to the party to the right

mands for continued austerity in return for loans, or unilaterally refusing to pay, with the prospect of being forced out of the EU.

There are signs that, faced with such a choice, Syriza could capitulate. As it has moved closer to power, its leader Alex Tsipras has moved the party to the right. As the business friendly magazine *The Economist* has noted, "European officials say he is no longer the intransigent firebrand who promised in 2012 to tear up the 'barbarous memorandum' if he came to power. Mr Tsipras has quietly tried to reassure potential investors bringing in money from abroad that Greece would be a business-friendly member of the euro zone under a Syriza government."

Even if it wins the election Syriza may need to form a coalition in order to form government, meaning compromises with parties to its right.

Syriza has promised to boost government spending to reverse cuts in the public sector and provide assistance to the unemployed and those in poverty. But unless it succeeds in re-negotiating the debt such plans will be impossible.

Syriza's rise has been a product of the enormous wave of struggle in Greece against austerity measures. There have been 32 general strikes since 2010. ERT media workers, cleaners and the ministry of finance, school workers and many others are still fighting to get their jobs back, after being sacked by the government.

Most recently, as Katerina Thoidou, a Greek socialist and candidate for the anti-capitalist coalition Antarsya, told *Solidarity*, "The government said it would sack 6000 working people in the public sector. But because of mass resistance, it failed. This was a very big achievement."

These struggles outside parliament hold the key to ensuring a new Syriza government sticks to its promises, and forcing a cancellation of Greek debt.

As Greek socialist Panos Garganas has written, "the anti-capitalist left has to organise pressure from the left and below. People anticipate that a Syriza government will bring real gains for them."

The challenge is to "make sure that what we've been fighting for will actually materialise after the election" through strengthening the struggles from below. The anti-capitalist left in Greece will be at the centre of this struggle.

Struggles outside parliament hold the key to ensuring a new Syriza government sticks to its promises

Sri Lankan war criminal replaced by one of his henchmen

By Mark Goudkamp

A SHOCK election defeat has brought an end to Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa's rule. But as yet there is no evidence of a substantial shift to ease the persecution of the Tamil people.

Over a decade of brutal and corrupt rule Rajapaksa established a near personal dictatorship, bolstered by his ruthless victory in the civil war against the Tamil Tigers.

Even during the election campaign opposition rallies were fired upon, state resources pillaged for Rajapaksa's campaign, and the state media held under tight control.

Yet this couldn't prevent his former health minister Maithripala Sirisena, who defected the day after presidential elections were called last November, winning with 51.28 per cent of all votes cast. Sirisena successfully attacked Rajapaksa's regime over corruption and cronyism.

Allegations have surfaced the Rajapaksa and his Defence Secretary brother Gotabhaya summoned the army, police chiefs and the Attorney-General at 1am on election night, but failed to convince them to annul the elections and stage a coup.

Sirisena managed to pull together a broad, seemingly unwieldy coalition—winning the support of the conservative opposition United National Party by promising to appoint its leader prime minister. It also included the Sinhala Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), and gained support from Tamils, Muslims, human rights organisations, and the hard-core Buddhist Jathika Hela Urumaya party.

Even among the Sinhalese who make up two-thirds of the population, although Rajapaksa won a majority (55 per cent), his relatively slender margin is astounding given his hero status six years ago after defeating the Tamil Tigers.

But given the new president's ministerial role in Rajapaksa's government, including as acting defence minister during the last two weeks of the civil war when some of the worst war crimes were committed, many are rightly sceptical that Sirisena will bring about justice for the Tamil minority.

Nevertheless, it was a very large Tamil voter turnout got him over the line. The Muslim minority, which has suffered a wave of communalist



attacks from Buddhist fundamentalists, voted even more heavily against Rajapaksa.

The new president faces three main challenges: the restoration of democracy, inclusive economic growth, and a resolution to the Tamil question.

