

Solidarity

Issue No. 90 / May 2016

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Refugees, unions, Medicare: **TAKE THE FIGHT TO TURNBULL**



THROW THE LIBERALS OUT

TAX THE RICH

Turnbull's budget for the millionaires

SYRIA

The horrible history of a repressive regime

'AUSSIE JOBS'?

Why nationalism is a dead end for the unions



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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.

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Things they say

I hope this sector will acknowledge and demonstrate their gratitude to him in his years of retirement from this place

Tony Abbott calls on the mining industry to pay their due to retiring Resources Minister Ian McFarlane, who lead the repeal of the mining super profits tax

The one thing everybody knows about me is that I've made a quid
Too true, Malcolm Turnbull

Well I can confidently predict there will be protests on campus
Education Minister Simon Birmingham on what to expect from his announcement of cuts to higher education

I drew no conclusions from the material presented at the time ... I did not say that

Scott Morrison claims he did not accuse Save the Children workers on Nauru of anything when he was Immigration Minister, after a revelation the government has now had to pay compensation for accusing them of encouraging self-harm

If people want to be political activists, that's their choice, but they don't get to do it on the taxpayer's dollar and working in a sensitive place like Nauru ... the public don't want to be played for mugs. They are employed to do a job, not to be political activists. Making false claims, and worse, allegedly coaching self-harm and using children in protests is unacceptable, whatever their political views or agendas

What Scott Morrison said about Save the Children on Nauru when he was Immigration Minister

I have previously expressed my frustration and anger at advocates and others who are in contact with those in regional processing centres and who are encouraging them to engage in behaviours they believe will pressure the government to bring them to Australia

Peter Dutton shows he's learnt nothing, blaming the horrific self-immolations on Nauru on those who support refugee rights

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Bring Them Here - cartoon by Mahmoud Salameh



INSIDE THE \$Y\$TEM

NSW cops abandon 8-year-old in wagon

AN ABORIGINAL woman in Caraki in Northern NSW found her son struggling to breathe after he was left forgotten in a police wagon for three hours in April.

Jane Williams' son was picked up by police with a group of other boys for allegedly throwing rocks and eggs at a council vehicle. After getting a phone call saying her son was in custody Ms Williams said, "I went round to the police station and was talking to a different police officer who was on duty there and I said to him, 'where is my son?' He then got on the phone to talk to the other police officer to ask where my son was and the officer realised he was still locked in the back of the truck.

"He's taken off and left my son locked in the back of the bull wagon for nearly three hours." He was apparently only able to breathe through a small hole in the bottom of the police wagon.

16-year-old terror suspect egged on by cops

THE 16-YEAR-OLD arrested last month on terrorism offences was lured into making statements online that led to his arrest by police posing as extremists.

The boy, charged in connection with an alleged Anzac Day terror plot, discussed obtaining a firearm online with undercover police, according to *The Guardian*. There is no indication that the boy had obtained a weapon. The revelation throws into question police claims that the boy was planning an imminent attack and that, as NSW Police Commissioner Andrew Scipione claimed, "Officers were forced to act... We had to do that in order to ensure the safety of the community".

The Guardian also revealed that the boy was actually participating in a police run de-radicalisation program at the same time as the cops were egging him on while posing online as extremists. Ann Aly, a specialist who has advised police on de-radicalisation programs, said their actions were "like putting someone in drug rehabilitation and then putting drugs in front of them".

Centrelink stuff up hits thousands of students



FEDERAL GOVERNMENT sources have told Fairfax that tens of thousands of low-income students have been denied the opportunity to attend university or TAFE after their claims for student payments were "auto-rejected". The debacle unfolded after Centrelink's computer software crashed, causing a backlog of payment claims that peaked at 90,000 in March. By this time the first semester of university was well under way.

Under-staffing exacerbated the crisis as Centrelink bosses drafted in at least 650 extra staff to help clear the backlog. According to sources inside the department, the staff brought in were casuals with minimal training who "auto-rejected" claims without checking them properly. "Quality-checking" was turned off to clear the backlog more quickly, they say. This led to a massive number of unfair and arbitrary rejections. Centrelink boss Alan Tudge has blamed the crisis on "unprecedented demand" for student payments. However, departmental sources are adamant that accurate forecasts of demand were on-hand and that the bugs in the ironically named "Customer First" software were well known.

Student study exposes racist cops

A GROUP of US students from Seton Hall University recently did their own study to test whether cops were disproportionately targeting black and Latino drivers. While racially targeted stops and tickets for traffic offences are notorious in the state, police were failing to record the racial background of drivers handed tickets. The students decided to gather the data themselves by sitting in on traffic court hearings.

The students sat through around 70 hours of hearings and recorded the ethnicity, age, gender, and area of residence for each person who appeared in a court in Bloomfield, a suburb in New Jersey. Bloomfield is an affluent, predominantly white suburb that sits between two poorer, mainly black and Latino areas. Black and Latino drivers accounted for 78 per cent of court appearances for traffic violations, but only make up 43 per cent of Bloomfield's population.

According to the research the average traffic ticket cost \$137. According to the students' calculations black and Latino drivers coughed up over \$1 million to the Bloomfield Municipal Court between 2014 and 2015. Following the embarrassing study the Bloomfield police department has started collecting a racial breakdown of their traffic stops.

Research and writing by Adam Adelpour

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

Rich to skip airport queues under new plan

THE LIBERALS have used the 2016 budget to announce special queues for the rich at Australia's airport terminals. This "premium" airport experience would include a fast track passage through border clearance or possibly even separate terminals. An Immigration Department spokesperson claimed the user-pays "premium traveller facilitation services" could boost traveller numbers to Australia.

An Executive from Tourism and Transport Forum Australia, Margo Osmond, said such a "premium service" could include fast tracked passage through arrivals and departures and "seamless" disembarkation and immigration clearing processes. Special treatment was increasingly expected by "high yield" travellers with plenty of money, she said.

Major Liberal donor caught in Panama papers

THE PANAMA papers have linked a major Liberal Party donor and former Reserve Bank board member to a British Virgin Islands (BVI) company which tried to hide the fact he was its beneficial owner for four years.

Robert Gerard resigned from the RBA board in disgrace after it was revealed that he was fighting the Tax Office over charges of evading tax at the time of his appointment in 2003. Gerard has donated \$1.9 million to the Liberal party since 1999, including a \$96,000 donation in 2014.

The recently leaked e-mails show that he has continued to actively use tax havens while making great effort to conceal his beneficial ownership of the BVI company involved. After the BVI introduced its Anti-Money Laundering and Financial Terrorism Code in 2008, requests for the passports of all company directors were made, but were ignored for four years in an attempt to maintain secrecy.

EDITORIAL

Turf the toff Turnbull and build a fightback

TURNBULL HAS called an election on the back of a budget tailor-made for the rich. While there is less open savagery than in Tony Abbott's hated 2014 budget, the priorities are clear.

Turnbull's tax cuts for corporations and the rich are designed to send a message to big business that the Coalition will deliver for the top end of town. After, ridiculously, refusing to name the figure, it's now come to light that Turnbull's corporate tax cuts are worth nearly \$50 billion over ten years.

Jennifer Westacott of the Business Council of Australia approved, saying, "what the government has put forward is probably the most comprehensive plan to reduce business taxes." Of course, business wants more cuts, but as Westacott says, "There isn't the political appetite." That's what's behind Turnbull's multiple backflips on unpopular reforms like increasing the GST—he needs to deliver for business, but get elected, too.

Turnbull and Treasurer Scott Morrison hope that positioning themselves as better economic managers and repeating the slogan "jobs and growth" will be enough to get them across the line at the election. If they do we can expect cuts to Sunday penalty rates and the reintroduction of the construction union police, the Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC).

In decrying Labor's criticisms as "class warfare", Millionaire Malcolm is only further entrenching the image of himself as a top-hat wearing toff. It seems like every week, he demonstrates how out of touch he is—like his recent comments that parents should just "shell out" to buy their children houses. Scott Morrison did his part by claiming those making \$85,000 a year were "average" income earners.

Meanwhile all the illusions that Turnbull represented anything different from Abbott—on climate change, refugees or LGBTI rights have been well and truly put to bed. Turnbull is fundamentally loyal to the conservative social and economic interests that the Liberal Party represents.

With offshore processing in crisis, Turnbull used his election announcement to reassert his commitment to stopping the boats.

The election is now a real contest. Labor leader Bill Shorten has cut through with attacks on the negative gearing tax rort, and a budget reply that zoned in on Medicare cuts,



Above: The NSW nurses' union opposing cuts to health at the Sydney May Day rally

education and taxing the rich. He has promised to legislate for same-sex marriage within 100 days, and stop Medicare privatisation.

Don't rely on Labor

Labor needs to win 19 more seats to kick the Coalition out after just one term. But there are limits to Labor's promises to reverse the Liberals' cuts. In his budget reply speech Shorten pledged to "turn around these Liberal deficits and deliver Budget repair"—code for cuts—promising only that Labor's cuts would be "fair".

Shorten made a point of declaring Turnbull's superannuation reforms, that take back some money from the wealthy, as "chaotic" and risking investment certainty. He has refused to put back the whole \$57 billion the Liberals are cutting from hospitals, promising only that Labor would offer higher funding than the Liberals.

When the Papua New Guinea courts declared Manus Island detention illegal in late April, Labor Shadow Immigration Richard Marles put on a disgraceful display, calling for Peter Dutton to demand a law change or offer money to Papua New Guinea to keep the centre open. Labor are committed to maintaining offshore detention.

We can't rely on hoping for a Labor win. Turnbull's agenda needs to be fought, and we will need to continue that fight regardless of whether he wins or loses.

The Australian Council of Trade

Unions (ACTU) is mobilising their "secret army" to doorknock in marginal electorates. It is a far cry from the Your Rights at Work campaign and the mass mobilisations that saw the back of John Howard in 2007.

If unions, Labor and The Greens were serious about building grassroots movements, they could have people on the streets against the Medicare cuts, Turnbull's \$4-an-hour internships and university cuts. This is where there is real power to defeat Turnbull and step up the fight against the bosses.

Greens leader Richard di Natale has focused his budget response on climate action. There's no doubt that Turnbull is ignoring the climate emergency.

But in an election about "class warfare", The Greens should be putting their commitment to workers' rights at the forefront, and calling for real funding for climate jobs, not market solutions. They need to give a clear commitment that they will direct preferences to Labor to start to undo the damage of the Senate voting reform debacle that broke trust between The Greens and unions.

Everybody needs to get active to make sure we get Turnbull out. There are refugee rallies in major cities at the start of Refugee Week to help push the issue into the election campaign.

But if we want to make the rich pay and free the refugees, we need a socialist alternative that's committed to fighting the system that both Liberal and Labor want to run.

.....
Millionaire Malcolm is only further entrenching the image of himself as a top-hat wearing toff

By Erima Dall

TREASURER SCOTT Morrison didn't mention higher education in his budget speech. But the Liberals remain determined to cut university spending and hike student fees. They have had to walk away from full fee deregulation, citing "community concern".

