



## Trans Pacific Partnership

# Towards corporate dictatorship

Anna Pha

October 5 marks a dark day in the history of Australia with the Coalition government signing an agreement for the recolonisation of Australia. Not by Britain but by monopoly capital, by the largest, global corporations. It will enable giant monopoly corporations and international tribunals to over-ride Australia's sovereignty and democratic processes, including judicial and parliamentary processes once it comes into force.

The Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiations were concluded after five years of secret negotiations and it now depends on each country to follow through with their domestic requirements for ratification to become a binding treaty.

The TPP encompasses 12 Pacific Rim countries representing more than 40 percent of global GDP. The other 11 signatories are Brunei Darussalam, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, and Vietnam. Russia and China are not participants.

Trade Minister Andrew Robb describes it as "the biggest global trade deal in 20 years", which "will deliver enormous benefits to Australia, including unprecedented new opportunities in the rapidly growing Asia Pacific region, with its rising middle class, for our businesses, farmers, manufacturers and service providers."

The TPP covers a host of issues including workers' rights, environmental protection, health, pharmaceuticals, manufacturing, the resources sector, agricultural products, transport, banking, finance, education tourism, telecommunications and government purchasing.

But the TPP is far more than a trade agreement. Its content is far reaching and will affect every aspect of life in Australia and the environment. It enshrines the rights of foreign investors over those of governments and people. It even gives foreign corporations more rights than domestic ones.

The giant global monopolies sat around the negotiating table with government bureaucrats and a token representation from "civil society" to negotiate the various sections of the agreement. The people and their elected parliaments were kept in the dark throughout the whole process. The only information revealed prior to the signing was from WikiLeaks.

The Australian Parliament will not be able to amend it.

### ISDS

The investor-state dispute settlement provisions (ISDS) allow foreign corporations to sue governments before international tribunals if a change in policy or regulation is seen to "harm" their investment.

The US Philip Morris tobacco company is using ISDS in an Australia-Hong-Kong investment agreement to sue the government over our plain packaging law, despite the decision of the Australian High Court that they were not entitled to damages under Australian law.

It affects workers. Similar ISDS provisions are being used by the transnational corporation Veolia to sue the Egyptian government for loss of profits after it raised the minimum wage.

A government imposing strict labelling rules or banning a toxic substance could face being sued for hundreds of millions of dollars. The reverse does not apply. There is no provision for governments to sue foreign corporations. Nor do domestic corporations have similar rights.

In effect it means that unelected foreign transnational corporations can dictate the policies of democratically elected governments and over-ride the highest courts in the land if they so wish.

### Cost lives

On October 9, WikiLeaks released the text of the TPP Treaty's Intellectual Property Rights Chapter. This chapter will have wide-ranging effects on internet services, publishers, privacy, democratic rights, medicines and biological patents.

One of the most contentious and important areas of the TPP is the protection of patents for pharmaceutical products. Monopoly protection of a product is for a minimum of five years following marketing approval in a country. This is extended to eight years in countries where new uses, form and methods of administering are offered.

Only when this monopoly period is over can far cheaper generic forms be introduced in that country.

Minister Robb boasts about standing up to Big Pharma and limiting the protection of monopoly rights on biologics to five years – actually it is a minimum of five years and could be as long as eight years. Biologics are medical products derived from living organisms, including many new and up and coming cancer treatments, vaccines and therapies such as insulin.

Monopoly pricing by Big Pharma can run

into tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars per patient per year, even where they might be life-saving. The Australian government might be able to make them more accessible with heavy subsidies under the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme, but what about poor countries such as Vietnam.

The TPP does not curb the monopoly prices charged. In fact there are provisions which will enable the pharmaceutical companies to lengthen, strengthen and broaden special patent and data protections and thus delay the entry of generic competition.

### Almighty Trinity

The TPP is the first of three major agreements aimed at securing US-EU economic global domination, commonly referred to as the Trinity or three Ts.

### TISA

The second is the Trade in Services Agreement (TISA) which covers 52 countries including Australia and accounts for almost 70 percent of world trade in services.

It will bring about the deregulation of banking, finance, insurance, transportation, telecommunications, construction, accountancy, energy provision, water distribution, health, education, and other services and open up public services to private operators.

Corporations based in other signatory countries would have the same rights as domestic companies or even greater rights arising from the ISDS procedures.

The rights of workers would take a hit with liberalisation of the movement of labour

without any guarantees or legal protections for these "temporary workers". It would be 7-Eleven on steroids.

TISA is being driven by the US and the EU. As with the TPP it is being negotiated in secret. Without the great work of WikiLeaks we would not even be aware of the negotiations. But worse than that, it has been classified to be kept in secret for five years after it enters into force! So much for transparency and democratic rights!

### TTIP

The third member of the Trinity is the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), an EU-US version of the TPP. It is also being negotiated in the same undemocratic manner as the other agreements.

The Trinity, if the agreements are concluded, would cover 51 states, 1.6 billion people and two-thirds of the global economy.

### Economic arm of US pivot

"The Trans-Pacific Partnership is the economic side of the US [military] Pivot into Asia-Pacific and is driven by the US and its multinationals and banks. It is being ruthlessly imposed on 40 percent of the world and nearly one billion people. The TPP will open up and create new markets and areas of investments for its corporations, banks and giant financial institutions to intensify and broaden the exploitation of people and the environment to maximise profits." (Shirley Winton, "Dangerous allies: US bases and troops in Australia", *Guardian*, #1699 August 26, 2015)

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## Guardian

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# Globalisation

## Midwife to the New World Order

Anna Pha's page one analysis of the Trans Pacific Partnership trade deal examines the existential threat to workers' rights, to the democratic process and the very independence and sovereignty of the nation state. The TPP should be considered in its historical context, back to the relatively recent past and the US/NATO war on the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s and further back to the emergence of monopoly capital.

Globalisation, the term used at the time to describe the latest phase of imperialism, was the midwife of imperialism's New World Order; an imperialist New World Order.

NATO was to impose military order on behalf of the troika; the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and World Trade Organisation, and its whiphand the Multilateral Agreement on Investment. The UN was to be, and has been, sidelined. The NATO bombing and break-up of Yugoslavia without any reference to the UN was a big step towards this end.

The aggression against Yugoslavia was a qualitative leap that set the pattern for the future. Globalisation in the hands of the big corporations meant:

- all countries were to be forced into the global market on conditions determined by the TNCs;
- the privatisation of all publicly owned enterprises and institutions;
- deregulation and the rolling back of the state's economic control mechanisms;
- "opening up" world markets, with all restrictions by governments being swept away;
- less direct investment in specific productive industries and more highly speculative trading in currencies, shares and derivatives;

- further and rapid monopolisation as take-overs and mergers of existing TNCs formed even bigger corporations.

The capitalist clarion call is for freely circulating capital, effectively giving control of economies to the big banks and financial institutions.

This capital is privately owned and controlled by a small number of financial oligarchs who decide where and when it will be invested.

It will only be invested where it will return the quickest and largest profit, where investment is made conditional on workers' wages and living standards being taken to and kept at rock bottom.

To achieve this new form of global slavery, the ruling class in the US and leading Western powers have used – and will continue to use under the latest trade deals – all the means available to them: military power, economic control, political and ideological manipulation.

However, there are sharp contradictions and antagonisms between the major capitalist groupings. Each wants to be dominant and strives to protect its interests while trying to expand and take more of the world market.

(The contradictions in the TPP will soon make themselves known in terms of its attempt to marginalise and isolate China's economy, which is totally integrated in the world economy.)

Central to these developments is imperialism's drive to plunder the resources of all the world, its excesses being most noticeable in the poorer, less developed countries.

It is significant that globalisation increases the huge disparities between developed and developing countries. This is a direct consequence of imperialist exploitation.

As the advanced stage of capitalism, imperialism has developed a number of main features, including:

- the growing monopolisation of the economy by a handful of major corporations;
- the increasing export of productive capital to undeveloped parts of the world;
- the growing integration of finance capital with productive capital, and the dominance of finance capital.

In *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, Lenin described these main features as far back as 1917:

- Capitalist over-accumulation in the developed capitalist countries leading to an increase in the export of productive capital.
- This required the creation of larger companies which resulted in growing monopolisation.
- There followed a scramble and bitter struggle between the imperialist powers to control the world's resources.

Even by the end of the 18th century the accumulation of capital saw an intense concentration of power and resources. Production was organised into ever larger integrated factories, bringing former isolated workshops into a single production process.

Capitalism still poses as a competitive system in a free market, but transnational corporations now dominate and control the markets.

The export of productive capital came out of the growing concentration and accumulation of capital. It gave birth to colonialism, a ruthless domination that has continued to this day, taking different forms, from direct rule, to gunboat diplomacy (now air strike diplomacy) and indirect rule via neo-colonialism.

### Finance capital

Another important feature of imperialism noted by Lenin was the vast accumulation of finance capital – that is capital accumulated in banks and other financial institutions and not used to produce goods and services but in speculation. Although productive capital and finance capital became intertwined, the dominant position was taken by bank capital.

Bankers no longer wanted to only lend money for productive purposes. Huge profits could be made by speculation. Lenin's analysis which noted this development has held true throughout the 20th century to today as finance capital has come to completely dominate the system.

US economist Richard Barnet put it this way: "The global financial network is a constantly changing maze of currency transactions, global securities, euro-yen swaps and an ever-more innovative array of speculative devices for repackaging and reselling money.

"This network is much closer to a chain of gambling casinos than to the dull, grey banks of the past. Twenty-four hours a day, trillions of dollars flow through the world's foreign exchange markets. No more than ten percent of this staggering sum has anything to do with trade in goods and services."

The New World Order and globalisation is about imposing the world-wide domination of capital.

Twice last century a major conflict in Europe, driven by the crises and contradictions of capitalism, resulted in world wars. Profits, from war, from plunder: that is the meaning of globalisation and its current manifestation, the TPP and its associated trade deals based on global plunder.

### Website and Computers Appeal

The CPA a Special Appeal to buy two new computers and develop its website and social media has raised a total of \$5,325.00. One of the computers has been purchased and the social media planning is moving forward. We would like to thank everyone who has contributed for their generous support.

