



On the backs of battlers

Anna Pha

The Coalition government wished the big banks and corporations a Prosperous New Year with the promise of tax cuts and more corporate welfare. But the message was different for the most vulnerable and least well off as the government embarked upon one of its most callous and criminal exercises yet – Centrelink's Auto-Debt Recovery Program. Thousands of social security recipients and former recipients are being pursued to pay debts they do not owe in a massive exercise to reduce the budget deficit on the backs of the poor.

Alan Tudge, the Minister for Human Services, or more accurately the Minister for Inhumane Services, said "the system is working as intended". It sure is!

"Every letter that is initially sent is based on a discrepancy between an individual's income data held at the Australian Taxation Office with their self-reported income data at Centrelink," Tudge said. This is misleading to say the least.

The ATO sent Centrelink the annual income of recipients which the automated system at Centrelink averaged out on a fortnightly basis. If this average was over the threshold to receive payments then the automated system sent the recipient a debt notice for "overpayment".

This method of calculation is completely inaccurate and either wilfully dishonest or incompetent. The ATO annual figure does not provide a fortnightly breakdown. So it does not take into account periods of eligibility when a person's fortnightly income was below the threshold, such as when they were unemployed or underemployed, or had a period of illness. It is inappropriate to compare it with Centrelink data.

The onus of proof is on recipients of debt notices to prove they do not have a debt. The so-called "debt recovery program" is causing considerable and undue stress and anxiety, to which the government's response was "ring Helpline"!

"Our aim is to ensure that people get what they are entitled to – no more and no less. And to crack down hard when people deliberately defraud the system," Tudge said when announcing the introduction of the new automated system in December 2016.

He said that it would bring in \$4.5 million a day instead of \$295,000 as in the past when departmental staff manually checked

apparent discrepancies and there were personalised avenues of redress such as the telephone. Savage staff cuts mean those receiving inaccurate notices have little or no means of redress except on the internet.

Blunt weapon

"Centrelink should not be used by the government as a blunt weapon to achieve a deficit reduction on the backs of people who already carry the greatest burden of inequality," Dr John Falzon, CEO of the National Council of St Vincent de Paul Society said.

Falzon further criticised the inadequacy of the Newstart Allowance, which has not increased in real terms since 1994. The Society believes the allowance should be increased by at least \$50 a week and indexed appropriately, he said.

Centrelink, no doubt under the instructions from the Abbott/Turnbull government, went back over six years and has been sending out debt notices at the rate of 20,000 per week. It has set a target of \$4 billion in reclaimed "debts"!

How many people keep records for six years? The ATO only requires that they be kept for two or, in more complex situations, five years.

Social security recipients face a Catch 22 situation with gross understaffing at Centrelink offices and jammed phone lines that result in waiting times of hours. Trying to resolve issues without any personal contact on line is near to impossible.

The online myGov portal is difficult to navigate, even for those who are technically savvy, let alone those who do not use the internet.

Of all the people in the community who are least likely to keep records for even a few years, let alone six, the government is targeting them in a desperate attempt to reduce the budget deficit.

This includes people who have experienced homelessness, women who have fled domestic violence, those with mental illness, or workers in and out of work and others on low incomes below the tax threshold.

Thousands of people have already attempted to query and have their alleged debts reduced or wiped. But the system is complex, certainly not easy for someone to understand, let alone have ability to question the government's actions or the wherewithal to seek legal help or go to an account.

Social security recipients with mental



illness, the long-term unemployed, those with inadequate literacy or a poor grasp of English are less likely than the general community to understand their rights, the processes or to have the skills to deal with the system or know where or how to seek help.

The government claims that the vast majority of people are resolving the issue online. But not according to the flood of complaints to welfare organisations, legal aid groups and the media.

The automated system should be halted immediately and all "debts" cancelled. The department requires a large number of additional staff to deal properly with questions of payments which should be done by the public sector.

Budget hypocrisy

Adding insult to injury, automated debt notices follow in the footsteps of the Omnibus Bill with its \$6.3 billion in cuts. It was rammed through Parliament with Labor's support last September. The government had lumped together 24 pieces of legislation into one bill.

Under the Omnibus Act, social security recipients will be charged nine percent interest on debts to the government if they do not agree to a repayment arrangement. The government

is also set to introduce a Departure Prohibition Order to stop them leaving Australia until agreement is reached.

These cuts hit parental leave, family payments, students, pensioners, families of migrants among others. Again, they hit the most vulnerable and disadvantaged.

As the government continues with its cuts in the name of balancing the budget, it is still going ahead with its planned tax cuts for corporations and the rich. This will only further reduce income and be used as a justification for further cuts to social spending.

Needless to say the \$1 trillion budget allocated for military spending over the next 20 years remains in tact. So too the multi-billion dollar infrastructure program for the private sector in northern Australia. This includes a \$1 billion subsidisation of the Adani Carmichael coal mine proposal.

This mine and the proposed subsidy is yet another example of reckless and environmentally destructive spending by a government which dances to the tune of the mining corporations and turns its back on the consequences of climate change and the people.

The government should turn its focus on the big corporations who cheat the public purse out of billions of dollars by paying no tax. ✖

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Under darkness, Gazans mark new year

Guardian

Issue 1762

January 25, 2017

“The way has been shown”

The year 2017 is shaping up to be a huge one for the working class of Australia and all exploited and oppressed people around the world. Communists around the world will be celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Great October Revolution, a momentous turning point in human history in which Russian workers and peasants took power and built a new type of society.

In Australia, the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) will be involved in these celebrations and holding a number of activities focusing on the Revolution, its achievements and their meaning for Australia.

The CPA will be holding its 13th National Congress where it will be analysing current developments and charting the way forward for the next four years. There are also plans to update its program, a document that spells out its policies and longer term aims.

Many are asking how such a reactionary, racist, xenophobe as billionaire Donald Trump could be elected as President of the US. At the same time how did Bernie Sanders who put the word “socialism” on the agenda – something unimaginable a few years ago – gain so much support?

Around the world people are looking for change. Decades of neo-liberal economic policies with cuts to social spending, privatisation, deregulation and attacks on democratic and trade union rights have seen living standards drop, homelessness rise and the gap between the rich and poor widen.

There is confusion. Some fell for the demagoguery of Trump, a ruthless billionaire capitalist pretending to care about the poor and exploited.

At the same time hundreds of thousands of protesters took to the streets in the US and around the world to protest at his policies, in particular his attitude towards women.

Cracks are appearing in the two-party system – some very large – in a number of countries as a result of growing dissatisfaction with the major parties and the façade of democracy they give.

In Australia, the left forces remain relatively weak. Pauline Hanson’s One Nation is being promoted almost on a daily basis in the media. Hanson and her reactionary views have been “mainstreamed”. They also hold currency in the right-wing forces of the Coalition.

These reactionary forces must be defeated. They cannot be allowed to fill the vacuum left by the major parties.

The Russian Revolution showed that it was possible for the working class to win power and throw out the capitalists. It inspired workers around the world and during the years that followed communist parties were formed, including in Australia.

The Communist Party of Australia brought Marxism to the working class of Australia. Party members have been active in so many struggles – against war, for democratic and workers’ rights, for jobs, for social services, for Indigenous rights, in international solidarity, for a socialist Australia and much more.

Many causes that Australian communists have fought for are still to be won. The working class movement has been at its strongest when the Communist Party has been at its strongest. When struggles are successful it is not long before the capitalist class attempts to wind back workers’ gains.

The current situation, domestically and globally, dictates the need more than ever for socialism – high unemployment, global warming, homelessness, economic crisis, starvation, massive dislocation of people, and war.

These crucial issues will be on the agenda of the Party’s 13th National Congress. Central to this is the building and strengthening of the CPA. So join us in celebrating the 100th anniversary of the October Revolution and building the CPA and struggle in Australia.

As Lenin put it following the October Revolution: “The ice has been broken, the road is open ... the way has been shown.”

PRESS FUND

The new ultra right-wing US President has deeply insulted women, disabled people and migrants, wants to block action to mitigate climate change, opposes national health for the citizens of his country, is threatening war with China, has his finger on the nuclear button, and was not actually elected by the US people at all! At the *Guardian* we’re committed to making sure we don’t get taken into yet another US-led war by the coalition government, which already seems willing to follow the dictates of that very dangerous billionaire buffoon. But we’ll need your help, so please send in a Press Fund contribution if you possibly can. Many, many thanks to those who contributed over the break, as follows:

J Ayres \$100, G Crowder \$15, RF \$1, C Greer \$150, NH \$50, D Humphries \$40, Max Hunt \$50, D Mudie \$50, R Kiek \$20, HN \$20, GL Spiers \$100, D Humphries \$40, E Seymour \$5

Progressive total: \$641

Union veterans’ WestConnex protest

Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) veterans bore the brunt of the NSW government’s bulldozer approach to decision making when they took a stand against its controversial WestConnex project.

MUA veterans, some aged in their 80s, were forcibly removed by police from Sydney Park in St Peters, where protestors are trying to stop the removal of more than 800 trees to make way for the motorway.

“If this is the way the Baird government deals with peaceful protest – have a pensioner aged over 80 skull-dragged across the ground – then the people of NSW are in serious trouble,” Joe Deakin, MUA Sydney Branch assistant secretary said.

“Officers were driving their

knees into people’s faces, bending people’s wrists back and as a result of this, both of my wrists are extremely sore and swollen,” he said.

MUA Sydney Branch deputy secretary Paul Keating suffered bruising to his face when he was dragged from the site. The MUA senior officials joined around a dozen MUA youth and veterans members, who went down to support the local community fighting to stop the destruction of vital public spaces.

“WestConnex is symptomatic of the Baird government disregarding the interests of ordinary people to benefit large corporations and developers,” Mr Keating said. “It was important that we go down to show our support because we know that real change comes when the

community stands up and fights for what it believes in.

“All communities have the right to public space so they can flourish, yet we see again and again the rich and powerful don’t care about communities.”

Protestors, led by the WestConnex Action Group, set up camp in the park four months ago in a bid to save it from being turned into a road interchange.

“Our democracy protects our right to protest peacefully,” Mr Keating said.

“The Baird government needs to be held accountable for today’s needless brutality, particularly against the elderly.” ✪

Vital legal aid lost

Dan Stubbs, NACLCL
Wayne Muir, NATSILS

The National Association of Community Legal Centres (NACLCL) and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (NATSILS) believes the Mid-year Economic and Fiscal Outlook (MYEFO) [last month] represents another missed opportunity by the federal government to guarantee access to vital legal help for vulnerable and disadvantaged people across Australia.

Between 2017-2018 and 2019-2020, Community Legal Centres will lose almost \$35 million and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services will lose close to \$18 million.