But major reforms have simply been delayed one more year, until the beginning of 2018. The Liberals are hoping to keep their plans quiet until after the election. A "discussion paper" has been released which outlines "options" including:

- Deregulation fees for "flagship" courses
- Increasing student fees to raise students' contribution from 40 per cent to 50 per cent of the cost of degrees
- Lowering the income threshold for beginning HECS repayments (e.g. from \$54,000 to \$42,000)
- Collecting unpaid HECS from the dead, or tying repayments to household income

But the Liberals have already decided to cut almost \$2 billion from the sector over the next four years, mainly through a 20 per cent cut to funding when their reforms are implemented in 2018. Universities would be told to recoup this money from higher student fees.

The discussion paper suggests that deregulated "flagship" courses, where universities could charge fees at whatever level they like, could enroll fully 20 per cent of students. This could still see \$100,000 degrees become a reality.

Unsustainable spending?

The Liberals want us to believe that university spending has become "unsustainable" due to increasing costs, more student enrolments and unpaid student debts. But this is a lot of hot air.

The Parliamentary Budget Office report, which supposedly raised the alarm on debt growth, predicted an increase in the annual cost to government of HECS-HELP loans from \$1.7 billion in 2015-16 to \$11.1 billion in 2025-26. But the main cause of this was the assumption of higher fees due to fee deregulation.

Government spending on higher education is currently around \$9 billion a year, about 0.7 per cent of GDP. This is well below the average in the OECD club of rich nations of 1.1 per cent.

Education is not an individual choice or personal privilege. Business needs highly educated graduates in fields like IT, science and communica-

More fees and cuts ahead on campus



Above: Student protest against the budget in Sydney

tions. The government's own discussion paper highlights this, saying "Higher education...is a key source of innovation for business and industry, central to Australia's successful economic transition".

As a social good, university should be free—just as primary and secondary education are. It can be funded through taxing corporations and the rich instead of slugging students.

The fight against Abbott's 2014 budget showed that protests work. Student rallies, along with "Bust the Budget" demonstrations, helped defeat the bulk of Abbott's budget.

The next year will see ongoing discussions between university bosses and the government over the reforms and increases to student fees. Students will need to protest and campaign to raise awareness and explain how universities could be funded.

There is every reason to believe we can beat Turnbull. People can see he stands for everything Abbott did: refugee cruelty, homophobia, climate inaction, attacking Medicare, union-bashing, and handouts for the rich.

We need to connect these issues and build a united fightback against the Liberals' agenda.

Sackings and slave labour: Morrison's 'jobs budget'

SCOTT MORRISON said his budget was all about jobs. But his internships scheme has been widely ridiculed as turning young people into slave labour. It would allow businesses to take on unemployed people aged under 25 for nothing, as well as receive a \$1000 bonus from the government for their trouble. It is wide open to exploitation through companies churning the unemployed through the short placements of up to three months.

This is more likely to destroy jobs than create them, as the government has suggested the internships could just be work in low-paid industries like newsagencies, cafes or supermarkets. The unemployed

will get just \$4 an hour extra from the government for the work.

To make matters worse, the government is cutting more jobs from the public service. An increase in the so-called "efficiency dividend", or across the board cut, keeping it at 2.5 per cent next year, will mean 3000 to 4000 more job cuts in the coming years according to the federal public service union, the CPSU. This is on top of 18,000 already gone since the Liberals came to office. Immediately, the Department of Human Services will lose 800 jobs, 300 will go at Immigration and another 344 from Social Services.

It's just more evidence this is an anti-worker budget for the rich.

The Liberals have already decided to cut almost \$2 billion from the sector over the next four years

Turnbull's budget delivers for business and the rich

By James Supple

THE CENTREPIECE of Turnbull's budget is handouts to business and high income earners. But for workers and the poor there are only cuts.

The Liberals still want to force through the bulk of the \$80 billion in cuts to health and education and the cuts to Family Tax from Abbott's horror 2014 budget.

Cuts to Family Tax payments will see a couple on one average income with two children in high school lose \$2800 a year, while a single mother on \$65,000 with two children will be \$5000 worse off.

Single parent families in the poorest 20 per cent of the population will be worst affected by the budget overall, according to modelling done at ANU, losing \$1400 a year. Low income couples with children are not far behind.

The cuts to Medicare pathology services, including blood tests, x-rays and pap smears, have also been retained.

The Medicare rebate has been frozen again, meaning more doctors will stop bulk-billing and charge co-payments. According to a Sydney University analysis, GPs will lose \$9700 in income next year, and \$29,500 the year after.

Primary Health Care, which owns 54 bulk-billing GP clinics across the country, announced two days after the budget that it will begin charging patients up front in a number of locations. Aged care has also taken a \$1.2 billion cut.

Treasurer Scott Morrison says this spending is "unsustainable". But his priorities are clear. All up the government is handing back \$13.3 billion in tax cuts over four years.

This is more than three times what the government is prepared to put back into schools and hospitals.

Everyone earning over \$80,000 a year, including those on million dollar incomes, will get a tax cut. Only the top 25 per cent of tax-payers will benefit.

The tax increase on those earning over \$180,000, introduced two years ago as a "deficit repair levy", is also being reversed. As a result someone on a million-dollar income gets a \$16,700 tax cut.

Alongside that are tax cuts for business. The Liberals are trying to



Above: Save Medicare rally against the cuts to pathology and the Medicare rebate freeze in Sydney

Over ten years big business will get a tax cut from 30 per cent to 25 per cent—at the cost of an enormous \$48 billion

cover themselves by saying these will go to small business first.

But they are also sneaking in a hefty tax cut for big business over the coming years, as the tax cuts are extended to larger and larger companies over time.

Over ten years big business will get a sizeable tax cut from the current 30 per cent to 25 per cent—at the cost of an enormous \$48 billion.

The Liberals want us to believe that handing back money to business will see it trickle down to workers. That is the substance of the government's grand plan for the economy. But many of them will just pocket the money and run.

Taxing the rich?

The government is raising more money through cutting back on superannuation concessions for the rich and corporate tax evasion. But the outcome is modest—more for show in the lead up to the election than any serious attempt to tax the rich.

The superannuation changes will

claw back \$2.9 billion over four years from high income earners. But there are \$12 billion every year in concessions going to the top 10 per cent of income earners alone.

The same is true of corporate tax evasion. Apparently the best the government can do is raise an extra \$1 billion a year.

Yet the tax office's own Corporate Tax Transparency Report released late last year told us more than one in three big companies were not paying any tax at all!

Turnbull has restored just over 25 per cent of the money Abbott cut from schools and a third of what he cut from hospitals between now and 2020. This is less a funding increase than an election fig-leaf. The bulk of Abbott's \$80 billion in cuts will stay.

The schools funding increases recommended by the Gonski review weren't simply a wish list.

They were designed to address concentrated disadvantage and inequality in the school system. But the Liberals have no interest in properly funding schools in poor and disadvantaged areas—as Turnbull showed when he speculated that it might be better for the federal government to get out of funding government schools altogether, and just go back to looking after private schools.

But as usual there's plenty of money for war. Australian participation in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan get an extra \$666 million. The total boost for defence is just short of \$1 billion, taking its budget to a whopping \$32.3 billion next year.

There was little for the environment, with the budget confirming a \$1.3 billion cut to the Australian Renewable Energy Agency (ARENA), which helps fund research and development of renewable energy technologies.

And there are many other smaller, nasty cuts like \$115 million from homelessness services and \$40 million from community legal centres that will also cost jobs in the community sector.

After Turnbull's pathetic effort, the need to seriously tax the rich to fund schools and hospitals is clearer than ever.

This budget should brand Turnbull as the champion of big business and the rich—and help make sure he's booted out at the election.

Turnbull backs big corporates over safety and truckies' pay

By Judy McVey

IN APRIL the Liberals abolished the Road Safety Remuneration Tribunal (RSRT), in another gift to big business.

It was opposed particularly by the big transport companies, as well as major retailers like Coles, for efforts to boost truck drivers' pay.

According to Transport Workers Union (TWU) NSW Secretary Michael Aird Coles' efforts to undermine the RSRT have extended to multi-million dollar lobbying operations in Canberra, with \$2.1 million donated to the Liberal Party in recent years and an extensive backroom lobbying presence.

The RSRT was introduced under the Gillard Labor government after a campaign by the TWU, supported by families of people killed in truck crashes and many drivers.

"My brother's death has devastated our family and we know he should never have died. He was killed by an inexperienced driver who'd had a 'grueling work schedule' and was driving a truck with faulty brakes, according to the coroner," said Sue Posnakidis, whose brother John was killed in a truck crash in South Australia in 2010.

Evidence on safety

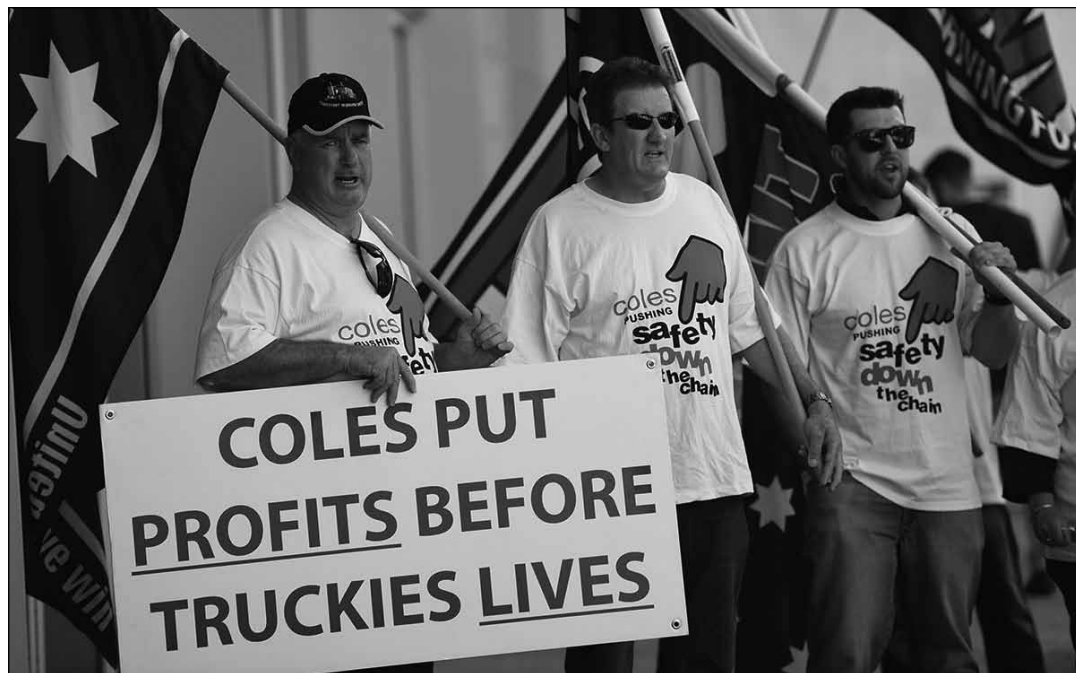
The RSRT was established to address both road safety and truck drivers' working conditions. There is overwhelming academic evidence of the link between truck-related deaths in road accidents and low pay.

In 2008, a National Transport Commission enquiry concluded that low rates of pay, incentive-based payment methods and unpaid working time, "create an incentive for truck drivers to drive fast, work long hours and use illicit substances to stay awake."

They also pointed to the hyper-competitive nature of the industry and low bargaining power of the drivers.