Our warmest thanks to the following for their generous contributions this week:

Dennis White \$25, K Manski \$100, Anna \$220.

This week's Total: \$345 Cumulative Total: \$5,325.00.

### PRESS FUND

Social media is proving to have very anti-social aspects. Stories of bullying and harassment on social media are still emerging, and disputes are permanently there for all to see. Bloggers abound, but like graffiti artists their work varies from very good to appallingly bad. Social media is valuable as an indicator of the spectrum of public opinion, but if you want a really reliable interpretation of what's happening here and overseas from the point of view of ordinary working people, you should read the *Guardian*. However, whereas the work of bloggers costs virtually nothing to produce, production of the *Guardian* depends on Press Fund contributions, so please if you possibly can, send us something for the next edition. Many thanks to this week's contributors, as follows:

Anonymous \$50, June Ayres \$50, Mark Mannion \$5, "Round Figure" \$15

This week's total: \$120 Progressive total: \$5,355

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As James Petras points out: "The Pentagon and the White House developed the 'military pivot' to deal with China's ascendancy as an economic world power. This is essentially a policy of strategic confrontations, including military encirclement through regional base agreements, deliberate economic exclusion through regional trade agreements and political provocation through threatened sanctions." ("US-China: Pentagon vs high tech", *Guardian*, #1704 September 30, 2015)

Further, "The US Pivot is defining Australia as a major US military and intelligence base, and a launching pad for its drones, overseas military incursions, targeted assassinations and, eventually, major wars in our region."

At the same time building its military encirclement of China, and expanding its armed forces in the region, including in Australia, the US has promoted the TPP and TISA. The Trinity do not include Brazil, Russia, India, China and

South Africa – the grouping of four nations known as BRICS. Their large and growing economies pose a future challenge to the global economic hegemony of the US.

The Trinity also excludes a number of Latin American countries including Venezuela, Cuba, Ecuador and Bolivia which are building their economies and asserting their independence from the US.

The US is also concerned about the growing strength of the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation (SOC) which held a summit with BRICS in July this year. Its members include Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan. India and Pakistan are joining after some years of observer status. Iran and Turkey attended the July summit.

SOC is both a political and military organisation. Since its formation in 1996 the SOC has expanded its work from the original aim of Deepening Military Trust in Border Regions. It has initiated many large-scale projects related to transportation, energy and

telecommunications and held regular meetings of security, military, defence, foreign affairs, economic, cultural, banking and other officials from its member states.

It also carries out military exercises.

The world is becoming increasingly polarised into two blocks, as the US uses everything at its disposal to assert economic, military and political power.

The text of the TPP has still to be ratified. It looks set to meet stiff opposition in the US Congress. In Australia, the only opportunity now to defeat Australia's membership is for enabling legislation to be defeated in Parliament. The Australian Greens have consistently opposed and campaigned against the TPP but Labor looks set to support it. The Independents are divided.

The next step for Australia involves tabling the treaty text in parliament along with a National Interest Analysis and a review by the Joint Standing Committee on Treaties to which all interested parties can make submissions. ☺

# A devious attack on penalty rates

Bob Briton

**Prime Minister Turnbull wants everything “on the table” in the lead-up to next year’s federal budget and election. Income tax cuts, the GST, negative gearing, capital gains and superannuation will all be considered. He is also chanting about the “seven-day economy” being imposed on Australians and how “we’ve got to find solutions to create a more flexible, dynamic, 21st century economy out of which everybody wins.” Look out workers!**

Low hanging fruit in the federal government’s quest for higher private profits are penalty rates. The government’s Productivity Commission has produced a draft report on Australia’s “workplace relations framework” and flagged penalty rates and the minimum wage for an assault. Some of the ground-breaking work has already been done in the retail sector in South Australia with a treacherous deal between store owners and the right-wing Shop Distributive and Allied Employees Association. This has reduced Sunday penalty rates in the lowly paid sector to the rate paid for Saturdays.

Other “aggregated” wage deals encompassing penalties for weekend, shift work and overtime have taken place around the country. Reaction to the federal government’s latest

proposition has been strong. It would not only slash pay for workers in the most precarious sectors of the economy but encourage further abuse of workers’ rights to rest and involvement in the community. Family life and workers’ health would suffer.

The attack comes on top of revelations about extreme low pay of the sort on offer at 7-Eleven convenience stores. It turns out that the sorts of illegal practices exposed by ABC TV’s *Four Corners* program are very widespread and include hourly pay rates of between \$4 and \$12. The legal ordinary minimum wage rate is \$17.29 an hour.

Not all the voices in opposition to the axing of penalty rates have resounded among the workers in the government’s sights. Opposition leader Bill Shorten said the cuts would make it hard for families to send their children to private school. The later attempt at “damage control” didn’t sound much better. “I was referring to the local Catholic schools, the primary schools in my electorate where a lot of the parents there, both of them working, both of them need the penalty rates,” he said. It sounds like those parents need stronger unions and higher base rates of pay.

The government is floating the idea of an income top-up for the workers who would lose out due to the changes. “You’ve got to be able to ... demonstrate that people are



certainly not going to be worse off and, ideally, in net terms, better off,” Turnbull said recently. The Productivity Commission discussed “earned income tax credits” (EITCs) of the sort now common in OECD countries. The scheme allows employers to pay very low wages that are supplemented by the taxpayer. It is a modern take on Milton Friedman-style “reverse taxation”.

The Productivity Commission acknowledges ideological problems with EITCs. “They must also be financed through taxes, which have their own adverse economic effects. In an Australian context, any EITC would also interact with a

well-developed tax-transfer system, which is also intended to improve the incomes of the low paid. The interactions between that system and an EITC would need to be carefully assessed.”

The federal government’s tax pie is set to shrink if nothing is done. Capitalism is in crisis. The economy is slowing. There is pressure building for even lower corporate taxes. Low personal income taxes are an article of neo-liberal faith and are good vote bait. States are going to be bludgeoned into endorsing a higher rate and broader coverage for the GST or see their public services fall deeper into decay. The government’s EITC

scheme will be sold as a progressive measure for the low paid and a step for addressing Australia’s yawning income divide.

Workers shouldn’t be fooled. One can easily foresee a further deterioration in the economy. The word will go out that the rate of the EITC will need to be trimmed and ultimately removed for the sake of the “economy” (profits). This has happened to other “tax-transfer” measures in the recent past. That would leave in place the low wages always sought by employers. The bosses and their servants in the major parties think long term in pursuit of their interests. Workers must, too. ✪

## AWU seeks clarification

**The Australia Workers’ Union has sought meetings with Alcoa to discuss the possible ramifications of the company’s announcement it will separate into two independent, publicly-traded companies.**

Alcoa announced it would be looking to split into an upstream company and a value-add company. AWU national secretary Scott McDine said as the largest union within Alcoa in Australia the union is seeking clarification.

“We need Alcoa to explain to us what this means on a global and on

a domestic level so we can consider how it might affect our members,” Mr McDine said.

“The AWU is the largest union in the aluminium sector, with thousands of members in the industry throughout Australia. This is a major global move from Alcoa and we need to understand the potential ramifications.

“The split into two companies and how assets and liabilities are allocated is obviously of significant interest to the AWU.”

Mr McDine noted that in the

split Alcoa had kept its energy assets and bauxite, alumina and aluminium assets together in the upstream company. “Aluminium manufacturing will always be an energy intensive industry and the link between it and energy is clear and reflected in Alcoa’s split,” Mr McDine said.

“This underscores the urgent need for Australia to introduce a gas reservation scheme so that Alcoa’s local operations have access to affordable, reliable, low-emission energy in this country.” ✪

### Pete’s Corner



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# Uni deregulation delayed not ditched

The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) says that the announcement by the Minister for Education, Senator Simon Birmingham, that the federal government has been forced to back down on the introduction of its higher education policies in 2016 is because the reality is they cannot get them through the Senate.

However, NTEU national president Jeannie Rea said the Minister's announcement amounted to little more than a delay tactic.

"No one should be fooled into thinking that this means the government is abandoning its plans to shift the cost of higher education away from the government and on to the shoulders of students," said Rea.

"If this government gets its way, there will be funding cuts and significant increases in university fees, as well as public funding made available to private for-profit providers, at the cost of our public universities. "Fortunately Labor, the Greens and cross bench Senators Xenophon, Lazarus, Lambie, Muir and Wang listened to the public reaction and voted down the government's unprincipled, unfair and unsustainable legislation.

Rea said that the Minister's announcement is purely a political ploy aimed at taking the heat off Prime Minister Turnbull by delaying the government's intention to proceed with its ideologically driven deregulation agenda, which would result in \$100,000 degrees as well as encourage the entry of many new private providers more interested in making a profit than providing a high quality education.

"The Minister needs to understand that the Australian public will not accept a public higher education system where some students miss out

on a place because other students are prepared to pay a higher price.

"Entry to our public universities must always be based on students' merit and not their capacity to pay.

"The NTEU agrees with Senator Birmingham that the sector faces three major challenges, namely funding sustainability, quality and access.

"The increasing reliance on casual staff to deliver higher education teaching is an issue which the Minister needs to address if he is serious about improving quality.

"If the Minister is serious about access he should be looking at ways of increasing student income support, not increasing fees through deregulation."

Meanwhile, Vocational Education (formerly TAFE) teachers at RMIT University in Melbourne took strike action for 24 hours on October 8 in response to university management's worst offer yet following more than two years of enterprise agreement negotiations.

The NTEU at RMIT says the teachers have been left with no choice but to take action following the university's appalling handling of the process.

"Teachers were dragged through a non-union ballot last year and then RMIT refused to release the results. The NTEU had to go through Freedom of Information to uncover that teachers voted down management's ballot by a thumping 72 percent," said NTEU RMIT branch president Dr Melissa Slee.

"In August of this year, RMIT management went to ballot for a second time with another standard enterprise agreement. Halfway through the online vote scheduled to last five days, the university stopped the process and declared they wanted to propose a different agreement.



