



## Budget 2015-16 – Indigenous Affairs

# Pushing disempowerment

**While no major cuts to Indigenous Affairs were announced in last month's Federal Budget, peak Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander bodies say Indigenous organisations are still reeling from cuts in the previous Budget.**

The National Congress of Australia's First Peoples called on the Abbott government to "lift its game" in the way it engages with Indigenous organisations and communities and to place greater value on community-led solutions.

Congress co-chairs Kirstie Parker and Les Malezer said funding cuts and ongoing uncertainty stemming from last year's Budget continue to "wreak havoc" on Indigenous communities and organisations.

"Twelve months on from the announcement of \$534 million in cuts across Indigenous Affairs over five years, and unveiling of the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS), the government has struggled to prosecute its case for change and there's little cause for optimism at this stage," they said.

### "Heavy price"

"Our communities and organisations continue to pay a heavy price for the past 12 months of funding confusion, backflips and reversals, and ongoing delays. Many remain in limbo; the Indigenous Affairs funding environment remains a trauma zone," Ms Parker said.

"Skewed funding models and shorter-term funding in many key areas, including legal services, family violence prevention and child and family supports, and a failure to ensure funding keeps pace with rising costs will handicap organisations already struggling to make effective use of scant resources.

"Notwithstanding recent welcome 11th-hour agreements about funding for some within our sphere, the process has been unnecessarily traumatic, and not the approach of a government willing or able to engage in a meaningful way with our peoples."

Mr Malezer said one of the most "debilitating and toxic" features of the government's approach had been its dogged determination to shut down advocacy by peak Indigenous organisations.

"In most cases, our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak bodies have been discouraged and, in some cases, explicitly prohibited through funding conditions from undertaking the vital advocacy on behalf of Aboriginal and Torres Strait people," he said.

"This holds key organisations to ransom and will inhibit the ability to effect much-needed change and reform. This also applies to Congress – regarded internationally as the central mechanism for national engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples – which had funds committed to its operations pulled by the government soon after its election.

### "Uncertainty"

"Nothing in the Budget signals a shift away from the upheaval and uncertainty of the past 12 months. Is this the way a government who cares about the most vulnerable goes about their business?"

Under the Budget, Indigenous Affairs Minister Nigel Scullion announced that the new Employment Parity Initiative would support some of Australia's biggest companies to get "20,000 more First Australians into private sector jobs by 2020".

Under the initiative, financial assistance will be given to "top 200" companies for job placements of Indigenous people for 26 weeks. Ms Parker and Mr Malezer said the employer apparently receives the bulk amount of funding at the end of the placement period and it was unclear how many permanent jobs would be created under the scheme.

"On the face of it, it appears that millions of dollars will be paid to large employers with little or no accountability for outcomes," they said.

Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) chairperson Sharron Williams said the childcare package in the Budget punishes those children who need support most.

"This package excludes vulnerable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children by mainstreaming Indigenous services and cutting childcare access for families that are struggling," she said.



National Congress co-chair Kirstie Parker speaks at a press conference at Parliament house Canberra after the 2015 Budget announcements.

"These children are the ones that stand to gain the most from early childhood service supports. Unless we invest in their education, intergenerational cycles of disadvantage will continue."

The activity test in the childcare package limits access to any childcare subsidy to 12 hours a week, where both parents don't meet work, training or study requirements, or no hours, where one parent doesn't work sufficient hours.

### "Disadvantage"

"We know that the reasons many of our families aren't working are linked to intergenerational poverty, disadvantage and disempowerment," Ms Williams said.

"Excluding these families from childcare

will only compound these issues and do little to get Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families into work. It will undermine efforts to prepare children for school.

"The decision to make all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander childcare services operate on mainstream funding from July 2017 will also reverse improvements in access to early learning services for our most vulnerable children."

The Budget also contained a commitment to implement a revised Tackling Indigenous Smoking Program and the reinstatement of funding for Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention Legal Services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services that were cut in last year's Budget.

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## Guardian

Issue 1687

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## Iron ore, "free" markets and the US alliance

The Australian public is to be "spared" a parliamentary inquiry into the current, low price of Australia's iron ore. Andrew "Twiggy" Forrest of the country's third-ranking iron ore producer, Fortescue Metals Group, recently lobbied and got the backing of his friend Tony Abbott for such an inquiry. Forrest made a lot of allegations about market manipulation and tax avoidance on the part of his larger rivals, BHP Billiton and Rio Tinto – allegations supported by minor players in the industry. Two weeks after backing a potentially lid-lifting inquiry, the PM backed down. The Treasurer and the pro-corporate media breathed a collective sigh of relief. BHP chief Andrew McKenzie said "we thank the government for its consultation across the industry and we welcome the decision."

Bill Shorten couldn't resist taking a swipe at the hapless Abbott. "There is no doubt the Prime Minister's actions and those of his ministers have damaged the industry," the Opposition leader said. "This has been a debacle of the government's own making."

Forrest claimed the current low iron ore price was about more than weak international demand. He said the "big two" were maintaining high levels of investment and production in Australia to cause a shake-out in the minerals sector from which they sought to benefit. He claimed they were looking to knock out their smaller rivals and concentrate ownership still further. Forrest previously suggested that the "big four" producers in Australia should agree to limit production in order to lift the ore price. This prompted talk of a charge of advocating a cartel against Forrest who pleaded the "national interest" had motivated his suggestion.

The Fortescue Metals chief went in hard about the tax arrangements of BHP Billiton and Rio Tinto. When asked about the subject on ABC Radio last month, Forrest let them have it. "Well that's a really sensitive issue, isn't it," he said. "You've made huge profits and then you've funnelled those profits through a tax shelter in Singapore. You've taken around a billion dollars in profits, you're arguing with the Australian Taxation Office, you're not playing a fair game, either on the iron ore volume, the iron ore price or even the tax you pay." Forrest's complaints about the use of the marketing "hubs" would have been stronger had it not been discovered that Fortescue established an (as yet inactive) marketing company in Singapore last year.

An exposé of the workings of one of Australia's major "free" (i.e. monopoly-dominated) markets would have raised more questions in the minds of overseas customers – Chinese customers, in particular. Chinese Premier Li Keqiang recently signed \$63.5 billion-worth of deals during a state visit to Brazil. The agreements cover resources and food exports, contracts that Australian producers would have been keen to tie up. China has lifted a ban on the import of beef from Brazil; a move that may worsen prospects for Australian graziers.

Lately, China has been seeking to diversify sources of supply to its still booming economy. Australia's expanded role in the US military "Pivot" to the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions is raising concerns. The Abbott government's strident backing of US provocation over disputed islands in the South China Sea has also chilled relations. "The alliance between Australia and the US is a major constraint on the relationship between China and Australia," Wu Xinbo of the Institute of International Studies at Fudan University said recently.

Australians are becoming worried about the prospect of war with China flowing from a build-up that includes the Commonwealth's increased military spending, the basing of US Marines at Darwin and now the stationing of B-1 strategic bombers northern Australia. A lot of assumptions about our national interest and security are being shaken. If, after the PM's latest U-turn, the Senate fails to launch a thoroughgoing inquiry into the iron ore price, widespread assumptions about the operation of "free" markets will be protected for a time longer. But a major rethink about capitalist markets, the US alliance and Australia's future place in the world is inevitable.

## PRESS FUND

We keep telling the Abbott government how to fix up the national deficit, but they simply won't listen. Maybe that's because we recommended cancelling the order for unbelievably expensive US-made fighter bombers, ending tax rorts like overseas profit transfers, taxing super-rich individuals and corporations, taxing environmental polluters, cancelling handouts to the private health insurance industry and ending the diesel fuel rebate and other concessions for mining corporations! But in the meantime, concerning financial matters of a somewhat smaller stature, right now we really need Press Fund contributions. They help us cover our operating costs, so please send us something for the next edition if you possibly can. Many thanks to this week's supporters, as follows:

Mark Mannion \$5, Billy Wilson \$10, "Round Figure" \$15, N H \$50  
This week's total: \$80 Progressive total \$3,510

## Nauruan police admit attack

Nauruan police have finally admitted that an Iranian asylum seeker was savagely attacked on May 16. The 23 year-old female Iranian asylum seeker had been stripped, seriously bashed and robbed. A sexual assault has not been confirmed, and the police have not been able to interview the victim.

But after three days of denials, in the face of growing anger and the women's protest, the Nauruan police finally back-flipped and admitted the obvious.

A group of police attending a protest (May 19) at Beach House, announced that they did accept that the Iranian woman had been attacked.

"We will find and catch the people who did this," the police told the protest.

But finally admitting the obvious is cold comfort for refugees. When refugee women asked about their safety – police told them to "look after yourselves".

It is clear that without the protest, there would not have been any police response.

But it was more than the protesters got inside Beach House from the boss of Connect, the Australian funded service providers. Connect had shrugged off the attack, saying all they would do is pass their question to those who are in charge.

"The Connect response was a disgrace and the police admission is a case of too little, too late," said Ian Rintoul, spokesperson for the Refugee Action Coalition. "Too many complaints have been ignored. The attackers act with impunity, knowing they will never be pursued by the police."

"The Nauruan police are both unwilling and unable to protect

refugees from attacks. Indeed the police themselves have been responsible for attacking refugees."

Those responsible for the attacks are free to taunt and terrify the refugees. Nauru is too small for refugees to avoid those who are responsible.

In an attempt to cover up the abuse of asylum seekers and refugees on Nauru, the government has recently shut down Facebook and introduced laws banning free speech and the right to assembly.

"But the truth is out," said Rintoul, "Nauru is unsafe. This attack adds to the revelations that are emerging from the Senate enquiry into the Moss report of sexual and physical abuse on Nauru."

Meanwhile, the Australian government must provide the urgent humanitarian assistance needed by the up to 8,000 Rohingya asylum seekers in boats, at risk, in the Malacca Straits, says the Refugee Action Coalition.

"The Australian government is playing with asylum seekers' lives," said Ian Rintoul. "It is suddenly obvious that offering 'turnback' advice to Malaysia and Indonesia cannot save lives at sea, but only endanger them."

"The boats must be welcome in Indonesia and Malaysia, and Australia. Australia must immediately lift its ban on accepting UNHCR refugees from Indonesia and offer Rohingya refugees safe passage to Australia. An international rescue effort can guarantee that no lives are lost."

The Australian navy that patrols within hours' steaming time of the Malacca Straits should have been providing search and rescue assistance and ensuring that they can get safely to land. Every day and every hour that passes without that

assistance puts more asylum seekers' lives in danger.