Community Legal Centres (CLC) help over 215,000 clients every year and conservative numbers tell us that we turn away over 160,000 other vulnerable and disadvantaged people. Despite this,

CLCs are facing a 30 percent funding cliff nationally from 1 July next year and there was nothing in MYEFO to stop the funding cliff.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (ATSILS) provide vital legal help to vulnerable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In 2017, the ATSILS will be forced to withdraw frontline services from towns, remote and regional locations, courts and tribunals.

The ATSILS will be required to make critical staff members redundant, will be prevented from offering after hours assistance to those with emergencies and will have no choice but to turn away Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people seeking help from culturally competent legal assistance providers.

The hard truth is that ATSILS will be so severely impacted by these cuts that they will be unable to fundamentally help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

uphold their right to the natural justice that all Australian citizens deserve.

The funding cuts will have a huge impact across Australia. We understand there are significant budget pressures, however we urge the government to remember that investing in legal assistance services actually saves the government and community money in the long term.

No announcement means time is almost up for these services and their clients. We can only hope that in the new year and in the course of preparing the next federal budget the government listens to the voices across the community that have come out in support of the sector, including most recently pro bono firms, law societies and churches, and reverses the funding cliff facing CLCs and ATSILS.

We are already forced to turn people away and that the situation is only getting worse. ✪

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

“ And – they tell us – we at home
Live free from danger, they go out to battle:
Fools!
I’d rather stand three times in the front line
than bear
a child

”

Medea – Euripides

Find out more about the
Communist Party of Australia

web www.cpa.org.au email cpa@cpa.org.au phone 02 9699 8844

Another life at risk on Nauru

A refugee man on Nauru who appears to have suffered a serious cardiac event more than one month ago is being denied access to urgent medical treatment after Australian authorities have failed to transfer him to a facility with appropriate testing and treatment options.

Medical experts warn that the man, who the Asylum Seekers Resource Centre (ASRC) are calling Yusuf, may be at severe risk of suffering a heart attack or further complications that could lead to significant harm unless he immediately receives more advanced medical treatment that is unavailable on Nauru.

The case comes as the inquest into the death of Hamid Khazaei, who died after being denied an urgent medical transfer in 2014, hears damning evidence of the litany of mistakes and failed responsibilities made by the Australian government and Department of Immigration in the lead-up to his death.

"We cannot allow Yusuf to become another appalling failure of our government's duty of care – he must be transferred to safety immediately," said Kon Karapanagiotidis, CEO of the ASRC.

"Yusuf's treatment shows our government has learned nothing from the revelations from the inquest into the death of Hamid Khazaei.

"Australian authorities have a duty of care to refugees and people seeking asylum regardless of whether they are in detention centres or living in the community offshore and they are once again failing in that responsibility," he said.

"It is clear that Yusuf requires immediate medical transfer," said Natasha Blucher, ASRC Detention Rights Advocate.

"He has described ongoing symptoms to me, which medical specialists have explained are indicative of ongoing cardiac problems. These symptoms include sweating, pain in the chest that moves to the left side of body and very cold hands."

Despite the seriousness of his condition, he has been waiting for urgent medical care for more than one month. He is terrified.

The information Yusuf has given advocates once again raises serious questions about the adequacy of medical care for refugees and

people seeking asylum on Nauru.

Yusuf is a refugee man in his 30s and living in the community on Nauru. On around November 5 Yusuf says he felt dizzy, had numb feet, strange sweats on his body and cold hands. He presented at Republic of Nauru hospital where doctors conducted an electrocardiogram and blood tests.

Yusuf was told that his condition was very serious and that he could not be treated on Nauru. He was then transferred to the IHMS clinic on Nauru where they did further tests and told him the doctor at the hospital was correct, and that he needed an angiogram which cannot be done on Nauru.

Yusuf completed paperwork and was told he would be sent to Papua New Guinea on 23 November. This date came and went and nothing happened.

On around December 1, a doctor told him that the transfer did not happen as there had been no planes leaving Nauru. Yusuf was told that flights had resumed and he would be transferred within the next week. Despite these assurances he is still in his home on Nauru.

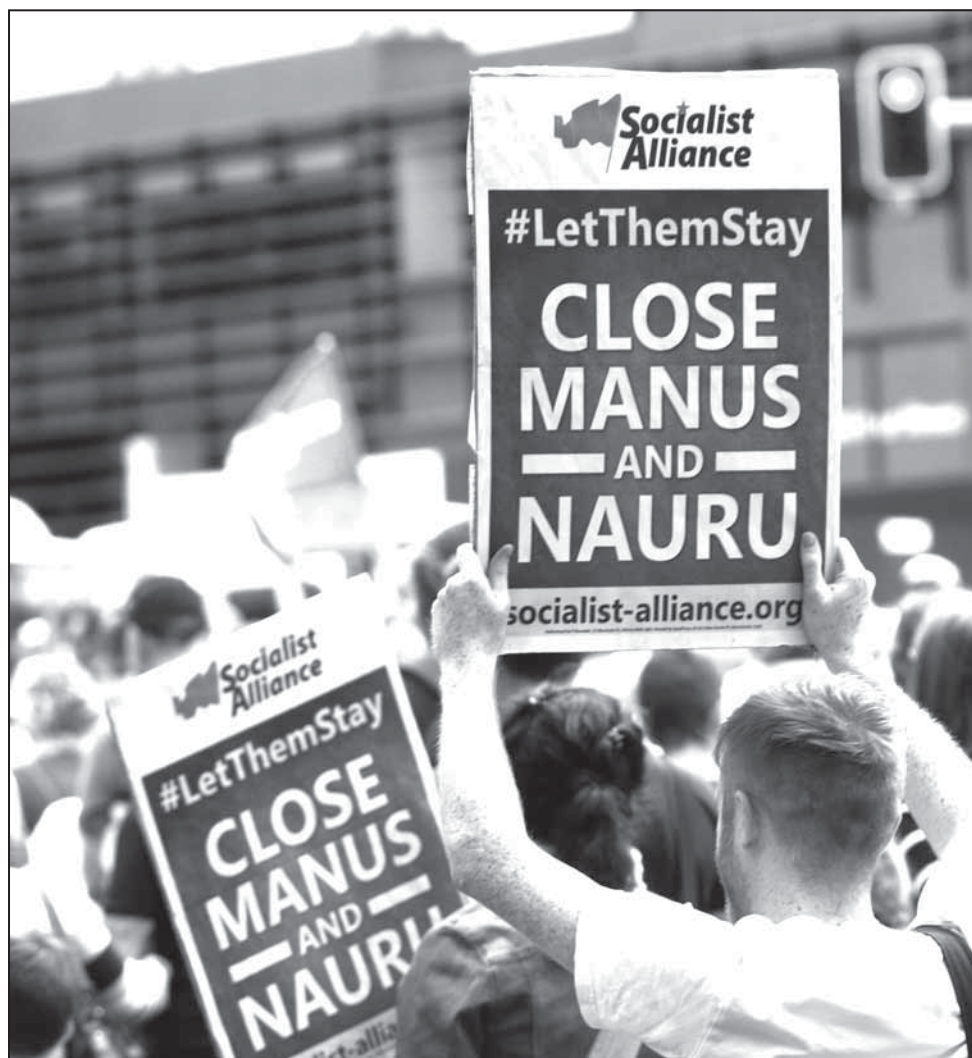
He has described ongoing symptoms sweating, pain in the chest that moves to the left side of body, and very cold hands that are recurring every 2-3 days or when he walks or exerts himself.

"Yusuf does not care where he goes, he just wants to receive treatment and to stay alive," said Natasha Blucher.

Dr Clare Arnett, a cardiologist based in Australia, has reviewed copies of Yusuf's medical notes that he was able to photograph while in hospital and offered her assessment of the seriousness of his case. Yusuf was not provided with his complete medical records from the hospital or the outcomes of his tests.

"This young man presented with left sided chest pain, diaphoresis (sweating) and dizziness. Such a presentation is potentially serious and conditions such as acute coronary syndrome, bradycardia and pulmonary embolism should be excluded," said Clare Arnett, cardiologist.

"I have very limited information from his medical records but I understand that based on clinical assessment, examination, serial



ECGs and Troponin blood tests his treating doctors were concerned that he was suffering from 'severe bradycardia and acute coronary syndrome'.

His doctors recommended referral for specialist medical care and I agree with this assessment based on my limited information."

"Furthermore, he has ongoing recurrent exertional chest pain which is of great concern.

This for me increases the urgency of his condition," said Dr Arnett.

It is clear that Yusuf requires a level of medical care that is unavailable on Nauru.

The ASRC is calling on Australian authorities to immediately evacuate Yusuf to a facility where he can receive the urgent medical treatment he requires. ✪

Mental health sector unites

More than 50 mental health sector organisations have written a joint letter to the Prime Minister and First Ministers outlining the many shortcomings in the draft Fifth National Mental Health Plan released in October and calling for decisive action.

The letter draws attention to the alarming gaps between previous commitments by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) on mental health and the consultation draft for the Fifth National Mental Health Plan.

Mental Health Australia CEO Frank Quinlan says early and consistent sector-wide feedback on the draft plan indicates it reflects old modes of thinking and does not reflect a changing world.

"It appears from the draft plan that governments intend to renege on past COAG commitments," said Mr Quinlan. "We are united on the key features of a world leading mental health system that supports consumers and carers to live contributing lives."

Mental Health Australia's submission on the draft Fifth National Mental Health Plan calls for a substantially re-drafted Plan to:

- clarify roles and responsibilities of governments, and take a whole of government approach to mental health
- include targets and indicators
- reorient investment towards early intervention and prevention

- expand and embed community services, close to need
- be subject to careful revision and be submitted to Ministers in mid 2017, rather than being rushed through in early 2017.

Signatories to the joint letter include the National Mental Health Consumer & Carer Forum, Suicide Prevention Australia, Orygen, Sane Australia, ReachOut, RUOK?, the Black Dog Institute and a further 50 organisations for a total of 57.

Expertise

A diverse partnership of 37 representative organisations of people with disability, disability advocacy organisations and disability peak bodies are calling for the 2017 Board of the NDIA to ensure strong representation of people with disability. The partner organisations made their call as part of a Civil Society NDIS Statement directed to the Council of Australian Governments and the National Disability Insurance Agency.