He has promised a range of reforms to abolish executive presidential power and to give more independence to the judiciary, the parliament, the army and police. It's been reported that he'd like to reinstate Shirani Bandaranayake, the former Chief Justice impeached by Rajapaksa. If the current parliament, which includes many of Rajapaksa's allies, refuses to approve this within 100 days, fresh parliamentary elections will be called.

Media censorship, including a ban on news websites, will be lifted and if we are to believe Sirisena, journalists will be free to challenge authority and expose corruption. The personal security apparatus of Rajapaksa's brother Gotabhaya will be dismantled, and torture houses closed.

Sirisena's manifesto promised to write-off 50 per cent of farmers' loans, reduce fuel prices by removing taxes and to increase public servant salaries. He intends to increase public health and education spending.

He has cancelled some controversial development projects, including the licence for James Packer's proposed casino, and a Chinese funded port city outside Colombo.

He also promised to move away from a reliance on Chinese invest-

Above: Sri Lanka's election brought down the authoritarian government of Mahinda Rajapaksa

ment and to improve soured relations with India, Japan, Europe and the US—which had become mildly critical of Rajapaksa's excesses since the end of the civil war.

Tamils

Sirisena has talked of a partial demilitarisation of the Tamil majority north and east, but has not indicated when or how he would tackle broader social justice issues for Tamils and Muslims—including language rights, equal access to higher education and to the public service. No explicit promise has been made to open the refugee and prison camps that still hold thousands of Tamil-speaking people.

Moreover, while he's open to an "independent" domestic investigation into war crimes and human rights abuses—including the massacre of at least 40,000 civilians in 2009—he refuses to cooperate with any international investigation.

The fall of Rajapaksa is also potentially a blow to the Abbott government, which shamelessly excused the regime's torture and gifted it two frigates to help "stop the boats". However the new government has already promised "continuing cooperation" on people smuggling.

While Sirisena has made a plethora of promises, unless forces emerge to challenge the Sinhalese chauvinism within the working class and stand up for the rights of Tamils and Muslims, the new government is likely to continue the policies of ethnic division.

ABORIGINAL ‘RECOGNITION’— A COVER FOR ABBOTT’S ASSIMILATION

Constitutional recognition is a farce designed to divert attention from the decimation of Aboriginal life through funding cuts and the closure of communities, argues **Paddy Gibson**

ON 11 December, Tony Abbott addressed a lavish fundraising dinner, hosted by “Recognise”—an organisation campaigning for recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Australian constitution.

Recognise was established with a \$10 million government grant and receives generous corporate donations. The attendance list for the dinner included a who’s who of corporate and government elites.

In his speech, Abbott insisted he was “ready to sweat blood” for the cause of constitutional recognition, adding “this is at least as important as any of the other causes that this government has been prepared to take on”.

Abbott has been crystal clear that his notion of “recognition” will have nothing to do with granting Aboriginal people any actual rights, or providing redress for past and continuing injustices. Aboriginal people were still being massacred when the Australian constitution was adopted in 1901. It is a thoroughly racist text, the founding document of a nation state premised on the genocide of Indigenous people and the exclusion of non-whites.

Abbott is happy to keep the constitution that way. What he is willing to “sweat blood” for, is his government’s assimilationist project:

“Indigenous recognition... will take the form of a pact—a heartfelt pact—between Indigenous people and conservative Australia. Indigenous people have to accept that any proposal put forward is worth doing because it does sufficiently acknowledge them as First Australians. And conservative Australia has to accept that any proposal put forward really is completing our constitution rather than changing it”.

In other words, Abbott wants Aboriginal people to accept some flowery poetry in a preamble of the constitution, which will recognise

Funding Recognise and stringing out a fruitless debate about constitutional change has been a very deliberate strategy

that their ancestors did in fact exist when the British military dictatorship arrived in 1788, but will not recognise the attempted annihilation of those ancestors by the state or their right to a single square inch of the continent.

