

Behind the Govt's Medicare plan: Killing Bulk Billing

Anna Pha

Last week the Howard Government managed to buy off four independent Senators and get its highly regressive Medicare legislation passed. The dishonestly named "Medicare Plus" is another step on the path to wiping out the universal nature of Medicare, including the scrapping of bulk billing: effectively the end of Medicare.

The public health system is in crisis, at the point of collapse after years of under-funding and undermining by government. Many doctors and nurses have already left and many more are seriously thinking about it. The Howard Government has taken measures to prop it up until after the elections.

It is doing this by throwing millions of dollars to doctors, in particular to specialists and rural doctors with negligible benefit to the health services.

For patients, the only certainties are that the cost of medical services will rise, public hospitals will remain under-funded and Medicare will move another step towards becoming a second class health system or "safety net" for those who cannot afford the expensive private sector.

"Medicare Plus is designed to kill off bulk billing", said Dr Tim Woodruff, President, Doctors' Reform Society. "It means that most of our patients will not be bulk billed because they are not pensioners and card holders. It means that many pensioners and health care card holders will not be bulk billed."

The original package that had been knocked back by the Senate remains virtually in tact. There are some relatively minor short-term gains for a few patients, but overall

the package undermines the integrity of Medicare and its future.

Tasmanian Senators Brian Harradine and Shayne Murphy, former Democrat leader Meg Lees and One Nation's Len Harris – all up for re-election soon – were bribed with some additional services in Tasmania and rural concessions regarding doctors' rebates and some semblance of dental and other benefits.

"Even though the incentive to bulk bill concession card holders and children under 16 will increase from \$5 to \$7.50 in rural areas [and in Tasmania], there is no guarantee that general practitioners in these areas actually will bulk bill", Australian Nursing Federation Federal Secretary Jill Illife pointed out.

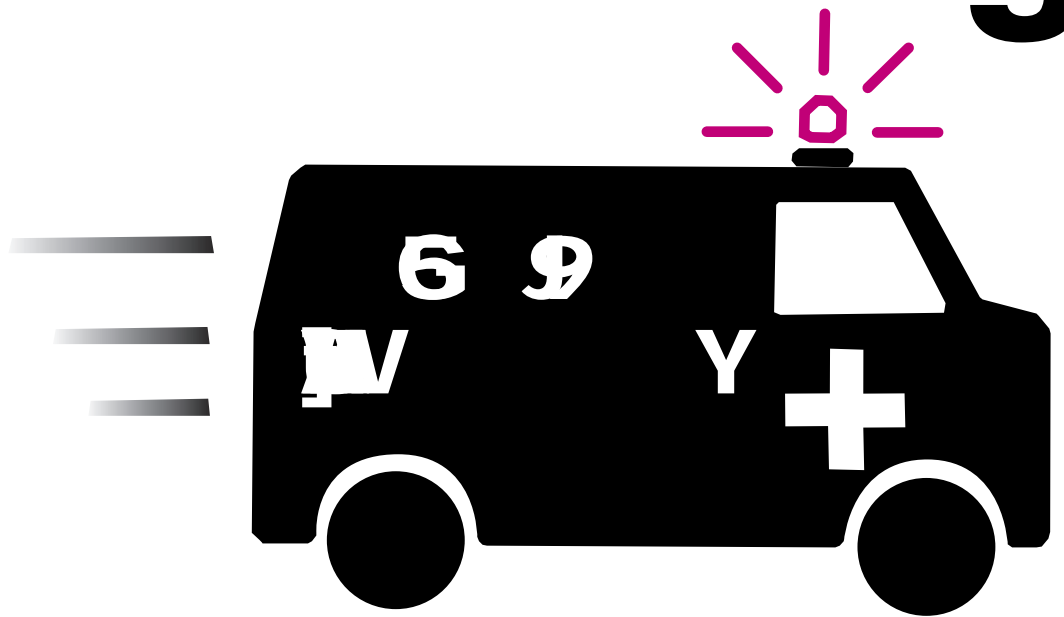
The proposals for enhancing primary health care by extending Medicare rebates to dental and other areas are a positive move, but fall far short of what is required.

Dental treatment under Medicare is limited to a total of \$220 for three dental consultations! That in itself is a joke! How many dentists offer treatment at that price?

"This is a health care measure not a dental care scheme and will only be available where dental treatment is required to treat a chronic medical condition", said Health Minister Tony Abbott whose government cut a national dental program that targeted pensioners and the poor when it came to office in 1996.

Likewise coverage for other health professionals such as psychologists, physiotherapists, podiatrists, dieticians and chiropractors will also leave patients out of pocket and with very limited access to Medicare benefits.

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"Our Dead, Your War"

Bob Briton

If the right-wing government of Spain hoped that the terrorist bombings, which resulted in 200 workers and students being killed and another 1500 injured, would stampede the people into voting them back into office, their hopes were dashed in Sunday's election.

The Spanish parliament is made up of 350 representatives. The Socialist Workers' Party increased its representation substantially from 125 to 164 seats, just 12 short of a majority. The conservative Popular Party's score fell from 183 to 148. Thirty-eight seats went to other parties.

The Socialist Party will have to gain the support of other parties to form a stable government.

The defeat of the conservative government is a big blow to the US's "war on terrorism". The Spanish Government had enthusiastically supported the US led war in Iraq and sent about 1500 troops to serve there despite the fact that the Spanish people overwhelmingly opposed participation.

The Socialist Party has promised to withdraw Spanish troops from Iraq and if it carries out this promise it will represent the first serious break in the US "coalition of the willing" and the US's intention to continue the occupation of Iraq

long into the future. The US leaders were also interested in the election outcome.

Not stampeded

The Spanish vote is an indication that the Spanish people were not stampeded by the terrorist act as the government hoped.

A statement by the Communist Party of the People's of Spain said it "condemns any kind of political manoeuvre using the misfortune [of the bombings]. The imperialist and neo-liberal forces have made the fight against terrorism a strategy to legitimise their system of domination, the curtailing of democracy and liberties, as well as a political line of intimidation to try to maintain the process of accumulation of capital and the exploitation of the working class".

Chain reactions

The Party's statement went on: "This political line [of imperialism] only contributes to a chain of reactions that feed a spiral of violence that prevent any democratic political solutions to conflicts and annuls the protest role of the masses..."

While condemning the terrorist act the Communist Party of the People's of Spain refused to join the mass demonstrations saying that this would legitimise the authoritarian policies of the

government under the pretext of fighting terrorism while undermining democracy, individual liberties and rights.

On the eve of the elections and following the bombings, the Spanish police attacked anti-war and anti-government demonstrations in Madrid. In the Basque territory in northern Spain a baker who refused to put up a black ribbon in his shop window was shot dead by a police officer, an action that outraged the Spanish people.

The popular Spanish anti-war slogan, "Our Dead, Your War" was made even more relevant by the pre-election bombings.