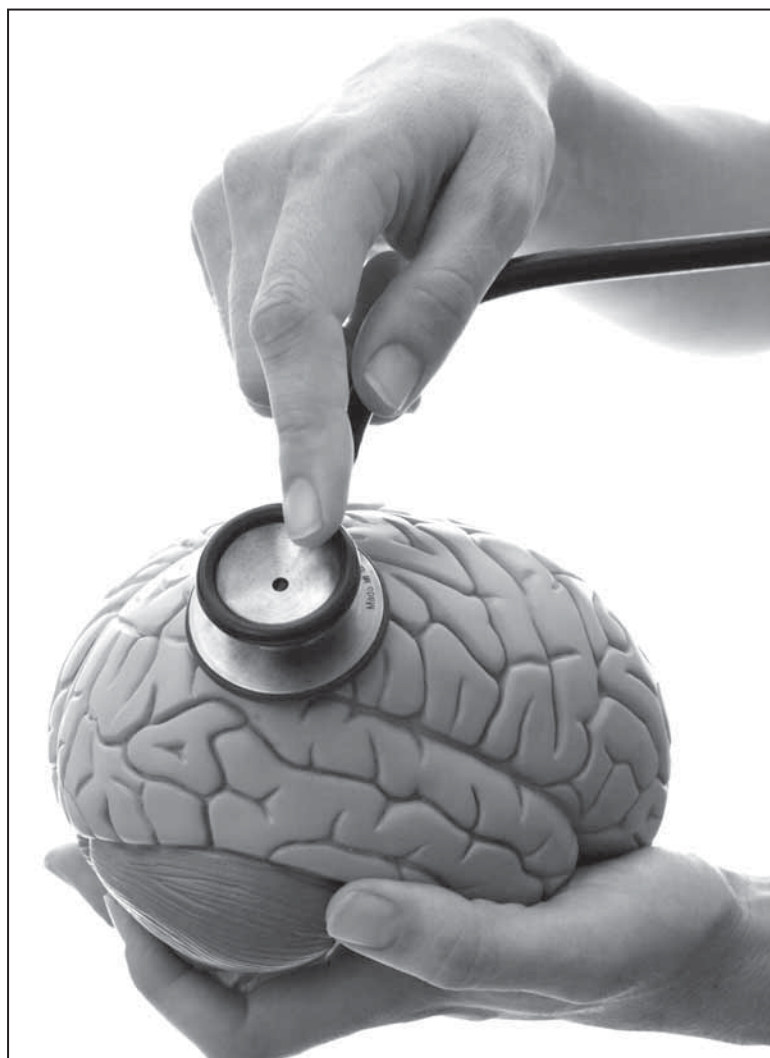
"The success of NDIS implementation cannot be adequately understood from simply an economic, market or financial perspective," said Bonnie Millen, President of People with Disability Australia. "We expect NDIA board members to lead and uphold the vision, objects and principles of the NDIS, which broadly aim to support our independence and social and economic participation. This requires

specific technical and disability knowledge, skills and expertise, and strong representation of people with disability on the NDIA Board is critical to achieving this."

Christina Ryan, Chief Executive Officer of Advocacy for Inclusion said, "High level corporate skills cannot be favoured over disability expertise. The long-term viability of the NDIS needs to remain steadfast in achieving core principles, including participant choice and control and genuine co-design by people with disability.

"We are the experts in our own lives, and this expertise is critical to the integrity and cost effectiveness of NDIS implementation. The government wrongly assumes that there are no people with disability with the high level governance, financial management and industry expertise required for the NDIA Board."

Executive Director of Community Mental Health Australia, Amanda Bresnan said, "Building strong linkages between the NDIS and other service systems, including the mental health service system is critical for people with psychosocial disability. NDIS governance must include people with disability to reflect the unique combination of expertise that is essential for a scheme that is more than an exercise in industry and financial management – it is designed to deliver secure lifetime support and equality of opportunity." ✪



The singer at the gates of dawn

A short story by Peter Mac

The Department concert was organised by one of the division managers as an attempt to boost staff morale during the government's selective retrenchment program. Some members of management sympathised with the employees because they knew that the government's real agenda was to abolish the entire Department.

The performers were drawn from all ranks of the staff. An architect whose name I've long forgotten did a creditable job of *Summertime*, which he played bush-style with a bow on a long, ancient cross-cut saw! I myself sang *I'm reviewing the situation* from *Oliver*, in which Fagan muses on his meagre prospects for comfort in his old age.

An engineer surprised us with a moving performance of *Old Man River*. Tall and thin, with a very deep voice, he always spoke quietly and courteously, and never at all about his time as an unwilling conscript in Vietnam.

But the biggest surprise came with the last item. The compere loaded into the hi-fi set one of the disks he'd provided to accompany the performers. He turned the volume up and announced laconically: "Rita's going to give us a song about a girl who decides to write a letter to someone she loves, but can't make up her mind to send it."

Invariably cheerful, Rita Jones from the Plan Records section was known as "the hummer" because of her habit of humming along and brushing back her tousled hair as she worked.

As the opening bars rose to a climax, we guessed what she was going to sing. Someone called out: "Just hum it, Rita!", and I heard a friend mutter: "Christ, she'll never make it".

But she did. Her singing voice was beautiful and wonderfully powerful; it leapt and soared, and for 11 minutes we sat dumbfounded, gripped and helpless like Kenneth Graeme's small animals at the gates of dawn, while this small, frail woman gave a tremendous, passionate interpretation of Tatyana's "letter scene" from *Eugénie Onegin*.

The stunning impact was magnified because it was totally unexpected. We knew relatively little about her. She was raising two children on her own, and there were rumours of a desperately unhappy former marriage with an abusive husband. Everyone had heard her hum, but no one had ever heard her sing, and no one realised she was mentally practising lines from opera while she hummed away at work.

Struggle

In the months after the concert, union members fought a determined, often bitter campaign against the redundancy program.

We achieved a cancellation of the first stage, during which mid-ranking professionals were pressured to nominate members of their staff who were the least efficient and therefore most deserving of consignment to the retrenchment section, nicknamed "the holding tank".

Of the few who co-operated in this shameful exercise, some were found to have nominated people with whom they'd never worked, and in one case a person nominated someone he'd never met.

Management conducted the initial appeal interviews without union representation, but following our protests a former arbitration commissioner was recruited to take charge, and he insisted that union representatives be present.

The government had deemed the Department commercially non-viable, and by association its former employees were seen the same way.



Sydney's General Post Office, one of Australia's best 19th Century government buildings, was given a multimillion dollar face-lift by the government Department of Housing and Construction before the Keating government leased it to Macquarie Bank.

We got several decisions overturned, but our triumphs were short-lived.

The government said the Department had to be profitable, and the management decided to buy computer-aided drafting (CAD) equipment. One union delegate calculated that stand-alone CAD machines (the industry standard) could have been purchased for every professional employee nationwide for \$5 million.

But the managers got a loan of \$50 million (according to our estimate) from the government itself, with interest set at the prevailing commercial rate, and bought a grossly complex second-hand wide area network CAD network from a bankrupt US architectural firm.

It was far in excess of our requirements and was little used. The management soon defaulted on the repayments, and the government claimed the Department was commercially unviable and had to be closed down. And we suddenly found that the leaders of our unions weren't prepared to take on a Labor government in an attempt to save the Department. The coalition won the next election and finished off the job.

On the last day of business for what remained of the Department, the few of us who were left could have taken the day off or done nothing. But we all came in and worked

hard throughout the day, tying up loose ends, struggling to deal with the last rush of requests from client departments and mourning in silence the passing of this part of our lives. Afterwards a few of us went out and got very drunk.

We fulfilled our role as public servants and I was very proud of my workmates on that day.

Losses and lessons

The department employees were highly dedicated and had a strong sense of social responsibility. In Sydney immediately after the Granville railway disaster the Department's office was almost deserted because the staff had walked out en masse and had gone to Sydney Hospital to donate blood.

The employees included highly talented people who had designed, documented and supervised the construction of most of the government buildings in the post-war period.

The closing down of the Department not only involved the loss of employment for a large group of Australian citizens, it also resulted in the loss of a valuable public asset.

The Department had won architectural and engineering awards over many years, and it played a key role in urban reconstruction in one capital city, after one of the nation's most catastrophic weather events.

Years after it was abolished three young workers died during the Rudd government's rushed and hopelessly supervised thermal insulation program. These tragedies could almost certainly have been avoided with proper control by a federal construction authority like the Department, which had a national staff of electrical works supervisors.

After retrenchment, most of the professional specialist employees were cherry-picked for employment by private firms. But others who had dedicated their lives to public service experienced difficulty in dedicating themselves to maximising profits for shareholders.

And many found themselves tarred with the brush of failure. The government had deemed the Department commercially non-viable, and by association its former employees were seen the same way. As any asylum seeker forcibly detained on a remote foreign island can tell you, if the government rejects you, others will do the same.

The worst off were middle-aged employees with young children and mortgages, particularly those working in administration or professional support roles. Many joined the ranks of the unemployed.

One of the first to be transferred to the "tank" became unbearably worried, moody and bad tempered. His wife walked out with the kids; he sank into a deep depression and was finally admitted to a psychiatric ward.

The Department had employed some people with minor mental disabilities for simple administrative tasks. Good workers, helpful and cooperative, they left quietly. Their outlook was particularly bleak.

And Rita Jones from Plan Records disappeared. Her friends suggested she had moved interstate to escape her obsessive, control-freak husband, and that she had always avoided the limelight of a vocal career in order to avoid him.

There were good memories as well as bad for all of us. For me, one outstanding memory was the night when Rita lifted the spirits of her workmates in a moment of unexpected musical ecstasy, and shone a brilliant light in a darkened hour.

But there were lessons as well as memories. If a government wants to abolish a department, its objective will undoubtedly be to benefit the private sector by getting rid of a competitor and to convert a public asset into a source of private profit. The biggest lesson is that we can and must challenge any such move. It's a matter of serving the public interest. ✪

A rich history

Sitaram Yechury is the General Secretary of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the parliamentary group leader of his Party. He was recently in Sydney to speak at a conference and while he was there visited the Communist Party of Australia's headquarters. He kindly agreed to an interview with **Anna Pha** from the *Guardian*.

Guardian: I thought we could start with some background about the Communist Party of India Marxist?

Sitaram: The Party has a very long history. It is the product of the fight of the Indian communists, first against revisionism that appeared in the communist movement and then against adventurism that surfaced a few years later.

G: What period are we talking about?

Sitaram: I am talking about the decade of the 1960s. Following the 20th Congress of the CPSU [Communist Party of the Soviet Union – 1956] these trends developed in the international Communist movement.

Both these manifestations emerged rather strongly in India and we had to struggle against them. Eventually, the Indian Communist stream ended up in three streams: one the CPI, one the CPI(ML) which was more aligned to Chinese and in those days Mao Ze Dong's positions and then us, the CPI(M).

But over a period of time we grew to become the stronger of these three tendencies and emerged as a major player in Indian politics, a role we continue to play now though not in such a big way as it used to be. But still it is a force that Indian politics cannot ignore.