Meanwhile, the Liberal government has been continuing with their historic process of decimation.

Their first budget, which cut more than \$500 million from Aboriginal programs, began the deepest crisis in Aboriginal affairs since the Intervention in the Northern Territory began in 2007.

Every month has seen the announcement of some new attack, either by the Commonwealth or racist state governments emboldened by the conservative climate. The most shocking is the complete withdrawal of Commonwealth funding for basic services from impoverished remote Aboriginal communities, leading the WA and SA governments to announce plans to close communities down and remove thousands of people from their traditional lands.

Funding Recognise and stringing out a fruitless debate about constitutional change has been a very deliberate strategy to distract from this crisis and paper over the deep racism destroying Aboriginal lives across Australia.

Recognition and Aboriginal Rights

The “Recognise” campaign often draws historical parallels between its own efforts and the successful 1967 referendum, which allowed the Commonwealth to make legislation for Aboriginal people. This granted a citizenship status to Aboriginal people they had long been denied.

This success came after many years of campaigning by Aboriginal activists, trade unions, churches and other supporters of Aboriginal rights. It came in a very specific context—

Aboriginal people across the country were living under discriminatory “protection” regimes run by state governments, controlling their income, movement, relationships and infamously overseeing the mass removal of Aboriginal children.

The referendum campaign saw itself as challenging this second class status. But the success of 1967 had no immediate impact in this regard and grassroots momentum for change continued to grow.

Indeed, disappointment at the failure of the then Liberal Commonwealth government to use its new powers to seriously address the gross injustices was one of the main factors driving the radicalisation of Aboriginal politics in the late 1960s and early 70s, which culminated in “Black moratorium” marches in capital cities and the establishment of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra.

In contrast, today’s referendum campaign has been driven almost entirely from the top down.

The push has its roots in the final months of the Howard government when, following the announcement of the NT Intervention, Howard tried to soften his image by declaring his desire to see a new preamble to the constitution which would acknowledge prior occupation of Australia by Indigenous people.

Kevin Rudd’s government oversaw the implementation of the NT Intervention, the expansion of income management across the country and the eventual extension of Intervention laws for a further ten years.

But it also built on Howard’s “recognition” momentum, announcing the appointment of an “expert panel” to consider the form constitutional change could take. Appointees included conservative Aboriginal figures who had supported the NT Intervention like Noel Pearson and Marcia Langton, along with more liberal lead-

FEATURES

ers Pat Dodson and Megan Davis.

This panel recommended more thoroughgoing changes than the government had expected.

Along with the inclusion of a preamble recognising prior Aboriginal occupation of Australia, the panel also recommended substantive changes to the constitution itself.

These included removing a constitutional clause that allows the exclusion of particular racial groups from voting in elections. The panel also wanted a clause guaranteeing that the Commonwealth powers granted in 1967 to make laws for Aboriginal people would only be used for their “benefit”.

Most controversial has been the recommendation for an explicit constitutional clause prohibiting discrimination against any group in Australia on the basis of race or ethnicity.

The expert panel held consultation meetings in Aboriginal communities across Australia, where they found widespread support for clauses that would protect against discrimination. This is entirely understandable. The Commonwealth has used its 1967 constitutional powers to introduce overtly discriminatory policies such as gutting Native Title and more recently the NT Intervention. The Racial Discrimination Act (RDA) was also suspended to bring in these policies, leading many to believe a constitutional clause would give them more protection.

But the RDA was re-instated in full in the NT in 2012 and the Intervention continues. Under Australian law, these laws are officially held to be “special measures” for their own good, regardless of what Aboriginal people may think of them. There is no reason to believe they would interpret a constitutional clause any differently.

Mainstream Australia thought the mass child removal of the Stolen Generations was similarly “for their own good”, and the same logic drives the current wave of removals by “child protection” agencies. As the radical movement of the 1960s and 70s discovered following the 1967 referendum, the only true guarantee against discrimination is anti-racist struggle—large scale social movements to shift social attitudes and defeat racist government policies.