The mood of many was captured by one Barcelona voter who said: "I wasn't planning to vote, but I am here today because the Popular Party [the conservative party] is responsible for murders here and in Iraq". Some young voters shouted "murderer" at the ruling party's chosen candidate for Prime Minister as he cast his vote at a school outside of Madrid.

Quick to accuse

The Spanish Government was quick to accuse the Basque separatist terrorist group ETA (Basque Homeland) in an attempt to make political use of the deaths of the 200 workers killed in the bombings.

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The real Medicare

- Public health system
- Universal bulk billing
- Use according to need
- No fee for medical services including dental
- Pay according to ability to pay through a progressive tax system
- Quality services, including emphasis on preventative medicine
- Adequately funded public health system
- Government takes responsibility for health of every member of society

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Looking behind the Spanish events

The horrific terrorist action in Spain has killed about 200 workers and students and wounded well over 1000. Speculation is rife as to who perpetrated this vile deed. The Spanish conservative Government initially blamed the Basque separatist movement in what appears to have been a premeditated response. This accusation has been repudiated by the Basque separatists. So now al Qaida is being blamed. But it is necessary to look deeper into the situation that has emerged since the destruction of the World Trade Centre on September 11, 2001. With all crimes, it is necessary to ask – who benefits, and in the case of terrorist acts, who benefits politically and how are they using the attack?

The Bush administration launched its so-called “war on terrorism” after the bombing of the World Trade Centre on September 11, 2001. The bombing was immediately used to justify the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan even though not a single pilot on the hijacked planes was identified as having come from Afghanistan. It was also used to invade and occupy Iraq although the government of Saddam Hussein did not have any weapons of mass destruction and was not connected in any way with al Qaida.

The “war on terrorism” needs continuous scare tactics to justify the introduction of draconian legislation restricting the rights and freedoms of many political and other organisations and activists. This has happened in Australia, the US, Britain, Spain and elsewhere.

Step by step, as each terrorist act takes place, the Howard Government introduces more and more such legislation which, sooner or later, will be used against the Australian people as they act to throw out his government and the repressive machine his government has built up.

It must be recalled that al Qaida was originally created and financed by the United States to fight against the Soviet Union. US agencies built numerous fundamentalist Islamic schools in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Bush family had both personal and business connections with the bin Laden family. Both bin Laden and al Qaida may still be conducting activities in the pay of the US.

Such a claim may seem outlandish but when one considers who has made the most use of such acts and where and when terrorist acts have taken place it is not out of the question.

The terrorist act in Spain occurred just three days before an election and one is entitled to speculate that the conservative government of Spain, fearing that it was facing defeat in the elections, hoped that a massive “terrorist” act would stampede the Spanish people into voting for the conservatives.

That the Spanish people saw through this aim and threw out the conservative government has tremendous political significance worldwide.

It could signal that the “war on terrorism” is beginning to lose the support of many people, not because they have softened their opposition to terrorism but because they are beginning to realise that it is being promoted and used by the imperialist governments themselves. In Spain this has backfired.

The defeat of the conservative Spanish Government could lead to the withdrawal of Spanish troops from Iraq, a step that the successful Socialist Party of Spain has promised to do. If carried out, this would signal the first serious break in the coalition of those backing the war and occupation of Iraq.

Religious fundamentalism, including Islamic fundamentalism, is an arm of conservative and right-wing extremist politics everywhere. Fundamentalists are not the enemies of conservative parties but allies in a common struggle against political and religious progress and freedom.

It is again necessary to recall that there is much evidence that leading persons in the Bush Government, including Bush himself, knew in advance about the coming attack on the World Trade Centre. They failed to act before the attack, despite warnings and on September 11 they failed to activate the air defences for New York and Washington that were in place specifically to protect these two cities from an air attack.

Australia is also set to have an election later this year and the conservative government is now on the ropes, and may well try the same tactics as have unfolded in Spain. We should be alert to this possibility.

PRESS FUND

Incensed at the power of mass media commentators, a Sydney reader recently asked indignantly: “Just who appoints the government, the electorate or the commentariat?” Alas, the papers for which these commentators write wield huge political influence, and represent big business interests. In contrast, *The Guardian* aims to be Australia’s most sought-after newspaper because of its content and open commitment to working people. However, right now we’re falling behind in our immediate goal of reaching the Press Fund’s \$14,000 annual target. Come on, comrades and supporters, we need your help! Our thanks go this week to the following, for their generous contributions:

Bert Appleton \$20, W Irving \$5, T Bartlett \$100.

This week’s total \$125. Progressive total: \$2500

US eyeing East Timor gas & oil?

John Gardener

More than 50 US Congress members – including both Democrats and Republicans – have sent a letter to John Howard, castigating him and the Australian Government on the oil and gas treaty signed with East Timor (Timor Larosae).

The criticism hinges on the areas claimed by both the East Timor and Australian Governments under the East Timor Sea Treaty and the Joint Petroleum Development Treaty. Australia has claimed – under provisions sometimes accepted under UN treaties – that the Australian zone include all areas covered by the Australian continental shelf. Using these continental shelf provisions, Australia has claimed around 65 percent of the Timor Sea, as the continental shelf extends roughly 200 kilometres into the Timor Sea.

During the negotiations, Australia’s Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer reportedly bullied his East Timorese counterpart saying: “Your claims go almost to Alice Springs. You can demand that for ever for all I care... We are very tough. We will not care if you give information to the media. Let me give you a tutorial in politics – not a chance.”

Contention

The drawing of the boundary has remained a major point of contention between the East Timor and Australian Governments. East Timor argues that the maritime boundary be redrawn according to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

If the maritime treaty boundar-

ies were redrawn on these lines, Australia would not only lose access to virtually all Timor Sea gas and oil, it would also lose control of about 25 percent of its continental shelf in that region.

This would remove any Australian control over virtually all Timor Sea oil and gas fields and, in particular, the enormous Greater Sunrise gas field. Under the current Joint Petroleum Development Treaty provisions, Australia has 80 percent control over the Greater Sunrise field, with East Timor controlling the remaining 20 percent.

This change would also mean that West Timor (part of Indonesia) could claim similar maritime rights over its adjoining gas and oil fields – a new oil-rich Brunei.

The Howard Government retaliated against the East Timorese claim and withdrew from the UN maritime border rulings and refused to recognise UN rulings on the question.

The US Congress members supported the redrawing of the East Timor Sea Treaty along the lines favoured by East Timor.

The Greater Sunrise field has not yet been developed. Apart from the obvious treaty problems, there have also been differing engineering views on the project.

Proposals

There are a number of proposals being considered: that the gas be piped to Darwin for processing, linking into a proposed gas pipeline being built between Darwin and the neighbouring Bayu-Undan gas field; that the gas be processed at sea on a floating Liquid Natural Gas processing plant; and that the gas be

pipled to East Timor for processing there. Until the treaty is finalised, it is unlikely there will be any final decisions made on processing.