So there is a distinct point of view in Indian politics that is articulated by the CPI(M) and represented by the CPI(M).

G: So how large is the CPI(M)?

SY: It has over 100,000 members. We are very, very selective in our party membership. We have very rigorous criteria. But we have what we call the mass organisations in which the party leaders work, leading that section of the people.

Apart from the trade unions, youth, students, women, the agricultural workers and the peasantry, we also have employees like federations of financial organisations like the banks, like the insurance companies, like the teachers, university and college teachers, and all these federations. When you add up the membership of all that together it is around 40 million plus.

G: Are you concentrated in particular parts of India?

SY: Traditionally we have been stronger in three of the Indian states – in Bengal, Kerala and in Tripura.

Of these three we have now the state governments in Kerala and Tripura – elected governments in which the CPI(M) is in the lead of these governments. In Bengal, we have been under tremendous attack by a grand coalition of all the reactionary forces that managed to come together to put an end to our winning elections after our winning seven times on the trot and forming and running a government for 35 years.

They had the great, grand coalition for that.

G: When did they succeed?

SY: That was in 2011. They succeeded on the basis of and continue to maintain themselves on the basis of a very intense level of politics that is determined by violence and terror.

We have lost more than 200 comrades of ours during the last four years or so. And these

struggles continue every day. There's physical fights that continue to happen. We are facing it, our comrades are braving it and I think will be able to hold them.

G: I think the CPI(M) has a rich history of martyrs and struggle.

SY: We do. The Party has what we call a very rich history of what we call mass agitations, which are not only strikes but marches where we march through various stretches of the country.

It is not as the long march of the Chinese but it is the same idea. We cut across the lands in the various states and we still do that. In fact next week, all the agricultural workers and the farmers are organising seven different marches from all across India to congregate at a central place after a period of nearly 45 days of marching.

That is to highlight the issue of a very deep agrarian crisis in India.

Agrarian crisis

G: Could you tell us more about that crisis?

SY: India has traditionally been an agricultural economy but of late in the last 20 years or so with globalisation and all that – all of us are familiar with – the nature of the Indian economy underwent changes and today it is the services, that includes the information technology sector, where India has developed itself to be very good with human skills in the software branches.

So the services sector has actually become the dominant contributor to India's GDP, and then after industry, agriculture has been reduced to the third position. But yet more than 60 percent of the Indian people are dependent on agriculture.

So therefore the agrarian distress is a very serious issue for us in India because of these new agreements that have been concluded. Whether it is the Doha agreement or the WTO [World Trade Organisation], or whether it is the access of foreign imports to India, Indian agriculture is actually suffering with the dumping of highly subsidised western products. That is really affecting our farming in a big way.

As a result of this the Indian farmer is not getting proper remuneration for his produce which is leading up to the farmers taking loans from the banks in order to survive. The inability to return these loans is pushing thousands of farmers to commit distress suicides. These distress suicides, very distressing as it is, the volumes are increasing rapidly.

So we have a very serious agrarian crisis. Unless the Indian government and the state intervene positively, giving relief to our farming community and ensuring proper wages to the agricultural workers, this crisis cannot be overcome.

In the last 10 years, for instance, the real wages of agricultural workers have actually declined so their living conditions are worse than what they used to be. So the march is highlighting these issues and demanding the government give these farmers an adequate minimum support price for their produce so that they don't have to starve.

Pitting worker against worker

G: If we could return to the question of services, this is an issue that concerns Australian workers and trade unions because, for example, Telstra recently announced the sacking of 400-500 workers because they are going offshore to India for call centres. There is a pattern of companies going offshore for cheap, skilled technical labour and sacking Australian workers which of course then has a tendency to pit Australian workers against Indian workers as they are seen as "taking our jobs". I am wondering if there are any communications between the trade union centres and what approach the CPI(M) is taking on this question.

SY: There are approaches, in fact both between the trade unions and also as part of the World Federation of Trade Unions whose Congress, as I speak, is meeting in Dublin that issue figured. This is going to be a major issue on which there should be a unified position.

The point is very simple. This is the tactic of the bourgeoisie to pit one worker in one country against the worker of the other while the actual culprit is the bourgeoisie who in their search for maximising profits that this offshore business is happening. It is not that the Indian people are stealing Australian jobs. It's the Australian bourgeoisie who is maximising profits by shifting to India.

That target should not be missed out. What the bourgeoisie always does is to pit one section of workers against the other while they get away scot-free by their predatory profit maximisation which is what capitalism is all about.

So I think both the Australian workers and the Indian workers will have to bring back the central issue into focus. That is as far as the Party is concerned. We are trying to tell the trade unions that you have to bring it back to that focus, saying that the Indian workers be given the same rates of wages that are paid to Australian workers.

If that is done then they will not shift. Why would they shift?

Deindustrialisation

G: Could you say more about the government's domestic policies?

SY: Domestically the policies are imposing unprecedented burdens on our people. The economic policy is more connected with creating greater access for foreign capital to maximise profits. They have opened up every area of the Indian economy to the inflow of foreign capital.

The net result is that Indian domestic industry is very badly affected. Not just agriculture, but everything.

India has a very large component of industry which we call small scale industry. They are small units. They are not huge factories and these small units employ the maximum number of people.

Now with this inflow of foreign capital, these small units are the ones that are getting wiped out. And with them employment for millions of people is wiped out. So that is leading to growing unemployment.

There are completely uncontrollable rises in the prices of all food articles and social commodities. The subsidies are all being withdrawn, if not already withdrawn they are all being withdrawn.

So the net result because of the global capitalist thirst, by opening up India's economy and resources for international capital profit maximisation, India's domestic deindustrialisation has virtually begun.

G: It could hardly have been said to have become industrialised?

SY: That's right. Last month data that had been put out by the government shows a negative, a minus 2 point something growth of industry and minus 3.3 percent growth of manufacturing.

Any economist would tell you that the production of capital goods is the index for the future of the economy. Last month's capital goods production figure fell by minus 29.6 percent. Whopping! That means no new investment is being planned for the next few years.

So this is the overall crisis, difficult times in India.

Trade agreements

G: India is part of the Trans Pacific Partnership, the Trade In Services Agreement?

SY: Yes, and now they are going for a free trade agreement with the European Union which will be disastrous for India. It means that highly subsidised European dairy and agricultural products will flood Indian markets and the Indian farmer, already in crisis, is going to be completely drowned with this.

It is a right-wing government in India, but so far the right-wing policies were confined to domestic issues which are also very dangerous as they are going to completely disrupt the unity of our country and our people.

India is a huge multi-national country. You really can't have an exclusivist political situation where you speak for only one religion or you speak for one language.

But among its diversities what we have is a government that is pursuing a singularly exclusivist agenda of wanting to convert India to be more and more dominated by just one community, a religious community and that is Hindu and by only one language which is Hindi.

India will just implode. That is India's domestic right-wing government that is happening and that is in current terms of employing people in various positions.

US Strategic Defence Partner

G: I think it would be worth you saying a few words about recent developments in India's relations with the US and the recent military agreement because India until the Modi government, if I am correct, was considered non-aligned.

SY: That's correct.

We are very, very concerned and critical of what our government, the Indian government, is doing in this area. In fact we have organised public actions against the government's move of virtually using India as a subordinate area of US imperialism.

India has now been reduced as a subordinate ally and the USA has declared India as its Strategic Defence Partner which is something that it has never been in India's case. This is the first time you are having a Non-Aligned Summit where an Indian Prime Minister has not attended. This has never happened in the history of our land.

It is a very clear shift to pro-US imperialism. It is happening in all areas. It's not only in foreign policy, but it is happening in defence as

A free trade agreement with the European Union which will be disastrous for India. It means that highly subsidised European dairy and agricultural products will flood Indian markets and the Indian farmer, already in crisis, is going to be completely drowned with this.



Anna Pha interviewing Sitaram Yechury.

a strategic defence partner; it is happening in the economic sphere with free trade agreements and the signing of various economic treaties; it's happening with climate change where suddenly against the opinion of the Indian parliament, decided to go and ratify the Paris Accord. This happened just two days ago. So these are not usual developments.

G: Have the relations with Russia changed with this government?

SY: Yes, because the government has moved away from the traditional framework of our defence cooperation relations. So, they moved away from Russian defence cooperation which means they are buying a lot of western defence equipment which again is very disturbing for us because we have about 200 million Indian Muslims. India is now buying a lot from Israel.

India has the largest military budget from Israel in the world today. This means that we are financing to a large extent Israel's continuing oppression of the Palestinians.

That is something that was impossible to have conceived of even a few years ago. Naturally it is disturbing Russia. Now they have signed to buy a huge number of French fighter planes and a lot of American equipment.

US imperialism is creating a situation, encouraging tensions between India and Pakistan.

Hindu fundamentalism

G: That brings me to my next question: what is happening in Pakistan and also in Kashmir?

SY: With the right-wing government in

India it was only a matter of time before this became very sharply exposed. I mean if you are talking only of a Hindu India then you will have a Muslim reaction. So you have Muslim fundamentalists on the other side and you have Hindu fundamentalists in India and they both feed each other.

That is exactly what is happening, with greater tensions between the two countries and that is a playground for US imperialism and for the military industrial complex.

G: They play both sides...

SY: Absolutely. The US have this defence agreement with India, calling it a major strategic defence partner and now they [the US] are talking with Pakistan along similar lines. So they do it with both sides, that's how they always come through.

But there has always been this tension between India and Pakistan on Kashmir.

Partitioning of India

On Kashmir, the fact of the matter has always been that British India was united, it included Pakistan, Bangladesh and Kashmir. When British India became independent, at that time, unfortunately the partition of India took place.

Many of these, what we call princely states, they are feudal kingdoms in British India – there were about 666 plus in British India at that time – so all of them were given the option to choose who they wanted to go with, India or Pakistan. So it was mayhem, some choosing here, some there.

So when that was finally settled, Kashmir remained in dispute, which actually was not a

dispute because the ruler of Kashmir had signed the accord of acceding to the Indian union in 1948. But Pakistan contested that. That is a bone of dispute.

Now historically the rulers were given the option of choosing where to go. The ruler chose to go with India. Pakistan's argument is that the ruler chose India because the ruler was a Hindu but the majority of the people are Muslim.

So it was not the people who chose to go with India but it was the ruler. So Pakistan claims that the people want to go with Pakistan. That is not a fact at all. Today, in fact, in Kashmir, if you ask anyone who they want to be with, they will tell you they neither want Pakistan nor India.

That is where we are worried because Kashmir is part of India but why are people getting alienated? For that we have taken, the CPI(M) have taken, a public position consistently through all these disturbances saying that the government of India should have a political dialogue with all the stakeholders in Kashmir.