But despite these suggestions from the “expert panel” being explicitly crafted to win support from the Liberal party and posing no real threat to their agenda, an ideological opposition to the concept of Aboriginal rights has seen the Liberals reject the proposals. All they are willing to do is to change

Young Aboriginal activists burned “Recognise” paraphernalia at a protest in Brisbane following Abbott’s speech

the preamble and perhaps remove the embarrassing clause about the exclusion of races from voting.

It is testimony to the farce of the “recognition” process that, all these years later, we still don’t have a draft amendment that government would be willing to put to a referendum. But keeping the “recognition” discussion at this level of generality suits their agenda perfectly, because it is primary purpose is to whitewash over and distract from the obscene injustices facing communities.

Young Aboriginal activists burned “Recognise” paraphernalia at a protest in Brisbane following Abbott’s speech, an expression of widely felt Aboriginal anger at the tokenistic nature of the entire campaign. Other Aboriginal people are more supportive of the need for constitutional change, but for the likes of Dodson and Davis from the expert panel, this support has so far been contingent on it bringing substantive rights, rather than simple “poetry” in the preamble. Such support may well evaporate as soon as the government’s proposed wording is on the table and offers no such rights.

Funding cuts

As the recognition farce drags on, conditions in Aboriginal communities are deteriorating and people are reeling from the new wave of attacks.

More than \$500 million has been cut from the Indigenous Affairs budget. It is unclear where these cuts will come from and Aboriginal organisations across the country have been thrown into chaos, unable to plan beyond the next few months due to lack of certainty about future funding arrangements.

On top of this, other programs have not been renewed, demonstrating a wilful desire to punish Aboriginal people and make their living conditions even worse.

A taste of what the withdrawal of services and the “closure” of more than 150 Aboriginal communities might mean is the experience of Oombulgurri in the Kimberly, where residents were relocated to urban centres following the withdrawal of health, education, power and water services in 2012. In September 2014, bulldozers were sent in to raze millions of dollars worth of buildings and infrastructure to the ground. Many are living destitute in towns like Wyndham and Derby.

Control, dispossession and resistance

The Liberal government are also committed to extending the core agenda of the Intervention—to control Aboriginal lives, organisations and lands to force assimilation into the Australian “mainstream”.

Abbott’s cuts target desperately needed Aboriginal services

MORE ABORIGINAL children are being removed by welfare services than at any time in Australia’s history, but the Liberals have ended funding for Aboriginal Child and Family Centres across the country which assist disadvantaged families to stay together.

Australia is the only developed country in the world which as not eradicated trachoma, due to third world conditions in many remote communities. Yet the dedicated Indigenous Remote Eye Health Service, which was delivering clear results, was completely defunded in December.

Aboriginal people are one of the most incarcerated groups on the face of the planet, horrific deaths in custody continue, yet Aboriginal legal services are being forced to lay off staff and close down services to remote areas. The WA Liberal

government has also announced they will defund the Aboriginal Interpreter Service operating in the north of the state. One hundred Aboriginal interpreter jobs are on the line meaning people will face court proceedings where they have no chance of understanding what is taking place.

The decision to end funding for municipal services in remote Aboriginal communities continues the agenda that has been gathering pace since the Intervention began—to force Aboriginal people off their lands and to “assimilate” into urban society. The Intervention was accompanied by Commonwealth policy encouraging “voluntary mobility” by starving remote communities of resources and jobs. Tens of thousands of jobs were lost, many in municipal services, as Community Development Employment Projects (CDEPs) were closed down across Australia.

Racist new funding provisions require all Aboriginal organisations to incorporate under the Office of Registered Indigenous Corporations, giving government officials enormous power to move at any time to sack boards, suspend staff and freeze assets. No such surveillance will be required of non-Indigenous organisations tendering for Aboriginal service contracts.