The letter to Howard follows hot on the heels of a lawsuit brought in a Washington (US) court alleging that one of the US companies involved in the East Timor oil and gas exploitation, ConocoPhillips, had bribed the East Timor Prime Minister, Mari Alkatiri, and “... had paid Mr Alkatiri about US\$2 million in bribes to secure his support for ConocoPhillips’ stake in exploring the Timor Sea for oil and gas ...”.

These allegations have been strongly denied by Mr Alkatiri, who is taking steps to bring his own lawsuit against the company making the allegations.

Bitter struggle

The letter to the Howard Government by the US Congressmen indicates that there is a bitter struggle between different oil and gas corporations – between those owing their allegiance to the US and those supported by the Australian Government.

In this contest between the giant corporations the interests of the East Timorese government and people will certainly come off second or third best.

One of the interesting points about the Timor Sea gas and oil contest is the complete absence of the largest oil company in the world, the giant US corporation Exxon-Mobil or one of its subsidiaries. It is very, very rare for major fields to be developed without Exxon’s participation. Strange indeed. ☺

Killing Bulk Billing

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The Minister is lying when he claims that “All Australians will now be protected against major medical bills resulting from out-of-hospital health costs including GP visits, specialist consultations, X-rays, blood tests, MRI scans, CT scans and radiation oncology”.

Safety net illusions

The “safety net” will come into play when out of pocket costs (co-payments) for Medicare services provided out of hospital, reach \$300 for a family or individual with a concession card or receiving Family Tax Benefit (A). For all others the safety net kicks in when expenses reach \$700.

When patients hit the safety net, Medicare will cover 80 percent of the co-payment. (The co-payment is the difference between what the doctor charges and the rebate that Medicare normally pays when a patient is not bulk billed.)

“This so-called ‘safety net’ is more a safety net for specialists’ incomes; a blank cheque for them to increase co-payment from \$50 to \$1500 without feeling bad, knowing that there is a limit to how much the patient will pay”, said Dr Woodruff.

The amounts might not sound much to the likes of Abbott, but to struggling families, the unemployed, pensioners and workers on low incomes, it is a lot.

When the \$300 or \$700 is added to the cost of prescription medicines (safety net kicks in at over \$600), medications that are not on the PBS list, hospital expenses, dentist visits, opticians, glasses, hearing aids,

prosthetics and all the other medical expenses many people will simply be locked out of the system

And if you are paying for private health insurance as well – as the government wants – then you could be looking at being out of pocket by thousands of dollars in the case of a serious accident or a chronic medical condition or even just from the normal wear and tear of getting old.

And that is now. What happens when the government increases the \$300 and \$700 thresholds and reduces the rebate or fails to increase it in line with rising prices. This is how it drove doctors out of bulk billing – making bulk billing economically unsustainable for GPs. This is what it did with the PBS system – the safety net threshold has risen by hundreds of dollars and the payment for scripts by hundreds of percent.

Dr Woodruff sums it up: “We will ... have a two tiered system, a charity system for some elderly and kids, receiving second class care and turnstile medicine as befits charity cases, and a pay-as-you-go system for the rest, with a saggy inadequate safety net which will fail to catch the many who will struggle to afford the bills.”

“... for those who are bulk billed it means they will be seen as second class citizens, not able to pay their way to decent health care, relying on doctors’ charity”, Dr Woodruff said.

Bulk billing for all

Medicare means everyone has access to bulk billing: it is not a

charity but an essential service that Australians from every walk of life support.

If everyone is fully covered then there is no need for any safety net. Safety nets are for catching people who fall out, who miss out, who are not covered.

The four Senators have traded off the essential elements of Medicare for a few dollars and some services that will diminish over time. They have voted for the destruction of Medicare and its replacement by a safety net system.

The government is spending an extra \$2.85 billion over the next four years (average of \$700,000 each year) for little long-term gain. In addition it will be throwing hundreds of thousands more dollars to the private health insurance industry and private hospitals through its 30 percent rebate on private health insurance. This is already costing \$2.4 billion a year, not one cent of which improves health care.

There is plenty of money to fund Medicare and the public hospital system as it should be funded. Apart from the \$2.4 billion handout to private health insurance there is the additional \$50 billion plus being spent on military equipment as well as a budget surplus.

With the \$2.4 billion alone, the government could restore Medicare to offer universal bulk billing for medical services. In addition it could improve and extend Medicare to cover dental health and reduce the price of prescriptions. It could provide adequate funding for public hospitals and begin to address the crisis in aged care. ☺

Howard's "solution" for male teachers

Peter Mac

Education authorities and teacher unions around the nation have pointed out that the real issue behind the low percentage of male teachers in Australian public schools is inadequate teacher salaries and conditions. The answer does not lie in the Howard Government's recommendation of repealing anti-discrimination legislation or special offers of scholarships for new male teachers.

Nor does the Howard Government's blaring announcement last week of a special funding grant for education address this problem. The "extra" funding, which was anticipated in the last federal budget, does little more than keep up with inflation, and the bulk of the funds go to private schools, not to public schools.

The Government's move to overturn the anti-discrimination laws follows the rejection by the Human Rights and Equal Employment Opportunities Commission of an application by the Catholic Education Office for it to be temporarily exempted from the Sex Discrimination Act.

The Act forbids education authorities from advertising for teachers of one particular sex. The Church argued that they needed to advertise in this way to attract more male teachers to amend the gender imbalance in schools, and thereby provide male role models for boy students.

Such a precedent would undermine the whole basis of anti-discrimination legislation in Australia.

Federal Education Minister Brendan Nelson defended the Government's move. Showing what he really thinks of women's rights, he declared arrogantly: "It will do this country no good if we spend the next decade hand-wringing and clinging to misplaced but well-guided ideological purity."

As the President of the Queensland Teachers Union, Julie-Anne McCullough commented, "We should attract a wide range of teachers to our schools, including more males, more Indigenous people, more people with disabilities and a variety of other skilled people from differing backgrounds."

"Attempts to change the law to allow male-only scholarships show the Federal Government is out of touch and just doesn't understand the challenges facing schools."

There is an overall shortage of teachers which is a direct result of the general downgrading of the public school system by governments. Schools are under-funded and under-staffed, and teachers' incomes are low relative to many other professions requiring four years of university studies.

The Federal opposition's spokesperson for Education, Jenny Macklin, agrees. "The evidence shows that the real barriers to men becoming teachers and staying in our schools are pay, career struc-



ture and status compared to other professions."

(Nevertheless, when interviewed on ABC TV last week, Ms Macklin would not be drawn as to whether she would try to talk her counterparts in the various state ALP governments into giving teachers a better salary deal.)

Meanwhile, teachers in a number of States have taken strike action over salaries and other issues. In NSW they are protesting against cuts to Technical and Further Education funding, which have caused huge rises in course fees and reductions in the number of student places in some courses. Some

23,700 students have missed out on TAFE courses this year as a result.

Last week the President of the NSW Teachers' Federation, Julie O'Halloran, stated that some course fees have risen by 230 percent, with a three-year hairdressing course now costing students \$10,000.

"There are a number of places where courses ... are now being offered on a commercial basis", she commented.