In December last year the RSRT decided to introduce minimum pay rates for owner drivers, commensurate with wages earned by employee drivers.

In a heavily competitive industry where owner drivers compete with each other as well as large trucking companies for contracts, owner drivers need protection from price-cutting. Too often truckies are forced to cut



Above: A TWU protest to demand safe pay rates for truckies

corners on health and safety, maintenance and therefore the safety of other road users to deliver the best contract rates. It's a race to the bottom.

"Low-cost contracts from wealthy retailers and manufacturers mean trucks are not maintained properly and drivers are under pressure to meet unrealistic deadlines, to speed, drive for longer than is allowed, to overload their trucks and skip rest periods," said Transport Workers' Union (TWU) national secretary Tony Sheldon.

The union says the RSRT ruling would have ensured drivers were paid for loading and unloading times, as well as when they cleaned, inspected, serviced and repaired their trucks and trailers.

The union argues: "Despite the Federal Government's opposition to safe minimum rates for truck drivers, its own reports released recently show that road transport has the 'highest fatality rates of any industry in Australia' with 12 times the average for all industries. The reports also show the link between road safety and the pay rates of drivers and that the safe rates system would reduce truck crashes by 28 per cent."

However, owner drivers are divided. While some support the new rate, others are very hostile, saying that the union is blaming drivers for poor safety on the roads. Many think that higher pay rates might mean they lost contracts and therefore their

livelihood altogether.

Dr Jason Thompson, a researcher with Monash University's Accident Research Centre, argues owner drivers are, "scared of a regulation that would at the end of the day benefit them."

The fear of pricing themselves out of a job has been fuelled by right-wing politicians like Bob Katter and Glenn Lazarus who demanded the government abolish the RSRT before the election.

Yet, as Victorian Greens Senator Janet Rice argued, most contracts will be maintained because the ruling means no one will be able to legally undercut prices.

Industrial action

It is clear that truckies will not achieve pay justice, secure contracts and safe working conditions simply by protest and appeals to parliament. There also needs to be an effort to mobilise the power that can hurt the profits of the big retailers and force them to increase pay.

Successful recent strikes won improvements in the cartage rate for quarrying and excavation industry drivers.

Long distance freight drivers recently blockaded oil company depots and the Melbourne docks demanding an increase in the cartage rate to compensate for increased fuel costs. It is strikes and industrial action that are workers' strongest weapon.

.....
There is overwhelming academic evidence of the link between truck-related deaths in road accidents and low pay.

Billions in tax rorts for the rich still untouched

By John Passant

THE 2016 Budget robs the poor to pay the rich. Its cuts to social welfare and other government payments and programs all had one target in mind—to fund tax cuts for big business. The handouts to business will cost \$48 billion over ten years.

Both major parties are also sprouting changes to various legislated tax havens like superannuation, the capital gains discount and negative gearing.

Many contributions to superannuation funds are taxed at 15 per cent, saving those on the top marginal tax rate 32 per cent in tax. Most superannuation payments to retirees are tax free, meaning someone like former NAB bank boss Don Argus with a family super fund balance of \$15 million pays no tax on his “pension” of say \$500,000 a year. These superannuation concessions cost about \$30 billion a year, and about \$12 billion goes to the top 10 per cent of income earners.

Negative gearing just means that the costs associated with a rental property (mainly but not limited to interest on the loan) are greater than the rent itself. That loss can then be offset against other income, such as salary and wages, reducing tax payable. The losses claimed total over \$5 billion a year and 50 per cent are claimed by people in the top 10 per cent of income earners even after including the “loss” itself.

Why would you negatively gear? The main reason is because when you sell the property a few years down the track, only half the capital gain is taxed. When former Treasurer Peter Costello changed the law to implement this Capital Gains Tax (CGT) discount there was an explosion in negative gearing to take advantage of it. That discount forgoes about \$6.15 billion in revenue.

Neither major party will get rid of these tax reductions for the rich in full because they both accept the idea that what is good for business and the rich is good for the rest of us.

Labor is proposing changes to negative gearing and the CGT discount which would recoup about one eighth of their cost. The Liberals have gone a little further than Labor on fiddling with superannuation. Their caps on contributions and other changes will claw back about \$1.5 billion of



Above: Disgust about the growing wealth of the rich is widespread

the almost \$12 billion going to the top 10 per cent annually.

Abolishing the CGT discount, the superannuation concessions and quarantining negative gearing losses to rental income would raise an extra \$40 billion a year that could be spent on public transport, housing, health and education.

Who pays?

Despite its tax cuts for business and high income earners, the budget papers show that as a percentage of gross domestic product the tax take will actually increase slightly.

Guess who will be paying? You and me through bracket creep (when your pay increases lift you into the next, higher, tax bracket or increases your average tax rate in the same bracket).

Another very small part of the extra tax will come from increasing the excise on smokers, people who are overwhelmingly less well off.

Another small part will come from cracking down on tax avoidance, evidently. The government says this will raise \$3.9 billion over four years. The much trumpeted Diverted Profits Tax (the “Google tax”) will raise \$100 million a year. This is chickenfeed in terms of total Commonwealth revenue of over \$350 billion a year.

So where is the other \$3.8 billion coming from? Maybe it is coming from increasing the staffing levels in the Tax Office by 1000, partially

offsetting the damage done by getting rid of 4400 tax officers already. If those workers were still in the ATO their energy and expertise could have lessened the revenue drain tax avoidance imposes.

The ATO’s Corporate Tax Transparency Report shows that of the top 1859 big businesses, 36 per cent paid no income tax whatsoever. This was on gross (untaxed) revenue of \$404 billion among public companies and perhaps another \$50 billion for private companies.

A small tax on that gross income of say 3 per cent would raise about \$13 billion. We could also impose a similar rule on individuals to catch the 56 millionaires with gross income totalling \$129 million who managed to reduce their tax to zero because of deductions like the \$47 million they spent on tax advice.

A net wealth tax of 1 per cent on the top 10 per cent would raise about \$45 billion. (Yes, the top 10 per cent own 45 per cent of Australia’s net wealth, all up about \$10 trillion.)

Instead of cutting the taxes on the top income earners on corporations we could increase them.

None of this is rocket science. They are just some examples of what we could do to tax the rich to fund programs in health, education, climate change, public transport, domestic violence, homelessness and lifting 2.5 million Australians, including 603,000 kids, out of poverty.

Labor is proposing changes to negative gearing and the CGT discount which would recoup about one eighth of their cost

Alternatives to detention and deterrence of refugees

By James Supple

OFFSHORE PROCESSING is in crisis, with the Manus Island detention centre likely to close and Nauru in meltdown as refugees despair after almost three years on the island.

Both major parties remain firmly committed to the deterrence of refugees coming here. But there is an alternative.

Jonathan Holmes, former presenter of Media Watch, took to *The Age's* opinion page in early May to chide critics of offshore processing for lacking any “vaguely practical alternative”. Unless we stop the boats, “there are hundreds of thousands, possibly millions, more where they came from”, he claimed.

It's nonsense. Most asylum seekers from Africa and the Middle East are hosted by poor countries, or headed for Europe—not Australia. The highest ever number to arrive by boat in one year was just 30,000 in 2013. The mainstream parties are proposing to lift the annual refugee intake close to this number, with the Liberals committed to an increase to 18,750 and Labor to 27,000. But even the higher number is still equal to just 7 per cent of the 203,750 permanent migrants Australia is accepting this year. The Greens have suggested 50,000.

The number of refugees seeking freedom is not primarily dictated by how “tough” border security policies are, but goes up and down in response to the conflicts and persecution that drive people to flee.

Malcolm Turnbull's claim that concern about the horrors on Manus Island and Nauru is just a case of “misty eyes” has no credibility. The anti-refugee policies of Liberal and Labor are driven by political opportunism and an effort to cultivate a scapegoat and boost xenophobia.

Alternatives

Refugees should be welcome however they arrive here, whether by boat, plane or through the government-sponsored program from refugee camps offshore. Asylum seekers travel by boat because there is no alternative.

If Australia was genuinely concerned about making the journey between Australia and Indonesia less dangerous, it could process refugee claims in Indonesia and flying recognised refugees here. This idea is widely supported in the refugee movement.



Above: The grassroots refugee movement has consistently put forward alternatives to offshore detention and turning back boats

But some asylum seekers will still have no choice but to come directly by boat. In May another boat arrived at the Cocos Islands directly from Sri Lanka, as others have previously. Responsive search and rescue services, instead of the inadequate efforts of recent years, could ensure boats were rescued.

No detention

All refugee detention centres should be closed completely—both Manus and Nauru as well as Christmas Island and all the mainland detention centres. Asylum seekers could be housed in open migrant hostels while their refugee claims were processed.

This is exactly what Australia did until 1992. Refugee arrivals from Vietnam in the 1970s and from Europe after the Second World War were not detained.

The Greens have committed to closing Manus Island and Nauru, but still accept that detention for a maximum of 30 days may be necessary.

But detention is not necessary for medical checks, security screening or any other reason. Millions of tourists visit Australia every year without the need for any period of mandatory detention to work out if they might be a security risk.

People's refugee claims should be processed quickly, so that they are not living in limbo for years on end. At present there are 28,000 asylum seekers in Australia who have been waiting

in some cases for almost four years for their claims to be assessed.

The refugee processing system is driven by the cruel logic of deterrence. Asylum seekers are being continually sent back to danger by a system designed to reject as many people as possible. Five ethnic Hazaras have been deported to Afghanistan in the last year, the last of them despite his two brothers being killed since he left the country.

Those found to be refugees must be given permanent residency with full rights to work and live wherever they wish, along with settlement support. Temporary Protection Visas, which leave refugees in ongoing uncertainty, must be scrapped.

Over the last year public opinion has started shifting towards greater support for refugees. Arguing to support refugees because they are good for the economy, or can be selected on the basis of having certain skills, is the wrong approach. Refugees should be brought here on the basis of the greatest need, recognising that some of them may not have trade or English skills. That is why The Greens' policy of including 10,000 “Skilled refugee” visas in their proposed intake is problematic.

Refugees are not a threat to jobs or services. Nor has any refugee arriving by boat ever been involved in terrorism in Australia. If the movement is to win majority support, we have to tackle the myths and xenophobia underlying hostility to refugees head on.

Australia has never had any genuine problem with the number of refugee boat arrivals

Sacked for being Australian? No sacked for being union

SINCE FEBRUARY, the maritime union's ad "Sacked for Being Australian" has been playing on TV and radio, and is part of a marginal seat campaign saying the union is fighting for "Australians and Australian jobs". But the ad, and the nationalist ideas behind it, are counter-productive to building a real fight for jobs.

Seafarers in Australia have been unionised since 1872, and over time have achieved wages and conditions that are among the best in the world. Their spirit of internationalism has also been an inspiration. The Seamen's Union of Australia and other seafarer unions in 1985 led the oil boycott of South Africa and the ban on South African products that was a real practical contribution to the fall of apartheid.

This history makes the MUA's current campaign slogan particularly disappointing. It is a diversion for workers needing to understand why they are being sacked and what they can do about it. Greedy bosses, not foreign workers, are the real enemy.