Mining magnate Andrew Forrest chaired Abbott's review into Indigenous employment, despite the failure of his 2008 promise to create 50,000 jobs in the private sector in two years. Six years later, it has not even achieved 20,000 short term placements.

Unsurprisingly, the plan includes no recommendations for public money to create a single job in Aboriginal communities—just further plans to force migration and micro-manage Aboriginal life.

Forrest recommended Centrelink recipients go on a “healthy welfare card”, which restricts what you can buy and prohibits cash withdrawals. In December, social services Minister Kevin Andrews signalled an intention to “trial” the card first in the NT. This would be even more draconian than the current 50 per cent income quarantine introduced with the Intervention.

Meanwhile, both Commonwealth and State governments are ramping up attacks on hard won Land Rights. The Commonwealth is holding desperately poor NT townships to ransom, demanding 99-year township leases in exchange for services. Now regulations before parliament will allow for newly formed corporations, that can include non-Indigenous business people, to take over the function of negotiating leases over Aboriginal land from the long established Aboriginal Land Councils. Aboriginal people will have land sold out from under them without even a pretence of consultation.

In WA, the Aboriginal Heritage Act has been completely gutted, allowing for the destruction of sacred sites by mining companies and other developers. While developers will be able to appeal heritage decisions under the new regime, affected traditional owners will not. In October, the SA government introduced draconian new powers to usurp control of the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands from the elected Aboriginal council.

In NSW, the Baird government moved in November to restrict all land rights claims over coastal areas,



Above: The protest organised by the NSW Aboriginal Land Council saw proposals to wind back land rights knocked off

following a successful Aboriginal claim for some beach-front Crown Land on the Central Coast. The NSW Aboriginal Land Council mobilised supporters in one of the first demonstrations it has seriously supported in many years. The government backed down immediately—though they are still threatening to re-introduce similar provisions this year.

This successful protest action serves as an important lesson. Both Commonwealth and State governments are attacking Aboriginal interests with increasing ferocity. But unlike Howard's concerted, poisonous NT Intervention campaign, these attacks are scatter-gun and politically fragile.

In late November, Aboriginal leaders from across Australia met for a “Freedom Summit” in Alice Springs to discuss the current crisis. There were representatives from a broad spectrum—from business minded Land Council officials, to grassroots fighters from Aboriginal Tent Embassies. All were reeling from the scale of the current attacks and condemned the “Recognise” campaign as tokenistic nonsense.

The Freedom Summit has called for protest action in Canberra, starting on January 26, invasion day. The plan is to begin a sit-in outside of Parliament House and build up for larger protests when parliament opens.

Buses are already planned from Brisbane, Sydney, SA and WA, includ-

ing from remote areas facing closures. On 13 February, the anniversary of Kevin Rudd's “apology”, this sit-in will be joined by an important protest against the continuing forced removal of Aboriginal children.

Currently, the Freedom Summit is focussed on replacing Abbott's hand-picked Indigenous Advisory Council with another Aboriginal body, yet to be constituted, which would be genuinely representative of Aboriginal interests.

What is desperately needed however is a series of clear demands and a national strategy of mobilisation to beat back the vicious attacks being faced by communities across the country.

So far there has not been a single significant protest, anywhere in Australia, against the devastating cuts to Aboriginal services. In the context of a deeply unpopular austerity agenda, such protests would find real resonance and stand every chance of success, witness Abbott's recent back-down on cuts to Medicare.

“Recognise” is masking a period of severe attack on Aboriginal communities which will result in more suicide, incarceration, child removal, unemployment, homelessness and preventable diseases. No tinkering with a thoroughly racist constitution can protect from these atrocities. Rebuilding a movement for Aboriginal rights that can confront them head on has never been more urgent.