The Commonwealth has now locked TAFE funding at 2003 levels, which will cause an effective loss of \$30 million by 2007.

The TAFE system, in particular, is of crucial importance to

working class students and their prospects of employment. Among the universities worst hit by the Howard Government's recent funding restrictions, is the University of Western Sydney, which serves a predominantly working-class area.

The well-being of working people is not uppermost in the Howard Government's scheme of things. There are justified fears among teachers and others that TAFE is being starved of funds as part of a process of turning them into commercial education organisations which will then be offered off for piecemeal sale to the private sector. ♣

Coffs Harbour residents fight development plans

John Gardener

The Coffs Harbour City Council is facing strong and growing resistance from local residents over its planned development of the Coffs Harbour foreshore on the northern coast of NSW.

The development plans, which were released late last year for public exhibition, would fundamentally change the entire nature of the area: large scale housing developments, close to the beach, and a massive expansion of the commercial marina have been included. As has become the norm, there was no broad community involvement in the Council's development planning.

In January, concerned local residents formed the Jetty Action Group (JAG), to maintain and build a campaign to stop the development. The group has been inundated with support.

"Opposition is almost universal throughout Coffs. The Council is trying to foist a nightmare on residents", said Wayne Evans, one of the JAG organisers.

"It has used rubbery figures to try and force this through. One of the arguments it's using is that an expansion to the commercial fishing in the area will add \$50m to the local economy. Figures like this are just ludicrous: catches from all commercial fishing have been declining for more than 15 years, as we know from catches recorded at both Coffs' fishing co-ops. Any expansion of commercial fishing is completely unrealistic.

"The government has already been buying back commercial fishing licences to reduce fishing catches in the area. It's stupid

when one government department is spending money to stop commercial fishing, while another is going to spend money on increasing it", Mr Evans pointed out.

"And the housing developments planned there are what worries us and most locals. Under the plans (drawn up by a Woollahra-based company, the Stafford Group) it's proposed that hundreds of housing units be built on the foreshores: we are concerned that if this goes through, how is council going to stop any additional developments that pop up in the future?"

Coffs Harbour residents have been opposed to over-development of the area for decades. More than 10 years ago, a large campaign was built to stop similar developments from going through.

"We are concerned that Coffs residents will be stuck with a giant \$74 million lemon, that we will be paying for through increased rates and charges. We will be paying more so that Council can provide a playground for the rich, that most Coffs residents won't be able to afford", said Mr Evans.

To protest against the planned development, JAG is calling its first major public rally on Sunday, March 21, starting at 11am, at the North End of Jetty Beach.

For more information, contact Wayne Evans 02 6656 1358 or Gavin Smithers 02 6651 6880. You can visit the JAG website at www.esmediaweb.com/jag or email them at savejetty@bigpond.com. You can also write to them at: Jetty Action Group, PO Box 1512, Coffs Harbour, NSW 2450 ♣

Local communities to be cut out of development decisions

Bob Briton

A soft lapping noise can be heard across Adelaide right now. It is the sound of developers licking their chops at the prospect of the so-called Sustainable Development Bill, ushering in a bright new "pro-investment" era. A draft bill has already been prepared and has drawn very favourable comment from business quarters.

Bryan Moulds, executive director of the Property Council of South Australia, certainly approves of it. "This raises the bar for all the other states and makes South Australia a greater investment attraction," he told the *Australian Financial Review* earlier this month.

The draft bill proposes the separation of planning policy powers for development within the state from the decision-making on individual projects. This means that decisions about whether or not development projects meet the needs of local residents would be taken away from elected councils and given to appointed panels. Developers have been campaigning for this for a long time and, finally, it appears to be within reach.

The newly powerful Development Assessment Panels would be made up of a government appointed chairman, three elected members of council (or three council officers) and three professionals with relevant experience. The arrangements give developers of unpopular projects much more cause for optimism in the decision-making process. The local council is reduced to

the status of what's called "stakeholder" in the corporate-babble commonly used by bureaucrats in recent years.

The Commonwealth's Productivity Commission has already singled out the separation of planning policy from building approvals as an area for "reform" in its draft report on housing affordability for the Howard Government.

This measure is designed to help investors seeking to make fast bucks, as well as the developers. Properties increase in value by an average 21 per cent when they can be sold with a piece of paper showing development approval.

Some Adelaide councils are already taking a lead. Salisbury Council only decided six out of almost 4000 planning and development approvals in 2003. "It frees us up to spend our time on policy-type decision-making", Mayor Tony Zappia told the *Weekend Australian* last year. The proposed legislation would "liberate" councils of this role entirely.

The South Australian draft bill also reflects the thinking of the federal-government-sponsored Development Assessment Forum (DAF). South Australia is obviously only a test case for changes envisaged for the rest of Australia. Peter Verwer, chief executive of the Property Council of Australia, heads up the DAF. A model for "reform"—resembling the SA proposal in many ways—was developed under its auspices.

A meeting of the Australian Local Government Association was

held in Hobart last month where the DAF model was considered and condemned. Association President Mike Montgomery had the following to say to *ABC Regional News*:

"Right from the start we want to nip in the bud any suggestion that local government be taken out of the assessment process and we want to make it perfectly clear that local communities need to have their say and need to be allowed in an efficient and effective process to be able to refuse and modify development applications that aren't in keeping with the amenity of a community."

The model displays the sympathies prevalent in government circles for the position of developers. A feature of the plan is for developers to have a right to appeal against decisions before a review panel while local government and the local people would have no such right!

Another consequence of the changes would be their dampening effect on opposition campaigns within local areas earmarked for misguided development. Tina Perinotto—in her *Australian Financial Review* article of March 5—gave the example of the residents that organised to stop residential development on the Callan Park site in Sydney.

The chances of mobilising people to fight onslaughts like that would be greatly reduced if local people knew in advance that decisions were to be taken by appointed "panels" with no right of appeal. ♣

SA public servants prepare for state-wide strike

Bob Briton

The long-running dispute between the South Australian Government and the state's 15,000 public servants is now set to escalate as the Public Service Association prepares for a state-wide 24-hour stoppage on March 26. The strike will be the first action of such scope in more than 20 years and comes in response to the government's intransigence over the provisions of a new Enterprise Bargaining Agreement (EBA).

The old agreement expired in November last year but so far, of the issues raised by the PSA claim lodged in August, the only ones taken up by the government have been wages and maternity leave. Questions like mobility across the public sector and adequate staffing levels have been ignored. The PSA originally called for a 12 percent

pay increase over the two years of the new agreement and for 14 weeks' paid maternity leave.

The government's first response in December was to offer three percent per annum to most public servants and four per cent for the lowest ASO1 category of workers. Six weeks paid maternity was suggested – which would still have been the worst such condition in public sector employment in Australia.

From the beginning of 2004, PSA members have been implementing a wide range of bans that have focussed on the government's revenue raising capacity. Faced with this widely supported resistance, the government came back with a revised offer in late January: a 3.5 per cent a year pay increase, an extension of the 4 per cent rise to workers from the next two lowest classifications and eight weeks paid maternity leave.