**"Entry to our public universities must always be based on students' merit and not their capacity to pay."**

"The only credible explanation is they were about to massively lose a second ballot. As it turns out, following another Freedom of Information request, of those teachers who had a chance to vote, 63 percent voted against management's offer.

"RMIT's offer amounts to a 5.1% pay rise over four years. The CPI has increased by 12.4% over the same period. The proposed workload clauses allocate teachers just half an hour preparation for their classes and many teachers are doing 24 hours face-to-face teaching a week which is an outrageously demanding schedule."

Vocational Education teachers at RMIT also have serious concerns around job security and the increasing

prevalence of fixed term contracts. Around 50% of RMIT's teachers are casually employed. Lack of job security makes it difficult for staff to plan their lives and make long-term financial decisions. In addition the superannuation contribution for Vocational Education teachers is the minimum allowable 9.5% whereas most other staff at RMIT University are on 17%.

"RMIT has a \$1 billion annual turnover and made a \$71 million profit last year, and RMIT profits have surged in the last few years which means it can offer better pay and conditions for all Vocational Education teachers at RMIT," said Dr Slee.

Vocational Education teacher and elected representative of teachers at

the bargaining table, Dr Olga Lorenzo agreed.

"Management can afford to pay us the same superannuation as they give everyone else in Vocational Education – librarians, IT staff, admin people. They have told us quite bluntly at the bargaining table that teachers are not worth it, which is very insulting. We will win because unfairness and disrespect are never winning strategies in the long run," said Dr Lorenzo.

"Until RMIT starts taking the concerns of its Vocational Education teachers seriously and makes a fair offer, teachers will be left with little choice but to take industrial action." ✪

## Vale William Horace (Bill) Langlois

The Maritime Union is in mourning after Seamen's Union legend, Bill Langlois passed away at 92-years-old on September 26. MUA national secretary Paddy Crumlin said Bill would be remembered as a tough activist with a big heart who loved the SUA and the comrades he met along the way.

"Our thoughts are with Bill's family and his many comrades, as we remember Bill, who was the embodiment of a merchant seaman," Crumlin said.

Born in 1923 in Holloway, North London, he began his career on Thames Barges at just 13-years-old. It was not long before World War 2 broke out and Bill found himself working on the North American Convoys, which he recalled in his interview for Diane Kirkby's "Voices from the Ships".

"(It) weren't the safest way to earn a quid, because if you got sunk you lasted about two to five minutes in the water," he said.

Bill was decorated for his war time service and honoured for his great contribution to the war effort as a merchant sailor as well. He fought in the battle of Normandy, as well as his trips to the Soviet Union in cargo vessels along the

supply chain through enemy territory in the North Atlantic. It was here that ships were continually torpedoed by German U Boats, or blown out of the water by mines positioned in their thousands by German raiders.

Following the war, Bill moved to Australia in 1948, where he continued his life as a merchant seaman and ramped up his political life. He was a member of the Communist Party and Secretary of the Australian Peace Committee at a time when the Cold War was at its height. For this action, Bill found himself, like many other active Communists at the time, on the ASIO watch list.

He was also active around the solidarity campaigns with Greek seafarers and joined former deputy national secretary Mick Doleman and another famous Sydney seaman John Benson on the 1 Million March for Peace in New York in 1982.

Apart from being a seafarer, Bill was a teacher at the Australian Maritime College in Launceston. It was there he met his partner in crime George Martindale.

It was there, according to Sydney Branch Secretary Joe Deakin, that they taught

up-and-coming seafarers not only seamanship but also the political requirements of the working class.

"Bill was a people's person as well, he never went around skiting about what he done in his life, but always, always, placed great emphasis on peace being the total objective of all the world's peoples," Deakin said.

"He was an outstanding delegate and political mentor, he was one of my mentors and I will be forever grateful to him for steering me the right way, the revolutionary way.

"When EV Elliott, federal secretary of the Seaman's Union of Australia was being harassed and threatened by the thugs and groupers, Billy was there to look after him.

"This wonderful man leaves behind such beautiful memories, memories of the struggle that he was up to his eyeballs in; the struggle for national independence for developing countries, the struggle against the ruling class hegemonists who wanted to turn the world into a fireball with their dreadful promotion of a nuclear war as the only alternative to combating the growing movement for national sovereignty and independence, and



The original crew from the Caltex Liverpool, the first tanker on the Australian coast: (left to right) Tex Moran, Alan Oliver, Bill Shaddock, Pat Geraghty and Bill Langlois. (Photo: www.mua.org.au)

comrade Bill Langlois was a strong and influential advocate of this movement."

Despite his political nous, Bill will still be remembered as a good mate.

Another contribution he made to "Voices from the Ships" was in fact about mateship.

"If a bloke needs a hand, you give him a hand. You go to sea and unless you can rely on your shipmates, you're dead. Your shipmates

are your background, they're your sidearm, they're your everything," he said.

Bill was a proud husband of Gloria and leaves behind children and grandchildren as well as a legacy of stories and will be remembered for the numerous framed ship's knots dotted around the country.

He will not be forgotten, as Joe Deakin put it, "People like Bill Langlois don't come by everyday." ✪

Taking Issue – Rob Gowland

# Anti-Soviet propaganda and Stalin (Part 1)

Where would anti-Soviet propaganda be without Stalin as whipping boy? Well, it would certainly still be with us, of course. It is an extremely potent weapon in the arsenal of the class war, and capitalism's ideologues wield it relentlessly. When the Soviet Union was in existence, they rigorously suppressed news of Soviet innovations and achievements wherever possible. When that wasn't possible – as with Sputnik for example, or Soviet aircraft – they resorted to sneering and smearing.

I remember, when I was at school, being told by a class-mate, that the wharfies went on strike in order to wreck the economy so the Russians could come in and take over. As conspiracy theories go, that one takes some beating. But the carefully fostered misinformation on which that argument was based started appearing when the Revolution was only a few days old.

Lenin was a “German agent” and the Soviets (workers and soldiers councils) were out to destroy Russia's Christian way of life and “open the front to the Germans” – that was the first anti-Soviet lie. There were lots of others after that (the startling news that “Lenin eats babies” perhaps the most memorable), but when Lenin introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP) to rebuild the shattered economy after the World War, the Civil War and the armed foreign Intervention (Russia had been continuously at war on its own territory from 1914 until 1922) the character of anti-Soviet propaganda changed.

NEP was essentially the introduction of a mixed economy while the new society rebuilt the country's infrastructure and laid the foundations for reviving its manufacturing capacity. The capitalists told the world, however, that NEP showed that the Revolution had failed and that Lenin had realised that Socialism could not work.

Their attacks on NEP were echoed by similar attacks from the ultra-left in the form of Lenin's opponent on the CC of the Bolshevik Party, Leon Trotsky. To end the divisiveness, and to abate the criticism, NEP was terminated prematurely. Lenin died in 1924, after years of overwork and constant tension. He was only 54, which enabled Western propaganda to boldly assert that



Winston Churchill, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Josef Stalin after the final meeting of the Yalta Conference, February 1945.

his successor as Bolshevik leader, Stalin, must have poisoned him.

That is the kind of smear that does not need to be proven to be effective. Soviet medical evidence was dismissed as “propaganda”. Stalin got on with the job, and in particular developed agriculture on a collective, Socialist basis in order to be able to feed the industrial workforce that the new society would be dependent on. Previously, about 5 percent of the 25 million peasant farms in Russia had belonged to rich peasants (kulaks), and about 35 percent to poor peasants (the remainder to middle peasants). The kulaks set out to sabotage the collectivisation process, aided by opposition elements within the Bolshevik Party, mainly Right and Left opportunists, followers of Bukharin and Trotsky.

Determined that the program of collectivising agriculture should fail, and thereby discredit the Soviet

government and the Party leadership of Stalin, these anti-Party elements, with funding and other support from abroad, played on the peasants' lingering small-holder mentality to persuade them not to join their farms to those of poorer peasants lest they be taken advantage of, and to certainly not co-operate with or treat as equals the large number of landless peasants. They were even persuaded to slaughter their stock prior to joining a collective farm, “otherwise the Bolsheviks will simply take your stock from you”. They also sabotaged the sowing of crops, poisoned meat stocks, and in general carried on an underground guerrilla war against Soviet power and the efforts to establish socialism in the USSR.

The result in some parts of the country was famine, and the propagandists of capitalism seized on it to assert that for some unaccountable reason, Stalin had deliberately caused the famine. Such a move would hardly be calculated to win the peasants to Socialism, but the purpose of the propaganda was not to support Socialism but to convince workers in the West that the Soviet system was based on criminal brutality and genocide. Deliberately creating a famine was “just the sort of thing Communists would do”.

When a few years later the Soviet government took decisive action to secure its home-front in the face of the clear preparations by Western governments to launch a new war against Soviet Russia spearheaded by Nazi Germany, the elimination of potential fifth columnists was made the subject of unprecedented anti-Soviet propaganda. The propaganda line that was relentlessly hammered home

was that Stalin was “eliminating his enemies”.

And when it became clear that not only were Western politicians and propagandists intent on kindling a war between Germany and Russia, to the benefit of other Western countries, but that because of that there was no chance of forming a meaningful anti-Fascist alliance, the Soviet leadership had to buy itself time by joining a non-aggression pact with Germany. Western governments were furious and their propaganda mouthpieces spewed all sorts of garbage equating Hitler and Stalin.

Then when the USSR had to resort to military force to shift its border with Germany's heavily armed ally, Finland, back from the outskirts of Leningrad, their imaginations ran riot. Any nonsense was printable providing it was anti-Soviet. Stalin was apparently presiding over the most incompetent military machine the world had ever seen. The British government tried to intervene in the war on the side of the Finns, but the British public proved reluctant. Before they could be persuaded, Finland sued for peace and moved the border.

