



Corporatising higher education



Bob Briton

Education Minister Christopher Pyne is piling the pressure on Labor and Senate cross-benchers to pass his higher education “reforms”. The Federal Budget package, which includes letting universities set their own fees, cutting their course funding dramatically and spreading federal funding to private colleges, TAFE and sub-bachelor degree programs, has met stiff resistance. Students, the universities themselves and some key small party and independent Senators have seen through the spin about “competition” and “sustainability”. Pyne has compromised on some of the detail but he has his orders to deliver a “free” market in tertiary education, \$100,000-plus degrees from corporate universities devoted to boosting private profits. Delivery is due by March of this year.

The federal government has made this privatising attack a major priority. It has spent \$8 million on a media blitz with the reassuring but dishonest message that the changes are minimal. That’s on top of the \$2.5 million for the design of the ads and \$560,000 for focus groups and market research. The message can’t be sold. Anybody with primary school maths can work out that removing the cap on university fees at the same time as reducing university funding by 20 percent will result in huge fee increases for students.

Pyne is sticking to his neo-liberal guns. “We are deregulating the university system in Australia. That means universities will compete with each other. We are also injecting 140

non-university higher education providers into the market,” he said last year. “The winners are going to be the students and parents of the students and the society as a whole as competition weaves its magic at university.” Universities that jack up their fees too far will have empty lecture theatres, or so the story goes.

Studies don’t back up the education minister. Modelling by the LH Martin Institute shows that universities will be forced to increase fees significantly and that the “group of eight” leading universities, especially, will be able to extract more income from reduced numbers of wealthier students. A nice elitist touch!

The federal government is also proposing to cut the \$2.8 billion committed annually to university research. Many universities could be forced to use part of the increased fees to subsidise academic research. Anticipating this pressure, Pyne wants to remove the requirement that universities must engage in research. “In my view if universities don’t want to focus on research they shouldn’t have to,” he said. If successful, teaching only “universities” would be added to the attack on research in Australia. It comes on top of the \$420 million funding cuts to the CSIRO, the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation, the Australian Research Council, the Defence Science and Technology Organisation, Cooperative Research Centres and other agencies.

Industry Minister Ian Macfarlane has indicated that the government wants to tie university research funding to the production of lucrative results for big business. “We might think about realigning block grants to

commercial incomes, and awarding them to universities not on the basis of how many papers they’ve published but actually on how many patents they have registered,” he said. The Minerals Council of Australia has backed the minister up and a pro-corporate shake-up of the Excellence in Research for Australia body that distributes Commonwealth funding can be expected.

Winners

Other winners in the Pyne “reform” package are private universities, private training and vocational institutes and those offering associate degree programs. TAFE’s ability to compete for a share of the \$820 million in new federal funding has been eroded greatly in recent times.

Religious teaching and training institutes will also benefit. The likes of the Sydney College of Divinity, Brisbane’s Christian Heritage College and the Perth Bible College stand to get \$4,214 in funding per student per year. Catholic colleges offering courses such as “Theology and Practice of Natural Family Planning” and “Marriage in the Catholic Tradition” would get funding. Priests could receive taxpayer support for part of their training raising concerns for the principle of the separation of church and state. Damage to that principle was done last year when the federal government announced it would provide \$244 million for a new school chaplaincy scheme and remove the option for schools to hire secular welfare workers. Clearly, the Abbott government likes to drape its corporate agenda in a religious cloak.

Unintended consequences?

If HECS debts are allowed to drift up to the levels of the mortgage on a home, other very negative consequences are inevitable. The predicament of foreign students gives some insights. Universities are already under pressure to pass foreign students lest the institution gets the reputation of extracting high fees without delivering a degree. Good old capitalist competition could lead to a sharp decline in standards if the staggering fees charged to foreign students are extended to the rest of the student body.

Cheating would become an industry. The use of fake ID for sitting exams and the downloading of assignments from disreputable websites would become more common. Fairfax media recently reported on the questionable services offered by the MyMaster Group Pty Ltd. “Are you racking your brains on your school work? Do you worry about spending \$3,000 retaking tuition on the failing subject? Leave your worries to MyMaster and make your study easier,” a flyer at the University of Technology Sydney advises. The website offers assignments and papers to foreign students under enormous pressure to succeed and it appears services like MyMaster have many customers.

“Elite” institutions, lower standards and corruption. That’s what corporate higher education will deliver. The Abbott agenda must be defeated and a movement for free, universally accessible and secular education must be built. ✚

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A right royal disaster

In selecting Prince Phillip for receipt of an Australian knighthood, PM Tony Abbott consulted only defence chief Angus Houston and the Governor-General Peter Cosgrove. By seeking their support he placed them in a position of conflict of interest, because he had nominated both of them to receive the honour themselves.

The ceremony will undoubtedly be held in London, but who will bestow the award? It won't be Abbott, because that would imply he's the Prince's social superior, and it won't be the Governor General, because he's only the Queen's representative in Australia. Presumably Betty herself will have to place the sword on her kneeling husband's aged shoulders.

The bizarre situation is truly worthy of a Gilbert and Sullivan comedy, so it's not surprising that it produced widespread amusement, contempt and embarrassment.

But it also evoked bitter public criticism from coalition MPs, one of whom commented: "It takes a particular talent to turn Australia's national day into a joke".

The controversy over the award is just the latest in a long series of gaffes by the Prime Minister. It undoubtedly contributed to the disastrous result for the Queensland Liberals, despite their desperate attempts to distance themselves from the Prince Phillip fiasco (known to dissident coalition members as "the Nightmare").

The Liberals are now discussing replacing Abbott as the PM. Communications Minister Malcolm Turnbull, who held forth about foreign affairs and leadership during a conference last week in Los Angeles, and Foreign Affairs minister Julie Bishop, who recently had discussions with media tycoon Rupert Murdoch in New York, are the front runners for the job.

The ruthless Minister for Social Services, Scott Morrison, regarded as a "star performer" in coalition circles, is also a possible contender.

The dispute within the coalition over Abbott's leadership has arisen because his government has failed to implement its savage budget measures, which included imposition of a \$7 GP co-payment fee and deregulation of university fees.

Coalition members have gnashed their teeth as those were blocked by opposition Senators, backed by massed public opposition.

Moreover, the conservative federal agenda includes an attack on industrial awards and conditions, including penalty rates, which is expected to follow in the wake of an upcoming Productivity Commission inquiry.

The real problem for the coalition does not lie in Abbott's incredibly inept and grovelling subservience to that parasitic remnant of feudal property relations, the British royal family.

Nor does it lie in the apparently fractious and domineering personality of Abbott's chief of staff, Ms Peta Credilin, despite Murdoch's claim to the contrary.

Nor, for that matter, is the essential problem Abbott's inability to "sell" his policy initiatives to the public, as claimed by Murdoch.

The government's extremely expensive taxpayer-funded advertising campaigns have failed to convince voters, and their cost has sparked a public uproar. The bill for the campaign concerned with university deregulation alone has soared to \$15 million, nearly twice the original estimate.

The real problem for the conservatives lies in the policies themselves. They were carefully concealed before the election, but the shocking budget initiatives revealed the government's real agenda in full and with all its nasty details.

The government is still intent on achieving its "wish list" cost-cutting objectives, as well as flogging off public utilities and agencies, or starving them of funding.

Meanwhile more and more of the costs of providing services are being transferred to the shoulders of working Australians. Many major corporations now pay far less tax than working families (and in some cases virtually none at all), and there's barely a murmur from the government.

Joe Hockey's claim that the GP co-payment was essential because people are going to live to 150 years of age was treated with the ridicule it deserved.

Australians are now letting the government know very clearly that no amount of PR will make the government's policy agenda acceptable.

And things won't change if the Liberals adopt a new leader. The coalition has to be dumped in order to achieve real change for the benefit of Australian workers.

Liverpool Plains coal mine approved



The Lock the Gate Alliance has slammed approval of a large and controversial open cut coal mine on the Liverpool Plains by the NSW Planning and Assessment Commission.

The Watermark coal mine by Chinese mining company Shenhua will mine 10 million tonnes per annum of coal near Breeza adjacent to some of the most productive agricultural soils in the state. It is fiercely opposed by the local farming community, who have previously turned out in large numbers to protest against the proposal.

Lock the Gate National Coordinator, Phil Laird said, "This is the final straw for the credibility of New South Wales mining law. This mine will jeopardise the rich farmlands on the Breeza Plain, and the productive Namoi Alluvial Aquifer, upon which our food-growing farming communities depend.

"The abject failure of this state to make laws that protect farmland and important groundwater from mining is now on ugly display: the approval of this mine is a damning indictment on the Baird government's failure to fulfil its promise to protect land and water from coal mining.

"Already, hundreds of properties in the Liverpool Plains, Gunnedah and Narrabri Shire [north west NSW] are owned by coal mining companies, including 85 properties owned by Shenhua on the Liverpool Plains. With this approval, Shenhua may swallow up 11 more properties, including productive black soils farms that should be feeding the nation.

"This time four years ago the

government went to last NSW election promising to protect farmland on the plains with no-go zones, which they failed to deliver. This mine should have been stopped at the first hurdle, never should have gone through planning process.

"The unfinished business of mining reform is going to haunt this government throughout the eight weeks leading up to the state election and beyond if they do not deliver action now to stop this madness."

Background: impacts of the Watermark mine

The proponent has moved its proposed mining away from the black soils of the Liverpool Plains and onto higher ground, but it will damage and change the aquifers that underlie those soils.

The Planning and Assessment Commission (PAC) recommended that the boundary of Shenhua's exploration licence be amended to remove areas that intrude on the black soil plans, but the proponent has said it is not willing to do this, indicating perhaps that it wants to maintain options for further mining, into the black soils, once the project is up and running.

The mine will unacceptably impact the agricultural character of the surrounding area, and result in long-term social and economic impacts, due to displacement of farming businesses, that have not been adequately assessed.

Furthermore, the Siding Springs Observatory has stated that the mine, along with other industrial

development in the North West, risks ruining the dark skies needed for the observatory to do their world-class astronomical research and observation. Despite this clear and compelling argument in favour of day-time-only operation, both the proponent and the Department of Planning have insisted that the mine must operate for 24-hours a day to be economic.

By far, however, the most profound impacts of this mine will be on water: The Upper Namoi Alluvial Aquifer is one of the most intensively developed groundwater resources in New South Wales. The Watermark mine will drawdown water from three zones of this over-allocated water resource, which supports irrigated agriculture on the rich and productive food-growing soils of the Liverpool Plains.

The mine is expected to take up to 103 megalitres per year from the Upper Namoi Alluvium, but Shenhua do not currently hold sufficient entitlements in the three affected zones of the Upper Namoi Alluvium to take this water, or to run the mine.

The Independent Expert Scientific Committee said of the Watermark mine that, "The proposed project is likely to result in salinity impacts from overflow of water storages, seepage from the backfilled and proposed open mine voids, connectivity between the alluvium and Permian strata and the removal of woodland from the proposed project site."

The Committee criticised the environmental impact study for the project for not adequately addressing the cumulative reduction in flow in the Namoi River that will occur if both mines go ahead, equivalent to about half the current surface water extraction from the regulated Namoi River below Keepit Dam.

Cumulative drawdown impacts of the two mines in the Upper Namoi Alluvium Zone 7 are predicted to exceed the 2 metre "minimum impact" of the Aquifer Interference Policy and cumulative drawdown in parts of the Gunnedah water management area will exceed 10 metres. The PAC has put a condition on the mine that it must provide "compensatory water" to landholders.