The miniscule "concessions" were accompanied by the use of inflammatory language by Premier Mike Rann and Industrial Relations Minister Michael Wright about "bullying" and "bloody-mindedness" on the part of the PSA. The PSA, however, had already signalled its willingness to accept any "double figure" offer.

On February 24, a rally of public servants at Dom Polski in Adelaide was linked up with regional and worksite meetings. Members strongly rejected the government's revised offer and authorised their union to organise a one-day stoppage.

Since then the government and the PSA have been involved in a series of voluntary conferences before Deputy President Peter Hampton of the Industrial Relations Commission (IRC). At one of these meetings the PSA undertook not to escalate bans as an act of "good faith", even though the government has not shown itself to be worthy of much confidence in the course of negotiations.

The government has been trying to get the IRC to rule against the union's campaign of industrial action. Last week it also sought to have DP Hampton outlaw the March 26 stoppage. Hampton has so far rejected these demands and called instead for the government to negotiate with the PSA prior to a

scheduled conference on March 18.

In the meantime, PSA member are continuing with their bans and preparing for the state-wide strike. The union has called on members to identify any emergency areas that will need to be maintained during the stoppage. Hospitals have already

been excluded from the action.

Members are heartened by the news that Tasmania's public servants have won a 14.75 percent increase over the next three years – an outcome that very nearly matches the PSA's revised claim of 10 per cent over two years. ☘



"We'll all feel pain during our downsizing. I, myself, will have to endure a smaller desk."

LABOUR NOTES

The Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance has warned against signing the US-Australia Free Trade Agreement. The entertainment industry union says that the agreement only gives a guarantee of four per cent of Australian content for pay TV. In addition, current protection for free-air-television have been slammed by the union as "inadequate": no local content levels have been set for any new technologies. "The agreement denies the right of Australian people to determine access to their own culture. John Howard is allowing a foreign nation to determine Australia's cultural future", MEAA NSW Secretary John Mills.

Melbourne's *Age* newspaper has been accused of abusing the Victorian Police and its editorial power in an effort to sack 86 workers in defiance of Industrial Commission orders. Commissioner Dominica Whelan ruled that *The Age* newspaper not make any of their maintenance workers or Spencer Street printers redundant until the expiry of their enterprise bargaining agreement with the Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union. AMWU State Secretary Dave Oliver said that up to 80 police were assigned to protect the newspapers' premises at Tullamarine where there was no industrial action taking place. According to Mr Oliver the police set up road blocks and asked workers for identification before letting them in. This was happening while the paper was publishing editorials condemning unions and criticising workers and promoting its right to renege on the agreement. Mr Oliver called the "biased" editorialising of the dispute "disgraceful".

The Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union has welcomed the findings of the Senate Inquiry into Poverty. "The Senate Report highlights the crisis of low pay and notes that a job no longer protects Australians from living in poverty." The report also calls on the Australian Industrial Relations Commission to establish a new minimum wage benchmark which would give an average Australian a decent standard of living in today's society. "We have been saying for some time that we do not have a genuine Living Wage in this country any more – \$448 a week is the current minimum and that is a joke", said LHMU National Secretary Jeff Lawrence.

Australian Taxation Office staff have been quizzed about their political leanings, foreign friendships and financial affairs in what has been termed a security blitz, much to the anger of workers. Staff working in areas such as fraud and the audit office were forced to undergo security checks in 2001. Workers were asked if they had been a member of a club or a union. The ATO is also asking referees if staff members have affiliation to political organisations "whose views come into direct conflict with Australia's constitutional and democratic system of government". Employees of the organisation are also being asked to name all those persons they have lived with over the last five years and if any of those have travelled overseas.

Telstra's "loose cannon" management

Peter Mac

Two weeks ago Telstra, the nation's telecommunications service provider, acquired the *Trading Post*, and its associated directories business, Sensis.

Although Telstra is still 51 percent publicly owned, its management is already behaving as though it were fully privatised. Their acquisition program, involving the blending of print media with telecommunications and digital technologies businesses on a huge scale, is a classic example of business empire building.

Telstra bosses recently proposed to acquire the Fairfax group of companies. The Telstra board rejected the idea, but if it had succeeded it would have had enormous implications, since Fairfax is one of Australia's media giants.

The full sale of Telstra is also a requirement of the US/Australia Free Trade Agreement. The government recently wrote to the US trade representative apologising for its failure to get parliamentary approval for the sale, promising to keep trying!

However, there are still major misgivings from within conservative

circles about the sale. In particular, there is concern that Telstra is not providing adequate telecommunications services such as Broadband, to regional areas.

This is hardly surprising, since provision of services to these areas is Telstra's least profitable activity. The Howard Government and the current Telstra management are concerned to maximise profits, rather than to provide a necessary public service. If the sale does go ahead, future telecommunications services to regional areas are unlikely to be maintained, let alone improved, without a massive price hike.

Telstra already has serious money worries. In its latest deal, to buy the *Trading Post*, Telstra is said to have grossly over-estimated the value of the business.

None-the-less, Sensis and *Trading Post* bosses were seen living it up at the Melbourne Grand Prix after the deal was finalised. The deal follows a number of other "money's no object" acquisitions which have left Telstra massively out of pocket.

The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) has also demanded that it show cause why it should not be taken to

court for anti-competitive practices. Telstra recently offered its retail customers products for sale at less than the wholesale prices it charged its competitors. It now faces a possible ACCC penalty of some \$9 million.

Telstra's financial problems have been widely attributed to specific business activities. However, the problem stems from the original decision to privatise the organisation. Its wild and financially irresponsible behaviour is not what the public is entitled to expect from what is still essentially a publicly-owned national asset.

John Howard complains that Telstra's continuing role as a government agency has interfered with its business activities. It is certainly true that its partial sale poses insoluble conflicts of interest for the organisation. However, the answer does not lie in flogging off the rest of it, as Howard maintains. The answer lies in wresting control of Telstra from the hands of big business and returning it fully to the Australian people. Only then can it give priority to providing a universally accessible, high quality and affordable service to rural, regional and urban Australia. ☘

Sydney

Bougainville Welcome Gathering & Film Night fund-raiser

Thursday, 18 March

UTS Students Association, Level 3A, UTS Tower on Broadway, Room 318

6.00pm: Welcome back Sam and Jossie Sirivi from Bougainville

7.00pm: *TUKANA* – a feature film tells the story of a university dropout in Papua New Guinea returning to his native village in Bougainville.

All welcome. Cost: \$5.00 or gold coin donation.

Funds raised will assist Sam, Jossie and other Bougainville people to travel to Canberra and Melbourne to launch the book "...as MOTHERS of the LAND," a unique account of one of the deadliest conflicts in recent decades, told not by the military or political chiefs, but by those caught in the middle of the fighting: Bougainville women.