In other emergencies, such as the earthquake in Nepal or the tsunami in Aceh, the Australian government offers aid and material assistance; but when it comes to asylum seekers' lives – the government is offering only dangerous rhetoric.

"It is obvious that Australia's policy of turning back asylum boats from Indonesia and Sri Lanka has created a dangerous precedent in the region, and turned asylum seekers into political footballs. Asylum seeker boats turned away from Indonesia and Malaysia are also at risk of being turned back by Australia."

"Australia's turnback policy has always been a 'go die somewhere else' policy and that is exactly what's playing out in the Malacca Straits. The rhetoric of blaming people smugglers is a shabby excuse to deny assistance to those in desperate need. The whole world knows the Rohingyas are victims of ethnic cleansing," said Rintoul.

To its credit, Indonesia has offered support to around 600 Rohingya asylum seekers who have landed in Aceh. But to the shame of the Abbott government, foreign aid to Indonesia was cut by 40 percent, even as the crisis unfolded.

Meanwhile Europe has announced a policy of proportionally sharing asylum seekers arriving from Africa or rescued in the Mediterranean, among participating European countries.

"It has never been more obvious that Abbott's slogan of 'stopping the boats' is a costly sham that costs lives. The government could have saved the budget and saved lives by scrapping offshore processing and its monstrous Border Force ministry," said Rintoul. ✪

## This can't be right

Just a few months after ANZ staff successfully stopped the bank from undermining redundancy protections, the Finance Sector Union (FSU) says the union once again have to step up to protect jobs at the bank.

The FSU wrote to ANZ on behalf of Credit Assessment Officers in Retail Lending Operations who discovered jobs, that appear to be the same as theirs, being advertised on seek.com.au and anz.com only two business days after the bank gave them notices of retrenchment. They had been told their jobs will be sent offshore.

While ANZ has said the jobs

advertised were due to "attrition", impacted employees have questioned whether ANZ is really being genuine about redeployment support.

Notices of retrenchment were issued to employees on May 15. Two business days later, on May 19, roles for Credit Assessment Officers appeared on seek.com.au and anz.com causing concern the redundancies would not be genuine redundancies.

ANZ now say employees on retrenchment should let it know of their "desire to be placed into any of these roles" by June 1. Impacted employees say "it's not right for ANZ to make us beg for our jobs".

Just how these job ads could have been placed while employees on redeployment were ignored, begs the question "who approved the job ads?" and "why didn't ANZ offer the jobs to employees on redeployment?"

FSU is working closely with Credit Assessment employees to ensure the process is fair and genuine, and that ANZ adheres to the enterprise bargaining agreement and the Fair Work Act.

Negotiations for a new ANZ EBA are expected to resume before the end of June. Job security is again going to be a major issue. ✪

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# The real threat to the Great Barrier Reef

Peter Mac

**After intense international lobbying by the Abbott government, the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) has decided not to place the magnificent Great Barrier Reef on the endangered list, although the decision will be reviewed in 18 months.**

The government claims that an "endangered" listing would severely damage the Queensland tourist industry, but its primary objective is to protect the coal industry, not Queensland tourism, nor indeed the Reef itself.

The Reef has suffered damage from sediment and nutrient run-off from coastal development and agriculture for years. Federal Environment Minister, Greg Hunt, promised UNESCO the government would bring these pollutants and the devastating crown of thorns starfish under control.

The promise is highly welcome, and undoubtedly influenced UNESCO's favourable decision. However, neither the state nor the federal government is likely to take adequate measures to deal with these problems, which surfaced decades ago.

The Reef will almost certainly be labelled "endangered" soon, because scientific evidence suggests that 50 percent of it has died over the last 30 years, and because the government would never dump its unconditional support for the coal industry, whose activities now pose the biggest threat to the Reef.

## The Great Barrier Reef spin

The Abbott government has responsibility for protecting the Reef, because of Australia's commitment to conservation of places on the World Heritage List.

But the government supports highly dangerous plans for development of major new coal-loading ports and use of the Reef as a route for coal-carrying cargo vessels.

The government also disregards or downplays the major threat posed by rising sea levels, ocean warming and acidification as a result of climate

change, which is stimulated in large part by carbon emissions from coal-fired power stations.

Mitigating climate change would necessitate phasing out the mining, use and export of coal, but the government is implacably opposed to any such measure.

When international journalists inspected the Reef prior to the UNESCO decision they were briefed by government and coal industry representatives, but not by marine scientists or organisations concerned about the Reef's condition.

During briefing sessions the government cited a 2012 study that blamed storms for 48 percent of damage to the reef, starfish for 42 percent and bleaching for 10 percent. Dredging and the dumping of silt for construction of new ports didn't get a mention.

The government overlooked the fact that the study concerned the mid to outer coral areas, which unlike the inner reef have so far suffered little damage from dredging or the dumping of silt. Nor did they mention that the study did not in fact examine water quality or the effects of dredging at all.

## Enter the lobbyists

More than 270 firms are now registered as parliamentary lobbyists. The struggle to save the Barrier Reef has demonstrated an astonishingly close interaction between the fossil fuel industries and their lobbyists on one hand, and government ministers and their departments on the other.

According to the Fairfax Press, former deputy Coalition Prime Minister John Anderson has acted until recently as chairman of Eastern Star Gas, and former deputy Coalition Prime Minister Mark Vaile now chairs Whitehaven Coal.

Former Labor Trade Minister Craig Emerson and former Labor Minister for Climate Change Greg Combet are both consultants for AGL Energy and mining giant Santos. Former Labor Minister for Resources, Martin Ferguson, now chairs the Advisory Council for the Australian Petroleum Production and Exploration Association.

Former Coalition Minister Helen Coonan and former Labor minister John Dawkins co-chair GRA



Cosway, which lobbies for AGL and other mining corporations. John Olsen, former SA Liberal Premier, and Nick Bolkus, former Labor Senator, now work for lobby firm Bespoke Approach.

Fourteen former Coalition and Labor staff members or advisers now work for coal, gas or other fossil fuel industry companies, while nine work for Citadel, Bespoke Approach, Kream Gavin Anderson and GRA Cosway, all of which lobby for those industries.

The personnel trade runs in both directions.

Fairfax journalist Anne Davies observed: "The current head of [AGL] government relations is Lisa Harrington, who was until 2013 a senior advisor to [NSW Premier] Baird. She replaced Sarah MacNamara at AGL, who went back to work in the Prime Minister's office with her old colleague Peta Credlin, whom she knew from her days in former communications minister Helen Coonan's office. Macnamara was Abbott's policy advisor on resources for a year and is now chief

of staff for federal Minister for Industry and Science Ian MacFarlane".

As noted above, Coonan now co-chairs GRA Cosway which lobbies for AGL and other coal seam gas (CSG) mining companies. Ms Davies adds: "Shaughn Morgan, AGL's manager of government and external affairs ... was an advisor to NSW Labor Attorney-General Jeff Shaw in the 1990s and worked with Adam Searle, now Labor's NSW resources spokesman. Morgan [was] also chief executive of the NSW Farmers' Federation for four years."

The Coalition will never act against the interests of the fossil fuel industries unless it is subjected to massive public pressure. Some National Party members now want their party to oppose coal seam gas mining (CSG) – but only in the NSW northern rivers seats of Ballina, Tweed and Lismore, where the party's support for CSG resulted in its virtual annihilation at the recent state elections.

Following the elections the Baird government hastily cancelled

gas explorer Metgasco's licence to develop its Bentley mine, which is bitterly opposed by northern rivers residents.

Metgasco won a court appeal against the suspension and now wants compensation for damages, as well as police protection from protestors when it resumes drilling, or else extra compensation. The Baird government's contractual obligations would probably force it to pay massive compensation.

Some energy corporations may be considering winding down their involvement in the mining and export of coal and gas. But this should not be taken for granted.

The public will have to force present state or federal governments to suspend the rampant march of the coal and gas miners, and in particular to save our wonderful natural treasure, the Great Barrier Reef. And politically we must look elsewhere to left and progressive parties working with community forces for long-term solutions to the terrible problems of environmental pollution. ☘

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# Budget Hit List

Compiled by Fayeza Khan

## 1. Loans for Coal Projects

Coal projects that are not commercially viable can get loans from the government under the concessional loan scheme of \$5 billion in the Federal budget. These are projects which have been rejected by the big banks for being economically unviable, and as Greens environment spokesperson, Larissa Waters, has said, are likely to be unprofitable and therefore not pay tax or provide secure jobs. These include coal projects in the Galilee Basin and in the Great Barrier Reef area, and will require construction of rail line connections, which will also be eligible for the government loans.

## 2. Increase in "Divorce Tax"

There will be a steep increase in Federal Court fees which will cause a significant rise in the fee to apply for divorce, amongst other family settlements. The biggest concern is for divorce as 40 percent of marriages end in divorce in Australia. The increase in fees is expected to raise \$87 million, of which \$22.5 million will be used to streamline the Family, Federal Circuit and Federal Australian Courts, while \$30 million will be used to refurbish court buildings. The rest, \$35.2 million, will return to the Abbott government.

## 3. GP Helpline to be Axed

The \$42 million GP helpline, used by more than 200,000 people a year for advice on medication and minor health issues, will be axed from June 30. This will result in chaos in after-hour medical care job cuts, and could put emergency departments under more pressure.

## 4. Mental Health

Mental Health Australia strongly emphasises that the long-term reform process as outlined in their Blueprint for Action on Mental Health must be continued without being distracted by any measures, or the lack thereof, in the new budget. They also emphasise that the time to implement the reforms is right now. The government ducked the big issues.

## 5. Cut to Aid Spending

The overall overseas aid budget, which accounts for only 1.2 percent of total spending, has been further cut by a billion dollars. This means Australia will be spending only 22 cents from every \$100 of national income on aid, which is far lower than the

commitment made to the UN's goal of 70 cents from every \$100. It is estimated that aid from Australia had been saving about 200,000 lives a year until last year's cuts started to take effect, and helped educate half a million children a year. By making cuts to aid, PM Tony Abbott and Treasurer Joe Hockey have attacked the voiceless, voteless people of the poorest regions of the world.

## 6. Child Health Check to be Axed

The government will be saving \$144 million over four years by abolishing a comprehensive health check program for children aged three to five years. This program allowed assessment of a child's growth, hearing, eye sight, oral health, toilet habits and allergies, to ensure timely intervention or prevention of medical issues. A study published in the *Medical Journal of Australia* in 2014 found this program was detecting problems in about one in five children. Royal Australian College of General Practitioners president Dr Frank R Jones and Speech Pathology Australia president Professor Deborah Theodoros, have both shown disappointment and surprise over the decision to cut this program.