The proponent has admitted that sediment dams will overflow into the creeks that feed the Mooki River. There will be a 33 percent increase in salinity in Watermark Gully because of "overflows from the project sediment basins during high rainfall events"

The proponent is not proposing to restore the landscape as it is now after mining ceases, but to leave behind a 100 hectare final void. This void will draw groundwater for two millennia after mining ceases, reaching salt levels equivalent to seawater after 400 years. ☹

PRESS FUND

The Queensland elections have been described as "the biggest turnaround in Australian political history". But one of its most significant aspects was that Labor's major campaign strategy involved opposition to the sale of government assets. That's a real turnaround for Labor, but it also reveals vehement public opposition to the conservatives' practice of using the demand for government services as an excuse to flog off valuable assets to the private sector. Let's hope Labor sticks to its guns, but in the meantime it's great to have a good news story for a change! Many thanks to this week's supporters, as follows:

Jessie Kiek – in memory of Alan Miller \$250

Marie McClintock – in memory of Alan Miller \$50

Tony Marinos – in memory of Alan Miller \$20

Theo Grigoriadis – in memory of Terry Markou \$20

Platon GWEA – in memory of Terry Markou \$20

Tony Marinos – in memory of Marie Briton \$20

Tony Oldfield – in memory of Ron Barrett \$50

Hannah Middleton – in memory of Ron Barrett \$20

Denis Doherty – in memory of Ron Barrett \$20

Anonymous – in memory of Ron Barrett \$5

Eddie Balta \$5, Mark Mannion \$5, "Round Figure" \$10

This week's total: \$495 Progressive total: \$955

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Obituary

Ron Barrett - a steadfast comrade

Denis Doherty

Comrades and friends have farewelled Ronald John Barrett, always known as Ron, who died on 22 January 2015.

Comrade Ron was born in London on December 15, 1937. His early years included dodging bombs during the London blitz during WWII. His education resumed after the war and he completed technical school studies in wood machine turning.

He was called up for national service and served some time in Cyprus in the early 1950s. This time left him with a lifelong hatred of the British Army and a conviction to work against war wherever he could. He used to say that all he learnt in the army was how to iron his shirts.

In 1962 he migrated to Australia and he joined the Communist Party of Australia in 1963. Ron was an active, steadfast and loyal member of several Party branches in Sydney's western suburbs and finally in the Auburn Branch.

Right up to the end Ron remained a loyal and determined comrade. He would turn up to branch and other meetings, functions and demos with

a regularity and a determination that was truly admirable. Even though he was not as agile in later years he still managed to overcome all difficulties by driving his beat up car as near as possible to the venue and then making his way at his own speed.

Comrade Ron wrote reminiscences of his time talking in Domain in Sydney

"I remember the first time I spoke, Bernie was anxious that I might lose the crowd, but I held them on that occasion and he was quite impressed. I soon got used to being called an 'F... Commo B...' and told to go back to Russia. I began to speak with more conviction and gained more confidence. Speaking helped me to develop both politically and personally."

While Ron was working as a wood machinist he was the union representative. On one occasion he wrote an article about an issue in the factory. The article was placed on the notice board by one of the workers. It caused a stir among the workers and the boss gave Ron an extremely hard time. However, he refused to back down.

Comrade Ron worked on Radio Red, a project of the CPA's

Blacktown Branch. A song he loved to play was *I get knocked down but I get up again*. It describes Ron well for he faced all difficulties head on and he always got up and continued with his service to humanity through his Party work.

Ron was a big man who did not move quickly. He was also shy and did not say much. Many may have underestimated him but he possessed a keen mind and when he did speak out it was well worth listening to.

Occasionally he would be stirred up by some event and would fire off perceptive letters to newspapers, mostly to the *Guardian* but also to local and major papers.

Tony Oldfield, speaking on behalf of the Party at Comrade Ron's funeral, described him as an exemplary Party member, a real foot soldier for the cause of communism and the working class.

Comrade Ron will be missed by his comrades but his example will not be forgotten. To honour his memory we must all continue to give all our strength to the greatest cause in the world – the liberation of humanity. ✪



Comrade Ron at the celebrations marking 90 years of the communist movement in Australia in 2010.

Noongar Native Title under cloud

Richard Titelius

In the lead up to Invasion Day (January 26), the Western Australian government announced that it was seeking settlement of the nine year old Noongar Native Title Claim with the South West Land and Sea Council.

While the government and the South West Land and Sea Council – which was responsible for negotiating the original claim in 2006, are quietly confident that the settlement

will be accepted, Noongar elders representing the six clan groups of the Noongar people which make up the claim accuse the proponents of the group of selling out on their culture and heritage.

Protester and elder Richard Wilkes labelled the proposal a "sham", which would not benefit the majority. Another respected Elder Ben Taylor said that Mr Kelly wanted to give away too much and that "The land is our mother. We don't want money when there isn't

any money. They just want to give us back our reserves when what we want is access to land."

The SW Land and Sea council's chief executive officer disagreed saying there had been strong interest from the community with many people pre-registering for the vote.

Over the next few weeks there will be a road show travelling to the major regional south west centres within the area of the Noongar Native claim to explain the significance of the settlement and giving

people the opportunity to vote on the deal.

The Noongar opponents of the Native Title Claim see the settlement as an attempt to extinguish Aboriginal claim to their land through the payment of \$1.3 billion over 12 years into a Noongar Future Fund.

While the then ALP government of Premier Geoff Gallop in 2006 appealed the decision they were never entirely successful in knocking off the very comprehensive and extensively researched Native Title Claim.

In 2014, the Liberal government of Premier Colin Barnett decided to protect its interests and that of the capitalist state, and made the deal with the SW Land and Sea Council which would have the effect of extinguishing any native title claims over the south west into perpetuity.

The money from the \$1.3 billion deal would in theory be used to run "cultural programs to reinvigorate connection to country through songs, ceremonies, engaging elders as teachers and supporting people to get onto country – country which would then be no longer recognised

as being that of the Noongar people".

However, elders representing the six clan groups of the Noongar people claim that up to 80 percent of their people oppose the land title deal which the SW Land and Sea Council and WA state government had put together.

It is believed by this group that the actual value of the resources which remain locked up in the south west in the form of various minerals and hydrocarbons such as shale gas is worth a lot more to the Liberal state government, resource mining and large agricultural land use interests than the value of the deal being put to the Noongar people.

The Noongar people which the opposing elders represent know once the money runs out they will have nothing and the Noongar people will collectively be nothing to the white Australian state.

While the proponents of the land deal say that the alternative to the deal is ongoing litigation, it is also argued that a negotiated settlement is possible and one which would be in the majority of the interests of the Noongar people of the south west. ✪

Pete's Corner



Philippines

**Workers and Peoples Unite:
Fight Neoliberal Attacks on Wages & Trade-union Rights
International Solidarity Affair (ISA)**

April 27 - May 6

An annual gathering of workers, trade-union activists, labor rights advocates, friends and supporters of the working class from all global regions.

Contact: Kilusang Mayo Uno (host): kmu.intl@gmail.com

Manus reprisals continue

Wilson security guards have again carried out reprisal raids on asylum seekers in Mike and Oscar compounds this (Friday January 30) morning.

Increasingly Manus resembles a prison camp with arbitrary raids, threats against individuals remaining on hunger strike, and the arbitrary kidnapping of anyone thought to be "of interest".

"It is obvious that the Immigration department is desperate to silence the voices of the asylum seekers and stop the truth getting out of Manus. The photos and testimonies have exposed the brutality of Manus Island to the Australian public and to the world," said Ian Rintoul from the Refugee Action Coalition.

"The tactic of silencing the critics is typical of the dictatorships from which the asylum seekers are fleeing. Freedom of speech is reserved for the Minister of Immigration."

Mike compound was also raided yesterday on January 29. "Aussie" guards with a handful of PNG police in support occupied the compound for five hours, systematically going from room to room, while the asylum seekers were corralled in the mess area.

More than 20 mobile phones were confiscated during the raid on Mike compound. One asylum seeker was "taken away", presumably to Chauka or Charlie compounds where up to 35 people are being held in isolation.

The immigration minister, Peter Dutton, says

that Wilson are confiscating "contraband". It begs the question of why mobile phones are "contraband".

But in Mike compound, the raid also removed large amounts of personal items – clothes, MP3 players, nail clippers, washing powder, sheets, blankets. Political banners were confiscated and asylum seekers warned not to make more banners and to keep away from the perimeter fences, on pain of arrest.

Meanwhile, in the aftermath of the ending of the mass hunger strike, a "message to the Australian people" (translation attached) has been released from the Manus Island detainees. In part it reads, "More than 900 people, 900 heroes, carried out the biggest hunger strike in history to deliver their oppressed voices to the ears of the whole world."

"Fourteen days of struggle between the tyrant and the oppressed, between right and wrong, between the rich and the poor, ended today on January 27. More than anything it showed the willpower and determination of an oppressed collection of people, every single one of whom has fled from the tyrannies of their own countries and sought refuge in the free country of Australia."

Concern is also growing for the welfare of the 60 people in Lorengau jail. The 60 are being held in the one crowded area.

Two asylum seekers who have swallowed razor blades in prison have not received medical attention. Lorengau hospital has refused treatment saying that the asylum seekers are not their responsibility. ☘



Hunger strikers in Mike compound in the Manus Island detention centre.

Message from Manus Island

To the respected people of Australia

Thirsty Manus has been quenched after 14 days. To all those who care about freedom and human rights, may you hear our message from Manus, a place that bears so much similarity to Guantánamo prison and has become known as the Australian Guantánamo. More than 900 people, 900 heroes, carried out the biggest hunger strike in history to deliver their oppressed voices to the ears of the whole world.

Fourteen days of struggle between the tyrant and the oppressed, between right and wrong, between the rich and the poor, was ended today on January 27. More than anything it showed the willpower and determination of an oppressed collection of people, every single one of whom has fled from the tyrannies of their own countries and sought refuge in the free country of Australia. But alas, today Australia shows no signs of a country with a commitment to human rights.

Respected people of Australia, what the Liberal government told you during the last 14 days was nothing but lies. Just as before, our movement was peaceful, free from any sort of violence and we believe in discussion and discourse in order to solve our problems. To our astonishment, different groups of Australian people and institutions, including the High Court, have chosen silence in the name of the national interest.

This unequal struggle finished today, while the United Nations failed to show any support. The great achievement of this movement was to send the message of freedom to the people of the world: the freedom that up to now, for us, has been only a dream.

But we are hopeful that with the help of different groups of Australian people – human rights institutions, lawyers, journalists and the media, refugee supporters, politicians and political parties, including the Greens, the Nationals, the Palmer United Party, the Labor Party and all of those from the Liberal Party – who still have a sense of humanity and are concerned about Australia's future, we can celebrate this old dream together, in the not too distant future.

To conclude, we would like to thank and show our appreciation for the help, support and sympathy of all the people in Australia, and other parts of the world, who stood by us and supported us during this time in every possible way. Your support and sympathy encouraged us and doubled our strength when going through this very rough and difficult path.

Viva freedom.

Unions' Day of Action

Mark Phillips

Unions have called a snap nationwide day of action to be held early next month in protest at Liberal-National Party policies which have undermined rights at work and living standards. Protests will take place in major cities around the country on March 4, as workers turn up the heat on the beleaguered Coalition government of Tony Abbott.