Contact: Bougainville Freedom Movement Phone: 02 9558 2730

Sexism, profits & football

Tom Pearson

"Gang-bang culture all in the game" ran a front page headline in the weekend edition of News Ltd's national broadsheet, *The Australian*, (March 6), in reference to allegations that six senior members of the Bulldogs rugby league team pack raped a woman in the NSW town of Coffs Harbour. Broadly typical of the mass media coverage of the incident, the article was an attempted justification of the actions of the players: damage control to protect lucrative sponsorship and television advertising dollars.

Nonetheless, two companies have so far torn up their sponsorship contracts with the Bulldogs. Fearing the implications for the National Rugby League (NRL) as a whole, its administrators swore public oaths of reform to change the game's "culture".

In tandem with this fine talk the Murdoch press has set out to play down the affair with a boys-will-be-boys approach.

"Footballers of all descriptions are more than capable of turning on displays of 'men behaving beyond badly'", we are told in the above article in the *Australian*.

To reinforce this line, the same weekend edition of the paper reverted to a historic gutter press ploy once the exclusive preserve of the tabloid muckrakers.

In the middle of page three was the photo of a young woman posing in the equivalent of a bikini top, the uniform of the "Page 3 Girl" that helped sell so many Murdoch newspapers during the 1960s and '70s.

How fortuitous that this sledgehammer sexism should make a re-appearance in the midst of a crisis over pack rape allegations besetting the sport News Ltd stole a decade ago in a hostile takeover.

There was certainly nothing fortuitous about the fact that the subject of the photo was Jodhi Packer, daughter-in-law of Kerry – with an accompanying promo for her new clothing label. Kerry Packer and Rupert Murdoch own the National Rugby League: Murdoch controls the board; Packer has the free-to-air

television rights; Murdoch's Fox the pay-for-view.

Murdoch's man at the head of the NRL board, chief executive David Gallop, while denouncing rape (how could he not?) and promising wide-ranging changes, announced that the NRL wasn't even going to fine the Bulldogs. Unfortunately for Gallop there soon followed a second allegation of rape, the accused this time from the Melbourne Storm club.

It turns out that the Melbourne club's chief executive John Ribot hushed up the incident, leaving Gallop holding the can: "We certainly would have liked to have known that Melbourne had an issue of this type."

The Bulldogs management had also tried to keep things in-house and quiet.

And all the time the News Ltd mill kept grinding out the justifications, reaching ludicrous heights in the sport section of the *Daily Telegraph* last week where a psychologist offered advice to the six accused Bulldogs players in the lead-up to the first game of the year.

The expert proffered his aid because the Bulldogs will be playing "under the enormous strain of having up to six players facing allegations of sexual assault".

News Ltd's justification campaign is thus exposed: it is by definition the transference of blame, from the alleged perpetrators to the alleged victim.

Which is why, again the *Australian* article, an unnamed ex-player is quoted: "Women were there to be used as part of a celebration of a good win ... or for that matter to help you get over a bad loss." The question begs – what has that got to do with rape? Ah, you see, they ask for it!

Gutter press

It is instructive to consider the treatment by the *Daily Telegraph* of another pack rape case last year to highlight the pernicious nature of the gutter press. When a group of teenagers from around Bankstown (ironically a suburb in the Bulldogs area) were accused of gang rape, the *Telegraph* had a field day.

In its coverage it inferred race as a contributing factor (the accused were from middle-eastern backgrounds) and sensationalised the case at every opportunity; photo mug shots of the accused; emotive interviews with the accusers, etc.

This line of reportage went on week after week, essentially setting up the *Telegraph* as judge and jury, passing a sentence of guilty before the convening of any trial.

At this time populist premier Bob Carr, after an exhaustive search, had finally found himself the hanging judge he'd been looking for, who, in a judgement tending toward justice-as-revenge, handed down individual sentences of up to 55 years.

Given the high profile notoriety of that case, isn't it curious that the zero-tolerance crusaders at the *Telegraph* seem to have lost their zeal for the kangaroo court?

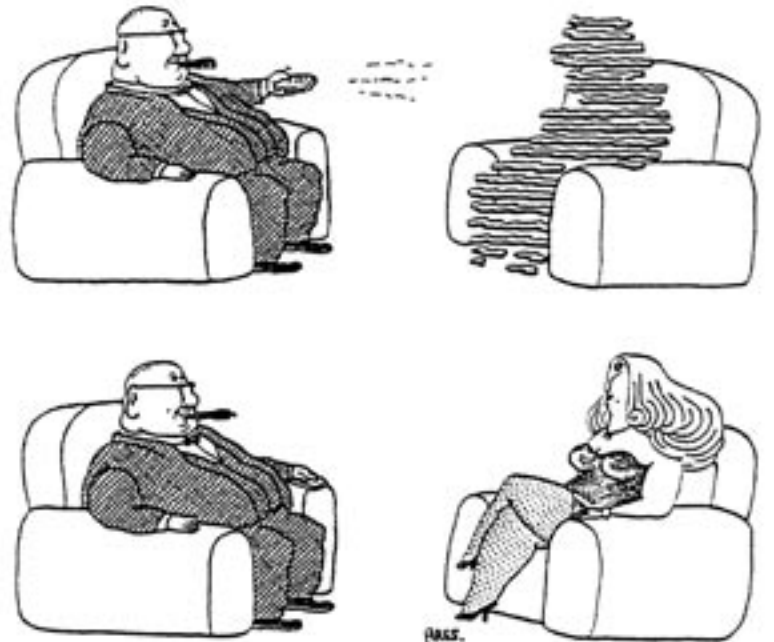
A suggestion

The treatment of women by some football players is a manifestation of a larger problem. This is the deeply engrained view of women as sex objects which is given impetus through the commercial media, particularly in advertising: it is profitable to degrade and demean women.

This attitude extends to all areas of society, including sport. So here is a suggestion to those in control of the NRL.

Rugby league has followed professional male sport in the US by the introduction of cheer squads of scantily clad women providing "entertainment" at games. This element of commercialisation emerged with the televising of sport, the women being used as sex objects to sell the product i.e. the game and the advertisements therein.

But people actually go to matches to watch the football. So let's see the NRL abolish the cheer squads, as the first, baby step to demonstrate there is substance behind the rhetoric. But don't hold your breath. In the end David Gallop and his fellow News Ltd cronies, whatever their personal views, are not moral guardians, but guardians of Murdoch's profits. ☘



The Murdoch press know how to promote militarism. The front page headline on an issue of *The Australian* last week ran: "Diggers to get 59 US tanks", with a pulled quote that said, "Despite reservations from some military experts, Army chief Peter Leahy says the Abrams is a 'big attractive tank'". As the Government runs down Medicare, prepares to sell Telstra, cuts deeper into public education and slashes welfare, and at the same time spends more than \$50 billion on the military, people are bound to get hot under the collar. That can't be good in an election year, and Mr Murdoch, a Howard Government supporter, clearly wants a positive spin on it all, hence the "big attractive tank".