## 7. Cuts to Aboriginal Remote Housing

The government is cutting grants to states for remote housing of Aboriginal people, which will result in those people having to move off country. This is a vicious move which is being strongly campaigned against across Australia.

## 8. Shutting Down of National Water Commission

The Senate has voted to shut down the National Water Commission, which provides important oversight of water policies. Prior to this, the NSW Office of Water and the Queensland Water Commission had also been closed. This gives the mining companies a freer hand when it comes to enforcing environmentally safe practices. As Greens Senator Rhiannon said: "This is an act of environmental vandalism orchestrated by the Abbott government."

## 9. Funding for Homeless Shelter Axed

The Haymarket Foundation, which provides shelter and medical care to the most disadvantaged residents of inner-Sydney, will have to close because its funding has



been withdrawn after more than 20 years. The organisation estimates it saves the health system more than \$917,000 each year by providing preventive healthcare. Its closure opens the way to increased drug abuse and related social and health problems in the community. According to the chief executive, Mat Flynn, the Foundation is desperately looking for funds to keep the facility running once the federal funding ends on June 30.

## 10. Funding for the Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency slashed, budget of the Fair Work Building Commission (FWBC) doubled

The national secretary of Electrical Trades Union, David Mier, has expressed grave concerns over funding cuts to the Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency. He said these cuts will prevent the implementation of asbestos removal programs. He said that the funding was already inadequate, and as a comparison he quoted the \$100 million dedicated to eradicate asbestos from schools in Victoria alone last year, while the Agency will only receive \$3.2 million from the federal government. Meanwhile, the FWBC's budget was doubled, and its coercive powers against workers were extended until 2017, despite more than 8,000 letters signed by construction industry workers urging Senators to vote against it.

## 11. FIFO Tax Break Cut

Zone tax provision for residents of remote areas could be claimed by fly-in, fly-out workers if they lived in a designated remote area for half the year or more. In the current budget, this right for FIFO workers has been stripped, making the government \$325 million over four years. However, the Minerals Council of Australia and the Australian Mines and Metals Association (AMMA) have strongly objected to this move.

The AMMA chief executive, Steve Knott, has said that FIFO workers work 12-hour days in remote areas and away from families, and such demanding work conditions must be taken into consideration.

## 12. Tax Concessions on Super Remain Untouched

Tax concessions on superannuation disproportionately benefit high-income earners: the top 10% of income earners get 38% of the tax concessions, while the bottom 10% are disadvantaged by paying 15% tax on their super, when their overall tax rate is less than 15%.

## 13. Cut to Parental Paid Leave for Working Mothers

There has been a show of outrage by women's groups against the government's accusations of "double dipping" and "rorts" by working women. These women have done nothing more than exert their right to existing parental leave provisions. At present they are entitled to government-paid parental leave at the minimum wage of 18 weeks (capped at \$11,500) and any payments by the employers. After the cuts, they will only get a government payment to top up to \$11,500 if the employer's payment falls short. There are concerns that this will force mothers back to work earlier, negatively affecting both the mother and child's health. The World Health Organisation standard is 26 weeks paid parental leave, but it has been cut back to 18 weeks in Australia. Moreover, this cut by the government may result in the employers also cutting paid parental leave.

## 14. Increased Co-payment on Pharmaceuticals

Patients will pay an extra \$5 on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme prescriptions and those with concession cards will pay an extra 80 cents. At the same time it is cutting funds to non-government organisations including Alzheimer's Australia and

Palliative Care Australia, to compensate for its defeat on the Medicare co-payments.

## 15. Deep Cuts to Science

The Australian Academy of Science welcomes the relief for the National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Scheme (NCRIS) in the form of continued support for two more years and establishment of the Medical Research Future Fund, but it has grave concern for \$290 million cuts to other key Australian science and research programs. Australian Academy of Science President Professor Andrew Holmes summed up the situation thus: "It's great that NCRIS facilities will continue to be supported for the next two years but significant reductions to block grants to researchers in universities is like taking engines off the jumbo jet."

## 16. Cuts to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Programs

The National Congress of Australia's First Peoples has noted that last year's half a billion dollar cut to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Programs as made under the pretext of savings in administration but there is no evidence of significant savings. Many community-based organisations have been rejected for funding under the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (AIS) on the claim that there were insufficient funds available. Moreover, advocacy funding for Aboriginal people was to be cut, limiting their participation in government decision-making.

## 17. Cuts to Australia Council

The new budget includes cutting \$104.7 million from the Australia Council to create a new National Program for Excellence in the Arts, administered by the Arts Ministry. While the Australia Council makes its funding decisions independent of the government, the new body will be controlled by the government's whims and wishes. ☹

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We call on the Chilean government and their representatives to stop their hypocrisy and respect human rights in Chile. Stop the violence against Mapuche indigenous communities. Stop the repression against students. Protect and fulfill their demands of the former political prisoner of the dictatorship on hunger strike.

In Australia we demand that the Chilean government speeds up the extradition process presented to the Australian government in January 2014 of the terrorist-criminal Adriana Rivas, a former member of Chilean secret police who is living in Sydney without facing justice.

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# Public sector workers' anger grows

**Industrial action over government attacks on public sector workplace rights, conditions and pay will intensify next month with half-day stoppages across the Commonwealth workforce, Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) national secretary Nadine Flood has told ACTU Congress, as she asks for the union movement to support CPSU members' campaign.**

Mass meetings in 19 cities and regional centres to highlight the attacks on public sector workers are also planned in late June.

Public servants are angry at the Abbott government's attack on their rights, conditions and take-home wages in bargaining. Industrial action is underway in more than 17 agencies or departments covering more than three-quarters of the Commonwealth workforce.

Speaking to an ACTU Congress session on Campaigning for Growth Ms Flood said the government's woes are set to worsen as more public sector workers are poised to join imminently.

"It's not going well for the

government; workers in its soon-to-be-created Border Force are voting this week on taking industrial action. In just 24 hours, over 50 percent of Customs and Immigration CPSU members have participated in their protected action ballot, pointing to a victory for the union. On top of this the government's strategy of picking what it described as a soft target with low union membership failed spectacularly this week when 77 percent of Department of Industry staff – not just union members – voted down a terrible offer.

"The government's reaction over the past year has been to refuse to meet with us and then to continually attack the union in Parliament and the media. Earlier this week the government's attack dog, Senator Cory Bernardi, sunk his teeth into us mentioning us more than 20 times in Senate Estimates and making comments about me such as 'how does she sleep at night'. This is a million miles away from modern, productive workplace relations, where employers sit down with unions and have a sensible conversation," Ms Flood said.

Ms Flood told Congress that from next month public servants will escalate their action and participate in a series of half-day stoppages to force the government to change its bargaining policy. The policy was released more than a year ago and is offering terms far more draconian than any major private sector employer.

"Workers are being told to cop cuts to rights and conditions, in return for pay offers so low they take real wages backwards.

"The government wants to remove up to 60 percent of the content of existing agreements – and I bet you can guess which bits they want to cut. Any rights that protect job security and workers right to representation by a union are gone.

"It's way past time for someone in this government to see sense and decide it's time to resolve this dispute. Despite the relentless attacks, we're still up for sensible discussions. Our door is open; it's just Minister Abetz's that is padlocked shut. I'm even prepared to go to Bunnings and buy Senator Abetz a pair of bolt cutters, to unlock the door to talks." ☘



ACTU Congress – "Safeguard – jobs, pay, rights".

## National School a great success

**One of the important differences between communist and social democrat parties, apart from ideology and aims, is the importance placed on political and ideological education of members.**

Party branches are expected to hold regular education study classes as well as participate freely in discussions on political reports and the branch's activities. They are also encouraged to read the classics and other material.

Last year the Central Committee organised two national schools which brought together comrades from different states who were able to share experiences. The sessions used an active model of learning which draws on real life questions to develop the theory.

Based on the positive feedback of participants, the CC decided to continue with the national schools this year. The first for 2015 was held on May 23-24 at the Party HQ.

On the Saturday morning, Anna

Pha provided a brief overview of the genesis of capital and its accumulation right through to the monopoly stage and imperialism. Students were given practical tasks using real materials which revealed the domination financial institutions and interconnections of banking and industrial capital.

Their findings were then tested against Lenin's characteristics of imperialism in *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*. Lenin had summed up perfectly almost 100 years ago what they found today.

The afternoon was spent looking at the aims of setting up superannuation funds and the implications for workers. Participants discussed the differences between banks and superannuation funds – both used for savings – the different types of funds and products and risks involved.

On Sunday, Party General Secretary Bob Briton led a group

exercise about the nature of the state, exploring its role and history in class society.

In the afternoon, Bob led discussion on the reinforcing of the repressive apparatus of the state in Australia, focusing on the expanded powers of ASIO and other spy agencies to carry out surveillance of activists.

He then demonstrated some measures participants could take to safeguard their email and Internet browsing from the unwanted attentions of spy agencies.

One of the strengths of the school was the interaction of students, asking and answering questions that arose. The social interaction over lunch and morning and afternoon tea breaks was also important, with new contacts being made and ideas being further developed.

Again, the feedback was positive, with requests for more such schools. ☘



You would not expect the people who use Salvation Army centres for assistance to be well off. However you may be surprised to find out how little money people have left to survive on. The Salvation Army has surveyed 2,400 of their clients and found out that their average weekly income was \$305. They spent \$180 on accommodation with only \$125 left to pay for utility bills, transport, clothing and food. The worst off were people on Newstart allowance. A childless couple on Newstart has to manage on \$9.57 a day after housing costs. In another troubling trend the Salvation Army's 2015 Economic and Social Impact Survey found that 56 percent of respondents reported that their financial situation was worse than last year; 37 percent of the respondents could not afford to see a doctor and the situation was much worse with dental treatment – 68 percent had to do without. Many parents skipped meals to provide a bit extra for their children. Two-thirds of parents were not able to afford children's activities or internet connection. Putting food on the table was a struggle and one-third could not provide fresh fruit and vegetables for their children each day. An estimated 2.5 million Australians live below the poverty line, including 603,000 children.

Power industry unions are considering their legal and industrial options following the NSW Baird government's failure to consult with the workforces of Ausgrid, Endeavour Energy, and TransGrid ahead of their privatisation. The Electrical Trade Union (ETU) and United Services Union (USU), which represent electricity network workers, have warned that without proper employment protection in place, private owners will slash jobs, apprentice numbers, close depots and offices, and contract out other services.