RACISM, POLICE AND BLACK RIGHTS IN THE US

Fifty years since the civil rights movement, racism and poverty among blacks in the US are as bad as ever, writes **Lachlan Marshall**

THE DEATHS of Michael Brown and Eric Garner at the hands of police have become emblematic of the racism and police violence in the US.

Police officers effectively have a license to kill unarmed black men. In December tens of thousands demonstrated to remind them that “Black lives matter”.

The death of Michael Brown, who had his hands in the air when he was shot in Ferguson, St. Louis in August, sparked mass protests in Ferguson and across the country. Brown’s killer, white police officer Darren Wilson, was acquitted by a grand jury in November, triggering riots in the town.

In New York in July, Eric Garner was arrested for selling single untaxed cigarettes. His last desperate cry while he was in an illegal police chokehold, “I can’t breathe”, has become a rallying cry for protesters across the country.

His killer was also acquitted by a grand jury in early December.

In a further twist, on 20 December a mentally disturbed man shot dead two New York Police officers in retaliation for police killings. At one of the officer’s funerals police turned their backs on New York Mayor Bill de Blasio to protest his mild criticism of police brutality.

This triggered a conservative media storm under the absurd slogan “Blue lives matter” pressuring the “Black lives matter” movement to tone down its protests while the city mourns the dead police.

Yet the black men killed by police didn’t trigger any such official outcry—highlighting the continued relevance of the “Black lives matter” movement.

The cases of Eric Garner and Michael Brown are only two examples of the shockingly frequent police murders of unarmed black people on US streets.

According to FBI figures, between 2007 and 2012 white police killed two black men a week, or around 500 in



Above: “Black lives matter” has become the rallying cry of the new wave of protests against police violence

total. Young black males are 21 times more likely to be shot dead by police than young white men.

Blacks under siege

Fifty years since the civil rights movement, with Barack Obama, America’s first black president, in office, the situation has barely changed for the majority of working class African Americans.

The state remains profoundly racist. Every gain won in the civil rights arena has been compromised by increasingly heavy policing in black areas under the guise of the “war on crime” and “war on drugs”. While blacks and whites use marijuana at the same rate, blacks are four times as likely to be arrested and charged for possession.

This has resulted in an explosion in the prison population and branded millions of African Americans as felons for life, depriving them of voting rights and other entitlements to public funds—key demands of the civil rights movement. Academic Michelle Alexander has described this as the “new Jim Crow.”

Concentration of police resources in black neighbourhoods makes racist abuses by officers inevitable.

In Ferguson police harassment over petty infringements is a daily reality. African American drivers account for 86 per cent of stops by Ferguson police, with traffic fines the second largest source of revenue in the town.

In New York City police harassment is given official sanc-

tion under the “broken windows” theory, whereby laws governing petty infringements like vandalism or public drinking—or selling untaxed cigarettes—are strictly enforced with the idea this will prevent a lawless environment in which more serious crimes might take place.

This has amounted to a state of siege for underprivileged and coloured areas. Stop and frisk has terrorised millions of New Yorkers, with 87 per cent of those stopped being black or Hispanic. In the past 15 years NYPD cops have killed 179 people, 86 per cent of them black or Hispanic. In just three cases were officers indicted, leading to only one conviction.

Ironically, a slowdown by New York Police in protest at Mayor de Blasio’s alleged lack of support for them has demonstrated the gratuitous harassment that is par for the course in police work.

After the police union advised its members not to make arrests “unless absolutely necessary,” arrests dropped a whopping 66 per cent and traffic tickets 94 per cent. This exposes how “necessary” the bulk of their work really is.

The racist belief that all black men are dangerous is expressed through laws like “Stand Your Ground,” under which George Zimmermann was acquitted for murdering 17-year-old Trayvon Martin because he felt threatened.

Often the mere sight of a black youth is enough to arouse the fatal suspicion of cops or vigilantes like Zimmerman. In November 12-year-old Tamir Rice was shot dead by police while he was playing with a toy gun in a Cleveland park.