The announcement of the rallies came on the eve of the Coalition's disastrous result in the Queensland election on the weekend, where Premier Campbell Newman was ousted from his own seat and the Liberal-National Party is on the verge of losing government after a campaign in which unions played an instrumental role.

ACTU president Ged Kearney said Queenslanders had sent a clear message that they will not sit back while health, education, public services and workers' rights are attacked.

"Tony Abbott is taking Australia where Campbell Newman took Queensland – slashing public sector

jobs, cutting services and attacking rights at work," Kearney said on Sunday.

The March 4 day of action was announced late on Friday in an email from ACTU secretary Dave Oliver to members of the Australian Unions campaign network.

Venues and times for the nationwide protests, dubbed Fight for our Rights, are yet to be confirmed.

"Our rights at work are again under attack from the Abbott government and employers," Oliver said in his email message.

"Just last week it became even clearer that the full-scale Productivity Commission inquiry into our rights at work could deliver cuts to penalty rates, the abolition of the minimum wage, bring back unfair individual contracts and swing even more power to employers.

"The time to stand up and fight back is now."

The email message listed a range of areas of where Australian living standards were under attack, including the potential of cuts to wages and conditions from the Productivity Commission review, higher healthcare costs and

university fees, cuts to the ABC and public services, pensions and superannuation, changes to unemployment benefits, and cuts to community services.

Unions had considered rallies around the nation this month to defend Medicare, but put them on hold after the government backed down on its move to scrap a \$20 rebate to doctors.

At latest counting, the Newman Government in Queensland had suffered an 8.5% swing against it, and held 40 seats, while Labor had gained 43 seats following an 11.4% swing.

Labor needs 45 seats to form government outright, but the ABC has it falling one short which means whoever forms the next government will need to strike a deal with Katter's Australian Party and the one independent MP.

"Our campaign didn't just start 26 days ago – it started in September 2012 when Newman and the LNP sacked 24,000 workers," Queensland Council of Unions President John Battams said on Saturday night.

Working Life ☘

Harbour ferries hit heavy weather

Sydney Harbour's famed Australia Day ferry race went close to being short of starters last month, due to the refusal of the fleet's operators to get on board with union members who keep the craft seaworthy.

The "ferrython" did go ahead after the unionists who maintain the iconic fleet put the public's enjoyment first, but not before members made their point to Harbour City Ferries bosses.

The workers have imposed overtime bans on the upkeep and refuelling of the fleet because their employer refuses to give assurances on job security. Talks over the next union agreement have struck heavy weather, dragging on for over six months after Sydney Ferries bosses declared they intend to cut maintenance jobs by a third.

Riggers, fitters, mechanics and crane drivers at the Balmain shipyards are seeking a guarantee of no forced redundancies, but the Harbour City Ferries owners want an exemption for "unforeseen business issues" after two years.

That's wide enough to drive a Manly ferry through.

"Sydney Ferries won't train the current workforce for maintenance on new ferries due to come into service in coming years, we believe they want the supplier of those ferries to do all the maintenance so the workforce at Balmain can be cut," said Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union (AMWU) acting NSW state secretary Robyn Fortescue.

"That makes no practical sense operating ferries day-to-day; it is bad for workers and bad for passengers because the service would be less reliable."

Angry shipyard workers voted unanimously for protected industrial action, with action.

AMWU delegate Bob Aitchison said management wanted the bulk of the pay increase in the final year of the agreement – by which time a third of the workforce could be gone.

"We've been bargaining in good faith with positive suggestions, but they keep demanding more so the boys are fed up," he said. ☘

Individual contracts on agenda

Anti-union wave coming Part 2

Anna Pha

Individual contracts, known as Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs), were introduced by the former Howard Coalition government. They were at the centre of the Your Rights @ Work community/trade union campaign against WorkChoices that played a major role in the defeat of the Howard government in 2007. The incoming Rudd Labor government's Fair Work Act phased out the AWAs.

Employers used AWAs to roll back more than a century of hard won conditions – increase working hours, reduce wages, casualise their workforces, remove penalty rates, treat public holidays as ordinary working days, reduce or cut out the annual leave loading, etc.

In 2007, one University of Sydney study of 8,343 employees found that people on AWAs on average earned \$106.40 per week less than workers on collective enterprise agreements.

The introduction of non-union AWAs was the culmination of a process started under Labor in the 1980s from reliance on a highly centralised and comprehensive system of union negotiated awards to enterprise agreements (EBAs) and non-union individual contracts. AWAs enabled employers to dictate terms and conditions, in particular, in non-unionised workplaces where workers are extremely vulnerable.

The question of individual contracts and EBAs was one of the subjects raised by the Productivity Commission which is holding an inquiry into Australia's workplace relations system commissioned by the Abbott Coalition government.

In 2007, one University of Sydney study of 8,343 employees found that people on AWAs on average earned \$106.40 per week less than workers on collective enterprise agreements.

On January 23 the Commission released five issues papers calling for submissions on the specific issues. See last week's *Guardian* ("Anti-union wave coming", #1670, January 28), for what the Commission had to say about modern awards, national employment standards and minimum wages – the three components that underpin the system in setting a "safety net" for workers lacking industrial muscle.

Enterprise agreements

"Pattern bargaining", where trade unions negotiate identical agreements with different employers, is also on the employer hit list. The Commission raises concerns about its impact. Unions adopted this process as the system was decentralised, attempting to maintain uniform conditions across an industry. There is a

real danger that competition between companies would see a race to the bottom in labour costs. If one company cuts costs, the others have to follow or go out of business.

Contractors

Unions in industries where the principal companies use contractors to provide labour have sought agreements that apply to all contractors and their employees. This prevents the driving down of conditions by competing contractors and uniformity across the site, whereas the Coalition and employers are strongly opposed to unions being able to negotiate an agreement with principal companies that applies to all workers on site.

The Commission takes up this issue from the perspective of employers. It raises the concept of "employee groups" negotiating a joint agreement with both the labour hire agency and the host business. Not the unions negotiating a single agreement applicable to all contractors and workers on site.

At present the Fair Work Act requires that EBAs contain "permitted matters" that relate to the employee-employer or union-employer relationship. The Act fails to define "employee-employer relationship". The Commission is seeking recommendations on "what aspects of the employee/union-employer relationship should be permitted matters under enterprise agreements." In other words it would like to further restrict the content of enterprise agreements.

Trade-offs back again

There is scope in an enterprise agreement to trade off particular benefits of a modern award against other benefits, as long as all employ-

ees covered by the agreement are better off overall – what is known as the "better off overall test" or BOOT.

The Commission is considering the scope of BOOT in enterprise agreements and whether the types of trade-offs by workers could be expanded.

It is also looking at measures to promote productivity increases in agreements – another form of trade-offs by work flexibilities to increase profits. This was done in the 1980s (two-tier wages system) by such means as cutting staff levels, reducing paid breaks, introduction of casuals, multi-skilling and the loss of other non-monetary conditions.

Concrete conditions were traded off for a few extra dollars which over the coming years were eroded by inflation. The Commission sounds eager to increase the scope of such

trade-offs. It means workers pay for their own wage rises through saving their boss money by sacrificing conditions. In fact, many employers made a profit out of the trade offs by saving more than the extra they paid workers!

Individual agreements

Under the Fair Work Act, all awards must contain a clause that gives the parties to the agreement the capacity to form Individual Flexibility Arrangements (IFAs) that vary the effect of the award. Similar provisions exist for enterprise agreements for flexibility terms "in order to meet the genuine needs of the employee and employer". Variations include such things as greater flexibility regarding working hours, rostering, etc. The question here comes down to who gains the flexibility – the boss or the worker!

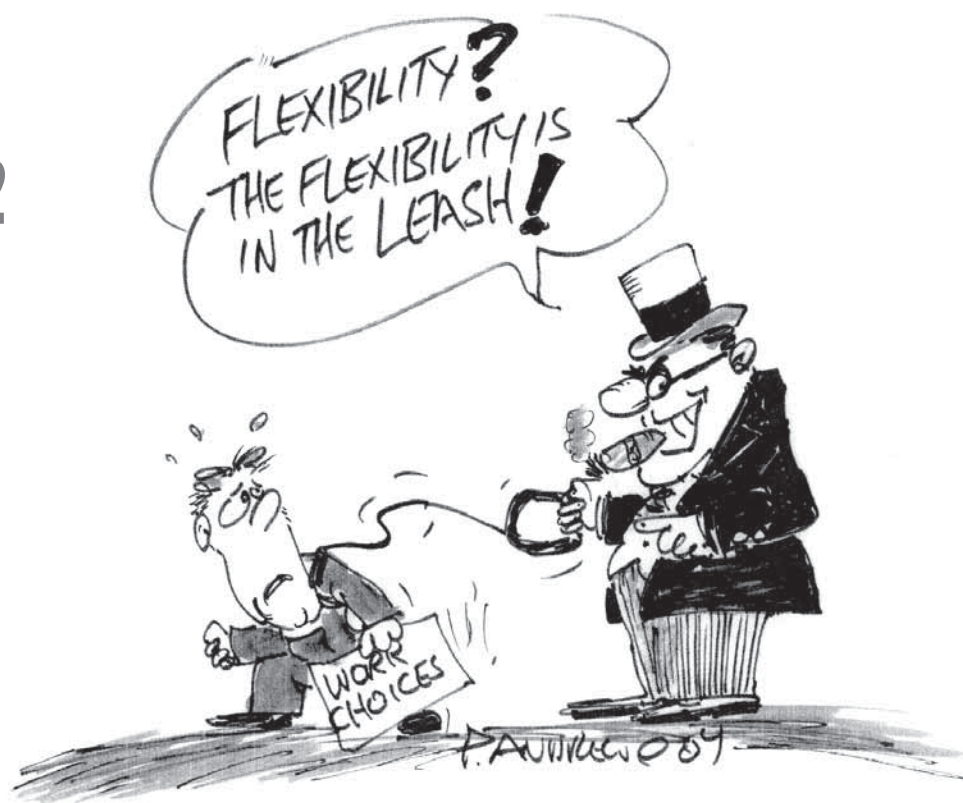
Unions have expressed concern over IFAs because they are supposed to be agreed to on an individual basis and could thus be used to not only undermine important gains won by the union in collective bargaining but serve as de facto individual contracts. This is particularly the case where workers are in lower paid and "less skilled" work.

Employers on their part are seeking greater flexibility. The Commission notes that more than 90 percent of employers do not have any IFAs in place in their workplaces and is looking at how to change this situation.

"Should there be restrictions on the matters that parties can trade off in forming individually-tailored agreements, and if so, why?", the Commission asks. Once again, reiterating the theme of trade-offs and individual agreements – a softer term for individual contracts.

The issues papers raise important questions and, as previously stated in Part 1, are presented as questions for organisations and individuals making submissions to offer their evidence and views. But the direction in which it is heading is not difficult to work out by its comments and the content of its questions. After all, the Productivity Commission has a well-earned, neo-liberal reputation that is far from pro-worker. The term "productivity" as used by neo-liberals is spin for "profit" per worker or rate of exploitation.