Portland jobs

The slogan was launched from the MUA national office in the wake of the heroic struggle of the crew of the *Portland* to save their jobs. In November 2015, US aluminium giant Alcoa announced that they were getting rid of the ship and its crew, which carried alumina from Western Australia to Victoria. MUA members occupied the ship for two months.

In January 2016, security guards raided the ship, forced the occupiers to leave, and escorted Indian seafarers on board to replace them. The ship then left Australia, with Australian officers and engineers (represented by different unions) but without any MUA members. In February 2016, a similar raid saw NSW police remove MUA members occupying the *CSL Melbourne* in Newcastle at the request of Rio Tinto.

Last year, Caltex, BP, and Viva also removed ships from the coast after workers' occupations, although none lasted as long or ended so brutally as the *Portland* occupation. Seafarers are justifiably worried about their future. With the loss of these jobs and those in the offshore oil industry due to the low oil price, they are facing a jobs crisis. That is what makes the facts of this campaign and its slogans so important.



Above: MUA rally in Portland, Victoria in support of workers on the Portland occupying for jobs

First, workers were not sacked for being Australian. They were sacked because they were a part of union that has been successful in negotiating excellent conditions. They were targeted by companies seeking to cut costs and boost profits. The compliant Australian officers and engineers were not sacked.

Second, the slogans should point to the real enemy and not ape the politics of right-wing governments on nationalism or border security just to get media sound bites. In the long-run, nationalism simply strengthens the idea that Australian workers have more in common with Australian bosses than they do with foreign workers. But, no matter what their nationality, workers everywhere have a common struggle against bosses who want to drive down wages and conditions.

The campaign's claim that Australians have "a right to work in their own country" is another appeal to nationalism. Everyone should have the right to a job, but the truth is that Australia is a capitalist economy that does not give anyone the right to work. The ad promotes the idea that "Australians" are being discriminated against, and that thousands are at risk—from foreigners. But Australian bosses sack Australian workers all the time.

The slogan also appeals to racism. Everyone knows that "Australian" and "Aussie" implies "white". Australia was established as a whites-only country, and non-white Australians and migrants regularly experience

racism—in applying for jobs and in many others areas of life. The claim that workers were "sacked for being Australian", reverses everything we know about racism.

It is no coincidence that the racist Australia First party (run by neo-Nazi Jim Saleam) has embraced the "Sacked for being Australian" campaign. Tragically, it fits with their racist narrative that foreigners are taking over Australia.

The alternative to this approach is actually contained in the campaign petition: to "ensure that Australian labour conditions are enforced within Australian borders"—that every seafarer, regardless of their nationality, travelling to and from or around Australia is paid the same as an Australian resident.

The MUA actually has a strong history of campaigning for this. Over 5000 ships visit Australia every year but Australian laws to pay seafarers at Australian rates are rarely enforced. This kind of campaign that could unite Australian and foreign workers in a common struggle.

The other key demand should be to scrap the restrictions in the Fair Work Act on industrial action so that workers, like the crew of the *Portland* and other ships, can organise and carry out real fights for their jobs without being pursued and prosecuted by the so-called "Fair Work Ombudsman" or the Federal Court.

It is in this kind of struggle where the real fight to improve the lives of workers must lie, not in visa conditions, or border security.

Nationalism strengthens the idea that Australian workers have more in common with Australian bosses than with foreign workers

Patrick threatens wharflies with nationwide lockout



By Matt Meagher

PATRICK HAS threatened wharflies at its container terminals with an indefinite lockout in response to any further industrial action, as a bitter dispute over a new agreement drags on.

Patrick has refused to come to the table on issues of job security, allocation of labour, safety and redundancies. MUA members began nationwide strike action in January. In April, despite being threatened with a lockout, MUA members staged two 72-hour strikes in Fremantle and 48-hour stoppages in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. The dispute has cost Patrick \$15 million so far.

MUA deputy national secretary, Will Tracey, said that, “the actions across the various terminals are because of both national and local claims, [but] the company seeks to shift the goal posts each time.

Instead of improving its offer, Patrick is now offering worse pay rises and refusing any back payment, arrogantly declaring these are “to offset the high cost to the business” of strike action so far.

Patrick’s Alex Badenoch has also blamed a, “business climate that has changed for the worse” and “the need to reflect external realities and pressures” for harsh EA conditions such as a below inflation 1 per cent pay rise in year one of the deal.

At Port Botany in Sydney, Patrick wants more labour for mid-night shifts and weekends. In ex-

Above: MUA members in Sydney protest outside Turnbull’s office

change for working extra nights and weekends the MUA has proposed additional job security and an increase in permanent jobs. Permanent workers would work a 32-hour week but remain on a 35-hour week wage. Permanent part-time workers would receive a 30 per cent increase in their guaranteed pay.

“Obviously no one wants to work at midnight or on the weekends and miss family time, so what we’ve basically done is we’ve increased the amount of midnighters and weekends and reduced the hours for the week by three,” said MUA Sydney branch secretary Paul McAleer.

“Any worker deserves a decent amount of justice and what we’ve seen, over recent years, is the whole system, basically, be exposed. I mean, all of workers’ job security is being traded away and hoarded in Panama bank accounts.”

In an act of desperation Patrick tried to bypass MUA negotiators and held a workforce ballot on the enterprise agreement—with 98 per cent rejecting it. Union membership and solidarity at Patrick is among the best in the country.

Patrick remains a major part of \$9 billion parent company Asciano which just posted a \$200 million profit in the first half of 2015-16. A takeover by Qube will proceed in June.

Despite Patrick’s threat to halt operations and lock out its workers, if the stand-off continues, more industrial action will be needed to stare the company down.

Patrick tried to bypass the MUA and held a workforce ballot—with 98 per cent rejecting it

ABORIGINAL PEOPLE living in Borroloola and the surrounding homeland communities in the Northern Territory have fought against the destruction of their lands by the mining industry for generations.

In 2007, there were fierce protests against the decision to allow for the diversion of the MacArthur River to facilitate a massive expansion of the MacArthur River Zinc mine owned by Glencore. This mine has poisoned the river. Spot fires caused by chemical reactions in the mine’s waste rock dump site produce noxious sulphur fumes which continue to make people sick.

Consistent mobilisation by the community forced a halt to mine operations last year while the company drew up plans to deal with the crisis. Against the demands of their own Environmental Protection Agency, the Northern Territory Government issued a temporary license to continue mining after the company encased the waste rock in clay, a band-aid measure that has failed on similar projects around the world. The community is pushing for immediate closure while demanding the retention of local jobs, and the creation of new ones, for a long process of remediating the mine site, a plan that has met with a positive response from NT trade unions. This campaign has continued despite intimidation and blackmail from Glencore, who fund many of the vital services in Borroloola, in the context of the NT Intervention, where governments have increased controls while withdrawing funding from Indigenous communities in an attempt to force people off their lands.

In the last few years, a new threat has emerged, with exploration licenses being issued throughout the region for unconventional gas that would be exploited through fracking.

Padraic Gibson spoke to three young leaders from the region, Scott McDinny, Nathan Fitzpatrick and Conrad Rory, who had travelled to Sydney to attend a conference organised by Indigenous Climate Youth Network SEED.

What is driving you in your fight to protect your land?

Conrad: We are carrying on the fight of our three great-grandfathers. We looked up to them, they passed their knowledge of the country down to us. The songlines, how to live in the bush, how to hunt. Which places to go and which places not to go. They have been looking after the country for a long time. It’s our sacred duty to

Borrooloola youth step up the fight for climate justice



keep up that legacy.

Scott: We have stories, songs and dances that connects us through the land that we live on. That's what drives us to fight. It was put in to my Nanna's heart and Grandfather's heart by their Grandparents. Now it's on to us. It's our responsibility.

Conrad: We have grown up seeing the mine destroy our country. We used to go to the river crossing every afternoon after school. Fresh water would flow down and the salt water would push it back up with the incoming tide.

There would be Barramundi, boney bream, we'd literally sit at the crossing waiting for the fish to swim upstream and just grab them, no need for a fishing line. You can't do that anymore. They flow of the river has been completely changed by the diversion. The companies come in, try and play mother nature and destroy everything. They say it's good for the economy—but whose economy?

Scott: The river is dead now. Even if there is remediation work done it will take a long time to heal itself. We've had doctors come down from Darwin and tell us, because of the heavy metals in the river, we are only allowed to eat a handful of fish. I don't want to just eat a handful. I want to do as my people have always done, eat the whole

fish and burn the bones so that the spirit of the fish is sent back to the river.

Talk about the threat of fracking and the actions you are taking to try and stop it. I know you have led strong mobilisations that have been joined by people from across the targeted areas and NT Unions have now affiliated to an international group, "Unions against fracking".

Conrad: Gas exploration companies have been given approvals over 85 per cent of the NT and that includes most of our region. They want to build a major pipeline to send the gas interstate. We fought off attempts to build the pipeline through the Gulf, now they want one to run through the Barkly, from Tennant Creek to Mt Isa. We have attended conferences and heard about the destructive effects on other communities from all over the world.

Nicholas: There have been some big protests, up in Darwin and recently in Katherine. CAAMA [Aboriginal community radio] was covering that march and got phone calls from Aboriginal people right across Australia whose lands are also under threat. They were thinking, "we are alone facing this", now they can see it's possible to stop it. We even got support from other Indigenous people from around the world. This is the year we can make a

Above: A protest in Borrooloola against the mining that is destroying their land



Conrad Rory



Scott McDinny



Nicholas Fitzpatrick

change.

Conrad: We also know fracking will only make climate change worse, that's why we are here with SEED, a young Indigenous group fighting climate change. We are out making connections, building support.

Nicholas: The climate is changing too fast. I was always a keen young fella for asking a million questions of old people. My grandfather lived on the Vandalin islands his whole life. He would talk about the changes that were happening, that the tides and sand movements were becoming unpredictable. The weather too, is no longer predictable, we have seasons starting early, things that happen within the season that should not happen, storms coming at the wrong time, or not at all.

If you are rejecting this fracking and mining, what do you want to see on the lands?

Scott: We want to see people back on their land. We don't want to be reliant on mining companies. When the homelands are occupied, with Indigenous ranger programs operating, if they are run properly, if the land is burnt properly, looked after properly, then the land can come to life again.

We get so much sunlight every year. Right now homelands struggle for reliable power, rely on traveling to fill up jerry cans for diesel generators. Solar systems could easily power remote communities, people can go back and maintain the balance of life. Even towns like Katherine could be completely powered by solar.

Nicholas: On the flat country, the tableland country, we have a lot of wind too. We could have wind turbines to power our communities also. We'd be laughing, we could send power to other places. There's lots of opportunities for agriculture, for eco-tourism, but the people need to be on the land.

Conrad: The governments, the mining companies, they only care about money. They sit in their offices and do deals, make approvals, they don't care about the people on the ground, they are willing to kill us off, they don't care. The only thing that can stop them is people power—and the more people we have in this movement, the more power we will have to make a change.

Protests in Egypt met with brutal repression

By Charlie Kimber

PROTESTS TOOK to the streets of Egypt in April despite a ban on demonstrations. The coordination and determination of the mobilisations marks a shift in the confidence of the opposition to the regime.

But they were met by a wave of repression. Soldiers were deployed to the assembly points and around 150 were arrested.