Economically depressed

The background to this assault on African Americans by the state has been the tearing apart of black communities as a result of the economic crisis and government neglect.

The great recession of 2008 savaged black communities. African American unemployment in St. Louis is 26 per cent, as against 6 per cent for whites. Across the country black Americans’ homes have been foreclosed at an alarming rate.

Cuts to social spending by the Obama administration and attacks on public school teachers and their unions undermine access to quality education for the black community. The corporatisation of education and spread of private charter schools is not only depriving black communities of

African American unemployment in St. Louis is 26 per cent, against 6 per cent for whites

free public education, but also disrupts the employment of thousands of black teachers who comprise a large part of the urban school workforce.

Overwhelmingly black cities like Detroit are simply being left to rot, with school closures and the dismantling of basic public amenities like water making life unbearable. Most white and wealthier residents have abandoned the bankrupt city, whose population has shrunk from almost two million to 750,000.

Detroit’s creditors are exacting inhumane sacrifices from the remaining population. Water rates are 50 per cent higher than elsewhere in the US and many homes have had their water forcibly cut off.

Obama and black America

Obama put great effort into mobilising black voters for his election and re-election. His presidency was said to have ushered in a “post-racial” era.

The latest police killings have further exposed the limits to the strategy of electing more blacks to positions of power while leaving the system unchanged.

Having a black president and Attorney General—not to mention the thousands of black city mayors and other officials—hasn’t been enough to prevent unemployment, home foreclosures and evictions soaring to record highs.

In fact their commitment to reviving American capitalism, which entails cuts to social spending vital to the needs of most African Americans, has made the situation worse.

Just before the acquittal of Garner’s killer and in response to Ferguson Obama and Attorney General Eric Holder proposed equipping police with 50,000 body cameras.

The subsequent acquittal of Garner’s killer, Daniel Pantaleo, made a mockery of this proposal. Garner was caught on camera choking to death as police officers pushed his chest into the pavement and broadcast on Youtube to a worldwide audience. Still the result was an exoneration for the killer cops.

Obama and Holder have appointed a Taskforce on 21st Century Policing to foster “public trust” between police and communities. But the \$263 million Obama has pledged to police departments to further these aims would be far better used outside police hands.

The source of the problem is ongoing discrimination and poverty, and the leviathan policing and prison ap-

paratus which targets and crushes the lives of millions of black people.

The aftermath of the killings has highlighted the estrangement of the black elite—who owe their status to the gains of the civil rights movement—from the daily lives of the majority of working class black Americans. Sharp class divisions have opened up in the Black community, with a small minority accepted into the middle class and some to positions of real power.

Their incorporation was a response by the US ruling class to the threat from the radical black movements of the 1970s. They have used the new black middle class to try to defuse the anger from below.

For example this elite, with Obama chief among them, preaches individual responsibility as the panacea to the problems of job and housing discrimination, racial profiling by police, and poverty experienced by the black community. This amounts to blaming the victim.

Obama booster and civil rights advocate Reverend Al Sharpton had the gall to proclaim from the stage at Brown’s funeral: “And now we get to the 21st century, we get to where we’ve got some positions of power. And you decide it ain’t Black no more to be successful. Now, you want to be a ‘nigger’ and call your woman a ‘ho.’ You’ve lost where you’re coming from.”

At a rally in Washington D.C. in December Sharpton tried to prevent younger activists from Ferguson speaking to the demonstration, fearing they would contradict the moderate message he wanted to convey.

There is growing bitterness with the black leadership, Obama in particular. Despite African Americans voting for him en masse in the 2008 and 2012 elections, they have little to show for it.

Fundamental change and a challenge to entrenched racism in the police forces and the state are needed to overcome black oppression in America. Working class issues must be at the forefront of this.

Workers fighting for a \$15/hour wage and union recognition in the service industry, in which much of the black working class make their living, have joined forces with those campaigning around racial profiling and police brutality in the new wave of protests.