Political parties, non-political parties, all those who are stakeholders and see where the promises made to Kashmir at the time of their joining India, if under those promises how much has not been fulfilled or not been kept by the Indian state, and how that has been constantly eroded by the Indian state that leads to the alienation of the people.

So they need to be addressed. Now the unfortunate part is that part of Kashmir is occupied by Pakistan, and that part of Kashmir they have not occupied Pakistan are saying is occupied by India.

G: And that suits the US?

SY: Absolutely. And that is the imperialist and the USA. Just look at it geographically and the geo-politics of it. Kashmir today, what is occupied today by Pakistan in that valley is what the US would love, that is what they want to have to create an independent state.

An independent state means that that is the point of access to Central Asia – to Afghanistan – and that is the part that joins with China, Tibet. And so it is a very, very strategic location. And that is exactly what the USA would want.

Pakistan, because of its own historical origins and because of its Muslim population is saying Kashmir is theirs and India is saying no, the king has signed accession to the Indian union, so it is ours.

And legally, India has the legal documentation, because that is what the ruler signed. That is what Mountbatten* told these princely kingdoms: you are to choose between India and Pakistan. They chose India. So legally India is right.

So all of this together contributes to a rather difficult situation. Therefore the only way is to win back the confidence of the people of Kashmir by the Indian state and this can only happen through a political dialogue with all the stakeholders concerned.

That is what we are pressing for.

* Lord Mountbatten was viceroy of India with a mandate to oversee the British withdrawal in 1947 when India won its independence from its British colonisers. ✪

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From Lenin to Davos

John Wight

The surprise over Oxfam's recent report on global poverty is that anyone is surprised. The revelation that eight people own more wealth than the poorest half of humanity merely confirms that neo-liberalism is working precisely as intended.

When the Russian Revolution occurred a hundred years ago in 1917, it did so in response to an economic order that had been responsible for the most devastating global conflict the world had seen, one that left 17 million killed and millions more wounded and maimed.

The First World War was fought over the colonial carve up of the undeveloped world, specifically Africa and the Middle East, in the interests of the wealth and power of European ruling classes whose greed for more wealth and power knew no bounds.

The very same level of greed, the complete lack of concern for working people and the poor on the part of the super-rich and elite, is the ideological driving force of neo-liberalism in our time, regardless of what its proponents and apologists argue. The eight multi-billionaires, named in the Oxfam report, who own more wealth than 3.6 billion human beings in 2017, are as follows: Bill Gates, Amancio Ortega, Warren Buffet, Carlos Slim Helu, Jeff Bezos, Mark Zuckerberg, Larry Ellison, and Michael Bloomberg. The striking though perhaps not surprising statistic about this group is that all but two of them are American.

Eight men could not amass such vast and obscene wealth without an obliging global political and economic order to make it possible. Neo-liberalism – in other words, unfettered global capitalism – is that very order and the very antithesis of national sovereignty. It has ensured that while governments around the world may speak the language of power, in truth they are mere courtiers at the feet of global corporations and those who own them.

So the surprise, given the nature of neo-liberalism, is not that such an obscene level of inequality exists in our time. The surprise instead is that such an obscene level of inequality, and the foundations of mass poverty on which it rests, has not sparked a social revolution of a similar impact as the Russian Revolution. Here



we must take account of the role of ideology in conditioning us to accept the status quo as normal, indeed natural, and in doing so ensuring that we toe the line, regardless of the glaring evidence of the irrational and unjust nature of that status quo.

According to the French political philosopher, Louis Althusser, "The ideology of the ruling class does not become the ruling ideology by the grace of God, nor even by virtue of the seizure of state power alone." He also observes, "Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence."

The point is that we live our lives within social, political, and economic parameters we have not chosen for ourselves. And even though we may be among the ever-increasing number of who find themselves struggling or living in poverty, we are conditioned to believe that the problem lies with us rather than the system. Stepping back from this dynamic for a moment: are we really saying that the aforementioned

eight multi-billionaires deserve to enjoy so much wealth, while the 3.6 billion human beings who own so little deserve their poverty?

Surely this is a question that answers itself. In the same week that wider members of the economic and political elite enjoy their annual Davos jamboree, otherwise known as the World Economic Forum, 154,000 children will die due to extreme poverty. You can bet that the children of the rich and powerful cavorting around this exclusive and luxurious Swiss resort are not among them.

It is a disgusting and despicable state of affairs, not to mention a withering indictment of what many have the temerity to describe Western civilisation.

Such statistics should have all of us – all people of conscience and consciousness – spitting nails at the level of injustice they reveal. Yet the truth is that we've become so accustomed to this reality that we have become desensitised and do not, or no longer believe, that an alternate reality possible.

Which brings us back to Lenin and the Bolsheviks in 1917. They refused to ignore reality or to become desensitised to it. Instead, they rode a tidal wave of anger that had built up at the scale of the suffering and injustice being endured by masses in Russia, with the end result a revolution that not only succeeded in overthrowing the existing order in their own country, but which also succeeded in threatening to do likewise throughout Europe. The end result, history reveals, was cataclysmic societal collapse of a kind that no-one should make the mistake of believing could never happen again. It could.

Indeed perhaps the only failing of the Bolsheviks is that they came too soon. However, that their like will come again grows increasingly certain with each passing year in which the world remains hell for the many and heaven for the few.

Our eight multi-billionaires and members of the Davos elite should take note.
RT ☘

Puerto Rico

Independence fighter free

Oscar will be freed! Oscar López Rivera, the Puerto Rican political prisoner who has served the most years in prison for fighting for his country's independence, had his sentence commuted by President Barack Obama, January 17, 2017.

The United States government announced the release of López Rivera, who has been imprisoned in the US for 36 years for his struggle to free Puerto Rico from US colonial rule. López Rivera's sentence will now expire on May 17, according to a White House source, consulted by the EFE news agency.

López Rivera, born in Puerto Rico in 1943, is an independence leader in his native country. Upon returning to Chicago after serving in the Vietnam War, he joined the struggle for the rights of the Puerto Rican people and participated in acts of civil disobedience and other actions.

In 1976 he joined the clandestine fight for the independence of Puerto Rico as a member of the Armed Forces of National Liberation. In 1981 he was captured by the FBI accused of "conspiracy" and for his militancy in the FALN.

At the time of his capture, he proclaimed himself a prisoner of war, protected in the first protocol of the *Geneva Convention of 1949*.

The protocol protects López Rivera for being a person arrested in conflict against colonial occupation.

The US did not recognise the demand of López Rivera and sentenced him to 55 years in prison, after an alleged attempt to escape, the sentence increased to 70 years in prison, 12 of which have been spent in isolated confinement.

Former US President Bill Clinton in 1999 offered him a pardon. The offer was made to 13 members who accepted, but López rejected it because it included completing 10 years in jail with good behaviour. Leaders from around the world, as well as human rights organisations, have demanded the release of Oscar López Rivera.

Congressman Luis Gutiérrez and attorney Jan Susler, who have fought tirelessly for their release, reported the news to *Claridad*, the newspaper of Puerto Rico's independence.

Thousands of Puerto Ricans began to shout with joy, to cry with emotion and to give thanks because they will finally have López Rivera at home. His daughter Clarisa, his granddaughter Karina, his siblings and other relatives, as well as his people on the Island and in the city of Chicago, celebrated.

Thousands of people in Puerto

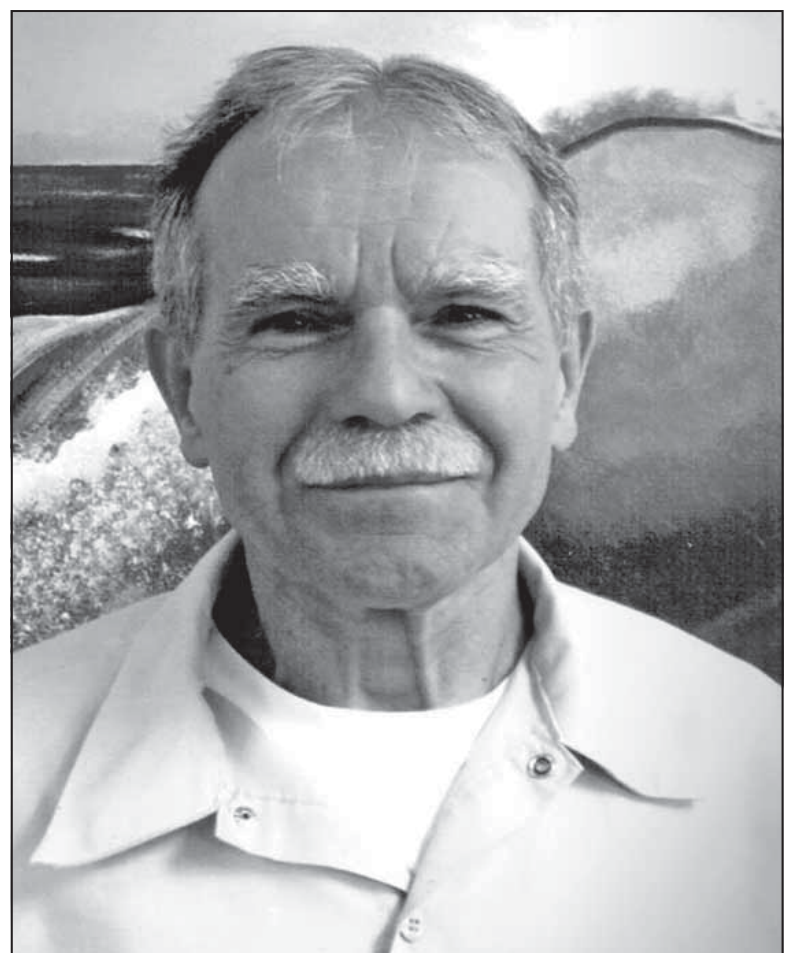
Rico and abroad, from the humblest to the world-renowned figures, include Pope Francis, fought for the release of López Rivera in a massive and intense campaign that lasted for years.

The most consistent and active organisations were Mujeres en el Puente, which met for years on the last Sunday of each month in San Juan, New York and Chicago; the Pro Human Rights Committee of Puerto Rico; 32 by Oscar; the Hostosiano National Independence Movement; and The Puerto Rican Independence Party.

In the struggle for López Rivera's release, the Puerto Ricans joined forces across party lines, including leaders of the Puerto Rican Independence Party, Popular Democratic Party, New Progressive Party, community organisations on the island, in the United States and internationally.

On June 18, 2012, the UN Decolonisation Committee approved a resolution, promoted by Cuba, in which it called for recognition of Puerto Rico's right to independence and self-determination and urged the release of the pro-independence detainees in the United States.