In the run-up to the protests the security forces has already seized people. They included labour lawyer and member of the Revolutionary Socialists Haitham Mohamedain.

He has been detained for investigation on charges of membership of the Muslim Brotherhood, attempting to overthrow the regime and inciting demonstrations.

The immediate cause of the mobilisations is the decision by the government of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi to hand over two disputed Red Sea islands to ally Saudi Arabia.

But there are also wider issues about democracy, workers' rights and the harshness of everyday life.

Protests

Protests against police brutality, and recent demonstrations over the islands have seen the re-emergence of open resistance.

In March, after police killed a taxi driver in Cairo, thousands of local people marched on the Interior Ministry. Slogans included "All police are thugs" and "Revenge!"

The regime is in crisis. The government is struggling to supply basic goods such as rice, cooking oil and bread. Unemployment is still rising with tourism paralysed. Egypt's currency has fallen to a record low against the US dollar, leading to the cost of imported goods soaring.

This means price rises for workers and the poor. It also means that raw materials are more expensive for companies, leading to anger against Sisi within elements of the ruling circles.

The regime's problems have led to speculation in the media of a "palace coup" that could see Sisi replaced by a different "patriotic" figure from the security apparatus.

Some of the left have celebrated such a possibility. The April 6 youth movement called on the army to



intervene and withdraw the decision to hand over the two islands.

But in a statement before the protests, the Egyptian Revolutionary Socialists said, "Three years of revolution and counter-revolution have shown the inherent hostility of the military establishment to the revolution.

"The military is the last line of defence of the state, and its most formidable prop. Calling for military intervention is dangerous because it leads the revolutionary masses to lose confidence in themselves."

It's crucial that as much solidarity as possible is raised internationally with the new resistance in Egypt.

This includes calling for the release of all those arrested and imprisoned, the investigations of "disappearances" and pressure to bring to justice those who tortured to death student Giulio Regeni.

Workers' protests grow as Chinese eco

SOCIAL CONFLICT and working class mobilisation in China are set to intensify as its once impressive economy decelerates and company profits decline. The past year recorded the slowest rate of growth at 7 per cent in more than two decades, and saw a stock market crash that tested the regime's credibility for managing economic risks.

As the manufacturing industry weakens, the fragmented but explosive workers' protest movement has reacted to a renewed wave of factory relocation and closure in the last two years, which in turn prompts the state to further restrict space for labour organising.

China's export-oriented manufacturing sector, which has consistently sustained weakening global demand since the global financial crisis, has been steadily shedding jobs and capacity for several years. This is now compounded by the overcapacity and unprofitability of state-owned commodity producers such as steel and coal. Individual enterprises and now the national government are cutting productive capacity and laying off workers.

The result has been an upsurge of labour strife in multiple industrial sectors, and for the first time since the turn of century, in both state and

As manufacturing weakens, the workers' protest movement has reacted to a renewed wave of factory relocation and closure

non-state enterprises.

Over the last decade, the Chinese state has hoped to reform the state-affiliated unions to incorporate rural migrant workers in order to address grievances before they escalate into protests. But the failure of such reforms and the simultaneous rising tide of labour protest have led the authorities to go back to the deployment of repressive tactics.

And, failing to secure workers' loyalty and fearing the strength of independent labour organising, the authorities heavily targeted community-based workers' centers in the latest crackdown: since December last year, a number of labour activists from well-known workers' centers have been detained and some charged for their role in assisting wildcat strikes.

But this has not deterred workers, who protest out of the desperation over unpaid wages, social insurance and severance compensation. Because of the legality and legitimacy of their claims, aggrieved workers will not be easy to stop. Nevertheless, the crackdown on workers' centers and short-term detention of strike leaders does disrupt the networks of activists.

It has been six years since the wave of strikes sparked by the auto-workers in 2010, and two years since arguably the largest single private-

John Kaye 1955-2016, Greens MP and tireless activist



Above: John Kaye speaking at Solidarity's Keep Left conference

By Bruce Knobloch
Greens member, Sydney

JOHN KAYE'S death has robbed the left of one of our most effective campaigners.

John worked tirelessly, especially for public education. John understood solidarity. As a pioneering electrical engineering academic at UNSW and a member of the NTEU he was a happy comrade on a picket line.

There isn't a TAFE college in NSW that John hadn't visited as Labor and Liberal governments defunded the public system and gave handouts to private colleges in order to undermine wages in the sector. The TAFE Teachers Association awarded John an honorary life membership before he died, the first time a non-teacher has been honoured.

John wasn't dogmatic, but scientific, trying to understand problems and find the best way to solve them.

His recent bill proposing compulsory 100 per cent government project procurement of Illawarra steel to defend the Port Kembla workforce was underpinned by a policy approach that said nationalisation—in full or in part—would probably be necessary for investment in cleaner technology to help build the energy and transport transition the climate crisis demands.

John played a critical role in clarifying the direction of The

Greens, especially in NSW, as a social democratic ecological party. He hated inequality, hypocrisy and bullshitters and disliked wowserism. For example, his work was critical to the party opposing the “lock-out” laws in total and rejecting any state funding to private schools.

An MP for nine years, John did not have illusions in parliament.

For him parliament was just one—and not the most important—arena to try to make social change. In a message to Greens members before he died, John warned:

The critical outcome for the Greens is to not be caught in parliamentarianism, to not be caught in the trappings of power, to not believe for one minute that just because you are in government you actually have control over the destiny of the economy.

This isn't and never has been about changing government—that's what Labor, that's what the Liberals and Nats do—this is about changing what people expect from government, what they expect from the possibilities of working together for the common good and the collective outcome.

John would talk with anyone and enjoyed asking people what they thought.

He used his ability to master detail and his wit in the parliament and the media to build campaigns and skewer selfish governments.

When Mike Baird rang him after the news of his illness was announced, he asked if there was anything he could do. John didn't miss the chance, telling Baird he could stop the sale of the electricity network's poles and wires!

John was inspired by the expansion of public services and freedom of choice under the Whitlam government and located “neo-liberalism” and “marketism” as the enemies. His theoretical framework was a work in progress. He was always looking for evidence and was soberly optimistic. The unexpected rise of Jeremy Corbyn and the Sanders movement filled him with hope even as his own potential slipped away.

John Kaye is survived by his partner of 30 years, Lynne, and a left party that owes much to his very hard work, clear thinking and ethics.

economy falters

sector strike at a footwear factory in 2014.

China's working class movement finds itself in deteriorating economic conditions and a hostile political environment.

Freezing the minimum wage and decreasing social insurance contribution by provincial authorities in the last few months, all in the name of reducing business burdens, are back on the government's agenda; there is even a hint of possible labor law reforms further down the road.

While these changes are threatening the social and economic gains workers made over the previous decade, the government recognises that any significant change to industrial relations and the labor legislations will be politically risky.

Beyond the manufacturing sector, the service sector not only employs more migrant workers as a percentage of the labor force, but has also come to share more in strikes. Sanitation workers and teachers, to name only two groups of workers, are among those who are taking action in pursuit of their rights.

So despite the political and economic conditions, the workers' movement is growing and learning to organise. And that is why it is so alarming to the authorities.

John understood solidarity. As a member of the NTEU he was a happy comrade on a picket line

Nuit Debout—France's new movement challenging politics as usual



By Nick Riemer in Paris

A PROMISING new protest movement has emerged in France. Triggered by new labour laws which drastically favour employers, the “Nuit Debout” (ND)—“up all night”—movement started on 31 March with the occupation of a central Paris square after a union-called demonstration. Intended to unite different campaigns, the movement has spread through France, and now constitutes a major pole of opposition to both the Socialist government and the entire business-as-usual of French politics.

In Paris, nightly assemblies have drawn thousands of people for open debates centred around people’s alienation from politics and thirst to end corporate control over democracy. Speeches range from social democratic to clearly anti-capitalist in content. Attacks on the “oligarchy” that runs French politics, calls for a general strike, and discussion about the mechanisms of the protest vote have been prominent topics. Organising on specific issues is devolved to commissions, which have mounted a range of occupations, protests and other interventions, many of them directed against the labour-law reform.

The movement comes during a period of weakness and fragmentation across the political spectrum, including the far left, and against a background of strong distrust of traditional

Above: At a Nuit Debout assembly in Paris, a child listens on with a placard reading ‘My life is worth more than your profits’

Nightly popular assemblies have drawn thousand of people for open debates

parties and unions. Reactions to ND from the major parties have ranged from contempt and insults to outright condemnation and calls for the movement’s banning. Opponents to the labour law have been the objects of violent police intimidation, both at ND’s own meetings and at the sequence of large demonstrations called by unions since the reform was announced. Mobilisation at these demonstrations has been solid, reflecting the 74 per cent of the public against the law.

Occupy reborn?

In many points, ND resembles recent protest movements like Occupy or Spain’s Indignados, such as its near-consensus (80 per cent) decision-making, or its use of square-occupations as the main organisational form.

Critics have singled out two characteristics especially: the movement’s “horizontality”—its refusal to nominate a leadership or spokespeople—and its reluctance to make specific demands beyond the withdrawal of the labour reform. Both these characteristics are seen by many as counterproductive. ND might not like the traditional structures of spokespeople, political platforms and explicit demands through which movements assert themselves, but it cannot ignore them. If it is to last, it will need to recognise the difference between politicians’ cynical misuse of public undertakings, and the indispensability of spokespeople and

demands to any organised social force. Without these it will simply deal itself out of any possible influence.

The movement’s relation to unions is also crucial. While strikes are frequent in France, actual union membership is extremely low, and unions are often seen as just as problematic as the established parties. One union, Solidaires, has helped ND from the start, but others were initially more hesitant. The head of the largest labour union has, however, addressed the ND assembly, and ND was prominent in the traditional May Day march.

Another challenge comes from ND’s relation to poor and immigrant-origin people who live in the depressed suburbs of big French cities. This is a very different demographic from the largely white and middle-class participants in the nightly assemblies. Many people from the suburbs are in long-term unemployment. This means the labour law changes are simply irrelevant, and so not any basis for mobilisation. Conceiving of ways to effectively reach out to this demographic, and to workers, will be important in weeks to come.

The future

Capitalism’s continual attacks on social protections regularly prompt grassroots movements like ND. The risk is that the dynamic these attacks trigger will merely be defensive. If the campaign against labour reform is ultimately won, the political energy ND has crystallised is in danger of evaporating; if the campaign is lost, its lack of a defined broader project means easier demoralisation and demobilisation.

As many ND participants recognise, the challenge is how to coalesce anger about the labour law into mobilisation around a positive political project that isn’t paradoxically dependent for its momentum on attacks from the right. It’s too early to say whether ND will achieve this. In a recognition it doesn’t have the numbers needed for the reform to pass, the government has invoked a constitutional mechanism to bypass parliament and introduce the law directly, as it did with a previous suite of reforms last year. This will make contestation on the street even more important. For ND, a crucial first step will be to shift the focus from providing a place where people excluded from politics can just express their opinions, to one where they can act collectively in the large numbers that have been attending the meetings. If it succeeds in doing this, it will be a major development.

CAN PLANNING REPLACE THE MARKET?