Institutionalised racism, poverty and unemployment are what Aboriginal people face from the day they are born. These have been further entrenched by the policies of the Howard Government, which among many other things has gutted the Native Title Act. This means that Indigenous Australians have been blocked from seeking some form of justice even through the whitefella's legal system. And so it was that last week the Kimberley Land Council announced that due to inadequate resources it cannot represent Kimberley traditional owners in their native title litigation in the courts. There's more than one way to dispossess a people.

Anything that Hugh Morgan, the fascist-minded former head of the Western Mining Corporation, champions you just know has got to be bad news for working people. Now president of the Business Council of Australia, Morgan attacked critics of the Free Trade Agreement with the US saying they were "all looking after their own protected self-interest" and that they "should get on board with the future". Morgan's "future" is one where unions are wiped out, wage labour is slave labour and profits are endless. Good reasons to join the campaign against the FTA.

Private policing is big business, and growing. But even the NSW Government – a big promoter of the use of private security companies – has had to act after it was revealed last week that during the past 12 months 300 security guards have had their licences revoked after being convicted of serious crimes, including theft, drug dealing and assault.

CAPITALIST HOG OF THE WEEK: is that dangerous halfwit that our government has tied our country to, George W Bush. The Mars space program has been on the agenda for some time. Here's Bush doing a promo for it in 1994: "Mars is essentially in the same orbit. Mars is somewhat the same distance from the Sun, which is very important. We have seen pictures where there are canals, we believe, and water. If there is water, that means there is oxygen. If oxygen, that means we can breathe."

"Our Dead, Your War"

continued from page 1

This allegation was quickly denied but gave credence to the impression that the Spanish Government was covering up the truth.

The indiscriminate killing of such large numbers of people from working class suburbs is not an ETA trait, either. This separatist group has targetted figures it sees as associated with rule from Madrid.

Regardless of who is responsible, the front-men of imperialism were eager to exploit the suffering of the Spanish people and show their solidarity with the rightwing government of Spain. Italy's neo-fascist prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi and Britain's Deputy prime minister, John Prescott were among the dignitaries to attend the demonstrations.

"We love life"

On the other hand, Gladys Marin, the President of the Communist Party of Chile, was among the many progressive leaders from around the world to express their solidarity with the people of Spain. From Havana, where she

is recovering from treatment for cancer, she said:

"Because we love life and struggle for it, we completely condemn the dark and crazed terrorist attack carried out in Madrid, which arises out of the climate of war and violence that has been imposed on the world by the unleashing of the Bush doctrine. No doubt he will use this despicable act as a pretext to continue with his military interventions and the war against the peoples."

Bush has already made public vows to do better in the war on terror, although the specifics of how people boarding suburban trains can be protected are not mentioned. The root causes of terror arise from imperialist domination and social injustice of the capitalist system and these ills are not on the Bush agenda.

In Australia, the media is doing its best to blur the issues. The most recent edition of Adelaide's *Sunday Mail* printed a large colour picture of the previous day's demonstration in Madrid. On the right hand side was a smaller picture of Attorney-General Philip Ruddock. Across the whole page was the headline: "Talk terror, it's jail".

Ruddock wants new legislation similar to the old law against "consorting with criminals" to catch even more people in the "anti-terror" net. He wants this in his armoury to use against any outspoken critic of US foreign policies or those like David Hicks, who is currently languishing in a US concentration camp in Guantanamo Bay. Hicks could not be prosecuted in Australia at present – he has not broken any Australian law.

The ink is not yet dry on the most recent batch of ASIO legislation limiting the civil rights of Australian citizens when Ruddock bobs up ready with a new assault. The tragic events faced by the Spanish people are being used to support the drive in the crudest fashion imaginable.

Who benefits?

Who benefits from the detonation of bombs packed with nails and other shrapnel on trains full of people rumbling through the working-class suburbs of Madrid? This is a question that must be asked. And the answer will help to reveal who are the real terrorists in the present situation. ☘

Arguing some Marxist principles

Peter Symon

In his criticism of the speech made by Sitaram Yechury which was published in *The Guardian* (18/2/04), David Matters (letters, 10/3/04) suggests that a more thorough analysis of this speech should be made. This is a contribution to that appeal.

Sitaram Yechury, when speaking to the World Social Forum held in Mumbai India earlier this year, said that he put forward his contribution "in the nature of a healthy provocation". He obviously anticipated that it might bring controversy. It would be helpful to approach the issues raised in the spirit of discussing their content to bring greater understanding.

Sitaram Yechury remarked: "Socialism is the first structure of society that was first erected in the mind before it was erected in reality".

What does this mean? And is it a departure from Marxism in that it is a repudiation of the Marxist concept that the fundamental source of ideas is to be found in the economic and social conditions of any historical period and that it is these objective factors alone that determine developments?

David Matters has drawn the conclusion that "To assert that the uniqueness of Socialism is that it was first conceived in the human mind is to run back to a view of world development that thought is primary (i.e. that it creates the world and in this case socialism)".

The remarks of both Sitaram and David raise the question of the relationship of thinking to being. This question was fundamental in the contest between the Marxists (the materialists) and the many brands of idealists. Marxists argue that matter is primary and thought is secondary and that thought is the product of matter that thinks (the mind).

The idealists in the crudest forms argued that thought was primary and matter was the creation of the mind. It is on this basis that the creationists derive their explanations of the origins of the world and the world around us. It was the will of god that brought everything into existence.

Consciousness

The conclusion of the Marxists does not mean that the importance of thought (consciousness, ideas) can be ignored and relegated to being of no importance in influencing or even determining the outcome of events.

As long ago as 1890 Engels made this point. He wrote: "... According to the materialist view of history, the determining factor in history is, in the final analysis, the production and reproduction of actual life. More than that was never maintained either by Marx or myself. Now if someone distorts this by declaring the economic moment to be the **only** determining factor, he changes that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, ridiculous piece of jargon".

Engels went on: "The economic situation is the basis, but the various factors of the superstructure – political forms of the class struggle and its consequences, namely constitutions set up by the ruling class after a victorious battle, etc., forms of law

and, the reflections of all these real struggles in the minds of the participants, i.e., political, philosophical and legal theories, religious views and the expansion of the same into dogmatic systems – all these factors also have a bearing on the course of the historical struggles which, in many cases, they largely determine the **form**. (Emphasis in original)

(Full text in Engel's letter to J Bloch. September 21-22, 1890 *Marx-Engels Collected Works* Vol 49 p34-35)

Universal emancipation

In his historic work *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* Engels writes: "To accomplish this act of universal emancipation is the historical mission of the modern proletariat. To thoroughly comprehend the historical conditions and thus the very nature of this act, to impart to the now oppressed proletarian class a full knowledge of the conditions and of the meaning of the momentous act it is called upon to accomplish, this is the task of the theoretical expression of the proletarian movement, scientific Socialism". (*Socialism: Utopian and Scientific, Marx-Engels Collected Works* Vol 24 p 325)

Here, Engels makes clear that the task of ending the capitalist system and building a socialist one had become a **conscious act**. Furthermore, Marx, Engels and Lenin drew up the general principles of the future socialist society before any such society came into existence. Humanity was no longer driven by the blind, violent and destructive forces that had hitherto driven societies.