Continued next week. ✪



There are training exercises and training exercises. With Australia being on "high" terrorist alert, according to Tony Abbott, the last thing that anybody wants is to panic people unnecessarily. But that's exactly what happened in Sydney recently when Circular Quay was evacuated. The CBD was thrown into transport chaos, hundreds of people had their plans disrupted, business owners in the Circular Quay area lost earnings during their busiest time as the place was in lock-down. The cause of all this was a device (bottles filled with liquid, wires and nails sticking out of them) that had been used as part of previous training exercise by the Harbour City Ferries. The Harbour City Ferries is run by the private companies Transdev and Transfield services on behalf of Transport NSW. One of their employees brought the device for training but evidently forgot to mention it to other staff. When the device was discovered the police were notified and chaos ensued. Now the state government has ordered an investigation into the origins of the device which led to bomb scare and evacuation. It will be a good idea to also look into how a private company is running a critical piece of transport infrastructure (and why) and the lack of communication between a private company, police and state authorities.

Every little bit helps in making progress in the climate change challenge. One of the methods used to lean on big business is divestment from banks that lend money to fossil fuel companies. There is a global divestment campaign which is coordinated by protest group 350.org. Australian National University is one of the participants in this campaign. Now Marrickville Council is pulling \$15 million from deposit with the major banks. The strategy is to shun the big four banks – ANZ, Westpac, Commonwealth and National in favour of smaller institutions that do not fund fossil fuel projects. These include Bendigo Bank, Bank of Queensland and Suncorp.

Mention the words "sharia laws in Australia" and the response will be swift, emotional and highly negative. These are the laws that are being promoted by ISIS fighters who want everybody to be thrown back into medieval times. The beheadings, the floggings and other monstrosities are rightly condemned. But we seem to make exceptions for our "friends and allies". They can get away with murder. Last year 87 public beheadings were conducted in the country whose king just died. The new king started off well in that respect – it is believed that three people have already been beheaded. Yes, we are talking about Saudi Arabia and the disgusting display of praise from western leaders. People there are killed for blasphemy, homosexuality, adultery, witchcraft. For Australia to fly the Australia flag at half-mast as a mark "of mourning and respect" for their dead king is disgusting.

Is the US ready to trigger war in Asia?

Andre Vltchek

The anti-Chinese and anti-Russian propaganda howl is reaching a deafening crescendo, especially in Asia. Western media outlets are in high gear, spreading propaganda through their own outlets and their local media affiliates in the client states, mostly owned by big business. China and Russia are now vilified, openly insulted, and blamed for the escalation of tension in the Asia-Pacific region, and for the military build up. The entire mighty Western propaganda machine is now at work, demonising China, Russia and other independent countries.

Politicians are parading, one after another, in front of television cameras, pledging allegiance to capitalism, the Western-style regime or simply put, to the Empire. All these derogatory and inflammatory speeches against their “enemies” are embarrassing, but they are becoming the norm.

Many are warning that this can lead to a world war, that the West has lost all restraint and is ready to bathe the planet in blood, once again. A quarter of century ago it appeared that with the destruction of the Eastern block and with China then increasingly on a capitalist course, the West had finally got what it had fought for centuries for – the total and absolute control of the planet.

But something went “wrong” for the West. Latin America rose and most of it gained freedom, then spat on the Monroe Doctrine. China began pushing for socialist reforms in medical care, education, culture and many other spheres. And Russia refused to get bullied and humiliated, reminding both Europe and North America that it will not be stepped on as happened in the era of Gorbachev and Yeltsin.

The dream of unopposed rule over the world is beginning to disappear into thin air. Is the West going to risk the destruction of our planet simply because it cannot own it?

Whose order?

“Stephen Harper attacks Vladimir Putin and ‘evil’ communism”, reported Canada’s *CBC News* on May 31, 2014, in reference to the “lengthy keynote speech” at a fundraising event that the right-wing Canadian PM gave in Toronto. The speech was spiced with “language reminiscent of the height of the Cold War.”

Grotesquely, the President of the most aggressive country on Earth, the United States, Barack Obama, was promising to “curb the aggression” of Russia and China, two countries that have not invaded anywhere in the last few decades.

In a speech clearly aimed at provoking China, the US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel, spoke more like a thug than a politician: “The United States will not look the other way when fundamental principles of the international order are being challenged.”

“Which order?” Some would ask. Was he talking about the order that is being imposed on the world from Washington and European capitals and has been for centuries, at the cost of hundreds of millions of human lives? Quite an order!

Christopher Black, a leading international criminal lawyer based in Toronto, provided an analysis for this report:

“The speech made by President Obama at West Point, that the fulcrum of American policy will be to curb the ‘aggression’ of Russia and China immediately followed by his Defence Secretary Hagel in Singapore accusing China of destabilisation in the South China Sea, rightly characterised by Lieutenant General Wang Guanzhong as ‘threats and intimidation’, expresses the clear intent of the United States to wage war in all its aspects against the two most powerful nations that dare to develop independently of American domination.

“The United States has attacked China several times since World War II, first in the Korean War, followed by decades of attempted sabotage and isolation and then by the NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in 1999. It now has continued that pressure by trying to destabilise China internally through various mechanisms of infiltration of ‘human rights’ groups into Chinese society and within China’s military and administrative mechanisms and a constant propaganda campaign to defame China and its people around the world.

“The momentum of this strategy has been stepped up with the recent attacks by fanatical Muslim groups from western China against Chinese civilians in key cities and transportation hubs and use of provocateurs to attack Chinese interests in Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines and Africa and the recent absurd charges against Chinese military officers for cyber attacks.

“The recent events in Ukraine show that the pace of this aggression is accelerating as America attempts to complete the encirclement of Russia and China by advancing NATO to Russia’s borders and by repositioning of 60 percent of US military assets to the Pacific.”

But now the true aggressors are blaming the victims for “aggression”. And it is nothing new under the sun. Nazi Germany and its propagandists employed the same “logic” and arguments, before and during WWII. And the French used it in Algiers and their other colonies.

Local servility

In Asia, on a local level, the servile press in countries like the Philippines is taking orders and often surpasses its handlers in the West by its zeal.

On May 25, 2014, *The Philippine Star* began with lashing out at China, continued by quoting the words of Admiral William Locklear III, the commander of US Pacific forces, that “Russia has its own ‘pivot’ in Asia”. Then the newspaper finally produced a few pieces of “brilliant” analyses: “Official sources said Russia’s incursion into Ukraine has raised concern in Washington that China may try something similar in staking its territorial claims, in the guise of protecting its citizens overseas.”

“Russian incursion into Ukraine?” That sounds more like propaganda shouting from the pages of the North American or European daily press. In some 15 years of work in the region, after interacting with hundreds of media people from all over Southeast Asia, I have to testify that such a thought as quoted above, could never have come from a local journalist. Here, knowledge about Eastern Europe is very near absolute zero. Someone else wrote it.

Most of the local Philippine press generally concluded that the US has basically no choice but to expand militarily, because of “China’s aggressive moves”. Almost all the newspapers mentioned the high cost of the permanent US military bases in the region, also arguing that “spokes”, bases belonging to local countries but wide open for use by US forces, are the real way forward. Such bases would also be located on Australian and Japanese territory, and possibly in Singapore and Thailand, as well as Malaysia.

The mainstream Philippine media is not even bothering to question such a military agreement, which is in direct violation of the nation’s Constitution.

Eduardo Tadem, Professor of Asian Studies at the University of Philippines, explained, during our recent conversation in Manila:

“The recently signed agreement between the Philippines and the United States is called EDCA (Economic Defence Cooperation Agreement). In this agreement the Philippine government offered virtually all the military bases in the Philippines total access for American soldiers, for a ten-year period. But who knows for how long, really ... This is very dangerous,

because all military installations of the country are now open for ‘entry’ of the US forces. And this certainly goes against the Philippine Constitution, which bars the establishment of foreign bases on our territory.”

Then what really happened? Why the sudden change?

“It has to do with certain factors,” Tadem explains. “One, of course, is the factor of the so-called ‘US pivot’ to Asia. Under Obama there is this strategy of ‘pivoting to Asia’. Second has to do with the so-called Trans-Pacific partnership proposal of the United States; to build some sort of integrated market in the Asia-Pacific region. Except that the Philippines is not part of it for now ... The third one has to do with the territorial disputes that are taking place in this region, both in the South China Sea and the North China Sea.”

China

Tadem continues: “It is mainly an issue of nationalism. And it is also because here they were always asking for more assistance, including military assistance. And this is the way to get that assistance. Also remember that Philippine presidents were consistently supportive of the US. You probably saw the survey that shows that the Philippine people love the United States more than Americans love themselves. So for the Americans it is easy to get support for their China policy here.”

I asked both Teresa Tadem, Professor of Political Science at the University of Philippines, and Professor Eduard Tadem, how was it possible that a country, the Philippines, that suffered so severely during its occupation by the United States, during the colonial era, feels so positive towards its former brutal coloniser?

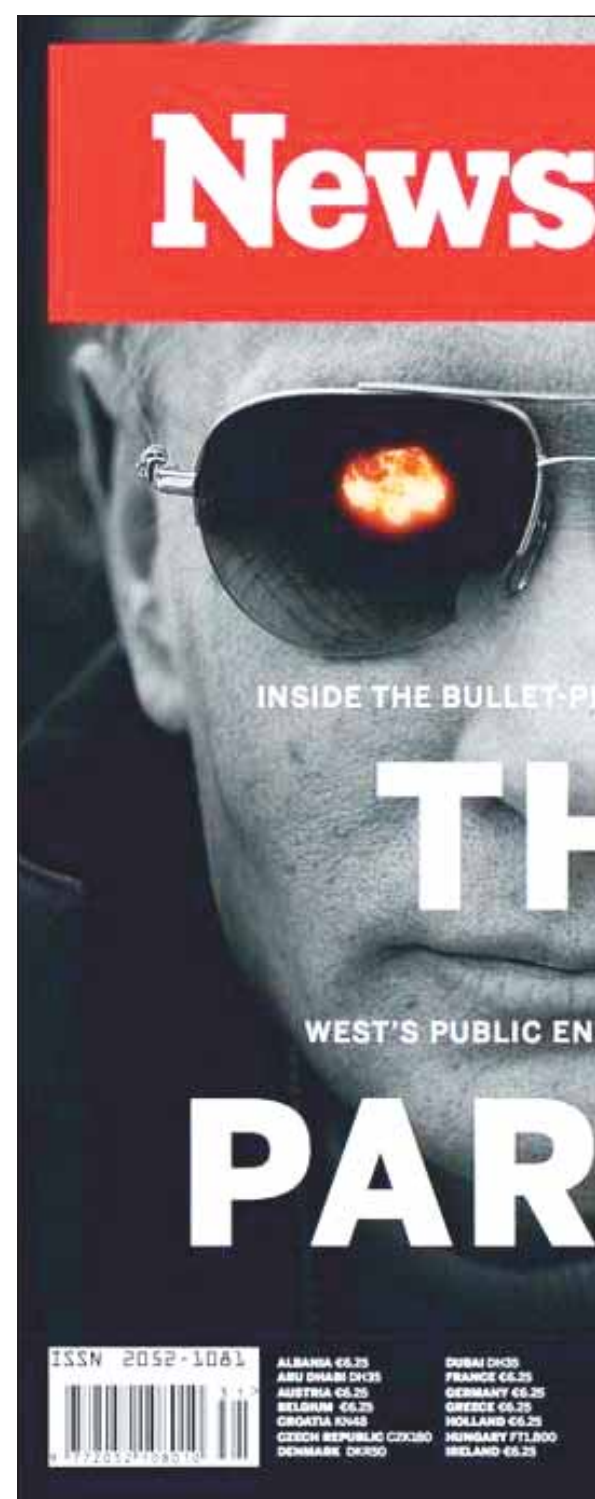
“It has to do with the extremely intensive American propaganda machine, which depicted the colonial era as a benevolent type of colonialism. Atrocities during the Philippine-American War of 1898–1901, which saw a million Philippine people killed, which was then almost one tenth of the population, were made to disappear from the consciousness of the people ... the genocide, torture ... The Philippines was known as the ‘first Vietnam’ ... all of this has been conveniently forgotten, hidden in the history books. And then of course the image of Hollywood that we are bombarded with ...”