When advisors to big banks and insurance companies start talking about employers being "creative" it usually means screwing their workforce. Lynda Gratton, a London Business School professor and HR consultant who was in Sydney to address the World Business Forum said: "I think one needs to be more creative about how we think of age and salary structure. One difficulty is in any corporation, because people's salary goes up every year, the older you are often the more you're paid and that makes old people more expensive." Ms Gratton's suggestion is not to give employees pay rises as they get older and even cut their pay. National Seniors Australia chief executive Michael O'Neill pointed out that the comment was "completely out of touch" with the Australian industrial relations system. "I would be happy to run a campaign against any institution that chooses to reduce workers' pay because of their age and I'm sure consumers will react," he said. "We recognise the contribution older Australians make in the workplace. They should be remunerated fairly and it's nonsense to say otherwise. Negotiating pay based on a birth certificate is clearly unacceptable," he said. Employers who followed Ms Gratton advice might buy themselves legal troubles as pay cuts or salary freezers purely on the basis of age exposed employers to the risk of unlawful age discrimination.



AUSTRALIAN  
SPEAKING TOUR  
BY BESTSELLING  
AUTHOR  
**Anne  
Cadwallader**

**Lethal Allies**  
British Collusion in Ireland

**PERTH:** Saturday June 20,  
2:00pm, Trades Hall,  
Unity House, 77-79 Stirling Street

**ADELAIDE:** Monday June 22,  
6:30pm, Irish Club

**SYDNEY:** Tuesday June 23,  
7:30pm, Gaelic Club,  
1/64 Devonshire St, Surry Hills

**MELBOURNE:** Friday June 26,  
4:00pm, Celtic Club,  
Cnr La Trobe and Queen Streets

**BRISBANE:** Sunday June 28,  
4:00pm, University of Queensland  
(room tbc).

# Food under commodified agriculture (Part 1)

Gunnar Rundgren

**Even as hundreds of millions go hungry, food has a low price tag attached to it in the global market. This is because we have externalised many of the costs of producing and consuming it. We let someone else – nature, other people, future generations, taxpayers – foot the bill for climate change, for loss of biodiversity, for eutrophication, for nitrates and pesticides in our groundwater or even for losing the water or the soil altogether. It has become painfully clear that we can no longer afford cheap food.**

## An unsustainable system

Cheap food allows a growing proportion of the global population to eat meat, fresh vegetables and fruits all year round, something most people could only dream of a few generations back – and something many people in the world can still only dream of. People live longer, are taller and are generally healthier than in the agrarian societies of the 18th and 19th centuries. But the current food system has also produced obesity, allergies and other diseases, and destroyed the environment and devastated farming communities.

Our whole food system contributes at least a third of human-made total greenhouse gas emissions. The extraction of water for irrigation exceeds the regeneration of water sources in many parts of the world. Pesticides cause a major loss of biodiversity and hundreds of thousands of direct deaths among farmers and farm workers. Nobody really knows how they affect other aspects of our health.

The European Nitrogen Assessment concluded that farmers using nitrogen fertilisers create costs for society at large that are on par with the economic benefits for them. European chickens or Chinese pigs are, to a very large extent, fed soy protein from Latin America, much of it from the Cerrado, the Amazon or the Pampa, landscapes which are razed and raped by agribusiness. The extinction of species and the greenhouse gas emissions caused by this are also not included in the price of chicken breast or pulled pork.

That almost a billion people don't have enough to eat, while even more eat too much and huge quantities of food are simply wasted, also shows that the food and farming system is socially unsustainable. For most farmers in the world, farming is not economically viable. Global competition causes the abandonment of farms even in large parts of Europe where almost a hundred million hectares of farmland has been abandoned in the last 50 years. Rich countries such as Sweden which could be almost self-sufficient in food, import increasing quantities of foods, but even more troubling is that many of the least developed countries have become net importers of food. Sub-Saharan Africa went from a 14% surplus of calories to a 13% deficit in the last 50 years.

Farming has become one of the most capital-intensive businesses. The very successful Danish farms have an average debt of US\$1.6 million per farm. In the United States the total farm assets in 2014 amounted to US\$3 trillion, corresponding to US\$1.2 million per full-time job. Low labour cost is no longer a comparative advantage in crops where production is easily mechanised, such as the main staples.

On the contrary, low prices for staple crops make it impossible for small farms to mechanise production, which is why more than 80 percent of the farmers in sub-Saharan Africa

and around half of the farmers in Asia and Latin America still farm manually. Such farmers would have to devote all their monetary income over a whole lifetime to upgrade to ox-ploughing. However, they are still, mostly, (just) above the threshold of survival, which means that they will continue to farm as long as there are no more promising alternatives beyond agriculture.

By and large farmers are stuck on a treadmill. They are forced by competition to increase productivity, and the increased productivity leads to lower prices. Vanguard farms will constantly develop and improve and mostly increase in size, at the expense of their less successful counterparts. Larger farms are not normally more productive per area unit, but they do have lower costs of production. They will establish a new level of costs and prices, each time racking up the notch for the minimum efficiency needed to stay in business. For farmers who cannot participate in this stiff competition, there is no option except to get out. The fact that "people will always need food" is small comfort for the farmer who cannot compete.

## Chickens and commodification

A closer look at the major agricultural commodities helps us understand why things are as they are. Chicken consumption increased ten-fold from 1961 to 2009 globally. The past practice of chicken rearing saw small numbers of chickens raised on waste products or seeking their own feed in the farmer's yard, the thicket or the manure heap – a very popular place for the animals. Chicken meat was relatively scarce and thus expensive in many cultures. Today chicken from broilers in the shape of nuggets, wings or strips are munched 24/7. There is hardly any other food that has increased its market share at such speed in such a short period. Why is that?

A trend analyst would explain that consumer choice is driving this, that consumers prefer white meat to red for health reasons, that chicken is low in fat, that chicken is an international food or that chicken is better for the climate than eating beef. Well, I'm no trend analyst and venture that the main explanation is that chicken has become much cheaper compared to other foodstuffs.

But we can go one step further and ask why chicken has become so much cheaper. In my book *Global Eating Disorder*, I examine why our food and farming system has developed the way it has and explore the underlying causes. There are three megatrends that have shaped our food system over the last couple of centuries: 1) the commercialisation of the entire food system; 2) the use of energy and applied technology (eg, in the form of machinery or nitrogen fertilisers) to replace animate labour and processes; and 3) demographic changes, such as population growth and urbanisation, and the related lifestyle changes.

These three megatrends are mutually reinforcing. For example, the application of energy and mechanisation in farming, in particular the use of fossil fuels, has increased productivity per agriculture worker by between 50-200 times, which meant that the share of population engaged in farming dropped tremendously. Without fossil fuels, globalisation and massive urbanisation could not have happened. And without urbanisation, there would be little development of markets for agricultural products. Similarly, without



commercialisation of farming, there would be little incentive to mechanise and use chemical fertilisers, as both presuppose market-driven farming.

With these mega-drivers as a background, we can discern some factors which have played a major role in the transformation of the luxury that was Sunday chicken into a very cheap food.

Earlier, most farms with animals also produced their own feed. With the large-scale introduction of chemical fertilisers after World War II and improvements in transportation technologies, farms no longer had to integrate animals and crops. With increasing mechanisation, crop farmers could produce much cheaper grain, and later on also soybeans – increasingly grown in monocultures. The grains were sold to specialised livestock farmers, including chicken producers.

Chickens, just like humans, depend on sunlight to produce vitamin D. Therefore chickens would feed on worms and other insects in the yard and would be fed maize when they went back into the chicken house. Once farmers realised they could simply add vitamin D and other vitamins and medications to the chicken feed, they no longer had to let the chickens outdoors. Meanwhile, technology for automatic feeding had been invented. Now, the industrialisation of both broilers and laying hens could proceed apace.

**Mechanised slaughtering**  
Mechanisation of the whole slaughtering process helped to reduce prices and increase volumes. In just over 50 years, the number of chickens produced in the United States increased 14-fold, while the number of farms having chickens dropped from 1.6 million to just 27,000. Half of all American broilers now come from farms producing more than 700,000 chicks per year. Big food industries came in and contracted producers for their brands and provided them with technologies and markets. At the beginning of this century three-quarters of global chicken production were in the hands of agribusiness companies.

The development of broiler production was paralleled by developments in the processing, marketing and consumer side. The birds themselves are torn into pieces and reconfigured in a multitude of products such as nuggets and strips. In 1930 the then 40-year-old

KFC founder Harland Sanders (who never was a real Colonel) was operating a service station in Corbin, Kentucky, and it was there that he began cooking for hungry travellers who stopped in for gas. He called it "Sunday Dinner, Seven Days a Week". Today, KFC, together with Pizza Hut and Taco Bell, is part of Yum! Brands Inc, the world's leading restaurant company with over 40,000 restaurants and 1.5 million people employed in more than 125 countries and territories.

Chicken breeding is extremely concentrated as a result of high research expenditure and the capital-intensive nature of the chicken business. By the late 2000s only three sizeable breeding groups remained for broilers: Cobb-Vantress, Aviagen and Groupe Grimaud. Two breeders control 94 percent of the supply of laying hens.

In just half a century, the breeders created two different specialist chickens, each one incredibly efficient for its specific purpose. A typical laying hen of today needs 1.99 kilograms of feed to produce 1 kilogram of eggs, while a broiler hen will need 5.22 kilograms of feed for the same quantity. But the broiler chicken is far superior in converting feed to meat. To produce 1 kilogram of live weight the broiler needs only 1.7 kilogram of feed, while the chicken of a laying hen needs 3.8 kilogram. Unfortunately, both the broiler and the laying hen are less efficient than their common ancestor in being a chicken.

Today 300 million male chicks of egg-laying hens are killed in the European Union each year as soon as they hatch, because it is uneconomical to raise them for meat since meat from chickens especially bred for meat production is cheaper. Many of them, and their American siblings, are consigned to "Instantaneous Mechanical Destruction", which is a technical way of saying they are ground up alive. Hens that no longer lay eggs also pose a disposal problem and are burnt or thrown into wood-chipping machines, sometimes alive.

The chicken industry provided a blueprint for the industrialisation of livestock. The capital-intensive model cuts out small farmers and pastoralists and is built on the use of bought-in inputs: feeds, medicines, technologies and breeding stock as well as external knowledge. The production model bears a close resemblance to assembly industries, and producers all over the world use the same breeds, feed and technology.