People's World ☘



Delusional threats and “Hard Brexit”

Finian Cunningham

Britain’s Prime Minister Theresa May delivered her much-anticipated speech on Brexit last week, and it was suffused with delusions of grandeur. When are British leaders going to realise that their days of imperial greatness are long gone? Listening to May, however, one would think that the world’s map was still splattered in red, white and blue colours of the Union Jack – otherwise known by former colonial subjects as the Butcher’s Apron.

The Conservative prime minister gave a bravado speech that heralded a blissful, prosperous future for “global Britain”. May said that Britain was now open for free trade with the rest of the world, after having voted in a referendum last June to quit the European Union, after 43 years of membership.

Finally, after seven months of dithering and confusion on the matter, May declared that Britain would henceforth be seeking a “hard Brexit”, whereby the United Kingdom would no longer seek to be part of the EU’s single market. It would therefore be free from obligations concerning migration and free movement of European citizens. That is, Britain would gain full control of its borders. A “soft Brexit” option would have involved a compromise between retaining single-market membership and accepting a degree of open borders.

No way. Theresa May was at last supposedly giving clarity on Britain’s position, saying there would be “no half measures, no half in, half out ... Brexit means Brexit”. The *Financial Times* approved of her upbeat message with the headline: “No more Theresa Maybe”.

Listening to May’s prognosis of glowing prospects for “global Britain” – trading with the US, Canada, China, India and the Persian Gulf among others as bilateral partners – makes one wonder why Britain ever bothered joining the EU’s single market back in 1988, as her predecessor Margaret Thatcher had zealously committed to (15 years after its original accession to the European Economic Community, the precursor of the EU.)

Perhaps it has something do with the fact that nearly 50 percent of the UK’s exports go to EU markets – free from any trade barriers. How Britain’s exports will fair in a global marketplace of cut-throat trade tariffs is a moot question.

According to the British government it’s all going to be rosy. That, by the way, wasn’t May’s position prior to the referendum. She campaigned for remaining in the EU and in doing so she had predicted that leaving the bloc would spell economic disaster for Britain. All that doom seems to have dramatically disappeared now

in May’s apparently revised upbeat world outlook, without providing an explanation for her U-turn.

More questions

Here’s the thing: Downing Street’s supposed announcement of clarity on the Brexit last week raises, on the contrary, even more befuddling questions. May is aiming to conclude Brexit negotiations in two years with the European Commission based in Brussels. But that time-scale is impossibly optimistic. Only a few weeks ago, her top diplomat charged with negotiating the Brexit was forced to resign because he dared to warn that a separation deal would take up to 10 years to finalise. And that longer-term view is probably a realistic assessment. For instance, it took Canada seven years to recently conclude a free-trade pact with the EU. For Britain, with many more legal entanglements to resolve, any less time-frame seems in the realm of “daydreams” – as some EU politicians caustically remarked following May’s speech this week.

Britain’s Foreign Minister Boris Johnson can crow all he likes that “the world is queuing up to do business with Britain”. One of those potentially new trade partners is Britain’s old colony, the United States of America. Following President Donald Trump’s welcoming remarks for a “quick trade deal” with Britain earlier this week, there was much excitement from Johnson and other Brexiters that a new lucrative horizon was indeed dawning.

The harsh reality is that Britain will be technically and legally a member of the EU until it concludes departure negotiations that could take several years. Under those circumstances, as several EU politicians have pointed out, Britain will not be free to negotiate bilateral trade agreements with the US or any other nation. That means that Britain will not be able to gallop off into supposed new trade deals with the US, China or anyone else, until it finishes its no doubt protracted divorce proceedings with the EU.

The Brexit process is going to be a rude awakening for British leaders who seem to harbour delusions about Britain’s stature in the world.

This delusional thinking was revealed when Theresa May issued a barely veiled warning to the EU that Britain would not accept a “punitive” Brexit deal.

Despite her speech opening with charming talk of Britain being the best of friends with Europe, May drew a dagger towards the end.

“I know there are some voices calling for a punitive deal that punishes Britain and discourages other countries from taking the same path. That would be an act of calamitous self-harm for the countries of Europe. And it would not be the act of a friend,” said the British premier.



If the British are seen to get a “cherry-picked” deal of access to the single market, yet be able to spurn any immigration that would be tantamount to giving an exit license for other members of the EU to do likewise.

With a foreboding tone, she added: “Britain would not – indeed we could not – accept such an approach. And while I am confident that this scenario need never arise – while I am sure a positive agreement can be reached – I am equally clear that no deal for Britain is better than a bad deal for Britain.”

May the knife

It was a glinting threat from May, akin to flashing a knife at the EU.

Earlier, May said in contradictory fashion that while Britain was leaving the single market, at the same time it was demanding “full access to markets as an associate member to make trading as frictionless as possible”.

So, only in a rhetorical sense is the British government declaring a “hard Brexit” by purportedly “leaving the single market”. For all intents and purposes, however, the British still want “full access” to the market, as May stipulated in her speech. And this privilege is to be had at the same time that Britain takes full control of its borders over EU migration.

That sounds like Britain wanting to have its cake and eating it too. Supposedly being out of the market, but still in it for all practical purposes, while pulling up the draw bridge on the rest of Europe. Moreover, the British prime minister is declaring that if Britain does not get “full access” it will be perceived

as “punitive” – and then in that case her country will “walk away” from negotiations.

Cherry pick

Her haughty attitude sparked outrage across the EU. Guy Verhofstadt, the EU Parliament’s point man on Brexit, reportedly fumed that Britain’s “days of cherry-picking and a la carte Europe are over”.

Tomas Prouza, the Czech’s EU minister, noted sardonically of the British position: “Trade as free as possible, full control of immigration ... where’s the give for all the take?”

What May was alluding to in her threat of walking away was that Britain would undercut the EU by slashing corporation tax, thereby luring foreign companies away from continental Europe to set up shop in Britain. That is, turning Britain into a tax haven to cheat the rest of Europe.

May also hinted that Britain’s military forces in NATO might be pulled out of Poland and the Baltic states, which would have the effect of destabilising these EU members, given their congenital paranoia over alleged Russian aggression.

The British government’s threats to the EU stem from a misplaced arrogant attitude of a has-been world power, which somehow still thinks that it can pontificate to other, perceived lesser nations.

With a ballooning trade deficit with Europe and an all-but extinct

industrial base, the only asset that the UK can claim is its City of London global financial centre – which accounts for 80 percent of its national economy. Despite Theresa May’s supercilious tone, Britain will find that it needs Europe a lot more than Europe needs Britain. And if cut loose harshly, the former Great Britain is in no industrial shape to ply the global markets as it once did with the backing of its colonial armies of occupation.

Britain’s “hard Brexit” is all “hard talk” belying typical British subterfuge to wheedle self-serving concessions. Such conceited British attitudes will only stiffen EU resolve to make minimal trade concessions in the final separation. If the British are seen to get a “cherry-picked” deal of access to the single market, yet be able to spurn any immigration that would be tantamount to giving an exit license for other members of the EU to do likewise. And given the level of Euro-scepticism rising across Europe, Brussels and other pro-EU governments must, of their own necessity, act sternly towards Britain in its divorce arrangement.

Britain can indeed expect a “hard Brexit”. On much harder terms from the EU than delusional British politicians are arrogantly demanding. Less Rule Britannia; more like Fool Britannia.

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Centrelink debt recovery fiasco must be suspended

Disabled People's Organisations Australia calls for the Centrelink debt recovery process to be immediately halted, amid concern about the impact on people with disability.

We are concerned that the current debt recovery process, that uses automated data matching, is particularly unfair for people with disability.

Centrelink has recently begun to use data from the Australian Tax Office to check records about people's income, without staff involvement or oversight. People have received debt notifications, sometimes going back six years and have had a limited time to respond.

Many people with disability

rely on social security payments to make ends meet. For those that work in casual or contract work, this new system appears to be particularly problematic.

The majority of people with disability being reviewed will have been entitled to social security payments and have done nothing wrong. Cutting social security payments to recover debts in this way could leave people with disability substantially worse off, and we already know that almost half of all people with disability live in poverty. People with disability are being made more vulnerable by how these policies are implemented.

Springing this kind of change on people just before Christmas, with no additional resources to assist them, is unacceptable.

People with disability may need more time and support to understand the information and respond, may need the information in different, accessible formats and should have increased advocacy available to engage with the Centrelink system and manage such a stressful situation.

DPO Australia is calling for the federal government to immediately suspend this automated debt recovery system and start to sort out the mess that has been created.

Advocacy support needs to be significantly ramped up to make sure people with disability are not disadvantaged by poorly planned and implemented changes like this in government policy.

Matthew Bowden
People with Disability Australia

Is it time to shed the alliance shackles?

The Independent and Peaceful Australia Network is asking this question as it seeks to advance the prospect of Australia becoming truly independent.

Recently, US Secretary John Kerry told the Israeli PM Netanyahu that friends need to tell each other the hard truths in relation to the political policies and actions of allies.

IPAN warns Australian political leaders, as friends of the USA, to take note: some hard talking is called for. IPAN points out that when, after the 2001 World Trade Centre attack, the then Prime Minister Howard fell at the feet of George W Bush and committed the ADF to wars of aggression in Afghanistan and Iraq, he was no friend of the American people.

Almost 14 years later, there is wide agreement that Australia's

participation in the US-led wars in the Middle East has created widespread chaos in the region and made it a virtual training camp for terrorists, with some of these groups receiving arms and other assistance from the US and its allies. The threat posed by these terrorist groups has spread around the globe.

Successive Australian governments have been no friend of the people of the Middle East. Millions of people are now displaced, wounded, dead, over the past 14 years.

Next week Donald Trump will become President of a country that expends \$596 billion a year on maintaining its military supremacy. Mr Trump has made no secret of his intentions to use the US military, including its nuclear arsenal, to "make America great again".

It's time for Australia, as a friend

of the American people, as a founding member of the United Nations and a signatory to UN human rights conventions to speak up and oppose the policies and actions of the US where they contravene the United Nations founding principles. If this doesn't meet with the approval of President-elect Trump, then so be it.

IPAN believes that Australia could be a significant voice for calm and rational policies in the interests of world peace if it spoke and acted from a position of genuine independence. It is time for Australia to think for itself and follow the Canadian example, having the courage to stand on its own two feet.

It's time for Australia to become a truly independent, just and peaceful member of the world community.

Bevan Ramsden
IPAN

Culture & Life

by Kevin Childs



The last Veddhas of Sri Lanka

Last month the United Nations Special Rapporteur on minorities Izsák Ndiaye praised the current Sri Lankan government for offering "a glimpse of hope" to excluded communities across the island. However "challenges remain", and beyond the Sinhalese and Tamil friction, another minority is fast disappearing altogether.