Clare Fester looks at how a socialist planned economy that puts the needs of people and planet first could work

WE ARE told that the market is the only efficient way to organise society. But capitalism is actually hugely inefficient and incapable of distributing resources equitably.

Under capitalism competition and profits determine how resources are allocated and what is produced, not rational decisions about human needs or the environment.

As a result there is too much of some things produced that aren't needed, and not enough of others that are. Huge amounts of money are invested in biofuels rather than growing food to feed the starving. There are more useless gadgets produced every day.

People who contribute nothing to society like hedge-fund managers are paid six figure salaries while teachers and nurses are underpaid and undervalued.

Competition between different companies making the same products breeds inefficiency, duplication and waste. As Marx explained, capitalism is the first economic system to produce crises from overproduction, rather than scarcity. Competition for market share means that companies race to sell more products than each other, so more goods are produced than can actually be sold.

To influence the choices people make between products, billions are wasted on advertising every year. This kind of wastefulness, inefficiency and inequality is built into the system.

Yet there has been a huge expansion of wealth under capitalism. There is more created now than ever before, with more than enough to go around so that no-one need starve or live in poverty.

A socialist revolution would harness all this potential by putting production under democratic control and making the things we actually need.

Planned economy

We are told that planning simply can't work. In fact, there is a tremendous amount of planning that goes on under capitalism to co-ordinate production within individual corporations.

Vast international supermarket chains need to carefully plan enough stock daily, but not so much that

food goes bad before it can be sold. To do this they use complex data and distribution systems. Such technology and organisation could be generalised across the entire economy.

Because of their association with Stalinism in Russia and Eastern Europe, planned economies have reputations for inefficiency and mismanagement. Defenders of the market say that at a whole economy level, the scale of information required to produce the things society needs is too complex for centralised planning.

But under Stalinism, in which a small clique ruled Russia and made all economic decisions, there was no attempt to have any democratic input about what society needed. The economy was run on the basis of competition with surrounding military powers.

A genuinely socialist planned economy would make use of an array of decentralised, local democratic bodies to feed in decisions of what society needed produced.

Delegate voting bodies at workplace, local, city and regional levels would make decisions about how resources are allocated, what is produced and where surplus value would be invested in society.

Capitalism gives us a false sense that managers and bosses are best equipped to make decisions within particular workplaces or companies.

But in a socialist economy many decisions would be made at a workplace level by the people who know their industry best and are most affected by those decisions—workers themselves. We already run the schools and treat the patients and write the software. This would unleash a level of collaboration and innovation unlike anything possible under capitalism.

In the Paris Commune in 1871 and the Russian Revolution in 1917, and in many struggles between and since, ordinary women and men have organised to take control of their own lives. They've created organs of political power for strikes and factory occupations.

But in these struggles they also organised the most basic necessities like distributing food and housing.

This kind of democratic control would also mean we could make much larger decisions about what is produced. We would produce technology that's not designed to be obsolete in two years. We would get rid of the

Delegate voting bodies at workplace, city and regional levels would make decisions about what is produced

nuclear arms industry and patents on pharmaceuticals.

To do this we would need planning on an international scale. Capitalism is an international system where production chains are organised across borders.

Without the full international expansion of socialism, individual planned economies would be up against economic isolation, capital flight, political intervention from outside and even armed invasion.

Climate action

The current climate crisis is a clear example of how necessary socialist economic planning is. Cutting emissions means implementing a strict global set of targets and investment in renewables on a huge international scale. There is no way to organise such a global effort without co-operation and planning.

UN summits and international conferences can set emissions reductions targets, but they are small and unenforceable. Instead capitalism invents new (and profitable!) markets for emissions trading, dodgy carbon offsetting schemes, or carbon taxes that force ordinary people to pay for climate action.

Right now it is still profitable to pull coal out of the ground for energy production in Australia and for export. This means companies are less interested in investing in riskier and less profitable clean energy technology.

But a rationally organised and planned economy would decide to switch from fossil fuels to solar thermal and wind. Workers in the energy sector in Australia would be re-trained and power stations re-tooled. We could massively expand public transport and high-speed rail between cities so there'd be less reliance on polluting cars and planes.

We could plan urban spaces that reduced the need for long commutes, build safe and accessible bike paths, insulate buildings properly, build low-energy public laundromats. These things are only possible on a mass scale with huge public investment.

A planned socialist economy could harness all the creative, innovative and economic potential humans already possess. We could direct this toward human need and environmental sustainability, instead of profits for a tiny elite.

NO MATTER WHO WINS THE ELECTION: IT'S THE RICH WHO RULE

The rich run society in the interest of profit—and we can't vote them out come July, explains **James Supple**

ELECTIONS ARE about deciding who runs the country, they say. But most of the power in our society is not held in parliament, and even the choices of elected governments are heavily restricted.

This is because a tiny super-rich minority, the ruling class, control most of society's wealth.

The Liberals announced on budget night that government spending made up 25.8 per cent of the economy—and a raft of mainstream economists and commentators complained that this was still too high. But that means that three-quarters of the country's economy remains in private hands. Wealth, accumulated over many years, is even more concentrated.

In 2014, Australia's richest seven people controlled around \$56 billion dollars between them, equivalent to the wealth of the bottom 1.73 million households, or 20 per cent of the population.

At the top of society there is a very small group of people who run the major corporations through their positions as CEOs and directors of the large firms.

There is considerable overlap between companies. One study from 2006 found that half the directors of Australia's 50 largest companies held seats on four or more corporate boards. Altogether, these 500 companies were effectively controlled by around 160 people.

The result is that we live in a world where the rich write the rules, and the economy and political system are run for their benefit.

The Panama Papers revealed the immense amounts of money they have stashed away, and the devices like shell companies used in an effort to avoid or minimise tax.

An estimate from 2010 said between \$21 and \$32 trillion dollars are stashed away in tax havens around the world.

The staggering thing is that so little is ever done about it. In fact the largest tax havens are run by the world's richest countries themselves—jurisdictions in the US like Delaware, or British territories like the Virgin Islands.

They could close them down whenever they choose, yet they are allowed to continue operating because it suits the interests of the rich and powerful.

It's a rich man's world

There is increasing anger about inequality. In Australia the top 10 per cent of the population control 45 per cent of the country's wealth, and the top 20 per cent of income earners make five times as much as the bottom 20 per cent of the population.

The situation in Australia is not yet as stark as in some countries, such as the US. There the top 0.1 per cent (made up of just 160,000 families) hold 22 per cent of the country's wealth.

But inequality here is growing. Last year ACOSS produced a report on inequality in Australia. It found that over the previous 20 years, income for the top 5 per cent grew at the fast rate, while growth for the bottom 20 per cent was the slowest. The growth in wealth was ever more unequal, with the top 20 per cent increasing their wealth by 28 per cent and the bottom 40 per cent by just 6 per cent.

The super-rich ruthlessly defend their power and privileges, even from minor challenges. The big four banks dominate the Australian stock

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exchange and doubled their profits between 1984 and 2013. When Labor announced its support for a Royal Commission into the banking industry earlier this year, Banking Industry chief Steve Munchenberg responded by saying the banks had "not ruled out" a mining tax style ad campaign against Labor.

This was a warning shot to Labor not to go too far. A Royal Commission could expose more banking scandals and dubious practices, but Labor was not proposing a significant tax increase on the banks or anything that would do more than tarnish their brands.

When Labor announced its mining tax, and did try to increase profits on mining companies, the miners spent \$22 million in advertising and forced Labor to cave in.

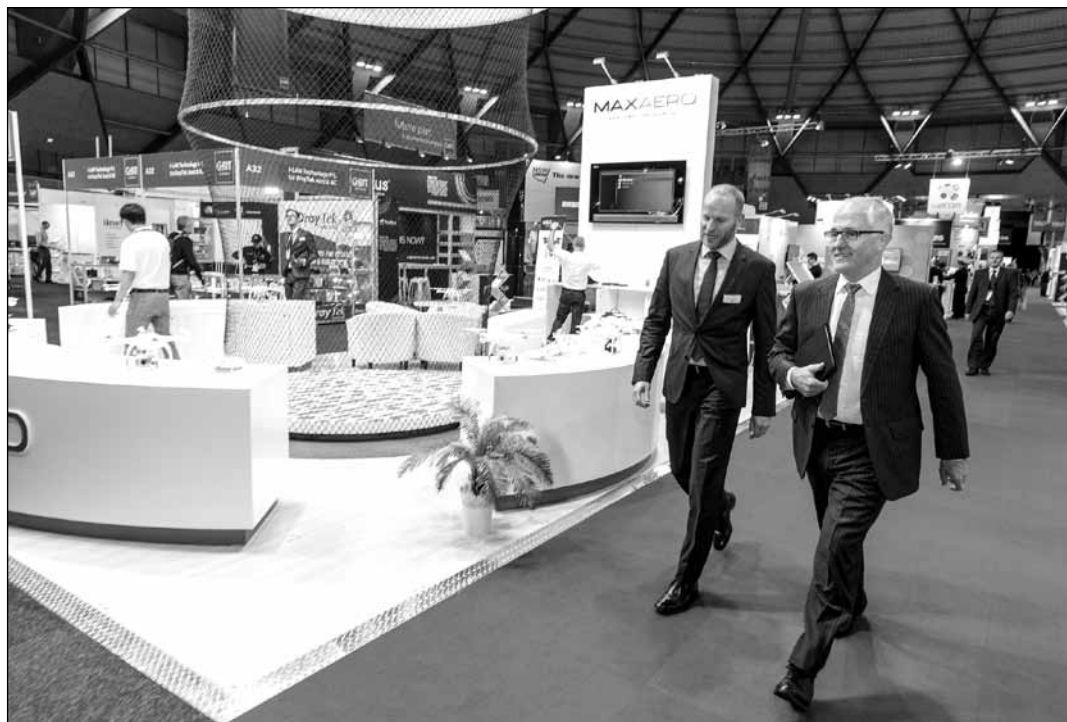
Control of wealth isn't just about being rich. It also means control of major companies and the decisions they make.

Big businesses make decisions in the interests of their profits. In the face of what they view as threats to their business, like taxes and regulations, the wealthy can attempt to move their wealth out of the country, shutting down factories and offices.

This is true across the global capitalist system.

In one famous example, the British Labor government that won office in 1964 faced an attack on the currency by speculators who wanted to force it into raising interest rates and cutting wages and spending.

Prime Minister at the time Harold Wilson, in a private conversation with the Governor of the Bank of England, commented that, "because of the sheer compulsion of the economic dictation of those who exercised economic



Above: Turnbull's innovation agenda is a way of signalling he wants to govern in the interests of business

power", Britain had "reached the situation where a newly elected government with a mandate from the people was being told...that the policies on which we had fought the election could not be implemented; that the government was to be forced into the adoption of Tory policies to which it was fundamentally opposed. The Governor confirmed that that was, in fact, the case".

Today, both major parties basically accept that things have to be run in the interests of big business. The Liberals are the most open about this, with Turnbull describing his new budget as designed to drive, "aspiration and enterprise and growth". When in government Labor does essentially the same thing.

Power and parliament

Real power does not lie in parliament. Any party that wins control of government through parliament is trapped. Since they are hostage to the whims of big business, they find that unless they do their bidding, they face major economic problems as businesses sack thousands of workers and close down companies.