The notion of landscape, place or culture in our foods has totally lost any meaning under these conditions. What is particularly disturbing with the commercialisation of animal production is that it doesn't take into account that animals are living, sentient beings. Through the commodification of animals, their welfare and their ability to exercise their natural behaviours have become externalities – side factors of

**That almost a billion people don't have enough to eat, while even more eat too much and huge quantities of food are simply wasted, also shows that the food and farming system is socially unsustainable.**

# Herbicides and antibiotic resistance



production – just as the landscape has in plant production.

## The myth of choice

We might believe that we chose to eat a certain food; that it is the consumer who is the conductor of the whole food system, but that is an erroneous starting point for a conversation about which foods we eat and which we should eat. Our palates have been shaped over centuries to like some things and dislike others. Differences in local foods and food preferences are proof not of how different from each other we are, but of how well we adapt to what is available.

Swedes liked herring and cheese, Bantu people liked cassava and goat stew, and people in South East Asia preferred rice. Fermentation, drying, freezing and curing have all played different roles in different countries. If you lived in the humid tropics, your culture would never develop cured ham, as the conditions for making the ham do not exist in such a climate. The availability of fats and fuels determined your favourite style of frying or roasting or if you mostly ate food boiled in water. Our food preferences were thus by and large dictated by the local ecological context we lived in.

With fossil fuel and capitalism, this all changed. Today, our food choices are by and large determined by the economy instead of ecology. In most parts of the industrial and urbanised world, people hardly eat anything that comes from close by. Consumption has no direct link to local agriculture, which is organised in the same way as modern assembly lines, with parts being delivered from all over the globe to be assembled as a Gorby's pizza, a McDonald's hamburger or a Ben and Jerry's ice cream.

Indonesians consumed a stunning 14 billion packages of instant wheat noodles in 2012. What is strange about that? Indonesia produces no wheat at all – what has become a national dish is based on a raw material that is completely imported. The history of wheat in Indonesia began in 1969 when the United States extended food aid in the form of wheat flour and wheat to Indonesia. Indonesia's wheat imports outweigh the total agriculture development budget in this nation of 250 million people.

Does this mean that people have almost unlimited choice from the global supermarket? Not quite. To be sure, when one stands in front of a supermarket shelf or sits at a table reading a restaurant menu, there are many choices. But before we face all those choices, a number of people have already made the selection for us to choose from. Governments and agribusiness are choice architects and they shape what consumers can and cannot buy.

Next week: The modern food system  
*Third World Resurgence* ✪

A recent two-year study of the sub-lethal effects of three of the most commonly used herbicides has revealed some disturbing findings with regard to antibiotic resistance. One of the co-authors of the study, *Jack Heinemann*, explains.

**A weed is any plant growing where it is not wanted. Commercial herbicides are sold to kill weeds. That sounds simple, but it isn't.**

Herbicides are composed of a variety of different chemicals. The most often named is the so-called “active ingredient”. This compound is the key to the efficacy of the herbicide. However, it does not act alone. The active ingredient must be able to both be delivered to the target plants and gain access to targets within the plant. This requires surfactants and other adjuvants to make the herbicide practical to use.

Each of the ingredients used in herbicides has the potential to cause harm to organisms that are not the herbicides' intended targets. Full knowledge of these harms informs government regulators who then issue decisions on if, how and for what purpose a herbicide can be used. But have they been operating with complete knowledge?

Probably not. Only this year we released results of a two-year study on the sub-lethal effects of three commercial herbicide formulations on bacteria (Kurenbach et al., 2015). All three formulations caused a previously unsuspected effect on both species of bacteria that were tested. The effect was that the bacteria uniformly responded by demonstrating a change in their ability to survive exposure to other kinds of toxins – those we use in clinical and veterinary medicine and which we call antibiotics.

The three herbicides were Roundup, Kamba and 2,4-D. The active ingredients of these herbicides are glyphosate, dicamba and 2,4-dichlorophenoxyacetic acid, respectively. These three herbicides are among the most used in the world, with glyphosate-based herbicides clearly No. 1. They are used in agriculture, but also in public spaces, sports fields and in home gardens.

The bacteria we used belong to species that cause disease in people and animals. They were *Salmonella enterica* and *Escherichia coli*. The bacteria responded

according to some species-specific differences to the different herbicides and antibiotics.

Frequently, they demonstrated an increase in resistance to the antibiotics we tested. Occasionally there was no response or an increase in sensitivity to the antibiotic. It would be premature to assume that an increase in sensitivity would have a beneficial effect; we are testing that now.

An increase in resistance is an observation to take seriously because the effectiveness of antibiotics is declining. Even relatively small increments in resistance can undermine treatment. For example, one study found that a two-fold change in resistance of infecting bacteria was enough to cause 21% of patients to get a lower-than-target dose of the recommended antibiotic. And when the resistance reached a four-fold increase, 75% of patients failed to receive the target dose. The effect we measured caused changes between two- and six-fold.

The effect required exposure to a more concentrated source of herbicide than is generally legally allowed on food, eg, the “maximum residue limits” set by Codex Alimentarius. However, much less herbicide than is allowed to be applied to plants causes the effect. Therefore, potentially farmers but especially farm animals exposed through spray drift or feed they consume on-farm could have these levels of herbicide. Insects such as pollinators can be exposed to these levels. In cities, children and pets may be exposed as they unwittingly walk in or play on treated lawns and gardens. All of these unintended exposures are in people and animals that routinely receive antibiotics to control disease.

Even when people and animals are not directly exposed to the herbicide, people and animals may be exposed to bacteria after they were directly exposed. For example, in some countries antibiotic use in farm animals is so high that the antibiotics are detected in manure. This manure is also spread on fields

as fertiliser, where it may also come into contact with herbicide. This is the mix that results in the resistance response. Other research has shown that insects such as flies that visit the manure can acquire the bacteria, potentially transferring them.

Exposure to herbicides via the mouth, called ingestion exposure, is not limited to eating food. There can be non-dietary ingestion of herbicide. For example, our hands may be exposed to multiples of the residue found on different products through handling food during harvest or preparation. This may cause a “from hand to mouth” pathway for exposures to higher levels of herbicide. We are uncertain about how high skin concentrations can be. That is why we imagine that pets would be an important potential vector to study. They conceivably are exposed to application rate concentrations of herbicide when they roam through recently treated lawns or gardens and then may transfer the herbicide to the hands or face of those who stroke the pet.

Our study also found that combinations of different products (eg, Kamba + aspirin) had an additive effect. It is likely that other chemical exposures can also combine with herbicides to cause the effect. This effectively lowers how much herbicide is needed to cause the effect.

The additive effect of aspirin has some irony. Aspirin is acetylsalicylic acid, or more generally a salicylate. These compounds have long been used in some kinds of agriculture as “safeners”, compounds added to desirable plants to lessen the toxicity of herbicides. Daniel Goldstein of Monsanto referred to glyphosate (although not Roundup) as no more toxic than aspirin. Others have also made this particular comparison.

Why is this ironic? In effect, the herbicide is also a safener. However, the effect of the herbicide is to reduce the toxicity of some antibiotics to bacteria.

Professor Jack Heinemann is with the Centre for Integrated Research in Biosafety (INBI) and the School of Biological Sciences at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand.

*Third World Resurgence* ✪



# USA: \$15 victory

John Wojcik

**LOS ANGELES:** Perhaps no one is happier these days than Rusty Hicks, the man who holds the top job in the Los Angeles County Federation of Labour. Just five months after his election as the federation's secretary treasurer, his vow to push for a \$15 minimum wage in America's second most populous city has become reality.

The city council, of course, has just voted to raise the minimum wage, in steps, to \$15 an hour.

"It's a great day for all working Angelenos," Hicks said on May 26 in an exclusive phone interview with the *People's World*. "The voices of the workers have been heard and this gives us much to celebrate."

Hicks, who took over on January 1 from the "legendary," as he described her, Maria Elena Durazo, had declared at the outset that a hike in the minimum wage to \$15 was his top priority. "The purpose of this labour federation is to battle against income inequality and to fight both for those who are currently organised into unions and for those who are not. Everyone rises together; there is no going it alone."

Hicks attributed much of the rapid success in achieving the wage hike to the fact that LA unions have been actively reaching out to work with non-traditional labour organisations, worker centres and community groups to fight for the interests of not just union workers, but everyone who works for a wage. The AFL-CIO, nationally, has been pushing this approach to building a broader labour movement for years now.

"The LA federation is very much in the forefront of this model of unionism that involves building partnerships with groups outside the labour movement," he said, noting

that "hundreds of groups worked together in a coalition to win the minimum wage increase in LA including community, faith, and many other groups."

"We were in all the way with the Raise the Wage Campaign that joined these groups together to fight for the more than 750,000 low-wage workers in the Los Angeles area," Hicks said.

Though new in his current job, Hicks who is 34, is not new to the business of building powerful organisations. He moved into his current job from the position of political director of the labour federation. In that role he helped turn the federation into a force to be reckoned with in California politics. Politicians not only in LA but all across the state have sought the fed's endorsements.

Hicks was elected to his position by hundreds of union reps who represent the federation's 800,000 members distributed through more than 300 union locals. He was the clear choice of his predecessor, Durazo, who took a national job with Unite Here, her old union, to enable her to promote her passions, civil rights, and immigration reform.

"Rusty is a brilliant young organiser," she told the *People's World* the day after the mass mobilisations by fast food workers earlier in the Spring, "and he will bring to this job the experience of a great political organiser as he continues the labour movement's commitment to immigration reform and civil rights."

"There was a change in leadership, but there's been no change in mission," Hicks said. "The labour movement continues now to fight for immigration reform, a path to citizenship for the undocumented millions. It cannot be otherwise. Labour is the movement of the workers, immigrants are a big part of the workforce."



**LA unions have been actively reaching out to work with non-traditional labour organisations, worker centres and community groups to fight for the interests of not just union workers, but everyone who works for a wage.**

Hicks said the labour movement's aim is to "to fight for the freedom of all workers to have a voice on the job, in the community, and at the ballot box."

He praised President Obama for his executive actions that allow millions to remain in the country without fear of expulsion and added, "There are millions in LA alone who need our support." He singled out wage theft as a particular area of concern for immigrant workers.

Hicks also talked about President Obama who, he said, "has done many good things" for workers. The labour leader said, however, that he "could not understand why the president is pushing for the Trans Pacific Partnership trade deal."