The Veddhas, or the Wanniyala-Aetto as they are traditionally known, are the last Indigenous people of Sri Lanka. Traditional hunter-gatherers and forest-dwellers, they may in fact become extinct within a generation. Here, the interplay of history, conservation, and human rights rub shoulder to shoulder, and the Wanniyala-Aetto's future remains uncertain.

The world currently retains 370 million Indigenous people, and 70-80 percent of which live in the Asia-Pacific region. "Emerging Asia" is a term bandied about the development sector, but despite modernisation, more than half the continent lives below the poverty line. Indigenous people are generally, the poorest of the poor. Despite the UN's International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, and a raft of legislation from the International Labour Organisation, low education, high unemployment and poor health, remain common.

No matter how much the Wanniyala-Aetto assimilate into the dominant culture, they will still be seen as impostors and stigmatised regularly.

The Wanniyala-Aetto are now consigned to a tourist attraction; courtesy of Sri Lanka's Ministry of Culture. But a life traded as a heritage token is an imperilled life to say the least. Professor of Sociology Premakumara De Silva, is a foremost authority of the Veddhas. Escaping the ivory towers of the University of Colombo, he has ventured into Wanniyala-Aetto settlements to find out the wider picture. He

concedes, the Wanniyala-Aetto "community is facing stresses that threaten to modernise them which could easily result in vanishing them as cultural group." However, it is true many maintain their traditional way of life, against the turn of the tide.

Clothed in a sarong, naked from the waist-up and an axe slung over the shoulder, they continue to hunt, fish and forage Sri Lanka's forests. They also continue to practice traditional religious rites like the worship of the Na Yakku spirits of dead. However, even with their new protected status, in real life, they fare badly. The Wanniyala-Aetto traditional customs are now being abandoned or impinged upon to the extent that weapons and tools are becoming obsolete. Water scarcity and land alienation pave way to rising levels of malnourishment and obesity. Finally, social and economic exclusion is leading to friction with Sri Lanka's police department and politicians. It appears, the 21st century has caught the Veddhas in its crosshairs, and they continually find themselves undergoing a process of "Sinhalese and Tamilisation". Or being converted to Buddhism, Christianity, and of course Modernity.

The Wanniyala-Aetto displacement has been stretched out over decades. The south-east corner of Sri Lanka, the Uva Province, contains 3,300 square miles of dry zone. In the last 50 years, this land has been deforested, irrigated and marked for continuous redevelopment. Land acquisition of the region began almost immediately after 1948 independence. The Gal Oya project of 1949-53 and the Mahaweli Development Scheme 1964-83, were particularly important in raising living standards. However, such programmes, for the Wanniyala-Aetto, led to forced eviction and relocation to government reserve villages. Forced to adapt or die while living in exile, they have been in

decline ever since. Yet there are other factors at work too.

The 21st century is the century of species extinction. A recent Living Planet Index study has concluded that the earth is set to lose two thirds of animals by 2020, and quite rightly societies have become increasingly concerned about conservation. Poaching and logging continue to contribute to the decline of the natural world. When the Sri Lankan government nationalised forests turning them into nature reserves, hunting was made illegal and even fishing required permits. So not only do we now see health problems in Wanniyala-Aetto, their lifestyle has been made illegal. This led to an upsurge in dangerous livelihoods revolving round an informal economy. Premakumara De Silva notes: "Instances where women and children are alleged to have become in situ and ex situ sex workers [...] Led by extreme economic deprivation" and also incidents of "children and women who are coerced, procured and trafficked" into domestic servitude. Even when the Wanniyala-Aetto are able to get conventional jobs such as rice farming or construction work, it has been to the detriment of their identity. As their living space shrinks year by year, and economic pressures mount, many abandon their heritage altogether.

On the clay wall of the thatched house the ceremonial bow and arrow remain unused and obsolete – a warning for the Wanniyala-Aetto.

Unfortunately, no matter how much the Wanniyala-Aetto assimilate into the dominant culture, they will still usually be seen as impostors and stigmatised regularly. Either considered noble savages or backward primitives, they are seen as choosing to ignore the unstoppable rise of modernism. The truth is, some remain as part of their Indigenous community, but many will leave it. Either way, while the

word "Vedda" is thrown about in common parlance as an insult, the Wanniyala-Aetto continue to face language barriers, educational barriers, and employment barriers. This means they are locked out of wider society. As one Indigenous community member, Uru Varige Sudu Banda, Henanigala, relates, discrimination becomes the norm:

"Officers promised to build a tank and allow us to use forest resources. Now we are losing those [...] He said that we will disuse our traditional ancestral worship. He was right. Now those traditions are not practiced."

What's left of Sri Lanka's forest remains partial to the natural rhythms of the island rather than the constitution. The Wanniyala-Aetto will continue to practise hunting and fishing regardless of the legal status. Conservation laws regarding the natural world are in direct conflict with the human rights laws of Indigenous people. It's a complex problem, but that doesn't mean it can't be solved. The living Planet Index makes clear it is not indigenous hunting practices that destroy ecosystems, but rapid land acquisition. Considering the finite number of the Wanniyala-Aetto, it would be sensible to grant exceptional rights to exceptional people. If we don't they will disappear.

As TB Gunawardena, Pollebedda, another indigenous community member, asserts:

"We will be respected only if we remain as Veddhas. If we become identical to the common Sinhalese, we will lose the pride of being Veddhas. Therefore, we prefer to carry on our ancestry."

It is this defiant note of self-determinism and self-identity, that means the 10,000 remaining Wanniyala-Aetto may not only survive, but continue to remain "Indigenous for this generation and even the next".

New Internationalist ✪

Book review by Eric A Gordon

Invasion

The FF's, the Funny Fish, suddenly appeared on aging radical Billy Morton's fishing boat off the coast of Long Island, and followed him home. There these beings that looked like furry beachballs in their relaxed state, but which could also morph into almost any shape imaginable in a nano-second – including into human form – seemed friendly enough, and super-smart. Before long they had moved into the Morton family home and started tinkering with the boys' computers.

What was their objective coming to Earth? They mastered the technology easily enough, and soon government and corporate websites and networks were being hacked. Individuals and progressive non-profits around the country suddenly had millions of dollars mysteriously transferred into their bank accounts.

Who knew Robin Hood was a tribe of aliens from outer space?

This is the premise set up in Luke Rhinehart's new sci-fi novel *Invasion*. Rhinehart is best known for his earlier bestseller *The Dice Man*.

The FFs, or as they come to be known officially as "Proteans", really are here only to make life more fun. They are appalled at how seriously humans take everything, and they are also dedicated egalitarians. Big business malfeasance and government malpractice are abhorrent to their life affirming ideology.

It doesn't take long before every government agency in existence is on their trail, ready to wipe them out. Of course, they are "terrorists" – what else could they be in these times? To the FF mind, however, "Human beings are the planet's way of committing suicide." The aliens were out to save humanity from itself.

Rhinehart uses an omniscient strategy to tell the story from a number of points of view: From the account by protagonist Billy Morton, the official history of the invasion by a government historian, by various related items in the news, by the off-centre but right on target Protean definitions for human concepts they find need greater clarity, and from an individual agent's filed reports. The voice

telling the story is the author's, and he is not objective.

A few choice definitions from *The New Protean Dictionary of American Usage* will suffice to indicate the author's proclivities:

Advertising: "The centre of modern civilisation, now with a new formula and 50 percent off. It enables humans to replace the old excrement they didn't need with new excrement they don't need."

Global Warming: "An ongoing process denied by many Americans because they are able to see clearly that it is sometimes quite cold out."

Military Drones: "A weapon developed to kill people in far away lands that permits the killers not to miss karaoke night at their favourite bar."

Network Nightly News: "A half-hour TV program during which lengthy and important commercials are interrupted by occasional discussions of trivial recent events."

Terrorist: "Anyone who perpetrates an act of violence against unarmed human beings. In American usage, does not include actions by members of the American, European, or Israeli police forces or military."

If George Orwell had written science fiction, *Invasion* comes close to what he might have produced. In an "Item in the News", the Republican National Committee announced its six basic principles. The first is "On Eternal War":

"We Republicans, knowing that people throughout the world will always hate us for our love of Freedom, believe that Our Beloved Nation should be eternally at war with all who resist our just interference in their nation's affairs; that this Eternal War must be offensive rather than defensive; that all killing should take place in other lands; and that there will be peace in the world only when Our Great Nation has pacified all our enemies."

Rhinehart draws appealing portraits of the Morton family members – Billy, Cuban-born wife Carlita, and their two sons Lucas and Jimmy. Even his local police and federal agents, and the US president, are drawn as conflicted, rounded human

beings. The FFs themselves have real personalities and the reader will be drawn into a deeper appreciation of their fun-loving thought as the novel proceeds. *Invasion* entertains probing questions about what is an "alien", after all, and concurrently, what does it really mean to be human? One love affair in the novel between a woman and an FF confounds our judgment while also reminding us that historically many forms of "miscegenation" have been considered illegal, immoral and unnatural.

Unmistakable allusions to the Occupy movement, the civil rights and Black Lives Matter movements, historic campaigns against bigoted laws and behaviour, the war on terrorism abroad and at home, appear throughout. Even the now president-elect gets a mention: A jury in the trial of one of the FFs is comprised of "typical American citizens – meaning a quarter of them thought Jesus would be coming soon, that Iraq had taken out the Twin Towers, that Donald Trump was an intellectual giant, and that the Protean invaders were the Antichrists."