How dangerous is it to antagonise China and even Russia? For centuries, China had been a very peaceful country, and it still is to this day. Many Filipinos come from China; it is a natural, historical ally ... While the West is liquidating, and bombing entire countries into the ground, overthrowing governments, China pulls one oil rig into disputed waters, sprays a few boats with water cannon, and it is immediately defined as the aggressor.

“It is again all about propaganda. They depicted China as Communist and here they always attach a negative connotation to that word,” said Professor Teresa Tadem.

“For me the most dangerous country on Earth now is the United States,” continues Eduardo Tadem. “It has been the most aggressive ... intervening in many countries all over the world, thousands of miles from its shores, trying to impose on the planet its vision of a global capitalist system. So, if you compare what China is doing in the vicinity of its territory, and compare it to what the US is doing in all parts of the world, on every continent ... then you clearly see the disparity in the image that has been created, depicting China as a danger to peace in the world.”

Both professors then expressed deep concern over the fact that Western propaganda is igniting Sino-phobia in Filipinos and in other Asians. They pointed out that what the US is doing is actually fanning ultra-nationalism, which can easily mutate into fascism. This is, according to them, an extremely dangerous



Demonising the leaders of countries targeted for regime change

situation – planting seeds of Sino-phobia all over the continent.

“This can lead to a point of no return,” explains Eduardo Tadem. “I am afraid that this is what is happening now in the Philippines, as well as in other parts of Asia where territorial disputes are taking place.”

And it is clearly not only Sino-phobia that can lead to the destruction of the world, although partially Sino-phobia definitely is. Stirring hatred against Russia is also clearly on the menu of the Western masters of propaganda. Stephen Harper of Canada, Polish and Baltic politicians and their irrational anti-Russian speeches, are all leading to a frightening outcome: manufacturing racism against those nations that are standing in the way of US and European domination of the world.

Dehumanising a potential enemy, unleashing racist and derogatory sentiments against him or her, is the first step in the Western ‘art’ of war, the first step towards a confrontation.

Speaking up

People are beginning to speak up. Geoffrey Gunn, a prominent Australian historian and Professor Emeritus at Nagasaki University in Japan, wrote to me, for this report:

“The international media big notes the ‘China threat’, yet who is the provocateur? We observe the Japanese Prime Minister in Singapore (May 30) offering to lead an international coalition to check Chinese aggression offering ‘quality’ Japanese naval vessels to obliging clients as with the Philippines and Vietnam. This is madness coming from a nation without official contrition, seeking as well to unpick its ‘god-save the peace constitution’. Meantime, the neo-con government in Australia overreaches with matching rhetoric, together snaring the US Defence Secretary to offer his own ‘pivot’ to the South China Sea. My spin is to let Asian nationalisms (China, Vietnam, Japan, Korea) resolve their own problems diplomatically – after all



change is part of imperialism's tactics

the central kingdom has been in place for several millennium – outsiders keep out, militarists watch your step, and China rise peacefully.”

Are we being dragged into the final global confrontation, to a possible WWII? Observed from Asia Pacific or from Ukraine, it clearly appears so.

Christopher Black has no doubts that provoking, antagonising and insulting powerful independent countries like Russia and China may be the next step towards the destruction of our human race:

“All these actions are preparations for war. In fact, the positioning of American anti-ballistic missile batteries in Eastern Europe is in preparation for a nuclear first strike on Russia. Those batteries are deployed solely for the purpose of trying to intercept a retaliatory strike by Russian nuclear forces after a US first strike.

“They have no other purpose. These preparations for a war of aggression, in fact nuclear war, are a clear violation of the UN Charter and all international laws and can rightly be characterised as war crimes. But since the United States has contempt for all international laws and civilised standards of behaviour we can expect these preparations to continue.

“Mankind rests on the brink of annihilation for no other reason than the American pursuit of unlimited profit. They are the extremists of the capitalist system. We must hope that the skilful diplomacy we have seen employed by both Russia and China, the increased pace of their bilateral cooperation with each other and their increased steps to achieve multilateral cooperation throughout the world from Latin America to Africa and Europe and Asia will change the power dynamics of the world sufficiently to prevent the Americans and their allies from achieving their aims so that the peoples of the world can live in peace and devote their energies to solving mankind's pressing problems.”

RT ✘

Everything old Is new again



Blake Deppe

I just heard a rumour that Disney is going to be involved in remaking *Indiana Jones*, with Chris Pratt as the ideal leading man, in place of Harrison Ford. If true, this is only the latest in an ongoing, decade-long problem. Film studios are trying to remake, reboot, and add new instalments to, or spin-offs of, every successful or memorable film you can think of, and destroying the legacies of those films in the process. And there's a reason for that.

Big film studios are becoming greedy. This is the driving motivator behind the whole thing. It's safer to stick with tried and true film franchises that people recognise, and it's been proven that tapping into someone's nostalgia generally piques that person's interest. So, for example, a new *Star Wars* film won't even be questioned by the average moviegoer. It's *Star Wars*! It's a guaranteed money-maker. The *Transformers* movies? They'll make 10 of them, at least. And then there's that nostalgia. A lot of people remember the *Ninja Turtles* from their childhood, so they'll flock to see a really bad live action rehash of it starring Megan Fox as Megan Fox.

The irony here is that the film studios are missing the whole point. Popular film series like *Star Wars* were successful because they offered something new, original, and well done. *Scarface* was loved because it was such a good film, with a stellar lead actor. A remake would only look like a poor imitation, bordering on parody, by comparison.

There are so many things in this world that are better because they're unique. There's only one Golden Gate Bridge. Only one *Vitruvian Man* (though it has been parodied). There's only one Stonehenge. Would anyone want to try and make a copy of any of these things? It wouldn't be as good as the original. It would have no authenticity.

But one has to, unfortunately, look at this from the perspective of a big film studio.

They've determined that it no longer matters if the films lack quality or distinction. The *bottom line* is what matters, as opposed to taking risks on something new, which, if it doesn't pan out, means money taken out of their pockets. That sort of gamble used to be worth it – it's how great film classics were born.

But studios don't need to do that anymore. Today's generation of kids won't know that the original *Indiana Jones* or the 80's version of *The Goonies* (yes, that's being remade) is better. They'll simply be stuck with a low-quality copycat. Film studios know that. They're banking on it. Because they can show each new generation a lesser, regurgitated form of what their parents or grandparents watched.

The sad thing is, it wasn't always that way. Basically, when I was a kid, things were different.

Consider this: in 2014, there were at least 40 major movies that were either remakes, reboots, sequels, threequels, prequels, or spinoffs. In 2004, there were just 19. In 1994, there were 11. And in 1984, there were – wait for it – five. Notice a pattern here?

And it's only going to get worse going forward. Within the next few years, the following remakes, reboots, etc could all possibly hit theatres:

Terminator, Indiana Jones, Fantastic Four, Spider-Man, Batman, Power Rangers, Goosebumps, Ben-Hur, Frankenstein, The Crow, The Mummy, Poltergeist, Tarzan, Scarface, Pet Sematary, Little Shop of Horrors, King Kong, The Toxic Avenger, Weird Science, Friday the 13th, A Nightmare On Elm Street, The Ring, The Grudge, Invasion of the Body Snatchers, Predator, Gremlins, Ghostbusters, Jacob's Ladder, The Omen, Flatliners, An American Werewolf in London, Jumanji, Highlander, Tomb Raider, The Goonies, Robin Hood, The Three Musketeers, Green Lantern, Spawn, Van Helsing, Stargate, The Rocky Horror Picture Show, Mortal Kombat, Street Fighter, and The Wild Bunch.

Excited yet?

Some people will argue that we're seeing so many remakes because there are just no new ideas left; that there's nothing truly original that can still be done. That's not true. In fact, there are *plenty* of original ideas out there. Books, alone, provide an excellent example. Check out the *Powder Mage* trilogy by Brian McClellan, or *The Stormlight Archive* by Brandon Sanderson. Really, really original offerings with exciting twists and compelling narratives.

Look online. There's tons of creative content being developed and uploaded to YouTube every day. Online streaming is big, too. Shows are debuting on Netflix, Hulu, Amazon, etc. And I'm sure there are plenty of people trying (and failing) to get their creative movie ideas pitched to big film studios. Take it from someone who writes fantasy – there's no shortage of creativity out there. It's simply a matter of whether that creativity is being repressed. And it is. In the interest of profit. Another ripple effect of capitalism.

But something needs to change, and soon. From the days of ancient Greece and Rome to the modern era, what we now call “pop culture” has always existed, in various forms. Where would we be without the tales of Ulysses, or the writings of Sophocles? Or the works of William Shakespeare? A dearth of new forms of art, whatever format they may be in, is bad for us as a culture, and as an intellectual society.

We will continue to be “dumbed down” as creativity is shunted to the sidelines, and as we are handed shoddy versions of things that already exist. Without new ideas to provoke us, inspire us, and become part of our lives, we will continue to run along like hamsters trapped in a cycle of cultural repetition. And that's a really big loss.

As Bertolt Brecht once said, “Art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it.”

People's World ✘

The film studios are missing the whole point. Popular film series like *Star Wars* were successful because they offered something new, original, and well done.

France

Eight-year-old suspected of “defending terrorism”

Ali Abunimah

Just when it seemed that the crackdown on free speech in France could not get worse, French police last questioned a second grader on suspicion of “defending terrorism.” BFMTV says that administrators at a primary school in Nice reported the child to police on January 21 after the boy allegedly said that he “felt he was on the side of the terrorists.”

“A police station is absolutely no place for an eight-year-old child,” the boy’s lawyer Sefen Guez told BFMTV. He said that the incident showed that France was going through a state of “collective hysteria.”

Guez Guez said that on January 8, the day after two French gunmen attacked the offices of the magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, the boy, whose name has been reported as Ahmed, was in class when he was asked if he was “Charlie.”

“He answered, ‘I am on the side of the terrorists, because I am against the caricatures of the prophet,’” the lawyer said.

Since the murders of the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoonists and the lethal attack by a third French gunman on a Jewish supermarket, French government officials and media have adopted the slogan “*Je Suis Charlie*” – I am Charlie – to indicate social conformity and support for official policies, all under the guise of supporting free speech.

The Collective Against Islamophobia in France, which has taken up Ahmed’s case, provided these additional details: “On January 8, Ahmed, a second grader, was called on by his teacher who asked him if he was Charlie. Being of Muslim religion and aged only eight, he opposed *Charlie Hebdo* because of the caricatures of the prophet, and responded naively that he was on the side of the terrorists. Angered, the teacher

sent him to the principal, who was in the class next door, and who asked him three times in front of the whole class, ‘Are you Charlie?’”

The child’s parents were called in and “played an educational role, explaining to him what terrorism really was and why one should be on the side of the *Charlie Hebdo* victims,” Guez Guez said.

Principal calls police

Instead of leaving the matter there, on January 21, the school principal lodged two complaints with police, one against the child for “defending terrorism,” and another against the child’s father for trespassing.

According to the lawyer, the child had been deeply upset and isolated after what happened, so his father accompanied him to the school playground on three occasions after January 8, before being told he was not allowed to do so.