The hope is that a new layer of activists can pick up where the civil rights struggle left off.

BACK THE HUNGER STRIKERS MANUS MUST BE CLOSED

By Ian Rintoul

AS *SOLIDARITY* goes to press, the hunger strike on Manus Island is in its tenth day. For ten days, over 700 asylum seekers have maintained the most desperate protest against the brutality of Australia's offshore detention regime.

Detention centre operators Transfield and the Immigration Department have used the most savage repression in an attempt to break the protest.

Over 200 people in Delta Compound were deprived of drinking water for 24 hours before scores of Australian guards and Wilson's Emergency Response Team broke into the barricaded compound to arrest supposed ringleaders.

Over the next few days, there was a witch-hunt through all the compounds, to arrest more ringleaders. Being accused of sending messages or photos was enough to be arrested. Up to 100 asylum seekers and refugees are now in Lorengau Prison or being held in the detention centre's notorious Chauka isolation unit.

Tony Abbott declared that a "major challenge to the policy of the government had been defeated". But, the day after the arrests, more people defiantly joined the hunger strike.

The hunger strike has managed to prevent the proposed 22 January forced removal of refugees to insecure, temporary housing in the Lorengau settlement on Manus that triggered the protest. But the cost has been high.

Around 40 people have stitched their lips together. Hundreds of asylum seekers have been treated for dehydration and the number of more serious self-harm, and attempted suicide, incidents are increasing. On the ninth day of the hunger strike, two people attempted to hang themselves, two swallowed razor blades and one swallowed a pair of nail clippers. Earlier on, two people had to be medivacced to Port Moresby, one after swallowing



razor blades, another washing powder.

Even though footage and messages of the protest were pouring out of Manus Island, for two days, Immigration Minister Peter Dutton denied there even was a protest. The Australian government has gone to great lengths to make it seem that Papua New Guinea is in control of the detention centre. When Transfield guards broke into Delta compound, they even had the PNG chief migration officer Mataio Rabura on hand. But they couldn't get the story straight.

At first, the media was told the chief officer negotiated a peaceful resolution. The next day, Dutton admitted that force had been used.

Then Dutton told the *7.30 Report* that, "Some transferees, as I'm advised, had fashioned weapons—or there was a suggestion of that...."

we're talking about homemade or home-fashioned weapons..."

The day after, a PNG government spokesperson told the ABC, that "asylum seekers did not use weapons during the intervention [into Delta compound]".

When the offices of Charlie Hebdo in Paris was attacked, Abbott proclaimed, "I believe in free speech—I absolutely believe in free speech." But not on Manus Island.

Papua New Guinea's immigration minister says the government is looking at restricting communications at the detention centre: "How we can control that information is also being addressed by the Australian government and the PNG government so that they [the asylum seekers] will get correct information that is in their best interests."

PNG is not safe

The asylum seekers on Manus Island have suffered the most stark discrimination. Firstly they were arbitrarily singled out for removal to Manus when they arrived on Christmas Island. Thousands who arrived with them on Christmas Island will now be processed and resettled in Australia.

The brutality on display on Manus Island is the inevitable result of the war that first Labor and now the Coalition have declared on refugees.

They have been kept in appalling conditions over the past 18 months. In that time, there have been just 71 positive refugee determinations. And no one has been resettled.

One year ago, Iranian asylum seeker Reza Barati was killed and scores of others suffered savage injuries when PNG police and local detention staff attacked the detention centre. In September, Hamid Khazaie died as a result of medical neglect. That reality hangs like a nightmare over Manus Island.

Any more deaths on Manus will also lie at the feet of the Abbott government. There will be no justice for the asylum seekers until Manus Island (and Nauru) are closed.

Above: Hunger strikers on Manus Island demand freedom

The hunger strike has managed to prevent the proposed 22 January forced removal of refugees to Lorengau

Solidarity