Earlier, the public trials of the Nazi fifth column elements in Russia had been lampooned. And yet the Nazis were actively seeking out Nazi sympathisers all over Europe (and beyond) as future leaders of the puppet states that would form the Greater German Reich: the disgruntled and notoriously pro-Nazi Duke of Windsor in Britain, Quisling in Norway, Marshall Petain and Pierre Laval in France, Jozef Tiso in Slovakia, the German-born Greek Royal family in Greece, Ante Pavelic in Croatia, and in Russia the head of

the short-lived Provisional Government before the Revolution, Kerensky, White Guard general Denikin and the exiled Leon Trotsky were all sounded out.

When war came to Britain and Churchill became Prime Minister, he despatched the Duke of Windsor to the Bahamas where he was safely out of the way, and rounded up many of the other Nazi sympathisers, who were now not potential but real fifth columnists. When war came to Russia there was relatively little fifth column activity (there was some, of course) but as soon as the Red Army had torn the guts out of Hitler's army and brought the War to a successful conclusion – at a hellish cost – the propaganda about the trials being “Stalin's purges” began again.

In fact, it was ramped up by the urgent necessity to destroy the Soviet Union's exceedingly high-status image as a result of its performance in the War. Churchill himself revived Goebels' line about an “iron curtain”, supposedly imposed on Europe by the evil dictator Stalin and the line was applied with vigour by Western politicians, media and of course propagandists.

Stalin refused to be intimidated by Western politicians and their threats to use nuclear weapons – of which the USA had a monopoly for several years – and he relied on the power of the working class movement to keep them at bay while the USSR pursued a policy of supporting revolutionary change in Eastern Europe and China, the anti-colonial movement around the world, and the working class movement everywhere.

Next week: Cold War propaganda offensive ☪



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# Militarisation of the police

Abayomi Azikiwe

**Over the last 14 months the notion of the United States as a bastion of human rights and democracy has been further shattered. With the police killing of 18-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, it set off not only a rebellion in this St Louis County suburb but nationwide demonstrations across the country. The rebellion in Ferguson forced the Obama administration to pay some symbolic attention to the plight of African American people who have been largely ignored as it relates to domestic policy over the last several decades.**

In fact when it comes to civil rights and human rights, there has only been regressive legislation and “benign neglect” since the late 1960s. Realising the complexity of the crisis facing the African American people, other people of colour communities and working people in general, the system would rather ignore the problems rather pay any attention to them.

Nonetheless, Ferguson proved to be a turning point in US history. Periodicals published in states that are aligned with Washington issued editorials questioning the domestic and foreign policy posture of the administration of President Barack Obama.

Even though the Justice Department was sent into to St Louis County to investigate the circumstances surrounding the killing of Michael Brown, no federal charges were ever filed against Darren Wilson or anyone else within the law-enforcement, judicial and municipal systems in the area. The lack of critical response by the Obama administration compounded the discontent after the local authorities decided that there was no probable cause for charges to be brought against Wilson and others in Ferguson.

The report issued by the Justice Department Civil Rights Division did demonstrate clearly that collusion was rampant within these various departments in St Louis County. Electronic communications were retrieved which illustrated that the African American community was being grossly exploited through traffic stops, citations, questionable arrests and prosecutions.

Many of the suburban municipalities within St Louis County are economically unviable and consequently utilised racial profiling and targeting as a means of generating revenue. The *New York Times* reported several weeks after the rebellion and mass demonstrations began in Ferguson that over 12,000 outstanding warrants existed in the small city of barely over 20,000 residents. This came out to approximately two warrants per household in Ferguson.

Residents with outstanding warrants were subjected to immediate arrests and even higher fines or possible jail terms. Such legal problems hampered people’s abilities to find and retain employment as well as maintain a stable family life.

What appears to have happened in regard to the situation in Ferguson and St Louis County is there was an apparent agreement that Wilson and other officials would resign their positions in exchange for not being pursued further by the federal government. It was also announced that some form of amnesty would be granted for residents facing high fines and jail time after being systematically targeted by the police throughout the County.

Such a compromise does not approach the resolution of the deeper problems of national oppression and racism so prevalent within law-enforcement culture. High rates of unemployment and poverty are by-products of national oppression and class exploitation which the American system is built upon.

## Militarisation unveiled

Rather than examine the causes behind the explosion in Ferguson, the response of the political superstructure and the law-enforcement agencies was to put down the rebellion with a vengeance. Police came on the scene with armoured vehicles, batons, rubber bullets, tear gas, pepper spray, long range acoustic devices (LRAD) and other forms of highly sophisticated and deadly weaponry.

Numerous law-enforcement departments were deployed in Ferguson along with the National Guard. Missouri Governor Jay Nixon

declared a “state of emergency” while law enforcement implemented a “no-fly zone” over the region.

The youth and workers who took to the streets both violently and non-violently were immediately criminalised. Journalists seeking to cover the story were attacked and arrested.

Corporate media pundits took to the airwaves over cable television networks to put their own spin on developments surrounding the mass demonstrations and rebellions. Those who fought back against the police and destroyed private property were labelled as criminals and thugs. These characterisations provided a rationale for the use of deadly force and the denial of basic democratic rights of due process.

Governor Nixon and local authorities blamed the unrest on “outside agitators” seeking to deflect attention away from the exploitative and repressive conditions so widespread in St Louis County. President Obama and former US Attorney General Eric Holder sought to define the forms of dissent that were acceptable and those that were not.

Moreover, the question becomes: where did these weapons, tanks, noxious gases and sound devices come from? These are the same weapons that have been used against the people of Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, Yemen and other geo-political regions over the last several decades.

The federal government through the Pentagon supplies these armaments through grants to local law-enforcement agencies. Are these the best tools to fight street crime? Or are these weapons supplied to fight existing unrest and more violent rebellions and revolts that are bound to come in the future?

## We can’t breathe

In Staten Island New York the police killing of Eric Garner provided additional lessons in our understanding of the current character of state repression. Garner’s encounter with the police was caught on a cellphone video and transmitted worldwide. His last words gasping “I can’t breathe” became a rallying cry for those who went into the streets by the tens of thousands in New York and across the country.

Apparently recording of this crime did not matter to the grand jury that acquitted the only police officer investigated in the killing. The billions around the world who saw the video knew that there were many officers who were involved in Garner’s death by holding him down, applying pressure to his vital areas and refusing to provide any medical attention while he lay dying.

The youth who videoed the killing was himself targeted for prosecution and jailed. Once again the Justice Department did not take any action against the cops or the grand jury which allowed the police and emergency medical technicians to walk free.

In response to the grand jury decision, tens of thousands of people went out in protest in Manhattan and other areas of New York City. They blocked streets, expressways, businesses and bridges. The city had not seen such an outpouring of spontaneous demonstrations in many years.

New York City has been notorious for its “stop and frisk” and “broken windows” theory of policing. This style of law enforcement conduct rides the waves of gentrification and forced removals of African Americans, Latinos and working class people in general throughout the municipality.

Obviously there is a concerted effort to drive millions of oppressed, working class and poor people out of the cities throughout the US. In New York, despite claims by officials that crime has been reduced by 80 percent, the plight of marginalised working class has worsened.

The homeless problem in New York is worse than it has ever been in the city’s history. A recent front-page article in the Sunday *New York Times* published on August 29 exposed the plight of those living in homeless shelters.

Those are the ones who are inside although living with bed bugs and other vermin in overcrowded buildings. Others are unfortunately sleeping on the streets in subways, storefronts, in Times Square and other areas.



Nonetheless, the liberal administration of De Blasio has no program for providing decent housing to those who need it. Wall Street with all of its propaganda about an economic recovery ignores the conditions of the most vulnerable and miserable.

## A flashpoint for repression

Just earlier this year in late April young Freddie Grey was killed by the Baltimore Police Department. This was by no means an isolated incident since the city has a long tradition of systematic racism in housing and police-community relations.

However, after the killing of Grey who died in police custody, the community rose up in rebellion. Immediately the Governor declared yet another “state of emergency” moving into Baltimore personally and effectively taking control of the city from its African American woman Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake.

What was interesting about the rebellion in Baltimore was the more developed counter-insurgency strategy and tactics implemented. Thousands of police officers from various agencies were deployed from across the state as was the case in Ferguson, along with thousands more National Guard troops.

Nonetheless, the authorities utilised a cadre of so-called “community groups” including churches, gang members, elected officials, and other operatives to come into the unrest areas encouraging youth and workers to leave the streets and go home. They were told by these “community activists” to abide by an unjust curfew and to work with the cops and the National Guard.

Tactically they were also covered by the corporate and government-controlled media to present another face of the community to the public. After the first three days of demonstrations and unrest, the media portrayed the community as being hostile to law enforcement and private property. Suddenly, by the time the National Guard and Governor had entered the city, the people who were presented to the press were residents opposed to the unrest and working towards “restoring order”, or we should say restoring the existing order.

Hundreds of these “community activists” stood between the crowds and the police with their backs to the law enforcement agents and their faces towards the people. This was quite a symbolic effort to turn a section of the city against those who were fed up with the repression and exploitation.

Baltimore, like Detroit, has been hit over the last decade by massive home foreclosures and neighbourhood blight. Hundreds of thousands have been forced out of their neighbourhoods in East and West Baltimore to make room for the “developers and investors”. The banks were at the root cause of this displacement.

Also in Baltimore, it was announced during the spring that 25,000 households would be subjected to water shut-offs as what has been happening here since the imposition of emergency management and bankruptcy in 2013-2014. Although the emergency managers are being ostensibly withdrawn in Michigan, those who are the purported “elected officials” are carrying out the same draconian program of forced removals and benign neglect of the masses.

The lessons of Baltimore, Ferguson, New York and here in Detroit is that the workers and oppressed must be organised independently of the established two-party system. There must be a link drawn between law enforcement repression, economic deprivation, gentrification and the denial of public services. The militarisation of the police is designed to reinforce the system of oppression. All of these variables must be taken into consideration in any program of resistance and fightback against the structures of exploitation and political repression.

## From the 1960s to 2015

The militarisation of US society is as old as the American system itself. However, for the purpose of this discussion we must look to events of the 1960s when cities exploded from Watts to Detroit during the period of 1965-1968.

Detroit proved to be a turning point in the militarisation of the US police when thousands of National Guard and federal troops were deployed to put down the rebellion in July 1967. The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorder found in its report that the police played an integral part in sparking urban rebellions.