Fabienne Lewandowski, a spokesperson for the Alpes-Maritimes regional police, confirmed to BFMTV that they received the complaints. Lewandowski revealed that the school principal claimed that the child had said “French people should be killed,” “I am on the side of the terrorists” and “the journalists deserved to die.” The child then allegedly refused to take part in a government-decreed minute of silence.

“During our interview, the child indicated that he had said some of these words, but did not really understand what they meant,” the police spokesperson said. “The purpose of this interview was to understand exactly what had happened, and what could have led him to say this.”

“We can regret that this took the form of an official police interview,” Lewandowski said, “but under the circumstances, we could have gone even further.”



According to the police spokesperson, the father “showed regret for his son’s words.”

The Collective Against Islamophobia in France said that his interview by police “was an additional trauma that illustrates the collective hysteria that has ensued since the beginning of January.”

Prosecutors in Nice have yet to decide how to proceed in the case.

Victim of bullying?

Ahmed has said that he was a victim of bullying by the school principal, according to his lawyer, BFMTV reported. On one occasion, the child was playing in a sandbox. According to the child’s account relayed by the lawyer, the principal told the boy, “stop digging in the sand, you won’t find a machine-gun in there.”

On another occasion, Ahmed, who is diabetic, alleges the principal deprived him of his insulin, saying, “Since you want us all to die, you will taste death.” The principal has denied the accusation.

Guez Guez said that Ahmed’s parents planned to lodge a complaint about the school’s behaviour.

According to *Le Figaro*, the French education ministry confirmed that the school principal had also made a report about Ahmed to child protective services.

Government crackdown

While Ahmed’s case may seem extreme, the complaint against him is enabled by an atmosphere of intolerance and authoritarianism fostered by the French government.

Since the attacks in Paris, the government has launched an unprecedented crackdown, condemned by Amnesty International as well as French civil rights groups, in which it has jailed dozens of people for things they have said, under the vague charge of “defending terrorism.”

Previously, as *The Electronic Intifada* reported, one of those arrested was a 16-year-old high schooler, for allegedly posting a caricature mocking *Charlie Hebdo*.

French President François Hollande used this year’s International Holocaust Memorial Day speech to confirm that his government plans to tighten its control over what people are allowed to say online and stiffen penalties for illegal speech.

globalresearch ☪

Guantánamo belongs to Cuba

Cuban President Raul Castro has justice and international law on his side when he demands that the United States return the illegally occupied Guantánamo Bay naval base.

The world’s overweening superpower has hundreds of bases in foreign countries, of course – 130 of the world’s 193 UN member states hosts some form of US military presence. Washington’s hard-nosed militarists and their media cheerleaders see nothing wrong with what amounts to the military occupation of half the planet.

They delight in such designations as “the world’s policeman” and “the indispensable nation” in order to maintain the myth that wars begun by the US are in some way legitimate. Certainly they have convinced themselves. The irony of US Secretary of State John Kerry’s

response to Crimea’s vote to reunify with Russia last year – “you don’t just invade a country on a phoney pretext in order to assert your interests” – must have been lost on him, or the state which started the Yugoslav, Afghan and Iraq wars on just such phoney pretexts would have been forewarned about the international ridicule that followed.

There is nothing legitimate about US global power. The worldwide network of military bases is quite simply the enforcement wing of a ruthless imperialist state so paranoid about its pre-eminence that it responds hysterically to challenges from even the smallest countries.

The five-decade-and-counting blockade of Cuba, pursued in the teeth of repeated denunciations by the United Nations, is proof of that. And there are a number of reasons why the Guantánamo Bay naval

base is an even greater affront to another nation’s sovereignty than all the others scattered across the globe.

For one thing, although the presence of US soldiers from Britain to Japan is generally unpopular with the peoples of the host nations, most bases are at least agreed to by the relevant country’s government.

Not so with Guantánamo Bay. True, the base was leased to the United States by the Cuban-American Treaty of 1903 – but as Cuba points out, this treaty was signed under duress.

It was part of Cuba’s grudging acceptance of the Platt amendment, which committed the island to allow the US to lease land for bases. Cuba had to sign in return for the withdrawal of a US occupation army.

Cuba has demanded the return of the land ever since the 1959

socialist revolution that put the country on the path to true independence from Washington.

Since then, Cuba has refused to accept the absurdly minuscule annual payments made by the US for the base – the figure of US\$4,085 has been unchanged since 1934. Fidel Castro memorably showed an interviewer a desk drawer full of the uncashed cheques – still made out to the obsolete “treasurer-general of the republic” post – in 2007.

And since the beginning of the so-called war on terror, the grotesque use to which the base has been put provides another reason why this involuntary “lease” must be terminated.

In direct breach of its own original treaty with Cuba, which states that the base can only be used as a naval and coaling station, it has

become home to the world’s most infamous prison camp.

Its inmates have been kidnapped from countries around the world by special forces or sold to the US by a variety of blood-soaked police states. They have then languished in legal limbo for years. Most have never been charged with a crime, many – like British resident Shaker Aamer – have even been “cleared for release,” but still they remain, victims of false imprisonment, torture and force-feeding, trapped in a never-ending Kafkaesque nightmare.

It is high time this travesty of justice and insult to the Cuban people was ended. Now the Cuban 5 are free, the liberation of Guantánamo is a top priority for all who stand in solidarity with the Cuban revolution.

Morning Star ☪

McDonald's sued for racial, sexual discrimination

SOUTH BOSTON: McDonald's workers who were fired last year after being told, "There are too many black people [working] in the store," have filed a federal civil rights lawsuit against the company alleging a widespread pattern of racial and sexual discrimination and harassment at three stores in Virginia.

The suit, filed in the US District Court for the Western District of Virginia by 10 former workers at three Clarksville and South Boston McDonald's stores, alleges the company last May simultaneously fired more than a dozen black workers who "didn't fit the profile" desired at its restaurants. The highest-ranking managers had told workers that it was "too dark" in the restaurants and that they "need to get the ghetto out of the store."

"All of a sudden, they let me go, for no other reason than I 'didn't fit the profile' they wanted at the store," said plaintiff Willie Betts, who was a cook at the South Boston McDonald's until he was fired last May.

"I had no idea what they meant by the right profile until I saw everyone else that they fired as well. I worked at McDonald's for almost five years, I was on time every day at four o'clock in the morning to open the store, and I never had a disciplinary write-up. They took away the only source of income I have to support my family," he said.

The suit comes as McDonald's faces increased scrutiny over its role as an employer at franchised stores and carries significant implications in the ongoing debate about whether the fast-food giant can be held responsible for the well-being of employees at its restaurants.

Despite McDonald's repeated assertions that it is not the boss at these stores, federal officials late last year filed a dozen complaints charging the company was indeed a joint employer responsible for labour violations at stores across the country. The workers' suit names both McDonald's Corp. and McDonald's USA and franchise owner Michael

Simon and his company, Soveva Co, as defendants.

The complaint contends that McDonald's Corp has control over "nearly every aspect of its restaurants' operations," and is therefore responsible for the harassment and discrimination workers faced. Several workers contacted McDonald's Corp to report the discrimination, but the company did nothing.

The complaint charges that the McDonald's Corp representative who conducted regular inspection visits at the stores had learned of the terminations soon after they occurred on May 12, but took no action. And the company did nothing after a local paper reported on the firings.

"We asked McDonald's corporate to help us get our jobs back, but the company told us to take our concerns to the franchisee - the same franchisee that just fired us," said plaintiff Pamela Marable, a crew-member at the South Boston McDonald's who was fired in May.

"McDonald's closely monitors everything we do, from the speed of the drive-through line, to the way we smile and fold customers' bags - but when we try to tell the company that we're facing discrimination, they ignore us and say that it's not their problem," she said.

Highest-ranking supervisors regularly called the Clarksville McDonald's the "ghetto store," referred to black workers as "bitch," "ghetto," and "ratchet," and disciplined them for rule infractions that were forgiven when committed by white workers, the complaint alleges.

One supervisor routinely touched female workers on their legs and buttocks, discussed sexual activities with female workers and offered better working conditions in exchange for sexual favours, according to the complaint.

Several workers contacted the South Boston chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) last year to report the harassment and discrimination. Leaders of the chapter met with the workers and then

contacted the Fight for \$15 movement for help. Both organisations are providing ongoing support to the workers in connection with the workers' suit.

"The treatment of these McDonald's workers seems like it's out of another era, but sadly the racism is a reality they are confronting today," said the Reverend Kevin Chandler, president of the South Boston Chapter of the NAACP and vice president of the NAACP Virginia State Conference.

"The South Boston NAACP will stand with these fired workers until McDonald's takes responsibility for the inhumane treatment these workers faced in its stores."

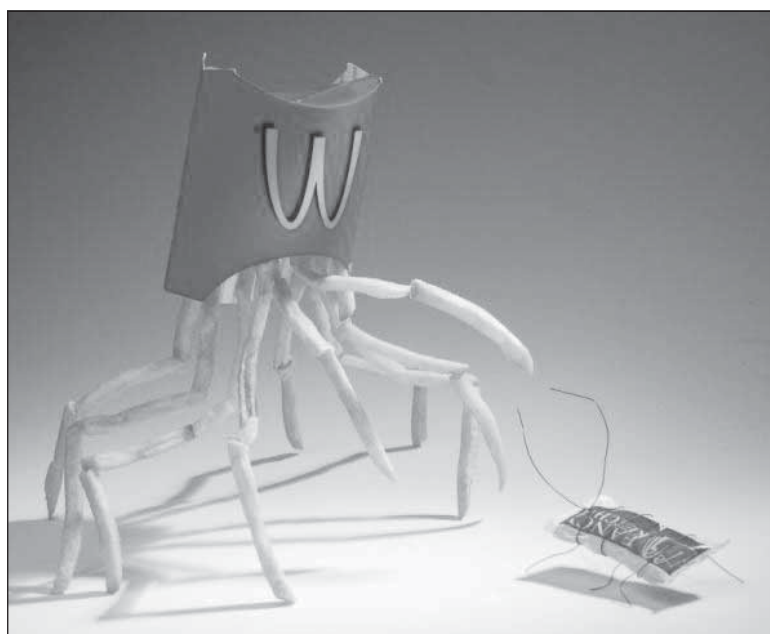
In response to the suit, the Fight for \$15 movement launched a toll-free national hotline for McDonald's workers across the country to report incidences of harassment and abuse at the workplace.

"This is a problem that goes far beyond these stores in Virginia - it's a problem with McDonald's business model itself when workers at the company have nowhere to turn," said Kendall Fells, organising director of Fast Food Forward.

"McDonald's has the power to fix this problem, but instead it chooses to skirt its responsibility and hide behind its franchise model."

Addressing racial and sexual harassment have been a goal for many fast food workers. "Dignity and respect is a common theme running throughout" many workers' narratives, wrote *People's World* reporter Tony Pecinovsky in 2013, "fast-food workers just want to be treated better. Racism, sexism, and favouritism are rampant."

The workers' complaint brings harassment and discrimination claims under Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and Section 1981. Soon after the lawsuit was announced Twitter activists began using the hashtag #NotLovinRacism, parodying McDonald's tagline, "I'm lovin' it." *People's World* ✪



Region Briefs

Celebrations were held across Vietnam to mark the 85th anniversary of the establishment of the Communist Party of Vietnam. In an interview, the Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong reviewed the country's great achievements and difficulties it faced. He said the Party, people and army would "utilise all resources to push the country forward on its path of renewal and development". Former Party leaders together with the people attended a special performance highlighting the Party's success and development in revolutionary struggles. The Party had successfully led struggles against the French and US imperialists as well as modernised the country. In 2014, Vietnam achieved a targeted GDP growth of 5.98 percent and its export income reached more than AU\$150 billion.