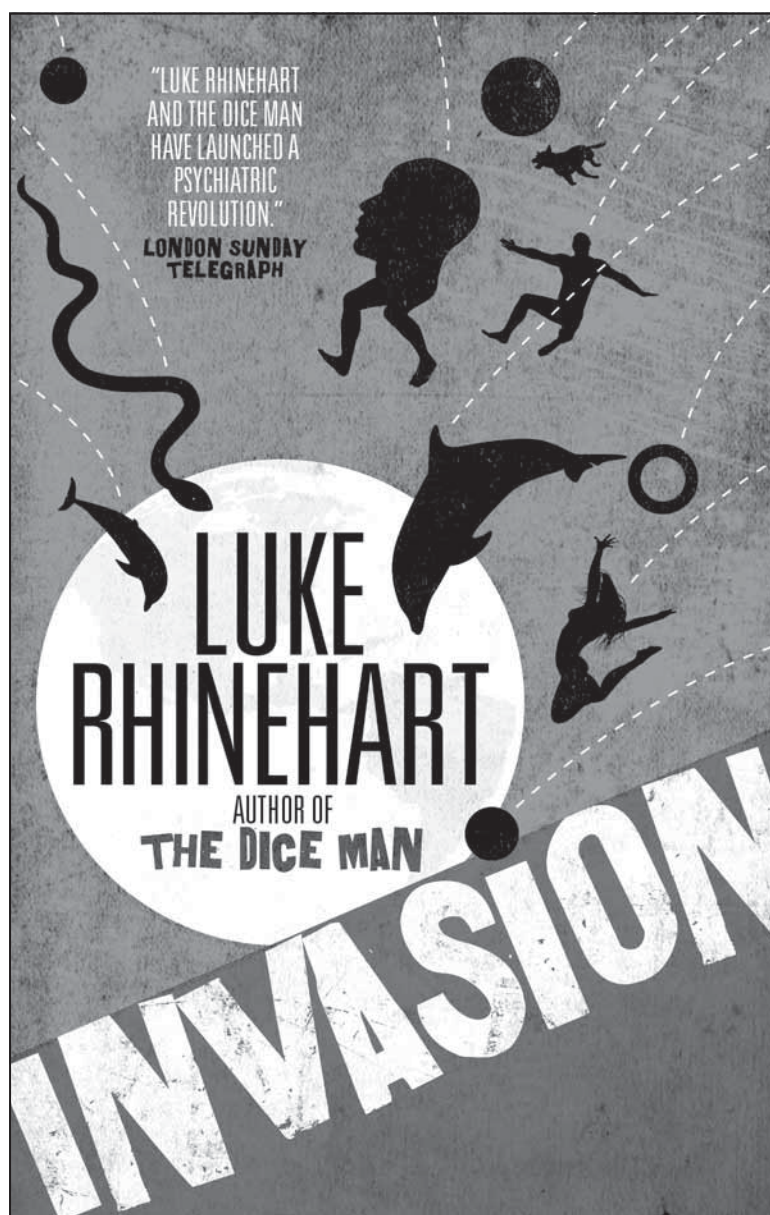
Although there are many LOL passages in *Invasion* as we recognise our own human and peculiarly American capitalist foibles, I would have to say that from time to time Rhinehart departs from the tone of his characters and speaks with his own authorial voice, which can wax a bit preachy (even though I approve his sermons).

But compared to the egregious flights of imagination detailed in this delightful story, and the perceptive insights provided into the true workings of our system, this is a small complaint.

The FX team at a major motion picture studio will have a ball creating the shape-shifting invaders. In fact, there's already a book sequel announced at the end of this apocalyptic tale: "The Hairy Balls and the End of Civilisation."

I am not a customary sci-fi reader; this book came to me by way of my sister, who instinctively knew I would love it. She was right. You will too.

People's World ☺



Sydney

POLITICS IN THE PUB

February 2

STATE OF THE ARTS (OPENING NIGHT SPECIAL EVENT)

- Politician: **Sarah Hanson-Young**, Federal Greens MP, Arts Portfolio
- Sydney College of the Arts Advocates: **Barbara Oaran, Juanel de la Foret, Cecilia Casto**
- Guest Artists: **Jenny Orchard, Undy Lee, Joyce Hinterding, Buck the Busker**

February 9

SYRIAN CRISIS – ALEPPO, THE LOST CITY?

- Dr **Ahmad Shboul**, former head of Middle East Studies, University of Sydney
- Dr **Rodger Shanahan**, Research Fellow, the Lowy Institute

February 16

LAND CLEARING, SPECIES EXTINCTION & MURDER: THE STRUGGLE TO SAVE OUR ENVIRONMENT

- Dr **Oisín Sweeney**, Snr Ecologist, National Parks & Wildlife NSW
- **Gregory Miller**, Producer at Film Projects, Director *Cultivating Murder*
- **Corinne Fisher**, Co-ordinator for Stand Up for Nature campaign, Total Environment Centre & Nature Conservation Council

February 23

THE CASE FOR PALESTINE

- **Nahed Odeh**, former Head, Women & Child's Unit, Palestinian Legislative Council, Ramallah & Doctoral student in Law, UNSW
- Dr **Peter Slezak**, Professor in Philosophy, School of Humanities & Social Sciences, UNSW

March 2

POLITICAL FUNDING: WHO PAYS THE PIPER CALLS THE TUNE? DOES DEMOCRACY MATTER?

- **David Shoebridge**, NSW Greens MP
- **John Keane**, University of Sydney
- Dr **Lloyd Cox**, Lecturer Macquarie University, Australian and US political history & foreign policy, globalization and nationalism

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Published by
Guardian Publications Australia Ltd
74 Buckingham St, Surry Hills, 2010

Printed by Spotpress
24-26 Lillian Fowler Pl Marrickville 2204

Responsibility for electoral comment
is taken by **T Pearson**,
74 Buckingham St, Surry Hills, 2010

Under darkness, Gazans mark new year

Lydia Noon

A father and his two daughters were three of the first Palestinians to suffer injuries related to Gaza's electricity crisis this year. They have been left with moderate burns after a candle the girls lit to do their homework started a fire in their apartment in Gaza City on January 2.

"At least five children have burned to death and many more injured over the last few years in similar incidents," Gazan Abu Ahmed writes in a message to me at night, on an electricity-dependent device. There will be more candle-related disasters during a winter of 20-hour blackouts in the crowded Strip.

As nightly temperatures plummet, so do the number of hours of electricity. Two million Palestinians have been living on three to four hours of electricity per day for the past two months, with LED lights, batteries and candles the only substitutes for most families. Expensive generators and car battery inverters pick up the slack for some households and businesses while the most privileged install solar panels; a luxury few can afford.

"These alternatives fill some electricity gaps but cannot power many appliances such as washing machines, baby bottle sterilisers and water pumps", says Gazan translator and blogger Jason Shawa. "So you need to shift all washing, ironing and bathing to when you have electricity. Many people do such chores after midnight because that is when the power comes on".

The power cuts are devastating for Gaza's hospitals. Incubators, ventilators and other life-saving equipment are powered by industrial generators but fuel, and money, is running out. Even if hospitals had access to enough fuel, generators are only designed to provide emergency electricity, not for hours, days and months on end.

Israel's decade-long military blockade has helped create Gaza's electricity and resource crisis.

The Strip's sole power plant has been the target of repeated air-strikes during Israel's three military bombardments of Gaza since the start of the siege. It has also been forced to shut down several times due to a lack of fuel.

Egyptian and Israeli electricity grids provide some of Gaza's electricity but the two



countries have severely restricted fuel imports into the tiny Middle Eastern enclave since the blockade began in 2007. Egyptian and Israeli authorities have destroyed the majority of tunnels built between Gaza and Egypt over the past few years, meaning it is no longer possible to smuggle in cheap diesel and other basic necessities.

Caravans for winter

A thousand families are still living in caravans and tents two and a half years since Israel's 50-day military bombardment during July-August 2014, with only an extra layer of nylon keeping out the cold and harsh winds.

The offensive, dubbed Operation Protective Edge, killed 2,251 Palestinians and 72 Israelis, and destroyed 70 percent of Gaza's infrastructure.

Some 20,000 homes were destroyed or so severely damaged that they became uninhabitable, leaving 100,000 people internally displaced and sheltering in makeshift shacks, schools, relatives' homes, rented accommodation or in their dangerously damaged homes. Some families are still living in tents next to their destroyed houses because they are afraid that if they leave, their land might be taken – the only thing they have left.

Along with fuel, the military blockade has

limited construction materials entering the Strip. The Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism set up in 2014, has tightened these restrictions, says Shawa.

Lack of funds have also prolonged the displacement of Palestinians: at Cairo's "Reconstructing Gaza" conference in October 2014, US\$3.5 billion was pledged to help. But only US\$1.6 billion has been donated so far, according to the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) and Aidwatch.

The diversion of media attention to other parts of the region such as Syria and Iraq has taken the pressure off countries to deliver on their promises, while some donors say that the lack of unity between the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and the Hamas party in the Gaza Strip is frustrating efforts to fund projects, but the real issue, tweets Jewish Voice for Peace director Rebecca Vilkomerson, is the Israeli blockade.

Locked in

This June will mark the 10th anniversary of Israel's military siege on Gaza. Movement has been restricted for Palestinians living in the 25-mile long enclave since the early 1990s, but when Hamas came to power in June 2007, Israel imposed a land, sea and air blockade. Many Gazans describe this blockade as living in the world's largest prison, with two million people denied access to other parts of Palestine and the rest of the world.

Since the start of the blockade, Egyptian authorities have also restricted movement by closing the Rafah crossing into Egypt – and the only way in and out of Gaza – for days and weeks at a time.

The new year does not signal renewed hope for Gazans.

"We are forgotten here, but we are desperate", says 24-year-old Rana via WhatsApp. "Most people are even denied a medical permit to leave Gaza for urgent treatment".

Shawa feels the same. "I see no glimmer of hope", he writes. "We are totally locked in by Israel; they control every single aspect of what leaves or enters Gaza, be it people or food or medication or anything else. Egypt too has us locked in from their side".

"Okay, there is big hope", starts Abu Ahmed, before abruptly changing track: "but

hope was there for many years and nothing changed. Things are even worsening".

The UN agrees. In 2015, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development published a report which said that because of "de-development" caused by the economic and military blockade, Gaza may be uninhabitable by 2020 "if current economic trends persist". Hurling towards that deadline and Gazans' basic necessities for life – drinking water, shelter, physical and mental health and employment – are becoming ever more scarce.

Running out

Only 10 percent of Palestinians in Gaza have access to safe drinking water, and, according to the World Bank, unless desalination and waste water plants are given approval by Israeli authorities to replenish Gaza's depleted natural aquifer by 2020, the water crisis will be irreversible. For now, Gaza's poorest drink salty and dirty water from the tap, risking disease, others use water filters or buy expensive bottled water.

Unemployment is the highest in the world at 43 percent, with young people under 30-years-old particularly affected by the lack of work. The blockade has taken 50 percent off Gaza's GDP and were it not for the multiple restrictions and Israel's military bombardments, Gaza's GDP would be four times higher.

One third of children displayed signs of post-traumatic stress disorder even before 2014's military offensive, says The Centre for Mind-Body Medicine, with many children having been born under siege and living through multiple bombing campaigns.

With Gaza at breaking point, will the rest of the world finally put pressure on the Israeli administration to end the siege?

"Not with US President Donald Trump at the helm of the 'free world' now," writes Shawa. "We have heard some of his opinions on the Middle East and none of them are promising."

"No. Other countries could end our suffering but they let Israel do what it wants," says Khan Yunis resident Rana, as her wifi signal comes and goes. "But we will keep on surviving, just as we always have".

New Internationalist ✪

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