Rather than heed to a program of reform, the society became more militarised and repressive. Under the presidential administration of Lyndon B Johnson an Office of Law Enforcement Assistance was created.

According to a website entitled “What-When-How”, it says that “In 1965, the Office of Law Enforcement Assistance was created in the US Department of Justice. This was the predecessor to the Law Enforcement Assistance

# Devastating effects of US blockade

WT Whitney

**Meeting with reporters on September 17, Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez discussed his ministry's recent report on the US economic blockade against Cuba. The 36-page document presents Cuba's case in advance of an October 27 vote in the United Nations General Assembly on a Cuban resolution calling for the blockade's end. This will be the 24th consecutive year for such a vote. The Assembly has recently approved the resolution overwhelmingly – 188 nations in favour last year, two opposed.**

This year is different. Cuba and the United States recently re-established diplomatic relations. The Obama administration has eased some embargo rules through executive action. And the President has urged the US Congress to exercise powers it gained through the 1996 Helms-Burton Law and lift the blockade.

Nevertheless, Rodriguez pointed out, "The blockade continues to be tightened with notable, increased extra-territorial application, in particular in the financial arena." It's the "principal obstacle to our development" and "leads to unmet needs and deprivations for all Cuban families." According to the report, the blockade has deprived Cuba of US\$834 billion (allowing for inflation) over the 50 years of its existence.

It surveys multiple US laws undergirding the blockade, details executive actions the Obama administration has already taken, and has recommendations for further presidential initiatives. In particular the document underscores hardship from financial services being withheld by international bankers and lending institutions seeking to avoid US sanctions. The report surveys present day US and international actions and campaigns opposing the blockade.

The overall thrust of the report is to emphasise the complexity and reach of blockade regulations. Prohibitions on exports to Cuba from foreign subsidiaries of US corporations, for instance, interfere with Cuba's efforts to acquire needed medical supplies. The report

makes it clear that any congressional action taken to end regulations most responsible for damage in Cuba must be comprehensive.

Cuba's report submitted to the General Assembly catalogues stories of distress and dysfunction stemming from the blockade. Its descriptions of adverse effects on agencies, organisations, companies, hospital patients, students, farmers, and athletes are taken from the year ending on June 1, 2015. Some examples follow:

- In March 2015 the US Treasury Department fined Commerzbank of Germany US\$2,283,456 for violating regulations on Cuba (56 transactions) and three other countries.
- Because foreign banks often refuse to handle dollars intended for Cuba, Cuba faces the loss of US\$27,645,000 owed for patient care for foreigners in Cuba and for academic services.
- "Botox", a US-made drug used to treat some 50 diseases, is obtainable in third countries only and so costs US\$500 instead of US\$200 per dose.
- Cuban haematologists can't monitor adverse effects of the anti-cancer drug Methotrexate because they lack "diagnostic systems" made in the United States.
- Medical imaging systems often don't work because they depend for activation on computer programming from Microsoft – which is unavailable.
- Because technical equipment made by US companies or their foreign affiliates is off limits, medical geneticists have to send tissue samples to foreign labs.
- A paediatric cardiology hospital must do without diagnostic catheter equipment manufactured only in the United States.
- Having to buy seeds in Europe and Japan added US\$592,269,000 in agricultural sector costs.
- Due to shipping costs, Cuban educators had to pay 30 percent extra to obtain disposable school supplies available only in Europe.

- Cuban athletes competing internationally missed out on prizes paid for in dollars.

These items represent but a tiny fraction of grief-ridden incidents included in Cuba's report for this year. Earlier reports documented hundreds more.

The 2015 version of the report to the UN General Assembly leaves out references to genocide found in earlier ones. Yet State Department strategic proposals on Cuba in 1960 anticipated that crime. As conveyed by Foreign Minister Rodriguez in his remarks, those proposals called for the "greatest inroads in denying money and supplies to Cuba, to decrease monetary and real wages, to bring about hunger, desperation and overthrow of government."

The Obama administration is steering now on a delicate course. Reportedly the US government may abstain from the approaching General Assembly vote on the Cuban resolution. In mid-September, however, Obama took criticism for re-authorising the Trading with the Enemy Act as it applies to Cuba.

But that made sense, says experienced Washington lawyer Michael Muse. Legislation replacing the TWEA in 1977 "allows the President to continue the TWEA-based embargo on Cuba ... on a year-to-year basis." Through that law, the president gained "executive authority to relax and modify" embargo provisions. Had Obama not reauthorised the TWEA, the 1977 law would have died, and the Helms-Burton Law of 1996 would have superseded whatever presidential discretion remained.

The blockade saga is grim. Yet Cuban socialism survives, and international solidarity with Cuba flourishes. And the United States had to abandon its way of bringing down a revolution. Measures of social well-being in Cuba are up, and tens of thousands of Cuban doctors are treating illnesses worldwide and training doctors from all over. Surely the scenario is of interim victory in a long struggle.

**Counterpunch** ✪



Administration (LEAA), which was established as a result of the work of the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice."

By 1968, as a result of a Congressional Commission on crime in the streets, the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA) was created continuing to the early 1980s. This same above-mentioned website notes that to ostensibly achieve the aims of reducing crime in the cities:

"To achieve this objective, the notion of criminal justice planning was introduced to the country. Heretofore, planning in criminal justice was virtually nonexistent. With the passage of the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act (1968), LEAA was authorised to provide funds to create a 'state planning agency' in each state that would have as its primary function the responsibility to develop a comprehensive state-wide plan for the improvement of law enforcement throughout the state. The act also authorised the states to make grants from a population-based block grant allocation to units of local government to carry out programs and projects in accordance with the planning effort to improve law enforcement."

By the early 1980s the further criminalisation of African American and other oppressed communities was well underway. We have witnessed the growth in the prison-industrial-complex with a rise in the incarcerated population by 500 percent over the last three decades. The "school to prison pipeline" is a reality for the majority of the African American people.

A recent article in *Atlantic* magazine looks at this phenomena through the experiences of former inmates and the families whose loved ones have been incarcerated. With no real jobs program on a federal level and the rising rates of poverty and marginalisation, this problem will not be solved short of drastic and sweeping policy initiatives that are well beyond anything that is being advocated by the White House, Congress and the corporate community.

Therefore, the struggle for justice in the US is up to the people themselves. The organised masses working in solidarity with the oppressed and working people around the globe are the remedies to seriously address these concerns.

This is the charge of the labour movement and the international solidarity struggle. We are part of both and will work with any and every one to achieve total freedom.

[globalresearch.ca](http://globalresearch.ca) ✪



Protest outside the US Consulate in Sydney's Martin Place earlier this year to demand that the US end its blockade on Cuba.

# Misrepresentation of the Colombian conflict

Matt Peppe

A week and a half ago news emerged from Havana that the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and the Colombian government had reached a framework for a final peace agreement to be signed within six months. This was hailed as a breakthrough in the half-century-old conflict and an opportunity to bring peace to the people of Colombia. But by adopting the government's narrative, mainstream media have failed to recognise the primary cause of the violence.

The decades-long policy of the Colombian government has been a national security strategy of counterinsurgency, developed in the late 1950s under the sponsorship of the US military. The goal of the US government was to maintain a business-friendly political system that would implement economic policies amenable to multinational corporations and foreign capital. Resistance to such policies was deemed subversion, and people who sympathised with such resistance were branded as internal enemies to be eliminated or neutralised by military means.

The narrative of the national security doctrine holds that if the insurgent threat is eliminated, then peace will be restored. The implicit assumption is that the FARC rebels have always been the side standing in the way of peace. According to this interpretation, when the FARC initiated their military operations the state was acting for the benefit of the nation as a whole by organising a counter response.

But this narrative is historically inaccurate. The Colombian conflict is not a battle of society at large against a group of guerrillas, but a battle of a small group of elites controlling the state apparatus against the majority of the population.

"As in many other Latin American countries, we can find the seeds of present-day social inequality and strife in the concentration of Colombia's land and resources under the control of a tiny minority, matched by the progressive dispossession of the majority of people, which originated with colonialism in the sixteenth century," explains Jasmin Hristov in her book *Blood and Capital: The Paramilitarization of Colombia*.

After the FARC developed as the armed wing of the Communist Party in Colombia, the counterinsurgency doctrine – developed by the US military and codified in manuals distributed as early as the 1960s – taught the US's Colombian counterparts to view any advocacy for social justice or democratic reform as a form of Communist insurgency. In addition to armed rebels, clergy, academics, labour leaders, human rights workers, and other members of civil society became potential insurgent targets.

To further extend their reach into Colombian society, the government legally authorised paramilitarism in 1965 with Plan Lazlo to form "civilian defence forces" armed and incorporated into the Colombian military system. These forces serve the government's goal of preserving the status quo by carrying out their dirty work through the use of death squads, assassinations, torture, intimidation and disappearances while providing cover and the appearance of distance from the state itself.

The Colombian conflict cannot be understood without recognising the true nature of the actors involved and the interests they represent. "The paramilitary has never been, and is even less so now, a third actor (the state and the guerrillas being the other two), as portrayed in mainstream security discourses," writes Hristov.

Writing in the *New York Times* after the peace agreement was announced, Ernesto Londoño declared the "three-way fight among guerrilla factions, government forces and right-wing paramilitary bands that often acted as proxies for the state had killed more than 220,000 people and displaced an estimated 5.7 million."

Dan Kovalik, Professor of International Human Rights at the University of Pittsburgh



***This is stunning historical revisionism that portrays the instigator and sponsor of massive violence that has lasted decades as an honest broker for ending this violence.***

School of Law, disputes the notion that paramilitaries merely occasionally serve as proxies: "It is impossible to talk about the paramilitaries as separate from the Colombian state, for the Colombian state helped create the paramilitaries, and human rights groups have concluded year after year that the state has provided them with weapons, logistical support and has carried out joint operations with them. Even federal courts confronted with this questions under the Alien Tort Claims Act have concluded that the paramilitaries are sufficiently integrated with the state that their misdeeds constitute state action."