On January 27 Vietnamese leaders and the ambassador of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) to Vietnam attended a celebration in Hanoi to mark the 65th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties between the two countries. The Vietnamese side thanked the DPRK Party for offering assistance to Vietnamese struggles for liberation and socialist development. The ambassador praised Vietnam's successful socio-economic development. Both sides agreed to continually develop friendship and cooperation in economic, cultural and political fields.

The Mayor of Beijing city, Wang Anshun, said in a report that the city's population had reached 23 million, and the government would "make comprehensive efforts to solve serious urban problems like air pollution and traffic congestion". He claimed that the government would employ market strategies under socialist laws to move 36 large commercial-product markets and 300 companies in polluting industries out of the city, in order to reduce over-population and high-density pollution in Beijing.

The head of the Secretariat of the Japanese Communist Party, Yamashita Yoshiki, criticised the 2015 budget as anti-people. The budget cut social welfare programs (pension payments) and increased sales tax to fund additional spending on new US military bases in Okinawa and the purchase of new weapons (fighter jets and Osprey aircrafts). Yoshiki said the budget proved that the government was determined to turn Japan into a fighting machine. Meanwhile, the Japanese Labour Ministry proposed and discussed a new system that was planned to legalise non-payment for overtime for office workers whose monthly salaries reached a certain amount. As a response, workers held a protest in front of the ministry, demanding the government implement the eight-hour working principle in practice.

In India's Sivaganga and Karaikudi provinces, police arrested 150 people who protested against US President Obama's visit to India. Protesters criticised the Modi government's pro-US policies that undermined the country's independence. The Politburo of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) stated that Obama's visit was the outcome of the Modi government's surrender policy, and that it was not in the Indian people's strategic and economic interests. Obama's visit showed signs that India and the US intend to form a military alliance to contain China's growth. In exchange, the US would give India the green light on developing nuclear products including weapons.

Cuba

Call for the 10th International May Day Brigade

April 27 to May 10, 2015

The Cuban Institute of Friendship with the Peoples and its travel Agency Amistur Cuba S.A, invites you to participate in the 10th edition of the international brigade, on the occasion of the international workers' day.

In addition to the voluntary work, participants will visit places of historical and social interest, receive lectures about our reality, and will have the possibility to exchange with representatives of different social and political organizations, they may exchange with Cuban workers and unionists and visit Playa Giron, where for the first time in Latin America imperialism received its first defeat in less than 72 hours.

The Brigade will take place in the provinces of Havana, Artemisa and Matanzas (Playa Giron). The same will lead the participants a better understanding of the current Cuban reality, in the midst of transformations that are carried out in Cuba, as part of the update of the economic model of our Socialist project.

For full program see www.cpa.org.au/whats-on

Letters to the Editor
The Guardian
74 Buckingham Street
Surry Hills NSW 2010



email: tpearson@cpa.org.au

Human cost of Syrian conflict

The human and material cost of the horrific conflict in Syria has been enormous. Since 2011, it is estimated that over 200,000 people have been killed. The UN figure is higher at over 220,000. Of these more than 63,000 were civilians, including about 6,500 women and at least 10,515 children. The remainder have been fighters of the various factions.

The fighting has also forced two and a half million refugees to flee Syria into Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and North Africa. Another 7.6 million refugees have been internally displaced because of the war.

Despite this harrowing death toll and the huge exodus of refugees, the world has largely ignored this brutal war and remained silent, refusing to take any meaningful actions to help end the massacres, the immense devastation and the appalling suffering of the people.

I find it heart-wrenchingly sad and beyond belief that after so many atrocities of the recent past, such as the Armenian genocide and the massive slaughter of Greeks and Assyrians by Ottoman Turkey, the large-scale mass murders by Nazi Germany and Japan in WW2, mass killings in the USSR, China, Cambodia, Iraq, Rwanda, Argentina, Bosnia and elsewhere and with the international community stating it would never allow such crimes against humanity to happen again, the world has done nothing to end this terrible carnage.

How much longer will the UN, the Arab League and the rest of the international community stand by and do nothing while this vicious war continues unabated. This blatant inaction is immoral and inexcusable. As much pressure as possible needs to be exerted on the world community

to act and compel all parties involved to bring about a break in the fighting and create the conditions for a just resolution to the conflict that brings genuine peace, security and freedom to the people of Syria.

Steven Katsineris
Vic

Inequality explodes

The richest one percent of the world's population will have more combined wealth than the remaining 99 percent of people next year unless the rapid rise of inequality is stopped. Said inequality was holding back the fight against global poverty at a time when one in nine people do not have enough to eat and more than a billion people still live on less than \$1.25 a day.

The scale of global inequality is staggering, and while there has been talk on the global stage about inequality, the reality is that the gap between the richest and the rest is widening fast.

This picture is reflected as much in our region as it is worldwide. Data from Forbes shows Asia's richest

person, Hong Kong's Li Ka-Shing, has amassed US\$31 billion in wealth, while 500 million people barely survive on US\$1.25 a day. It would take one of these poor workers almost 68 million years to earn that much money, even assuming they could save all of their daily earnings.

It is hard to believe that the Abbott government is cutting aid to the poorest in this region given the shocking rise in inequality in our own backyard, which we know is not just bad news for those at the bottom but also damages economic growth.

The scale of the aid cuts – the biggest in Australia's history – is so severe that it is hard to imagine any nation or region where Australian aid is currently delivered will be left

unaffected. It will take Australia's aid effort to its lowest level since aid records began, in 1960.

Urgent action is needed to stem inequality, starting with a crackdown on tax-dodging by corporations.

- Clamp down on tax dodging by corporations and rich individuals
- Invest in universal, free public services such as health and education
- Introduce minimum wages and move towards a living wage for all workers
- Introduce equal pay legislation and promote economic policies to give women a fair deal

Dr Helen Szoke
Oxfam Australia

Something to say?
Write to the Editor!

email: tpearson@cpa.org.au

Culture & Life

by Rob Gowland

Speaking with a forked tongue

Tony Abbott has warned the Australian people against getting rid of an unpopular leader prematurely. He wants them to give him more time, to give his policies a chance to "work". Fortunately for him, the Australian people are not in a position to get rid of Abbott and his ultra-conservative religion-driven policies just yet. There is no election due for some time. Only Abbott's parliamentary colleagues can oust him right now. And their only worry about his policies is a fear that "voter backlash" might take them down with him.

That the policies of Abbott and his despised Treasurer Joe Hockey are unpopular is abundantly evident: the "Bust the Budget" demonstrations and rallies, the banners bearing Abbott's likeness and the slogan "Ditch the Drongo", the panicky moves within the ruling class to dump Hockey. Don't make the mistake however of thinking that Abbott's parliamentary colleagues don't support and agree with his reactionary policies. They do. Wholeheartedly.

Their problem – if they have one – is only with the Abbott government's image and tactics. Perception, not reality. The implication in the pleas not to change leaders just yet is that we must give their policies time to achieve their ends. The further implication is that those ends are somehow in the interests of ordinary Australians.

Abbott's removal of the carbon tax, a gift to the mining industry and the big polluters, was promoted as reducing household electricity bills. His privatisations and wholesale

destruction of NGO-operated (and government-subsidised) social welfare organisations is similarly promoted with misleading claims and outright lies.

The social fabric of our country is being ripped apart by a cabal of extreme right-wing politicians who all subscribe to the view that the role of government is to support business – and nothing more. Everything else can be supplied by private enterprise as and if required – for a price. And if you cannot afford to pay the price then do without, or appeal to a charity for help. The state has no responsibility for the well-being of the people or indeed any interest in them other than as consumers and cannon fodder in this brave new world.

A frank admission of such a goal would be most unlikely to gain electoral support, however. So instead, in a tradition that dates back several hundred years but was perfected by another extreme right-wing government (that of Nazi Germany), Abbott and his cohorts say one thing to the electorate, the "common people" whom they claim to serve, and they say another thing to the bosses of the business world whom they actually serve.

Hitler functioned under Fascism, so he had total control over the mass media. But the people knew that and knew exactly how much trust to place in the veracity of the "news" in the Nazi regime's papers. Today, in Australia, we don't have Fascism but we do have Rupert Murdoch. His near monopoly of the mass media means news is just as false and misleading as anything from Hitler's Germany, but it



Abbott and Hockey employ the talents of sophisticated speech-writers and publicists to put such a "spin" on their pronouncements that they can say black is white while keeping a straight face – and they frequently do.

has the appearance of being "free" and "independent" – and hence credible.

Murdoch's local rival, Fairfax Media, which is clearly not enamoured of Tony Abbott, is nevertheless not going to challenge his class position. That would be revolutionary, and Fairfax is still a ruling class media corporation. So the most reactionary federal government this country has seen for many a year is effectively free to spread the lying furphy that "we are living beyond our means" and that we cannot afford the Medicare system, or women's refuges, or even old age pensions people can actually live on.

Hitler said similar (and similarly false) things to the German people, while saying often the exact opposite to the heads of German industry. Abbott is too canny to do anything so blatant. Instead, he and Hockey employ the talents of sophisticated speech-writers and publicists to put such a "spin" on their pronouncements that they can say black is white while keeping a straight face – and they frequently do. And Murdoch's media in particular backs up everything they say.

The grim reality is that this federal government is carrying out the greatest attack on living and working conditions (especially working conditions) in the history of this country, an attack occasioned by the crisis confronting capitalism across the developed world. Working conditions and wages won over 200 years of often bloody struggle are being stripped away at the whim of capitalist governments facing economic "difficulties" for which they have no

solutions other than to try to get the workers to bear the brunt of the burden for them.

Of course, they cannot tell the workers that that is what they are doing, so instead they do as they have always done: they lie. They say the economic difficulties are not the result of the failure of capitalism but are "inevitable", virtually acts of God that could not be avoided and hence must be endured by everyone without complaint.

They promote "austerity", by which they mean working people – not employers – accepting savage cuts to their income, along with equally savage cuts to welfare, government services, and working conditions. At the same time, and incredibly with the same justification, corporate tax is reduced and then reduced some more, public enterprises are sold off at bargain-basement prices to those same corporations, and the right of workers to organise in unions is assailed through legislation, the media, the judicial system and the police.

And all of it is put forward as necessary "reforms", steps that will "improve" the lives of the people. At the same time the capitalist mass media does its best to distract the people with its usual diet of trivia and sensationalism, so that they will not notice the flaws in the line that's being advanced, and won't become angry enough to actually do something about it.

If capitalism can keep the people confused and distracted, while their living and working conditions are ripped away, it will – and no lie is too great if it will serve to advance that aim. ☹



Sunday February 8 –
Saturday February 14

Hitting a large body of water from hundreds of feet up, at speed, in a plane not built to land on water, is to discover that water is not soft. Most planes that attempt it break up on impact, with disastrous results. Captain Chesley Sullenberger achieved fame by not crashing when he was forced to land his US Airways Flight 1549 on the Hudson River. His skill as a pilot and the prompt action of other services (notably the ferryboat crews who rushed to rescue his passengers from the wings and the water around the stricken plane) meant disaster was avoided on this occasion.