"The president has simply lost his way on this," Hicks said, "History shows that these types of trade deals end up hurting workers both here and abroad. Trade is fine, but not when it involves exporting our jobs or exploiting workers at home and overseas."

On the presidential elections Hicks said of the Republicans: "Among the Republican candidates you can't really distinguish between any of them. They are all spewing anti-worker rhetoric and pandering to the far right of their party."

"I'm not sure, though," he said, "that labour should declare for anyone until things develop. What we want to do now is use the campaigns as much as possible to foster a

conversation about income inequality and the ways to end it."

Hicks, who was born and raised in Fort Worth, Texas, said he learned in his youth about the need for workers to fight for their rights. His mother was a bookkeeper and he attended Austin College, coming to Los Angeles in 2003. He worked on the staffs of state assemblymen Mike Gordon and Ted Lieu, before taking the job as political director in the labor federation.

He serves now in the US Naval Reserves in intelligence and beginning in August, 2012, spent a year in Afghanistan.

*People's World* ✪

## Cameron's EU charade

**Prime Minister David Cameron appreciates the fragility of his party's parliamentary majority, so he is setting out his manifesto pledges in order to maximise success.**

Had he played up to his backwoods backbenchers by leading off with legislation to abandon the European Court of Human Rights, he could have stirred up a hornets' nest, confronting both opposition parties and civil libertarians in the Tory ranks.

Far easier to prioritise his EU referendum charade, putting the boot into trade unions, extending right-to-buy legislation to housing associations and cutting in-work benefits.

These issues all command overwhelming backing on the Tory benches and the PM can expect some support from opponents. Cameron's "renegotiation" rigmorale is a sop to his anti-EU backbenchers, but anything he achieves in talks with the other 28 states will be marginal.

His backbenchers want Britain to exclude other EU citizens seeking work or benefits, but this contradicts the very core of EU economic and social policy - namely, the free movement of goods, capital, services and people throughout the bloc.

Eastern European states targeted by Tory bigots have already insisted that they will not accept designation

of their nationals as EU second-class citizens.

However, Cameron may have more luck in winning allies to the cause of undermining EU social provisions since member states and the EU as a body are united in imposing anti-worker austerity across the entire bloc.

In any case, the Tory leader will back a Yes vote for Britain to stay in the EU, irrespective of what happens in his negotiations.

After all, he knows exactly what the banks and his City paymasters prefer.

Any Tory backbencher voting to leave the EU can be discounted because all major opposition parties will back staying in, hooked on their mirage of a neo-liberal capitalist superstate as an enlightened democratic force for peace, progress an environmental concerns.

Trade unionists in Britain who conned themselves and others into viewing the EU as a guarantor of workplace rights will have difficulty explaining how the Tories can exploit a small parliamentary majority to make it more difficult for workers to take lawful strike action against tight-fisted and bullying employers.

The demand for a 50 percent mandatory threshold for strike ballots from a government installed by less than quarter of the electorate indicates bias against working

people's rights to improve their lives.

However, the Tories should remember the 2009 wave of unofficial strikes by mechanical contractors who opposed the undermining of their pay and conditions through employers' manipulation of the EU 1996 Posted Workers Directive.

Official union structures may be hamstrung by legal red tape, but workers' anger, if deeply held, will find a way to express itself.

Cameron's obsession with the niceties of strike ballots is a diversion from the real voting scandal - first past the post - where a Tory parliamentary majority can be achieved with 37 percent of the popular vote and a 50 percent share, as in Scotland, can deliver 95 percent of seats to the SNP.

The Electoral Reform Society call for a constitutional convention to discuss devolution, which could look at federalism, proportional representation, voting age and other democratic improvements, merits support.

The Tories are intent on carrying through a vicious anti-working class program with no real democratic mandate to do so.

Whinging about it or appealing to Cameron's better nature is pointless. Only mobilisation and resistance can hold back and defeat the Tory onslaught.

*Morning Star* ✪

Perth **SATURDAY JULY 25**

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# Corruption scandals in Guatemala and Honduras

Emile Schepers

**Massive corruption scandals in two key allies of the United States in Central America, Guatemala and Honduras, are producing large demonstrations calling for the resignations of the presidents of both countries.**

In Honduras, a major scandal erupted when it was revealed that officials close to right-wing President Juan Orlando Hernandez had stolen money from the social welfare and health care budget and had surreptitiously given it to Hernandez's political party, the National Party, for the purposes of winning the 2013 presidential elections.

At that time supporters of the runner-up, leftist Xiomara Castro de Zelaya of the LIBRE party, had denounced the elections as fraudulent, and this new information supports that claim. Adding to the indignation is a decision by the Supreme Court, packed with Hernandez supporters, that Hernandez can run for re-election, which invalidates the Honduran constitution's prohibition on second terms. When former President Manuel Zelaya, Xiomara Castro's husband, was overthrown in a military coup in June 2009, the pretext was that he was secretly planning to run for re-election. So large scale demonstrations are being carried out by LIBRE and its broad mass support base, demanding that Hernandez resign.

In Guatemala, the main scandal, called "La Linea", has to do with bribery of officials by wealthy people and companies wishing to evade taxes and customs duties, as well as crooked subcontracting and other issues. High ranking members of the government of the right wing president, General Otto Perez Molina, of the Patriotic Party, are facing prosecution. The vice president, Roxanna Baldetti, was forced to resign on May 8, and people in the president's own office are also implicated. Perez Molina increased public alienation by appointing as the new Vice President a judge who had helped the former dictator, Efraim Rios Montt, evade punishment for genocide.

The networks that carried out the illegal acts go back decades and

involve several former presidents (including Rios Montt), army officers, judges and many others. Many, including Baldetti's personal secretary, are being prosecuted, but only because of independent investigations by the UN sponsored International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG).

Honduras (population 8 million) and Guatemala (population 15 million) are two of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere. Both governments have imposed on their peoples neo-liberal policies of austerity, privatisation and free trade, and have steered clear of the Bolivarian movement which has swept the region. In both countries, poverty has been rising and personal security has become increasingly shaky. Both presidents managed to get elected by promising a "hard hand" (mano dura) against criminals and especially drug traffickers. A particularly galling dimension of the scandal in Guatemala is that President Perez Molina had announced more budget cuts and austerity because tax collections were not bringing in enough money, and now it is revealed that a huge percentage of taxes on the rich were evaded in exchange for bribes paid to people in his government. And Perez Molina's son is being prosecuted in the United States for drug trafficking.

Some of the bribery appears to have involved foreign mining companies wishing to open operations in Guatemala, an especially touchy issue for rural Indigenous populations which have been battling against polluting and exploitative extractive industries.

The developments in Honduras are likely to help the left, though there won't be a general election there until 2017. One of the pretexts for Zelaya's overthrow was a false claim that he planned to try to run for an illegal second term. What really frightened the Honduran elites and the United States government was that Zelaya was bringing Honduras into alignment with the Bolivarian group of left and left-centre ruled countries, and specifically Cuba and Venezuela. When Zelaya was overthrown the other Latin American countries pushed to restore constitutional order and

return Zelaya to power, but the United States created pressure to go ahead with a dubious election, which brought in right-wing president Porfirio Lobo. Under Lobo and Hernandez, Honduras has become a hyper violent state in which women, gay-lesbian-transgendered activists, ethnic minorities, peasant and labour leaders and political oppositionists are especially targeted for murderous attacks.

The left-wing LIBRE Party has been playing a major role in the anti-Hernandez demonstrations, and seems likely to gain traction from the disgrace of the Hernandez administration.

In Guatemala, which has general elections on September 6, the prospects for the left are murkier. In the last elections, in 2011, the Indigenous rights activist Rigoberta Menchu, running as the candidate of the leftist URNG-Maiz party, got only 3.27 percent of the vote. The outgoing centrist president, Alvaro Colom, tried to run his wife, Sandra Torres, for president, under the banner of the National Unity of Hope Party. However, the Guatemalan constitution forbids spouses of incumbent presidents from qualifying as candidates. Colom and Torres tried to get around this by getting a divorce widely seen as fake. The courts disqualified Torres, and the Unity of Hope party ended up with no presidential candidate.

Whether any of the parties on the left or left-centre can get enough traction by the time of the elections remains to be seen. At least 41 percent of the Guatemalan population is Indigenous. This has led to discussion of a possible presidential candidacy Congressman Amilcar Pop of the leftist Winaq Party. Pop is a Q'eqchi Maya lawyer and defender of Indigenous rights. However, it is not clear that such a candidacy would be viable with three months to go and with the Indigenous electorate marginalised, by poverty and repression, from the process.

Meanwhile, demonstrations continue in both countries, advancing the demands for constituent assemblies to completely restructure the thoroughly compromised existing political institution.

*People's World* 🌐



Guatemalans call for Otto Perez Molina, of the Patriotic Party to resign.



## Region Briefs

Three thousand Japanese delegates visited Beijing recently, promoting Japan and China's people-to-people exchange and deepening mutual understanding and trust between the two countries. Chinese President Xi Jinping welcomed the delegation, and said that the exchange was the root for the two countries' friendship. This friendship would not only benefit the two peoples and countries, but also peace in the region and the world. He stressed that the Japanese people were also the victim of Japanese militarism, and they should not allow Japanese militarists to distort the history of Japanese invasion. The delegation agreed to work harder to improve friendly relations between the two countries.

The Chinese city of Tianjin recently increased pollution fines nine fold in order to reduce emissions from industrial enterprises. Dust and smoke were the core components of air pollution. The fines for dust from construction sites increased 10 times, urging enterprises to take measures in reducing pollution. The country will reduce by 15 million tonnes outdated steel production capacity in 2015. Hebei province has already closed nearly 10,000 polluting factories. The city closed three coal-burning power stations and plans to shut down another 180 coal burners by October, eliminating the use of five million tonnes of coal.

According to a ministry report, Vietnam's socio-economic situation and macro-economy in 2015 were stable and on the right track. The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Cao Duc Phat, said that a prolonged drought affected agricultural exports from the Central Highlands. He continued that the ministry would keep promoting the use of technology in order to raise agricultural production and would push hard on restructuring drought-hit areas. Vietnam's Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung called for cooperation among ministries to speed up agricultural reform.