Aside from inaccurately describing the fighting, Londoño's statement uses statistics about the cumulative violence without describing who holds responsibility for the deaths and displacements. Later in his editorial, Londoño implicitly blames the FARC for the majority of the violence: "Dozens of victims travelled to Havana to speak about abuses they endured at the hands of the guerrilla leaders. Some implicated government forces in brutal acts... The special war tribunals the government intends to start adjudicating crimes will be dismissed as kangaroo courts by those who would have favoured a military defeat of the FARC."

If one accepts the national security narrative that most violence by the government amounts to collateral damage as a result of reaction to insurgent aggression, then guerrillas would be responsible for the majority of deaths and injuries. But this is hardly the case.

Kovalik notes that "human rights groups have consistently concluded that the Colombian state and its paramilitary allies commit the lion's share of the human rights violations in

that country – in the worst years, at least 80 percent of the abuses can be attributed to these forces."

## Plan Colombia

Londoño also credits US policy with providing the impetus to achieving peace: "Washington's forceful intervention in the war, an intervention that began in the late 1990s, enabled the Colombian government to weaken the FARC and ultimately set the stage for peace negotiations."

Washington's counterinsurgency policy is seen not only as an instrument for peace, but as the primary factor enabling its achievement. This is stunning historical revisionism that portrays the instigator and sponsor of massive violence that has lasted decades as an honest broker for ending this violence.

In reality, Washington's intervention began 40 years earlier than Londoño claims, and it created the war that has raged ever since. By any objective measure, US policy in Colombia has been an abject failure. Under US direction, funding and training, the Colombian state has had one of the worst human rights records in the hemisphere. Many human rights organisations attest to this, and have demanded an end to US military aid to Colombia.

"Year after year US policy has ignored the evidence and the cries of the United Nations, Colombian and international non-governmental organisations and the people of Colombia. Plan Colombia is a failure in every respect and human rights in Colombia will not improve until there is a fundamental shift in US foreign policy," writes Amnesty International USA.

A Human Rights Watch report declared

that "all international security assistance should be conditioned on explicit actions by the Colombian government to sever links, at all levels, between the Colombian military and paramilitary groups. Abuses directly attributed to members of the Colombian military have decreased in recent years, but over the same period the number and scale of abuses attributed to paramilitary groups operating with the military's acquiescence or open support have skyrocketed."

Bogotá professor and historian Renán Vega Cantor, in a study of US involvement in Colombia, writes: "State terrorism that has been perpetual in Colombia since the end of the 1940s feeds off the military support and financing of the United States, as much as the interests of the dominant Creole classes, to preserve their wealth and power and deny the fulfilment of elemental economic and social reforms that are redistributive."

The portrayal of the Colombian conflict in the *New York Times* and other mainstream media replicates state propaganda, in the form of the national security doctrine, while failing to account for the inherent violence of the economic system in Colombia that has driven the perpetual militarism and coercion in the country.

While any agreement offering the prospect of decreased bloodshed is encouraging, the fact that the Colombian state continues to abide by the Washington Consensus and its neo-liberal socioeconomic model sadly signifies that the country is inevitably headed for continued violence, dispossession, and suffering by the vast majority of the population.

Information Clearing House



## Portugal

## Election blow for the right

Emile Schepers

**Portugal had legislative elections on Sunday, October 4. At writing, the question of whether Prime Minister Pedro Passos Coelho will stay on, and on what basis, is the subject of intense negotiations.**

The ruling right wing coalition of Prime Minister Pedro Passos Coelho got 38.5 percent of the vote (as compared to 50.4 percent in the last election, in 2011) lost 23 parliamentary seats in the 230 seat parliament or Assembly of the Republic, thus also losing its slender majority, but still got the largest number of seats in total, at 104.

The Socialist Party, which earlier looked to be overtaking the governing parties, faded toward the end but still picked up 11 seats for a total of 85, with a popular vote of 32.4 percent compared to 28 percent last time around.

On the left, the United Democratic Coalition, composed of the Communist Party and the Ecologist (Greens) Party, more than held its own with 8.3 percent of the vote (compared to 7.9 percent in the 2011 election) and picked up an additional seat for a total of 17.

The Left Bloc, BE in Portuguese, surged at the very end and swept past the Communist-Green alliance for a total of 10.2 percent of the popular vote, and 19 parliamentary seats. With a few races still to be decided, six seats were won by smaller parties, and none by groups to the right of the government.

Media in the United States misleadingly reported the Portuguese election results as a "victory" for Passos Coelho's government. In fact, it was a major setback.

What happens now is that the coalition government, because it won more seats than any one other party, consults with the mostly ceremonial president, Anibal Cavaco Silva, who will probably ask Passos Coelho to form a new government.

However, this is not automatic. The parties of the left and left-centre outnumber the ruling coalition with 121 seats to 104. As both the Communists and the BE quickly pointed out, this leaves the Socialist Party in the position of kingmaker, depending on whether it moves to support Passos Coelho's continuation in power, or to block it. A combined Socialist, Communist and Left Bloc government could vote "no confidence" in the government and cause its demise.

This election was fought on the subject of austerity and the subordination of Portugal to the dictates of the "Troika" of the International Monetary Fund, the European Union and the European Central Bank. This austerity was imposed, as in the case of Greece, in exchange for a financial bailout of US\$87 billion.

In the 2011 election, the Socialist Party, then in power under the leadership of former Prime Minister Jose Socrates, was severely punished by the voters for having acceded to the Troika's demands and imposed austerity, and this brought in the right wing government of Passos Coelho, a coalition between the Social Democratic Party (in Portugal a right-wing party in spite of its name) and the Democratic and Social Centre-People's Party.

However, Passos Coelho continued to implement austerity measures including wage and pension cuts, firing of public sector workers, dismantlement of social welfare programs, measures to weaken the unions, and onerous tax hikes, leading to widespread suffering on the part of the Portuguese working class and ordinary citizens. The government was the target of many mass protest actions led by the labour movement and the left, and as the election season got underway it looked as if it would be swept from power.

But the Socialist Party had to deal not only with the opprobrium of having implemented austerity, of not having opposed it strongly once in opposition, and with scandals involving ex Prime Minister Socrates.

When Socrates resigned as Secretary General of the Socialist Party he was replaced by the Mayor of Lisbon, Antonio Costa, whose initial statements indeed seemed to signal a move toward the left.

What brought about the surge of the Left Bloc at the last minute will be a matter of much speculation. At its founding it brought in organisations connected to the politics of Leon Trotsky's "Fourth International" and other far lefts, however it has moved away from those origins in recent years.

What happens now that Passos Coelho does not have a majority any more? The Socialists, Communists and Left Bloc don't have a recent history of working together. Both the Communists and the Left Bloc express scepticism as to Portugal's continuation in the Euro currency group and other European Union



Prime Minister Pedro Passos Coelho implemented austerity measures leading to widespread suffering on the part of the Portuguese working class and ordinary citizens.

institutions, but the Socialists are committed to remain.

So far it looks as if Passos Coelho will continue as prime minister, and this will be clinched if the Socialist Party ultimately decides to join in a coalition with him. But this is a risk for the Socialists as they will be blamed all the more for continuing austerity. They will have to bear in mind the fate of the similar PASOK party in Greece, which joined the right in a coalition and as a result has been reduced to marginality.

The General Secretary of the Communist Party, Jeronimo de Sousa stated that his party would vote in parliament against the continuation of the present government and called on the Socialist Party to do likewise.

Meanwhile, Catarina Martins, head of the Left Bloc, guaranteed to their supporters that her party would not lend itself to any arrangement that would allow the right wing government to continue in power or implement more austerity policies.

If Passos Coelho cannot put together a viable parliamentary coalition or finds it impossible to govern, another election will have to happen after a constitutionally required minimum period of six months.

*People's World* ☪



## Region Briefs

Chinese President Xi Jinping celebrated with 13 grass-root ethnic minority representatives, who contributed greatly to ethnic solidarity, in Beijing on the eve of China's October 1 National Day. The representatives were from the country's five autonomous regions of Tibet, Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Guangxi and Ningxia. The President took the opportunity to thank the representatives for their outstanding work and sent his festival wishes to all 56 ethnic groups in China. He says that all ethnic groups contribute to its development and that no single ethnic group should be left behind in the process of building a comprehensive and prosperous modern society. He urged people from all ethnic groups to "love each other like brothers and sisters and make efforts to safeguard unity".

Chinese President Xi Jinping won applause at the UN's General Debate as he called for protecting the interests of developing countries and supporting underdeveloped nations. He said that "we firmly support greater representation of developing countries, especially African countries, in the international governance system". The President explained China's future support for world peace and development: China will fund AU\$1.42 billion to support the UN's work; it will provide AU\$142 million to the African Union for responding to crisis situations; it will train 2,000 foreign peacekeepers for minesweeping missions; offer AU\$2.8 billion to support South-South Cooperation; China will cancel debts owed by the least developed countries; also provide 150,000 scholarships to citizens of developing countries for the purpose of receiving training and education in China.

The newly founded Cambodian General Department of Immigration has deported 2,659 male and 567 female immigrants from 46 countries since April 2014. Eighty-seven percent of the immigrants are from Vietnam and there are at least another 160,000 such immigrants currently living in the country. According to the country's immigration law, any foreigner without a valid visa, passport and work permit is considered as an illegal immigrant and is deported.

Cambodia garment and footwear workers agreed with a trade unions' proposal that demands employers increase the 2016 monthly minimum wage from the current AU\$182 to AU\$239. The Garment Manufacturers Association in Cambodia (representing factory employers' interests) however said that the factories could only afford a AU\$6.7 monthly wage increase, because many factories might not survive. The government will announce the new minimum wage for the workers next week. The country currently has 700,000 garment workers in 1,100 factories, and they have exported AU\$4.7 billion worth of products to overseas markets in the first six months of 2015, 80 percent of the country's total export.