The influence and reach of the ruling class extends into the institutions of the state, so that they are only under the control of government to the extent that it does not seriously challenge capitalism.

The generals, police chiefs, judges and top level bureaucrats in the public service are all part of the

ruling class and serve the interests of the rich.

Senior public servants generally come from the same privileged backgrounds and share the same worldview as the rest of the ruling class. Often there is a revolving door between government departments and senior roles in industry.

A Fairfax investigation last year revealed how financial sector regulators like APRA and ASIC were staffed with former senior managers from the big four banks.

Jeff Millard, the manager of supervision of insurance, came straight from Deloitte. Michael Saadat, a senior executive at ASIC, was formerly head of compliance at Citibank. Steven Casey went from a senior role in the Treasury Department working with Finance Ministers to become a director at KPMG.

Whistle-blower James Wheeldon has claimed that, "At ASIC, where I saw that revolving door in play... the culture there was not a culture of doing things by the book, it was a culture of facilitating business. And that affected everything. Giving business what they want, and rolling over for business."

And at the core of the state are repressive institutions like the army and the police, run by generals and senior officials who are determined to defend capitalism and the priorities of the ruling class—even against democratic governments where necessary.

So one serving army general

gave an anonymous interview to *The Sunday Times* to attack left-wing British Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, promising "the very real prospect of an event which would effectively be a mutiny" should he become Prime Minister.

The capitulation of the Greek Syriza government has shown the limits of democracy under capitalism. Although they were elected with popular support to tear up the austerity deal signed with the EU, they chose to compromise with the rich and the European institutions.

The rich and the most powerful companies inside Greece wanted to remain inside the European Union. Because Syriza went along with that, it meant agreeing to cuts and austerity worse than those they were elected to end.

No parliamentary road

Seats in parliament can be used as a platform to build struggles outside it, but not as a means to fundamentally change things.

The real power in society lies where the wealth is produced. The capitalist ruling class controls the economy through their ownership of the mines, factories and offices that are the source of their profits.

But they rely on the rest of the population, the working class, to produce those profits. When workers go on strike and take industrial action, it costs the bosses millions of dollars in lost profits.

It is possible to stand up the rich. But the power to do so does not come from electing left-wing MPs, but from workers organising as a class to assert their own control over production.

This means that struggle outside parliament, in the workplaces and on the streets, is the key to social change.

Winning real democracy requires workers to take control of the wealth in society and begin using it in their own interests. This means a revolution where new democratic institutions take power, like the soviets or workers' councils in the Russian revolution of 1917.

Similar organs of workers' power have emerged time and again in great social upheavals, from Hungary in 1956 to Chile in 1973 and Iran in 1979.

It is only through such struggles outside parliament that we can get rid of capitalism and the political system run for the rich.

THE LARGEST STRIKE IN BRITISH HISTORY UNIONS AND THE 1926 GENERAL STRIKE

Ninety years on, **Vivian Honan** discusses the 1926 general strike, and how faith in left-wing union officials produced a devastating setback

THE 1926 general strike was one of the largest strikes in British history. It marked the end of an intense period of struggle beginning in 1910 and stretching through the First World War and its aftermath.

More than three million workers went out on strike for nine days. The coal owners and the Conservative Party government wanted the miners to work longer hours for less pay, and set out to break the power and militancy workers had built up in the previous 16 years.

The miners were locked out of the coalfields by the bosses. In response workers from all sectors across Britain came out on strike in support of the miners.

The strike, however, ended in defeat when the union officials sold out the membership and sent them back to work without any wins.

It was a bitter lesson for the Left of the costs of relying on even left-wing union officials, instead of orienting towards the rank-and-file union membership.

In the lead up to 1926 there had been growing militancy among the working class.

The period 1910-1914 became known as the Great Unrest. While profits were growing, real wages were falling. Millions of workers took strike action during this time to demand higher wages and union recognition.

The outbreak of war in 1914 brought a new level of struggle. Bosses tried to use the war to attack pay and conditions. The union officials were concerned industrial action would affect the war effort and tried to discourage it.

The membership was forced to take action independently of the union leadership in order to maintain conditions.

After the war, encouraged by a

boom in the economy but high cost of living, hundreds of thousands of workers joined strikes to demand better wages and conditions.

However, in 1920 recession began to set in. In March 1921 the coal bosses tried to force through wage cuts, but the miners rejected this.

The bosses locked them out. Railway and transport workers initially came out on strike in support of the miners. But in April the union officials called the strike off.

This day of treachery became known as Black Friday. It left the miners isolated, and after three months they gave in.

Communists and officials

The Communist Party, newly founded in 1920, explained the betrayal in terms of “bad” union leaders who needed to be replaced by good leaders.

The Communist Party argued that they needed to either conquer the union leadership themselves, or at least find left bureaucrats to work with.

This position was influenced by the radical rhetoric that left-wing union officials were using at the time. Union leaders such as Purcell, Swales and Hicks talked of the need for revolt, destruction of wage slavery, and the establishment of a new society.

In 1924 the Communist Party established the Minority Movement. It was based on alliance and trust of these key left-wing union officials.

In 1925 the mining employers announced wage cuts and the abolition of national agreements. The trade union movement backed the miners and threatened united strike action. The Conservative government, led by Stanley Baldwin, backed off and announced they would subsidise the industry while a Royal Commission

There was such enthusiasm for the strike that the officials struggled to hold workers back

was held.

In the lead-up to the release of the report, the government prepared for a confrontation. They stockpiled coal and recruited some 100,000 volunteers ready to be used as scab labour. Police were given new powers and troops were mobilised.

The Trade Union Council (TUC), Britain’s equivalent of the ACTU, made no preparations.

On 10 March 1926, the Royal Commission report was released. It called for the government to end subsidies to the mining industry and for the workers’ wages to be cut.

The Labour Party and the union officials did not immediately launch a fight back.

Instead they began talking about the need for sacrifices. They began negotiations, but then on 16 April the coal owners declared they would lock out the miners from 1 May. The unions held a special meeting and agreed to call a general strike to begin on 4 May.

The union officials were hoping the threat of a strike would help in their negotiations, and they saw it as a way of controlling the movement that might launch strikes unofficially otherwise.

They did not call for all workers to come out together which would have been stronger, but instead called for “waves” where some sectors would come out for the first eight days, and then other sectors would join them.

This caused great confusion. Within workplaces some workers were called out in the first wave but others within the same workplace were held back because they were from different sectors.

There was such enthusiasm for the strike, however, that the officials struggled to hold workers back until the second wave. A report from the

engineers in Dundee stated, “Here as elsewhere our greatest difficulty in the first week was in preventing men ceasing work before being called upon to do so.”

The union officials tried to limit the self-activity of the workers during the strike.

No other papers were allowed to be produced except the *British Worker*—the paper controlled by the union officials. The paper discouraged militancy, such as pickets.

It instead gave tips such as, “Do what you can to improve your health, a good walk every day will keep you fit. Do something. Hanging around and swapping rumours is bad in every way.”

The strikers were encouraged to let off steam by playing sport, and were even encouraged to set up friendly sporting matches with the police!

The union officials also strongly encouraged them to spend more time at church. These tactics were used by the union officials to stop workers from holding pickets, meetings and demonstrations.

So intent on avoiding conflict with the state were they that the union officials in the TUC even allowed the government to take over full control of the food supplies, which meant scab labour being used in transportation and delivery.

Cave-in

On 7 May the TUC and Labour Party began secret negotiations with the government and bosses. Following negotiations, they put forward a draft proposal for wage cuts.

The miners were outraged to learn of the secret negotiations and rejected the proposal.

On 11 May, the TUC called the strike off and told workers in all sectors to return to work.

Apart from opposition from the mining union, none of the supposedly left union officials raised a word of protest at this plan.

This led to criminal charges, sackings and victimisation of strikers and humiliating agreements that locked in wage cuts.

The miners remained locked out for another six months. Isolated, they eventually gave in to the wage cuts and returned to work.

After betraying them, the TUC still had the nerve to call the miners selfish. The mining union’s leadership was little better, agreeing not to criticise the TUC.



Above: A meeting during the general strike in Manchester

The Communist Party had been so convinced of the progressive role of the left union officials they had not seen the betrayal coming

The Communist Party had been so convinced of the progressive role of the left union officials they had not seen the betrayal coming.

A Communist Party leader of the time, George Hardy, wrote in retrospect:

“Although we knew of what treachery the right-wing leaders were capable, we did not clearly understand the part played by the so-called ‘left’ in the union leadership. In the main they turned out to be windbags and capitulated to the right wing. We were taught a major lesson; that while developing a move to the left officially, the main point in preparing for action must always be to develop a class-consciousness among the rank and file.”

Throughout this period the Russian Revolutionary Leon Trotsky had argued for the Communist Party to not have illusions in the union bureaucracy.

Trotsky said, “Power must be wrested from the hands of the bourgeoisie and for that its principal agent, the trade union bureaucracy, must be overthrown.”

By encouraging trust in the union officials and calling for “All power to the General Council [of the TUC]”, the Communist Party were seen as implicit in the defeat.

Their membership and that of the

unions plummeted and the working class sunk into apathy.

Bureaucracy

An understanding of the nature of the union bureaucracy is crucial for socialists in the union movement.

The union bureaucracy has a different class interest to the rank-and-file members. The wages of the officials are not dependent on the outcome of strikes, and they do not face the same pressures and working conditions of the membership.

Instead they become concerned with maintaining a relationship with the employers, as they see negotiations as the way of winning reforms.

There is no doubt that we can work with union officials at times, and that they can be crucial in mobilising and encouraging the activity of the rank-and-file.

But we should never forget their different interests, and their action should never be seen as a substitute for the action of the mass of workers themselves.

The Clyde workers in Britain who self-organised during the war years perhaps put it best when they wrote, “We will support the officials just so long as they rightly represent the workers, but we will act independently immediately they misrepresent them.”

THE HORRIBLE HISTORY OF SYRIA'S ASSAD REGIME

Lachlan Marshall explains the Syrian regime's history of deals with imperialism and attacks on its own working class in order to boost its own wealth and power

IN 2011 revolutions toppled dictators in Tunisia and Egypt, sparking off the Arab Spring.

But some progressive commentators denied that the Syrian revolution shared the same aims. They focussed on the regime's occasional opposition to the West and cast dictator Bashar al-Assad as an anti-imperialist.

The US has continually said it wants to see Assad gone, favouring a leader more willing to serve its interests. Syria was a Russian ally through the Cold War and has relied on Russia and Iran as a counterweight to the US.

The Assad regime has refused to recognise Israel, offered rhetorical support for Palestinian liberation and aligned itself with Hezbollah and Iran. But like all capitalist states, its foreign policy is driven by self-interest and opportunism.

Ever since Israel occupied the Golan Heights in 1967 Syria has attempted to control the Palestinian liberation movement to use it as a bargaining chip with Israel and the US.

The regime has routinely suppressed Palestinian activists. Former President Hafez al-Assad moved against the Palestinian guerrilla movement in Syria, closing its offices and arresting its leaders.

In 1976 during the Lebanese civil war, which pitted Palestinian factions and left-wing Lebanese groups against the Lebanese government, right-wing Christian Phalangists, the US and Israel, the Syrian regime intervened decisively on the side of the latter.