The Communist Party of Vietnam's (CPV) Politburo held a national meeting in Hanoi recently, introducing guidelines for nominating candidates of the CPV's Central Committee. Head of the Party's Central Committee's Organisation Commission, To Huy Rua, said that the Central Committee must be united, transparent and strong. The Central Committee members should also hold a strategic vision, leading the country to a new phase of development. He stressed that the Central Committee cultivate tomorrow's leaders, ensuring continuity of leadership. The Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong concluded that "the nomination process should be done carefully right from the start and be strictly based on criteria and regulations to ensure the best outcomes".

Hundreds of government employees in Indian-controlled Kashmir of Srinagar marched to the Office of the Chief Minister, demanding the government increase salaries and regulate workers' temporary jobs. The peaceful protest was confronted by the police who used batons and water cannon against the protesters.

## Lorena Pizarro

### Australian Speaking Tour

### June 2015 – Human Rights In Chile

Lorena Pizarro is human rights activist and currently President of the Association of Families of the Detained and Disappeared in Chile. She will be speaking in Australia in June 2015 to highlight the importance of seeking justice for human rights abuses in Chile and to lend her support to the campaign for the extradition of Adriana Rivas who is accused of the aggravated kidnapping of seven people in Chile during the Pinochet dictatorship as well as fleeing Chile whilst on bail.

#### TOUR DATES

Melbourne June 6 - June 10  
 Sydney June 11 - June 13  
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 Melbourne June 18 - June 21

For tour information or media interviews contact

Pilar Aguilera: 0404 165 331

nctruthandjusticechileau@gmail.com

www.truthandjusticeforchile.com

Tour organized by the National Campaign for Truth and Justice in Chile

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



email: tpearson@cpa.org.au

## More support for survivors of human trafficking

**Australian Red Cross welcomes the significant visa reforms that will increase support and protection for survivors of human trafficking, slavery, and slavery-like practices such as forced labour and forced marriage.**

Foreign nationals who are suspected survivors of human trafficking or slavery, and who do not already hold a valid visa, will be allowed to stay in Australia lawfully, under the

Human Trafficking Visa Framework announced last week.

One of the core issues we have advocated around is visa changes so that trafficked men and women have access to the support they need to help them recover and rebuild their lives.

The changes to the framework include introducing a new subclass of bridging visa. Holders of the new visa will be eligible for Centrelink's Special Benefit payments and will be able to attend English language classes. As well the title of the Witness Protection (Trafficking) (Permanent) visa will also change, and people granted this visa will be exempt from waiting periods for a range of social security payments.

Renaming the Witness Protection Trafficking Visa will help remove the stigma associated with this sensitive visa and reduce the likelihood of people being identified. The addition of eligibility for the Adult Migrant English Program and the removal of the current waiting period will give people greater access to much-needed support.

Red Cross has been supporting men, women and children as they recover from human trafficking and slavery through the Support for Trafficked People Program, funded by government, since 2009.

**Lis De Vries**  
Australian Red Cross

## Abbott gov't complicit in Rohingya crisis

**The Australian government's refusal to act over the horrific Rohingya humanitarian crisis makes them complicit in the mistreatment of the world's most persecuted people.**

Rohingyas in Myanmar are effectively being subjected to ethnic cleansing. The fate of Rohingyas who have attempted to flee this persecution is equally horrific. Thousands have been held to ransom by people traffickers in bamboo cages in the jungles of Thailand and Malaysia, beaten and starved until their families pay for their return – or until they die.

Now stories are emerging of people being held by people smugglers at sea for months at a time in floating torture camps, with the dead simply tossed overboard. Others have been abandoned by the traffickers and remain adrift at sea. Likely to be without food or water, time is quickly running out for them.

The Abbott government's refusal to help makes them complicit with the people smugglers and with Myanmar's ruling regime which sanctions cruelty against Rohingyas.

For months now Tony Abbott and his cronies have peddled the line that they care so much about refugees' lives that they'll do anything to stop them dying at sea. They've made a big fuss about "smashing the people smugglers' business model".

But their willingness to turn a blind eye to the tragedy in our region sends a clear signal that they are fine with the state-sanctioned persecution of Rohingyas.

It signals to murderous traffickers that they can carry on with their brutal, wholesale kidnapping of vulnerable people. It's time that

the media and the community called the government out on its blatant hypocrisy.

Some questions the government needs to answer:

- What diplomatic efforts have they made to encourage an end to the persecution of Rohingyas in Myanmar?
- What have they done to help prevent the brutal trafficking of Rohingyas and ensure options for their safety in the region?
- How long have they known about the floating torture camps that have been on the water since at least February this year?

We call on the government to urgently support search and rescue operations for people stranded at sea, to help ensure safe passage and protection for Rohingya refugees and to help with their resettlement.

A failure to act is undeniable proof the government doesn't care about people dying at sea and they don't care about solving the issue of refugees in our region.

**Serina McDuff**  
Asylum Seeker Resource Centre

# Culture & Life

by Rob Gowland

## Abbott, the arts and arrogance

**Have you ever paused to notice how the extreme Right is absolutely steeped in arrogance? I don't just mean Nazis, but all those ultra-rich capitalists and their wives and children. And the politicians and other hangers-on who act on their behalf and serve their interests. It's an arrogance of power and privilege, buoyed up not only by wealth but by the firm conviction that they are superior to all the lesser mortals who do the work that provides them with all their needs and much more besides.**

Australia's ultra-reactionary Liberal Party government displays the same unfeeling arrogance that so typifies the extreme Right everywhere. This manifests itself in numerous decisions of the Australian government.

Take Aborigines for example. Australia's Indigenous population was systematically forced off the land it had occupied for 40,000 years by European colonialism. After a prolonged struggle, they were granted partial land rights over severely restricted areas by the Whitlam Labor government in the 1970s. Today's Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, on the other hand, clearly regards even those limited land-rights as an anomaly and an unnecessary impediment to the commercial exploitation of the country's mineral wealth.

The recent dumping by the Abbott government of a parliamentary enquiry into the mining industry has shown who pulls his strings (as if we didn't already know). A group of the smaller mining companies had sought the enquiry because of the blatantly unfair practices by the two largest companies to adversely

control mineral prices. Those two companies, Rio Tinto and BHP Billiton, told Abbott they did not want an enquiry and Abbott dutifully folded. He was probably only too aware that a few years before, when Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd tried to introduce a tax on mining companies' super profits, those same companies organised a coup within the Labor Party that ousted Rudd from the leadership and installed Julia Gillard instead, who promptly dropped the super-profits tax.

Many of Australia's Indigenous people, ousted from all the good land, now live in inner city ghettos or on the fringes of country towns and in remote settlements in the outback. Previous Liberal (and to their shame, Labor) governments have sought to invalidate elected Aboriginal leadership organisations and to de-fund government programs intended to improve health, education and job opportunities. Most significantly, in areas coveted by the mining companies, stories of child abuse were used to enable the government to take control of the remote Aboriginal communities. This was a blatant attempt to thwart any movement for Aboriginal land rights. And the beneficiaries of course would be the mining giants.

Tony Abbott actually distinguished himself by declaring that the Aborigines lived in these remote settlements not as a result of pressure from the land-grabbing Whites, but because it was a "life-style choice"!

It is not only Aborigines, however, who are the targets of the Abbott government's arrogance. Abbott – and most of his cabinet – have a religious right-wing agenda. The clerical

fascism that ruled in Spain under Franco or Hungary under Horthy would hold few qualms for Tony Abbott. He would in fact be in his element.

An infamous denier of climate change, when Abbott became PM he disbanded the Science Ministry. Who needs science when you can rely on God? At the G-20 summit in Brisbane, he brazenly lectured surprised world leaders on the insignificance of climate change, causing even a group of British Tories to liken him to a "17th century flat-Earther". Tony was unfazed.

This arrogance is not peculiar to the PM. It pervades all the ministries of his government. Treasurer Joe Hockey displayed it in spades with his previous budget which embodied the most arrogant disdain for the plight of society's battlers, especially the poor, the disabled and the unemployed. The latest to encounter the arrogance of this government are those engaged in the arts, normally something of a darling of the moneyed classes.

Hitherto, in Australia, government support for the arts has been managed through a government-funded committee, the Australia Council, which avoided claims of government bias by selecting projects for funding through independent committees of experts in each particular field. This probably rankled with some governments, especially Liberal Party governments, who too often saw arts grants going to "long-haired leftist layabouts". Tony's Arts Minister, George Brandis, has changed all that.

Arrogantly thumbing his nose at the potential for claims of "government bias" in future arts funding, Brandis has chopped off no less

than half the Australia Council's annual grant and taken it into his own ministry to be distributed by decision of his department only.

The previous budget's blatant anti-people measures provoked huge street marches and rallies. Abbott's response was to increase police powers. That has always been the response of the Liberal Party to popular anger. Remember the anti-Vietnam War protesters in the time of the Askin Liberal Party government in NSW? When protesters blocked the road to stop the limo Askin and US President Lyndon Johnson were riding in, Askin called out to his driver to "Drive over the bastards!" And then bragged to the media that Johnson had seemed to like it.

Tony Abbott likes to be seen running, cycling or swimming. One of the boys, just an ordinary guy. But he mixes in his social and political life with the likes of Gina Rinehart, richest woman in Australia (and very big in the mining industry) and with others of that ilk: creatures of wealth and privilege, who neither appreciate nor care about the inability of an age pensioner to put food on the table with the paltry amount that they receive as a pension. (In the Soviet Union, even despite the colossal ravages of the Second World War, and despite having to sustain an arms race with the NATO powers, pensions were set at half your wage when you reached retirement age – and rents of course had been at a maximum of 4 percent of your income for decades.)

The Right's arrogance of power is based on the belief that you can keep the "common" people down indefinitely. Newsflash: you can't. ☹



Tony Abbott – arrogance.



**Rob Gowland**  
**previews**  
**ABC & SBS**  
Public Television

Sunday June 7 –  
Saturday June 13

For Marxist-Leninists, history is a scientific issue. The origin of life is not down to the wishes of a god or a group of gods or even a bunch of druids worshipping the Sun. It begins with the interaction between elements and evolves over many millions of years into the earliest forms of life. This in turn evolves into more complex life, plants and animals. Improving our understanding of this process is the key to understanding the world around us.

The new documentary *Dinosaurs: The Hunt For Life* (SBS ONE Sunday June 7 at 8.40pm) follows palaeontologists who are researching blood cells discovered in the fossilised leg bone of a huge Tyrannosaurus Rex and making remarkable discoveries about this awesome predator.