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## Response to answered letter

Dear Senator Doug Cameron, Thank you for replying to my letter about the situation of refugee people in the camps outside Australia, as well as those in this country. First, there are no such people as “people smugglers” that Australia has foiled. No people have been “smuggled” into this country to my knowledge. They have been brought openly from Indonesia, into Australian waters where they have claimed asylum, as is their right, at the first opportunity. I ask you not to use the propaganda term, “people smugglers” but something accurate, such as “people movers”, or

### “asylum facilitators”.

If your party was truly interested in the safety of people at sea, rather than winning racist votes at the expense of “vulnerable people” (vulnerable to the predatory behaviour of Labor and the Coalition) you would propose processing, assessing refugee claims in Indonesia, then giving safe passage to Australia.

The “regional processing framework” you prescribe is sickening in practice. Are Cambodia, Nauru, and PNG going to settle our refugees? What about Bangladesh? I fully expect Labor to come to power, and ask Burma to take our refugees. How much does Labor plan to pay other impoverished countries to take poor Australia’s refugees? Please forgive my lapse into satire.

And how would Labor run “off-shore processing” that was different from the Coalition? How would Labor make indefinite imprisonment of refugees acceptable? Gold-plating the taps in the showers. How do you fundamentally change a system that is designed to break people? I think the only way is to close it down. To end detention of people seeking asylum in Australia. Do you not agree? Do you not agree that

indefinite imprisonment of the most vulnerable people is itself degrading and harmful, with or without assault, sexual harassment and worse?

I used to work in Scotland, and associate your accent with honesty, trustworthiness, straight talk. But I should know better than to stereotype people in this way. The tradition of Labor punishing refugees trumps any integrity.

I and many others demand the closure not only of Manus and Nauru camps, but all of them. No government can be trusted to “detain” (or rather imprison) people without charge or trial.

Thanks again for your reply. Please look over your shoulder at Britain and the US. Do you think the movement that has spurred on Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders, a movement for decency, could not take hold here?

Stephen Langford  
Sydney

## Oppose this trade deal

Prime Minister Turnbull and Trade Minister Andrew Robb committed Australia to the

### dangerous and undemocratic Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP).

The TPP is a dangerous deal that prioritises corporate interests above ours. It has very little to do with “free trade”, it is more about profit and investment protections for some of the world’s biggest and most profitable corporations.

The government, whilst keeping the text secret, is in overdrive spinning the supposed benefits of this deal to farmers. Australia already has bilateral trade deals with most of the TPP countries so the economic upside is limited. US government modelling actually predicts “zero” long term economic benefit to the Australian economy from this agreement.

Our parliament and Australian citizens have been completely shut out of the TPP negotiations, but we know big pharmaceutical and entertainment companies have been at the table pushing for monopoly rights. We don’t yet know exactly what the implication of the TPP is on our digital rights, copyright laws, health policy, environmental laws, local procurement policies for small business, and financial regulation

because the government still refuses to #ReleaseTheText.

Malcolm Turnbull and Andrew Robb have granted US corporations the right to sue the Australian government when it makes laws in the public interest, if those laws affect their profits.

The United States pushed hard for the inclusion of Investor State Dispute Settlement (ISDS) provisions in the 2004 US Free Trade Agreement but Australia refused. United States corporations are the most avid users of ISDS and have brought forward at least 127 cases so far. The majority of ISDS cases are either won by the corporations or settled at great expense to the country being sued. Most ISDS cases from the US have involved disputes being brought by energy, mining, oil and gas companies.

But what else have they signed Australia up to in the TPP? We won’t know until they #ReleaseTheText.

Peter Whish-Wilson  
Australian Greens

# Culture & Life

by Mark Dearn

## Global goals vs TTIP



Last week, amidst much fanfare, the UN proudly announced that human rights are at the heart of its new 15-year sustainable development policy. Three years in the making, the Sustainable Development Goals (known as the “SDGs” or “Global Goals”) – which succeed the Millennium Development Goals – have been the site of many battles, often waged by Southern states and civil-society groups, to ensure human rights are at the heart of the Goals.

But the Goals’ laudable aim of seeking to “realise the human rights of all” faces a severe threat from a new raft of secretly negotiated trade and investment deals. The deals, including the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), risk undermining any gains from the Goals by undercutting international human rights law. Indeed, a 3-million signature petition against TTIP was handed in to the European Commission in London and Brussels last week. War on Want Executive Director John Hilary explained that he thinks the petition “shows that the people of Europe are against these corporate-driven trade deals.”

One of the biggest fears for Southern countries outside these deals is that their exports to countries which sign up to the deals will fall. This effect is known as “trade diversion”, and studies on TTIP indicate huge losses for many countries, especially in West Africa and South Asia. As a German foundation notes: “If tariffs between the US and European Union [EU] fall, the relative barriers to market entry faced by developing countries become on average higher. It is exactly the poorer countries that suffer, some of them to a remarkable extent.”

TTIP seeks to create new “global standards” for trade. But these “global” standards will not be negotiated in the multilateral forum of the World Trade Organisation, where Southern countries have a voice, albeit severely restricted. Rather, they are decided behind closed doors between the EU and the US. Southern countries will have to trade with the US and the EU on their terms, or not at all.

TTIP’s energy chapter will also have drastic implications for Southern countries. A key aim for powerful fossil fuel lobbies is to open up the export of high greenhouse gas-emitting tar sands oil and shale gas into Europe; the consequence will be a Europe locked into a high-carbon future, and for Southern countries disproportionately impacted by climate change, the decimation of lives and livelihoods.

But beyond this, there is a major threat through the highly controversial and increasingly used investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS) mechanism. ISDS enables corporations to sue states for lost future profits, and while increasingly opposed in Southern countries such as Indonesia, Brazil and South Africa, TTIP and its sister deals will consolidate the role of ISDS. This will fundamentally undermine the legal human rights obligations of states to their populations in favour of prioritising the “rights” of investors.

The sanctity of investor rights was made clear to Argentina after it was ordered to pay US\$405 million to water corporations. Its misdemeanour: protecting families by ensuring water remained affordable during a financial crisis, in line with the human right to water.

After such a ruling, poor states locked into similar deals will think twice before taking action so people can afford water.

This has extra relevance to the Goals. One of the hardest-fought battles in developing the Goals was ensuring that the human right to water and sanitation was not side-lined, in spite of the efforts of the UK and US to do exactly that. For Northern countries, opposing social and economic rights and the application of human rights to corporations is standard practice; only last year, the richest countries of the world lined up to oppose an attempt to ensure corporations are subject to human rights.

But the right to water has become a key tool in combating the disastrous impact of water privatisation in the Global South, and as water scarcity increases, so too will reliance on that right. As the EU Parliament acknowledged in a resolution this month, privatisation in 1990s sub-Saharan Africa “... hampered the achievement of Millennium Development Goals on both water and sanitation, as the focus of investors on cost recovery has ... intensified inequalities in the provision of such services, at the expense of low-income households.”

The combination of privatisation and ISDS will have toxic results for many human rights. As an unprecedented 10 UN Special Rapporteurs warned in a statement condemning the impact of trade and investment agreements on human rights: “The regulatory function of many States and their ability to legislate in the public interest have been put at risk.”

Crucially, there is a mistaken belief that

human rights law doesn’t matter to investment treaties. When Argentina claimed that it fulfilled a human right by making water affordable, water corporations said “human rights law is irrelevant” to any breach in the investment treaty. Likewise, in refusing Argentina’s argument that human rights obligations override investment obligations, the presiding investment tribunal said it “... does not find a basis for such a conclusion either in the BITs [bilateral investment treaties] or international law.” The tribunal’s arbitrators didn’t look as far as the UN Charter or the Vienna Convention. Article 103 of the UN Charter outlines the pre-eminence of its obligations above any other treaty and the Vienna Convention makes clear that treaties are illegitimate if they compromise previous obligations.

As UN independent expert Alfred de Zayas says, ISDS arbitrators: “must not compromise ... the State’s fundamental obligation to ensure the human rights and well-being of all persons living under its jurisdiction. Agreements or arbitral decisions that violate international human rights law are null and void.”

Before the Global Goals are heralded as the means to ensuring human rights for all, civil-society groups must pay greater attention to this new regime of corporate-driven trade deals. To date, governments of the North have done everything in their power to elevate corporate interests at the expense of human rights. If we stand aside while these new trade deals are negotiated, civil-society organisations risk choosing the same path.

New Internationalist ☘



**Rob Gowland  
previews  
Public  
Television**

Sunday October 18 –  
Saturday October 24

The recent spate of feeble programs about cats and dogs compiled from clips posted on YouTube, and ballyhooed as “hilarious”, have rendered better-made and more serious programs on the same subject suspect. That is unfortunate, for our favourite companion animals are worthy of well-informed television programs.

One such is the new four-part observational documentary series *Dogs: Their Secret Lives* (SBS Mondays from October 19 at 7.35pm). Using hidden cameras and the involvement of some of the world’s leading dog scientists and RSPCA UK, the series investigates what “man’s best friend” gets up to while we’re out, and such modern-day issues facing our pets as obesity, aggression and mental health.

The six-part Australian drama series *The Beautiful Lie* (ABC Sundays from October 18 at 8.30pm) manages to take *Anna Karenina*, Leo Tolstoy’s classic tale of a deeply felt human relationship tragically wrecked by that social scourge identified by George Bernard Shaw as “middle class morality” and remove it from its historical period. No longer set among the well-to-do of Tsarist Russia, with their stultifying class relations and social mores, the story has been moved to “contemporary middle class Australian life”.

Good grief! Remove the context and what remains? The bare bones of the plot. Did the writers of the series pinch the plot of Tolstoy’s classic to give their own work some needed gravitas? Or is it just that they couldn’t think of a plot of their own? Surely that would have been better than this hybrid, which is neither fish nor fowl?

I used to work with a chap at the ABC who on pay day had to be kept away from poker machines or he would inevitably put his entire pay packet into the machine until he had lost the lot. He couldn’t help himself. Lord knows what he told his wife

when got home and had to admit they would have no income that week.

He was by no means unique, however. Gambling is a recognised addiction, and poker machines are deliberately designed to sucker people into losing their money. By returning to the player a proportion of the money they have put into the machine the illusion is fostered that the player can actually “beat the machine” and win big. But the reality is that despite the occasional individual’s “lucky break”, the great majority of people who play the pokies walk away with less money in their pocket than when they began playing.