In 1983 Syria supported Elie Hobeika as leader of the Christian militias, a Phalangist responsible for the slaughter of 2500 Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps.

According to the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, the role the regime has played historically in constraining movements it supports—like Hamas and Hezbollah—is acknowledged by Israeli officials, who, “fear the freeing of Palestinian organisations from any restraints and believe that the Syrian regime represents a central authority that regulates behaviour and keeps events from slipping out of

Syria participated in the CIA's torture program of “extraordinary rendition”

control.”

The collapse of the Soviet Union and Syria's own economic problems in the early 1990s prompted it to reorient towards the West and support the US in its first war with Iraq in 1991.

The second Palestinian intifada in 2000 along with Israel's decision to build 1500 settlements in the Golan Heights forced Bashar to adopt a less compromising attitude to Israel and the US, increasing support for Hezbollah and the Palestinian resistance. But Assad has not challenged the status quo in the Golan Heights.

In the lead up to the 2011 uprising, Assad's strategy involved trying to hedge between Iran and Russia on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia and the US on the other. For instance Syria participated in the CIA's torture program of “extraordinary rendition.”

According to the *Financial Times*, “In his dealings with the Kremlin, Mr Assad has adopted a strategy of playing one foreign power off against another. His trump card on this occasion was Iran. Russia has been nervous of Tehran's growing regional influence at the cost of its own leverage for months.”

Like all other Arab ruling classes, the Syrian ruling class has accommodated to imperialism. Its foreign policy twists and turns have been focussed exclusively on trying to maintain the most favourable position possible within a cut-throat system of competing capitalist states. Its commitment above all else is to running capitalism and increasing the wealth of Syria's rulers at the expense of workers and the poor. A look at the history of the Assad regime shows this clearly.

From national liberation to dictatorship

A period of social upheaval followed Syria's independence from France in 1946. That year saw strikes force the passage of progressive labour laws and a trebling of union membership. A peasant uprising in 1950 added to the tumult, forming the base for the

progressive and nationalist parties that dominated the period. In 1955 the Communist Party, Arab Socialist Party and Ba'ath Party formed an electoral alliance.

In 1958 Syria joined with Egypt to form the United Arab Republic (UAR) at the instigation of the Ba'ath Party and army officers, in an effort to undermine the wave of class struggle and the influence of the Communist Party. The new government introduced welfare reforms and land redistribution in exchange for total state control over the social movements. All independent unions and peasant organisations were banned and the right to strike was repealed.

The Communists failed to oppose these policies. They celebrated the Ba'ath Party as a “basic revolutionary force”, following the disastrous Stalinist policy of uncritical support for the nationalist bourgeoisie in post-colonial countries.

The Ba'ath Party took power in a military coup in 1963 aiming to further develop Syrian capitalism through a program of state-led industrialisation.

This required a challenge to the established elites through further land redistribution and nationalisations. Although the party used the language of anti-imperialism, its own support base was among army officers and the middle class—not the mass of workers and peasants.

The Ba'ath Party further restricted democratic rights. Worker and peasant struggles faced repression, as an obstacle to capitalist development. An emergency law suspending all constitutional rights has been in force ever since.

Bashar's father, Hafez al-Assad, took over in another coup in 1970. Syria is a diverse country, with a large Sunni majority of 65 per cent along with significant Alawite (14 per cent), Christian (12 per cent), Druze and Shia minorities.

Hafez, a member of the Muslim minority Alawi sect, used sectarianism to cohere an Alawi ruling class. He purged Sunni army officers and

installed a loyal Alawi officer elite. The regime stoked sectarianism by playing on fears of ethnic strife. But the stability his rule engendered allowed him to gain the consent of the Sunni capitalist class.

Neo-liberalism

Weaker economic growth in the 1980s forced the government to dismantle the social pact, cutting wages, benefits and subsidies. Deregulation opened up vast parts of the economy to private capital. Inequality increased so that by the mid-1990s 70 per cent of the population lived below the relative poverty line.

There was a ramping up of repression against all remaining opposition. The regime tortured political prisoners and periodically massacred inmates, for example in 1980 when the government ordered the summary execution of 1000 prisoners.

It responded ferociously to an uprising by the Muslim Brotherhood in Hama in 1982, slaughtering up to 40,000 residents, most of them civilians.

Hopes ran high for the British-educated Bashar, who began his reign in 2000 as a reformer, releasing political prisoners and speaking of the need for constructive criticism. This stimulated a flourishing of dissent that became known as the Damascus Spring.

Liberal intellectuals and artists launched a vigorous democracy campaign. Assad arrested most of the leaders of this movement in 2001.

He extended the neo-liberal agenda, opening the economy further to private capital, slashing corporate tax and paring back social spending.

Corruption and inequality skyrocketed under Bashar, who increasingly distributed the spoils of office to members of his family. This was epitomised by Assad's second cousin, Rami Makhlouf, whose family business empire controlled almost 60 per cent of Syria's economy on the eve of the 2011 uprising. Official figures put unemployment at 15 per cent, and one third amongst those aged 20-24 years.

From 2008-2011 the UN estimated that three million farmers were plunged into poverty as a result of drought and forced into slums on the outskirts of cities.

Imperialism, sectarianism and the civil war

The 2011 uprising in Syria was fuelled by hatred of political repression and the growing social pain of the neo-liberal era.

In 2011 revolutionaries stressed the anti-sectarian nature of the movement,



Above: A protest in Syria during the ceasefire

with slogans like, "In Syria, there are two sects: the sect of freedom and the sect of the regime."

But compared to Tunisia and Egypt, Syria's working class played little organised part in the revolution.

Local Coordinating Committees sprung up across Syria to organise resistance to the regime and the provision of services where the state had retreated.

However, Syria's unions remained largely under regime control. This contributed to many revolutionaries seeing no alternative to focussing on armed struggle. This left the movement incredibly vulnerable to being co-opted by foreign states who could supply the arms and funding needed to take on the Syrian army.

In order to divide the democratic, anti-sectarian forces of the revolution, Assad deployed sectarian militias from his own Alawite religion, while also releasing about 1000 Salafist political prisoners, who flooded into an increasingly Jihadist led insurgency.

Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states have also fuelled this process, channeling money and arms to Sunni Jihadists, to increase their leverage in negotiations over the future of Syria.

For their part, the US has given limited support to elements of the Free Syrian Army, with a similar intention of increasing their leverage against Assad and Russia.

The Islamic State (IS), born as a sectarian Sunni group in the chaos imperialism has inflicted on Iraq, capitalised on the chaos of the civil war to seize large areas of Syria, but they have not been a consistent op-

ponent of the regime.

Some Assad supporters argue that the regime is the lesser evil to the IS. In fact IS and Assad have mostly avoided direct conflict.

An analysis of IS by the Kings College in London said the group has suffered defections from fighters initially attracted to the military strength of IS because "toppling the Assad regime didn't seem to be a priority."

As Serdar Ahmed, a secular Kurd interviewed in the book *Burning Country* said: "We hate Daesh [IS], but you must compare them to Assad. Daesh's worst crime in Syria was the massacre at Taqa airbase where they killed 220. Assad has killed 200,000. He has committed thousands of massacres."

The logic of imperialism in the Middle East, to which the Assad regime has accommodated for decades, is now on graphic display, as Russia and the US negotiate the terms of "peace" in Syria, and regional powers back rival armed groups in an attempt to court influence.

But workers across the region have begun stirring again, with anti-government protests in neighbouring Lebanon and Iraq.

And despite the grip of military dictatorship, in recent months thousands of Egyptians have defied anti-protest laws to take to the streets again. Even amongst the enormous misery in Syria, democratic activists took advantage of a brief "cease fire" in April to again take to the streets.

The hopes of 2011 will only be realised through a revival of the revolutionary movement and the working class across the region.

MANUS TO CLOSE, NAURU IN CHAOS BRING THEM HERE

By Ian Rintoul

THE PNG Supreme Court's declaration at the end of April that Manus Island detention was unlawful has been over-shadowed by the sheer horror of the events on Nauru. Shockwaves from Omid's self-immolation, followed a few days later by the attempted self-immolation by Hadon, a young Somali refugee, rocked Australia and went around the world.

The tragic actions of Omid and Hadon have fuelled the daily protests on Nauru. Scores of refugees have quit their jobs in protest, bringing pleas to return to work from Nauruan officials. But the detention regime there is unravelling, bit by bit.

Amidst that despair however, there is a silver lining. The decision by the PNG Supreme Court means that one half of the government's offshore processing regime is finished. Not only is detention on Manus finished; the PNG and Australian governments face hefty compensation payments to the asylum seekers for the breach of their rights for the almost three years they have been unlawfully held there.

The Australian government is thrashing around—prolonging the agony on Manus Island and desperately trying to avoid the consequences of the decision in PNG before the election. High-level discussions between PNG and Australia have begun.

Peter Dutton has insisted that those who are found to be refugees can stay in PNG and the others can be sent home. But that ignores the court's finding that the asylum seekers were taken to PNG unlawfully. The law says PNG cannot send the asylum seekers anywhere but back to Australia.

Nauru was never going to be a destination—the detention regime there is struggling to cope. And Dutton's recent announcement that Manus people will not be sent to Nauru has ruled that out.

Dutton and Turnbull continue to say that the asylum seekers will not come to Australia. This is for public



Above: The daily protests on Nauru continue, after over 50 days

consumption. There is actually little option for the government other than to bring them here.

Both Turnbull and Dutton have suggested there could be settlement in "third countries". Labor's immigration spokesperson Richard Marles, the architect of the PNG solution in 2013, criticised the Coalition government for not having negotiated a third country.

No other options

But there is no third country solution for either Liberal or Labor. Australia's offshore detention arrangements have been shunned by the UNHCR and the world's resettling countries are not going to take asylum seekers that are regarded as Australia's responsibility.

Canada has already welcomed over 26,000 Syrian refugees since November 2015, compared to Australia's paltry 180 of the 12,000 it has promised to take. Canada is not about to take 1000 people that Australia dumped on Manus Island.

New Zealand has said it will take 150, but Australia will only agree to that once other options are exhausted. This is how Liberal Prime Minister John Howard used New Zealand when Nauru was first opened after 2001.

Australian governments have had almost three years to find "third coun-

tries" but never have. Dutton keeps mentioning Cambodia, but this is a fantasy. The Cambodia deal to accept refugees from Nauru has been a fiasco.

Further legal action in PNG and the Australian courts will put even more pressure on the government.

The pressure is mounting on Labor too. More candidates have come out against the offshore detention and the turnback policy of the Labor leaders.

But there is no room for complacency. Both Liberal and Labor will do all they can to prevent those that they sent to hell on Manus Island from coming to Australia. We should expect more dirty tricks.

The people power of the grassroots "Let Them Stay" campaign has kept the 267 asylum seekers from Manus and Nauru in Australia, and stopped baby Asha being sent back to Nauru. The same people power will be needed to force the government to bring all the asylum seekers and refugees from Manus and Nauru.

The "Bring Them Here" rallies during refugee week in June could not be at a better time—two weeks before the election. We need to make the rallies as big as possible, with all the union support we can organise to make it clear that there is no alternative but to bring them all here.

The PNG court decision means that one half of the offshore processing regime is finished

Solidarity