We've all probably seen the footage in *Miracle Landing On The Hudson* (SBS ONE Sunday, February 8 at 8.30 pm) before, but it is still fascinating to watch.

Flying the natural way is the subject of David Attenborough's latest scientific nature series, *David Attenborough's Conquest of The Skies* (ABC Sunday February 8 at 7.40 pm) (It says something about the popularity of the host when his name is a bigger drawcard than the actual subject.)

This new series looks at how animals, having left the water and conquered the land, then moved on to occupy the remaining niche, the air. First to do so were the insects, and the first episode has extraordinary slow-motion footage that shows how dragon flies can control each of their four wings independently to provide amazing aerobatic manoeuvrability, how butterflies' four wings function as though they were two, and how beetles turned one set of wings into hard protective coverings so the beetle can burrow underground without damaging the other delicate flying wings.

Next week's episode deals with how reptiles took to the air. Later will come birds and bats. In Britain, the series was shown in 3D, and you can see suggestions of this in some of the camera set-ups. This is "nature filming" at its very best.

I found *Judith Lucy Is All Woman* (ABC Wednesdays from February 11 at 9:00 pm) to be not so much all woman as all tiresome. Feminism is not some new-fangled discovery: it's been around for over a century. Its legitimacy is well established. Lucy's ranting style

seems aimed at other women rather than at the class forces that still work to keep women subjugated.

The program just seemed to me to be strident, misdirected and barely watchable. Persons new to the women's movement might react differently. Middle-class women will probably lap it up.

Highlight of the week's viewing for me was the new eight half hour observational documentary series *Outback ER* (ABC Thursdays from February 12 at 8.00 pm). The series introduces us to the incredible emergency response team from Broken Hill Base Hospital Emergency Department, and their colleagues in the Ambulance Service of NSW and the Royal Flying Doctor Service.

They are hundreds of miles from anywhere, part of the NSW Health system, but closer to Adelaide than to Sydney. When a patient needs the services of a large city hospital, they send them to Adelaide not Sydney, if they can negotiate a bed and transport for the journey.

There is drama in all the many observational documentaries about hospital ERs, but the raw drama and sadness in the first episode of this Australian series is very well handled and consequently very moving. The consequences of losing your life's partner after a contented lifetime of "there's just the two of us" has never been more poignantly disclosed.

Made by Screen Australia, this series is a credit to all concerned.

A new eight-part series of *The Doctor Blake Mysteries* starts this week (ABC Fridays at 8.30 pm). To freshen up the series, the scriptwriters have sent Inspector Lawson (Joel Tobeck) to Melbourne to face disciplinary charges, charges Blake is quite sure are his (Blake's) fault. In Lawson's place the scriptwriters have introduced Chief Superintendent William Munro (played by New Zealand actor Craig Hall).

"Whip smart, analytical and an excellent reader of people, Munro is one of the new breed of police command. ... Munro will not tolerate Blake's insubordination or unorthodox methods. He's going to bring this town and this Police Station back into line... and if that means removing Doctor Blake from his role as Police Surgeon, then so be it.

"There is a lingering awkwardness with Jean (Nadine Garner), Blake's assistant and housekeeper, and for the first time we gain some insight into Jean's history and her marriage that ended when her husband was killed in action whilst serving in the Solomons. Jean has her eyes opened to the fact that she is certainly not getting any younger, and that there is an entire world outside the confines of cosy, familiar Ballarat. Will she finally leave the town she's spent her entire life in? And if so, how will she tell Blake?"

Gosh! Isn't it exciting? It's just like a soap opera. Or shouldn't I have said that?



Outback ER (ABC Thursdays from February 12 at 8.00pm).

For me, kung fu movies have the same problem as professional wrestling: how can anyone be taken in by this pathetically inadequate presentation of patently bogus "stylised violence"? Especially if one has been fortunate enough to have seen the classics of real Asian screen fighting, Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*, *Sanjuro* and *Yojimbo*.

Undeterred, and desperate to gain viewers, SBS is presenting "the best in kung fu movies" throughout February to celebrate the beginning of the year of the sheep. First up is 2012's *Tai Chi 0* (SBS ONE Saturday February 14 at 8.30 pm). If you are into this sort of thing, then knock yourself out (please).

This week's episode of *Live At The Apollo* (ABC2 Saturdays at 9:20 pm) is hosted by comic Jack Dee, who is funny in a relaxed, self-deprecating way without being hilarious. He introduces two other comics, Seann Walsh and Milton Jones.

Seann Walsh is a funny man but his material here is limited to binge drinking, vomiting and attendant embarrassments. Milton Jones is from the other, older school of stand-up comedy where the comic's non-stop stream of one-liners and non-sequiturs have no theme but just pile unrelated gag on unrelated gag. He is very funny. And worth watching just to observe his minimalist technique. ✪

Sydney

POLITICS

IN THE PUB

February 5

METADATA RETENTION AND THE TPP? GLOBAL SURVEILLANCE TAX? OR JUST THE END OF PRIVACY, FREE SPEECH & THE FUTURE OF WHISTLEBLOWING?

Senator Scott Ludlam, Communications Portfolio, Greens WA; Samantha Castro, WACA (Whistleblowers, Activists & Citizens Alliance); Kas Cochrane, WACA; Philip Dorling, Dr, Special guest;

February 12

HOW SERIOUS IS THE CONTINUOUS GROWTH OF INEQUALITY DRIVEN BY NEOLIBERAL IDEOLOGY AND ECONOMICS, AND ITS SOCIAL AND PERSONAL CONSEQUENCES IN AUSTRALIA?

Chris Sheil, Dr, President Evatt Foundation and Visiting Fellow School of Humanities and Languages, UNSW; Frank Stilwell, Emeritus Professor, Department of Political Economy, Sydney University;

February 19

ISLAMOPHOBIA IN AUSTRALIA: THE POLITICS OF RACE HATE IN NEOLIBERAL AUSTRALIA

Jock Collins, Professor of Social Economics, UTS Business School; Alana Lentin, Professor, School of Humanities and Communication Arts, University of Western Sydney;

February 26

AUSTRALIA AT WAR AGAIN: THE REAL REASONS WHY WE ARE AT WAR IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Jake Lynch, Professor, Director of Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies; Richard Broinowski, President of Australian Institute International Affairs (NSW), former Ambassador Vietnam, Korea, Mexico; author 4 books, latest *Fallout from Fukushima*;

March 5

THE RUSSELL TRIBUNAL ON PALESTINE: PREVENTING THE CRIME OF SILENCE

Peter Slezak, Professor, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, UNSW; Cathy Peters, Australians 4BDS and former Marrickville Councillor;

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American Sniper and atrocity porn



Binoy Kampmark

If ever the direction of a film and the shape of a particular narrative of US history, as written by, say, the fiction set on Fox News, could come together, then *American Sniper* is it. Not that you will have director Clint Eastwood, screenwriter Jason Hall and main actor Bradley Cooper agree.

It all begins with a view of history seen through the eyes of the late Navy Seal Chris Kyle, deemed one of the US Army's deadliest snipers who served on four tours of duty in Iraq. It is from that preserve that the cinematic account springs from, guided by the memoirs titled *American Sniper: The Autobiography of the Most Lethal Sniper in US Military History* (2012).

Eastwood's choice of conflict is excruciatingly cruel, an example of naked force exercised on false pretences. It was a war that commenced

with a deception, marshalled against the dictates of international law. The Bush administration, doing its level best to imaginatively read available intelligence, invaded Saddam Hussein's Iraq, assuming it had those fabled "Weapons of Mass Destruction". The conflict served to destabilise not merely a state but the Middle East, unleashing the Sunni-Shiite fault line with incandescent fury and laying the ground for a future fracturing of the state. The Islamic State, to name but one force, has profited immensely from the zealous exercise.

That leaves the world view of Kyle, which is less that of geopolitical strategist than soldier patriot immersed in his job. What, then, is he fighting? "Savage despicable evil," storms Kyle in his autobiography. "That's what we were fighting in Iraq." As for why the United States was there, the mindset of the liberator rapidly becomes that of the avenging killer. "They hated us because we weren't Muslim.

They wanted to kill us, even though we just booted out their dictator, because we practiced a different religion than they did."

Eastwood, and Hall, insist that Kyle's world is divorced from that of the political. In Eastwood's words, "Pardon me for sounding defensive, but it certainly has nothing to do with any (political) parties or anything" (*Toronto Star*, January 13). Hall graces Kyle with the status of a firm believer and emphasised how it "cost him his physical health, his mental health and almost cost him his family" (*Time Magazine*, January 21). Patriotism, in short, is tragedy.

Elevating the malformed views of Kyle, ones best kept at home, to the level of myopic patriotism doesn't diminish its resounding shallowness. Manifest destiny needs its recruits, and Kyle performed that mission with uncritical thrill. His autobiography constituted an unvarnished apologia for an illegal invasion, a justification filled with blatant inaccuracies about finding "barrels of chemical material that was intended for use as biochemical weapons," and pieties about misguided Muslim "savages". He does confess to drawing the line somewhere – not shooting people, for instance, with Korans. "I'd like to, but I don't."

The chest-thumping bravura about a sniper boasting of 160 kills can leave room for Augustinian reflection about the heaviness war can bring, but Kyle doesn't allow it. There is no room for reflecting about the people he is dispatching, no amateurish anthropology or insight. There is, in fact, a distinct lack of pathos, a sense that the sniper is merely a child gone mad with his lethal toy fighting under the Stars and Stripes. "I only wish I had killed more," he says in *American Sniper*.

Duty is everything, and duty is what excuses everything. Kyle's first kill with a sniper rifle, was a woman, who walked out of a house 50 yards away from an approaching Marine convoy. She seemed to be drawing out a concealed grenade. "It was my duty to shoot, and I don't regret it. The woman was already dead. I was just making sure she didn't take any Marines with her."

Eastwood should certainly be allowed cinematic latitude, but he does not seek to improve

upon the subject matter he has. (Is it actually possible?) And there are a host of defenders happy with the clipped version they have. The conservative heavies, such as Rupert Murdoch, have been busy targeting the likes of Seth Rogen and Michael Moore for an apparent lack of sympathy, either about the role of snipers in general (cowards, for Moore) or parallels with Nazi propaganda on snipers featured in Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* (the subject of Rogen's comment). "Hollywood leftists trash *American Hero*, show how completely out of touch they are with America. Bravo Clint Eastwood!" (*Hollywood Reporter*, January 23).

There is even a sympathetic nod from the History Channel, which has mutated into the Channel of Non-History. Christopher Klein sports an article on the site describing Kyle's drinking, depression and the creation of the FITCO Cares Foundation in 2011 to encourage exercise equipment and counselling for veterans (*History.com*, January 21).

But Eastwood insists on grouping the sniper of his portrayal with other personnel, some of whom bore heavy consciences. He speaks of, "These fellows who are professional soldiers, Navy personnel or what have you, go in for a certain reason ... and there's no political aspect there other than the fact that a lot of things happen in war zones" (*Toronto Star*, January 13). Kyle doesn't quite make the grade.

As instruments of state, soldiers remain political extensions, whether Eastwood wishes for them to be otherwise. Instead, he tends to, in the words of Matt Taibbi, turn his subject into the nutritional value of baby food, where the narrative is purposely emptied of broader significance (*Rolling Stone*, January 21).

As for Kyle himself, he was far from having the nutritional value of baby food. He enjoyed killing and made no secret of that fact. "I loved what I did ... It was fun. I had the time of my life."

Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne.
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