The owners of casinos in the USA and the management of pubs and licensed clubs in Australia have grown rich on encouraging a culture in which losing money “playing” a poker machine is presented as “having fun”. Because you only put a small amount of money into the machine at a time, and because the machine lets the player win something back every so often, its extraction of the player’s money is relentless but seemingly painless. Australians lose a staggering \$12 billion a year on the pokies!

The documentary *Ka-Ching! Pokie Nation* (ABC Tuesday October 20 at 9.30pm) looks at the addictive nature of pokies, and its social impact. Australia has more poker machines and a higher spend using them than anywhere else in the world. Governments are powerless to rein in the pokies: the hotels lobby and licensed clubs, like the gun lobby in the USA, fiercely defend their turf, enlisting the support of their customers to repulse any attempt by “killjoy” politicians to interfere with people’s “rights”.

*Ka-Ching!* delves behind the surface gloss to reveal how carefully the operators of pokies program them for addiction. There is a highly organised network of mathematicians, musicians and designers, who work together on a single vision: to make sure people lose, and keep on losing. The mesmerising nature of the machines, with their repetitive, minimalist movement, is described by pokies victims themselves as an “unlawful hypnotism.”

The industry of course asserts that playing the pokies is an innocuous pass-time and the addiction problem only affects a small minority of individuals who “can’t control themselves.” The testimonies in the film cast serious doubt on this.

Before the overthrow of Socialism in the USSR – almost a quarter of a century ago, now – there was plenty of patriotism, but virtually no extreme right activity. Today, people’s yearning



Brett Jackson from Bally Technologies – *Ka-Ching! Pokie Nation* (ABC Tuesday October 20 at 9.30pm).

for the national pride they felt when the USSR was an acknowledged superpower has been hi-jacked by an emerging right-wing, anxious to win the youth with the usual fascist combination of violence and “racial pride”.

In *Far Right And Proud: Extreme Russia with Reggie Yates* (ABC2 Wednesday, October 21 at 9.30pm), the UK’s BBC Radio 1 host, Reggie Yates, investigates the phenomenon of ultra-right nationalism in Russia today, by living with three very different communities of these neo-fascists. As usual with this kind of program, it is long on surface appearance and short on analysis, but it does make the point that right-wing sentiments are being helped along by the stepping up of the Cold War by the West and the imposition of sanctions.

The series of programs entitled *Wild* [insert name of country] have shown us the wildlife and natural environment of a refreshingly wide range of countries, from Spain to Iran to Hungary and many more. Now we have the four-part series *Wild Germany* (SBS Saturdays from October 24 at 7.30pm). The series explores Germany’s mountains, rivers, forests and coastlines, plus the animals who inhabit these environments.

Episode One covers *Coasts*. The 2,400 kilometres of German coastlines are home to a great diversity of species and the program features a cat shark out hunting, guillemots fearlessly jumping from the cliffs of Helgoland, and the birth of a snow-white baby seal, as well as giving us a bird’s eye view of Germany’s picturesque coasts. ☘

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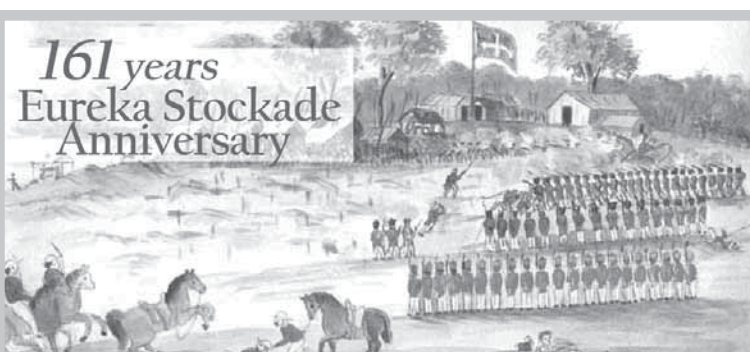
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# Syrian refugees in Bangkok: caught between a rock and a hard place

Alexi Demetriadi

Many Syrians fleeing their war-torn homeland risk the perilous journey over the Mediterranean Sea; a direct, but costly, route to the safety of Europe. But a minority have chosen a different route to escape the bloodshed and danger of their native Syria: they head to Thailand. This route, however, harbours its own perils.

A small contingent has fled east, toward the apparent safety of Thailand's capital, Bangkok, before attempting to be resettled in the Americas or Europe. Unknown to many, however, this option is far from safe. One refugee, Qusai, tells me that it might have been better for him to cross the Mediterranean because, "If I'm dead, I'm dead. Here, I die slowly".

A scroll down the Thai British Embassy website shows us that "Thai" means "Free". "Thailand" thus means "Land of the Free" or "Freeland". To some individuals, it is anything but.

Thailand is usually associated with beach resorts, full-moon parties and British expatriates. Holiday-makers do not usually associate the country with a fractured and non-existent democratic system that has been in a state of flux since democracy, or a form of democracy, was first introduced more than 80 years ago.

Since 1932, when absolute monarchy was abolished, Thailand has seen 12 successful coups d'état, more than any other nation. The 12th took place in May 2014, when the Royal Thai Army General, Prayut Chan-o-cha, overthrew the caretaker government following six months of political turmoil.

Following this latest coup, a number of personal liberties and democratic rights have been marginalised, while the already-small number of rights refugees once had have been further weakened.

Qusai, along with Amjad, are second-generation Syrian-born Arabians who fled Damascus and the Syrian civil war in 2012. Qusai and Amjad were both born refugees. Their grandfathers fled Palestine in 1948, following the Palestinian civil war, and resettled in Syria. Syria, they tell me, was good to them. They built their lives and, in Qusai's case, raised a family there. Many rights were enjoyed and exercised while jobs were relatively easy to come by.

After the start of the civil war in 2011, both were forced to flee their homeland and gain refugee status from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Rather than flee directly to Europe, the more expensive and dangerous route, their group of travelling Syrians opted to head to Thailand on tourist visas, which are easy to obtain.

Their perception of safety in Thailand was soon shattered. Amjad, who holds a refugee certificate from the UN, was soon arrested for travelling on a forged passport. Sent to trial, he was sentenced to two years in jail. Protesting his case proved futile and, after a thieving lawyer took the majority of his money and ran, an already poor start to Thai life continued to get worse.



Masses of Syrian refugees fleeing Western-backed destruction.

Qusai explains to me that resettlement has always been their aim, but after three and a half years of living in Thailand this seems light years away.

They were interviewed by the UNHCR in Bangkok just after arriving in Thailand, and by the Canadian Embassy more than a year and half ago, but Qusai, his family and Amjad are still no closer to knowing if their dream of starting a new life in the West will be realised. "It's a very long process," Qusai explains, "but no-one will answer us." The US, Canada, Australia and Britain are apparently notoriously slow at deciding who is to be given a "golden ticket" to build a new life. Sweden, on the other hand, took a friend of Qusai and Amjad's after just three months.

After almost two years, Qusai and Amjad have yet to hear a word from the Canadian Embassy on whether they have been successful in their application. "Reject or accept is fine, I just want to know," an exasperated Amjad states.

Qusai believes that the US won't take a Palestinian-Syrian like himself for political reasons, while his verdict on the current British refugee policy is equally damning: Britain "never takes refugees from here, never."

The purgatory period is painful for any refugee family hoping to be resettled, but what has made the last three years considerably more painful for Qusai and his family is the political context they find themselves in. Qusai shares a tiny one-person apartment room with his family of four and, living in a politically unstable Bangkok, there is "a new fear every day".

When I ask what he thinks of the Thai government, Qusai simply shakes his head and asks: "If the government wanted to help us, why catch us and put us in jail?" It transpires that after the bombing at the Erawan Shrine in August this year, animosity from the police toward refugees stepped up so much that 24 Syrians living in the same apartment block were rounded up and arrested. The 24 included children aged 2 and 5.

Qusai further explains that one night in late August police came to the apartment block and told the Syrians: "Don't worry, don't be scared." They had every right to be, however. They were shepherded, in the dead of night, to a local police cell, where the 24 Syrians spent the night. They were then sent to the Immigration Detention Centre (IDC), where Qusai and his family (his wife, 2-year-old son and 5-year-old daughter) were separated. The 24 Syrians spent a whole week locked up in the IDC before being released without explanation. A local aid worker tells me that there is a case of one man being locked in the IDC for 14 years.

Even before the bombing and the subsequent suspicion toward refugees, there were already many problems. Qusai tells the story of his employment at an Arabian restaurant in the popular tourist district of Nana: "I worked 12 hours with very little pay." This is an understatement: as Thailand is yet to offer work permits to refugees waiting for resettlement, many are forced to work illegally to feed their families. Qusai worked 12-hour shifts and was paid 300 Thai baht for his entire shift. This works out at less than \$1 an hour.

His young children, like many other refugees in Bangkok, are deprived of basic education through lack of compassion in Thai government policy toward refugees. His daughter cannot go to normal school and is instead taught occasionally on weekends by a local Muslim teacher. And this is more education than most refugee children receive.

"We are alone, we are waiting," Qusai explains. "Please speak to us," he pleads to the embassies.

I had the privilege of meeting with Qusai and Amjad at their home, and learned more about the refugee crisis, from a completely new perspective.

The horrific scenes we see of individuals attempting to start a new life, to escape potential death, and being met with animosity or the dangerous and deep waters of the Mediterranean are heartbreaking. Talking with Qusai and Amjad allowed me to hear about a different and lesser known plight that some refugees face. I also saw and understood the damage a government can do that has little, or no, compassion towards those without a home.

Qusai, Amjad and I shared Arabian tea and swapped phone numbers. We promised to meet up again if we ever found ourselves in the same country. Near the end of the afternoon, Qusai explained his hope for the future of his family, no doubt echoing the hope of many fleeing their homes in Syria: all Qusai wants is to "live in peace, work hard, and build a good future for my kids so they can go to school and learn and live a normal life."

*New Internationalist* ✪



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