Bourgeois politicians – in or out of office – are not renowned for their honesty. Their statements, reminiscences, etc, are nothing if not self-serving. To class bias they add their determination to make themselves look good at any price. Sarah Ferguson's three-part series *The Killing Season* (ABC Tuesdays from June 9 at 8.30pm) purports to be an "examination of the forces that shaped Labor during the Kevin Rudd/Julia Gillard leadership years". But the story is told by the actual politicians involved in the backstabbing coup against Kevin Rudd on behalf of the mining companies.

Their version tells you who said what to whom, but an honest analysis of the economic forces involved and their ruthless contempt for the democratic rights of the Australian people will not be found here. Instead, we have what is essentially a ruling class version (or versions) of what happened, presented in meticulous detail. It's designed to give the impression that we are receiving the "inside dope" on the affair, and to be fair those who made it probably

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thought that that is just what they were doing. However, they were undone by the program's method and its parameters.

Whether the politicians are pro-Rudd or pro-Gillard, they are all pro-capitalism, and their accounts are at once deliberately superficial and non-threatening to the system. A definitive account of the removal of Kevin Rudd has yet to be made.

The first episode deals with the "marriage of convenience" between Rudd and Julia Gillard to wrest the leadership of the ALP from Kim Beazley, an exercise in pure opportunism that was rewarded a year later in victory in the federal election. Typically, they posed as unquestioned leader and loyal deputy, while they coped with the Global Financial Crisis, but it was only a pose. If that's a revelation for you, then you will find the series enlightening.

Comedian Wil Anderson hosts the ABC's latest venture into sketch comedy, *The Best Of Fresh Blood* (ABC Wednesdays from June 10 at 10.00pm). Despite his relentless and seemingly sincere assertions that the sketches are utterly hilarious and exciting, I found them to be neither.

To me, the best thing that could be said about the series is that the episodes are only half an hour long.

Once upon a time, the makers of documentary films took as their subject how people made their living with the emphasis on not just portraying the appearance but also disclosing the underlying reality of the subject. Nowadays, there is no market for such films. Instead, the makers of documentary films seem obliged to seek out the bizarre, the "controversial", or the outrageous if they want their films to be shown on TV. From crazy tattoos to forbidding medical procedures to on-the-spot accounts of car crashes, plane crashes, and similar entertaining events, modern TV documentaries are a tribute to morbid curiosity.

*I Married A Crossdresser* (ABC2 Friday June 12 at 9.35pm) is part of the series *Forbidden Love*. This episode follows four English couples in which the male partner while not gay, just likes to dress up in women's clothes. The program reveals the remarkable reality of the women who willingly live with partners who cross-dress and husbands who dress up in their female persona and go clubbing with their wives, in a "girls' night out".

All four wives refer to their husband by his female persona name when he is wearing a dress and seem to find the relationship very satisfactory. It's all rather touching, if a little weird.

Actor Dustin Hoffman made his directorial debut with the charming comedy-drama *Quartet* (SBS ONE Saturday June 13 at 9.35pm). Starring Maggie Smith and Tom Courtenay with Billy Connolly, Michael Gambon and Pauline Collins, the film is set in Beecham



Pauline Collins as Cissy Robson and Maggie Smith as Jean Horton in *Quartet* (SBS ONE Saturday June 13 at 9.35pm).

House, a retirement home for former professional musicians, patterned after the real-life Casa di Riposo per Musicisti founded by Giuseppe Verdi.

Reg, Wilf and Cissy are retired opera singers who often worked together in the past. All the guests in the retirement home continue to be engaged in their former professions in one way or the other, including lecturing and initiating young people to music.

One day, Reg is shocked to find his former wife Jean Horton turning up to live at Beecham House. Reg is angry not to have been warned as their parting was on very sour terms. Reg, Wilf, Jean and Cissy were in the cast of a very highly-rated recording of the quartet for soprano, mezzo-soprano, tenor and baritone ("*Bella figlia dell'amore*") from the opera *Rigoletto*.

Wilf and Cissy convince Reg that the four of them singing the famous quartet again for the home's annual Verdi Gala concert will sell enough tickets to save the home. However, Jean is harder to persuade as she vowed never to sing again after retiring.

The film is warm and mellow as suits its subject, but not everyone was as taken with it as I was.

*Entertainment Weekly's* rather jaundiced critic wrote: "This lulling inspirational fantasy/comedy in the key of *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* offers aging, cultured English-folk (and one randy Scot, played by Billy Connolly) living out their golden years in a beautifully maintained residence for retired musicians. Every vista suggests that this gracious oldies' home is situated down the road from Downton Abbey, and every scene insists that real physical or mental infirmity belongs in some other picture." ★

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- 3.30pm **PANEL - CUBA IN TODAY'S WORLD**  
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**NO MEETING**

Public holiday long weekend;

June 11

**PUBLIC SECTOR MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS – HOW SERIOUS IS IT?**

**Alan Rosen**, Professor, Mental Health Policy Unit, Brain and Mind Institute, Sydney University;

**Sebastian Rosenberg**, Dr, Senior Lecturer, Brain and Mind Institute, Sydney University;

June 18

**WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT WEST CONNEX AND ITS IMPACT ON INNER CITY COMMUNITIES?**

**Michelle Zeibots**, Institute for Sustainable Futures, UTS;

**Jenny Leong**, MP, Greens Member for Newtown;

June 25

**THE REALITY AND RHETORIC OF UNEMPLOYMENT IN AUSTRALIA, WHO BENEFITS AND WHO LOSES?**

**Bill Mitchell**, Professor, Director, Centre for Full Employment and Equity, Newcastle University;

**John Buchanan**, Professor, School of Business, Uni of Sydney;

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## TTIP

# Now it gets political

John Hilary

Debate is hotting up over the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), the notorious trade deal cooked up in secret between the EU and the United States. With the official talks already in trouble, TTIP is now coming under renewed scrutiny from parliamentarians on both sides of the Atlantic.

In a series of forthcoming votes, the European Parliament and US Congress are turning their attention to an agreement that is becoming more toxic with every passing day.

The TTIP negotiations were launched in 2013, and there are several years before any deal could come up for final ratification.

Yet the new European Parliament elected last year is now set to hold its first plenary vote on an interim TTIP resolution during the week of June 8, with a preliminary vote due to take place in the parliament's trade committee as soon as this week.

The schedule could still slip, given the level of controversy surrounding the resolution; the timetable has been set back once already by the blizzard of 898 amendments that were entered by other parliamentary committees in protest at the first draft.

As is now widely recognised, TTIP is not a traditional trade agreement aimed at reducing border tariffs, which are already at minimal levels between the EU and USA.

Instead, TTIP focuses on dismantling the "barriers" to corporate profit that exist behind the border, namely the social standards, labour rights and environmental regulations that we hold most dear.

The impacts will be socially and ecologically disastrous: official estimates predict TTIP will cost at least one million jobs in the EU and US combined, while the resulting surge in US shale gas exports to Europe will lock us in to fossil fuel dependency for decades.

Most outrageously, TTIP is set to grant US corporations the new power to bypass domestic courts and sue European governments for potential loss of profits in a parallel judicial system available to them alone.



This so-called "investor-state dispute settlement" mechanism (ISDS) would allow US companies the opportunity to demand compensation wherever they felt that their "legitimate expectations" had been upset by the passage of new laws or regulations.

According to the official British government's assessment commissioned from the London School of Economics at the beginning of the TTIP negotiations, taxpayers will be forced to pay billions if the new power is approved.

For these and many other reasons, popular opposition to TTIP is running at unprecedented levels.

The European Citizens' Initiative against TTIP has secured close to two million signatures from across Europe in just eight months. The EU's own public consultation on ISDS saw a record 150,000 responses, all but a tiny handful rejecting the idea of granting transnational

corporations this new power. The message from the European people is loud and clear.

Yet the unelected bureaucrats of the European Commission are oblivious.

I met with Cecilia Malmström, the EU Trade Commissioner responsible for TTIP, in her private office earlier this year and asked her whether she was bothered that the people of Europe were up in arms against her.

Her response came back icily: "I do not take my mandate from the European people."

Malmström's handling of the ISDS question reveals all too clearly her contempt for democratic legitimacy.

Rather than respect the public's rejection of her plans, the Trade Commissioner is determined to press ahead with a "new and improved" version of ISDS, which singularly fails to address the fundamental issue raised in the consultation: why would we wish to give US corporations something that Malmström herself has characterised as a "VIP line to justice"?

As one MEP remarked caustically on being shown the new proposal: put lipstick on a pig, it's still a pig.

Yet some parliamentarians are all too happy to go along with the fiction that Malmström's reforms have answered the critics.

For most liberal and conservative MEPs, support for TTIP seems to transcend any belief in democracy or national sovereignty.

For many social democratic MEPs, including Labour parties from across the continent, the desire to be seen as trusted allies in the neo-liberal capitalist program overrides any commitment to the European social model they might once have held.

Small wonder that they find themselves increasingly out of favour with European electorates.

If the European Parliament passes a resolution that is supportive of TTIP in the face of such unprecedented public opposition, it will open up a new phase in our understanding of the institutions of the EU.

While the Commission has long been known to be unaccountable, and the Council

of Ministers is too remote to influence, the Parliament is at some level supposed to represent the will of the European people.

That argument will dissolve into thin air if MEPs vote against the public mood on TTIP. As Britain prepares for its forthcoming referendum on EU membership, people are unlikely to forget or forgive such a momentous betrayal.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic, Congress is going through its own TTIP contractions. The US debate centres on the special "fast track" powers that President Obama needs to secure if he is to be allowed to negotiate TTIP to its conclusion without referring every line to Congress for approval (see *Guardian* #1685 20-05-2015).

The bill preparing this Trade Promotion Authority has just managed to stutter its way through the Senate, but there are huge doubts that it will pass the House of Representatives – not least because the same power would also apply to the parallel Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) that the USA is negotiating with Asian and Latin American nations, which is seen as an even greater threat than TTIP.

Obama will not risk a vote that he might lose, and the clock is ticking on his presidency. Time is not on his side.

Popular resistance is making the passage of such legislation increasingly implausible, on both sides of the Atlantic.

The global day of action held on April 18 this year saw 750 actions in protest at the new wave of free trade deals that threaten to give transnational corporations new powers over society throughout the world.

Just as previous attempts to bring in such powers were successfully defeated in the 1990s and 2000s, TTIP is sure to be defeated too. The only question for EU and US parliamentarians is how many of them will go down with it.

John Hilary is Executive Director of War on Want. His introductory guide to TTIP, available in a dozen European languages, has now been republished in an updated 2015 edition, and can be freely downloaded from [www.waronwant.org/ttip](http://www.waronwant.org/ttip).

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