From necessity to freedom

And to make the point again, Engels wrote in *Anti-Duhring*:

"With the seizing of the means of production by society, production of commodities is done away with, and, simultaneously, the mastery of the product over the producer. Anarchy in social production is replaced by systematic, definite organisation. The struggle for individual existence disappears. Then for the first time man, in a certain sense, is finally marked off from the rest of the animal kingdom, and emerges from mere animal conditions of existence into really human ones. The whole sphere of the conditions of life which environ man, and which have hitherto ruled man, now comes under the dominion and control of man, who for the first time becomes the real, conscious lord of nature, because he has now become master of his own social organisation... Only from that time will man himself, with full consciousness, make his own history... It is humanity's leap from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom." (Engels. *Anti-Duhring Marx-Engels Collected Works* Vol 25 p 270)

It is these concepts summarised above that Sitaram Yechury is drawing on when he says that "Socialism is the first structure of society that was first erected in the mind before it was erected in reality".

This can be tested in another way. The concept of socialism was

developed decades before it first came into existence following the Russian revolution of 1917. That is an historical fact.

Marx and Engels proclaimed this aim even though they did not live to see their theory put into practice. Of course they developed their theories on the basis of the accumulation of the experiences of humanity and the development of the sciences up to that time. But they did so by using their brains and testing their ideas against practice.

Bourgeois revolutions occurred first of all in Britain and later in France and Germany and they proceeded to construct capitalist societies. But no one wrote at the time or proclaimed when the arising capitalist class seized power, that it would proceed to construct a capitalist society.

No one wrote a book called "Capitalism: The coming saviour of humanity". No one could have made a speech in the rostrums of ancient Rome: "We will now proceed to construct slave society" although that was the basis of their society and that is what came into existence at that time. They did not do so because although social classes pursued their economic and political interests the people of that time were still not conscious of the consequences of their actions.

The rising capitalist class pursued its class interests in opposing and setting out to destroy the old and decaying feudal societies based on the power of monarchies and feudal lords but they proceeded without any knowledge or understanding of what they were in fact building.

We know now what they were building but that knowledge came later and arose particularly from the analysis of capitalism made by Marx, Engels and other revolutionary writers of the times.

David Matters writes that Marx, Engels, Lenin and others "derived their thoughts and theories from the material world, i.e., the real life events such as the struggles of workers, the Paris Commune and the revolutions of 1848 in Europe..." Yes, of course they did and no-one is arguing that fact. They became **conscious** of the course of events by studying history and the events of their times.

Paris Commune

Drawing on the experience of the Paris Commune Engels wrote in his Introduction to Marx's *Class Struggles in France*: "The time of surprise attacks, of revolutions carried through by small conscious minorities at the head of masses lacking consciousness is past. Where it is a question of a complete transformation of the social organisation, the masses themselves must also be in it, must themselves already have grasped what is at stake, what they are going in for body and soul... But in order that the masses may understand what is to be done, long, persistent work is required, and it is just this work which we are now pursuing, and with a success that drives the enemy to despair." (Engels. Introduction to K Marx's *The Class Struggles in France. Marx-Engels Collected Works*. Vol 27 p 520)

This is all about raising the



consciousness of the masses and it is this work that is a priority task for every communist party. In the Russian revolution, a large number of the working people knew what they were fighting for.

In today's Cuba a tremendous amount of work to lift the political and ideological understanding of masses of people has been under-

it as soon as they have grasped – not always correctly – its main propositions. Nor can I exempt from this reproach many of the more recent 'Marxists' who have, indeed, been responsible for some pretty peculiar stuff". (Engels letter to J Bloch as above p 36)

In concluding this part of the discussion it is worthwhile recalling

Where it is a question of a complete social organisation, the masses themselves

taken and has enabled the Cuban revolutionaries to carry the people forward while resisting all the attempts of US imperialism to confuse, divide and destroy the Cuban revolution from within. The Cuban people have this understanding in their heads and when they shout "Socialism or death", they are responding to what they understand and have tested against their own experience.

Engels was critical of those who "attribute more importance to the economic aspect than is its due" and, thereby, fail to understand the relationship between thinking and being and the role played by ideas and theory.

"Some pretty peculiar stuff"

He wrote, "Marx and I are ourselves partly to blame. We had to stress this leading principle in the face of opponents who denied it, and we did not always have the time, space or opportunity to do justice to the other factors that interacted upon each other... Unfortunately, people all too frequently believe they have mastered a new theory and can do just what they like with

the remark of Marx: "Ideas become a material force once they have gripped the masses." (*Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*)

It is puzzling that David Matters regarded Sitaram Yechury's remarks about the breakup of the Soviet Union and its causes as an "attack" on socialism and that he (Yechury) is suggesting "that the only escape from bureaucratic distortions is capitalist restoration or that Socialism can't be built into a world system apart from Imperialism".

Sitaram Yechury lists four causes of the collapse of socialism in the Soviet Union and in the socialist states of Eastern Europe. They are: "the character of the socialist state; the content of socialist democracy; the construction of the socialist economy; and inadequate development of ideological consciousness amongst the people..." He mentions "the extreme centralisation of power in the socialist societies..."

In the analysis of these same events in 1990 the Socialist Party of Australia (now Communist Party) also listed a number of causes leading to the breakup of the Soviet Union and the social-

"Ideas become a material force once they have gripped t

Lessons from NAFTA

A decade of free trade in North America

Jayati Ghosh

The first day of January 2004 was the tenth anniversary of NAFTA – the North American Free Trade Agreement – which brought the economies of the United States, Canada and Mexico together. This ambitious trade deal was at that time proclaimed as the way forward for developing countries that were fortunate enough to be “chosen” as special trade partners by the all-powerful United States.

Even now, it is being presented as something which has worked to the advantage of Mexico and an example for other countries, especially in Latin America, to emulate through the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas.

But, the decade’s experience suggests that it is mainly the corporations that lobbied for the agreement that have benefited, while most of the other promises made earlier have turned sour for most of the people in the region.

NAFTA brought together three very different economies: the rich and powerful United States; developed Canada with its extensive social security system and workers’ protection; and developing Mexico with its regional inequalities and backwardness.

The people were promised that the agreement would not just boost trade and investment in the region, it would create millions of new and better jobs and raise living standards.

Consequences

Of course, it was clear from the start that some would gain more than others, particularly because of the way in which the final agreement was structured.

The US administration refused to make any commitments with regard to agricultural subsidies, and retained the right to protectionist measures against surges of imports from Canada and Mexico.

Despite this, it was able to push through very significant liberalisa-

tion of rules in Canada and Mexico with regard to investment and intellectual property, which greatly increased the power of US capital in these countries.

NAFTA did result in increased trade and investment flows within the region. Total trade among the NAFTA countries more than doubled between 1993 and 2002, growing much more rapidly than trade with countries outside the region. Foreign direct investment by NAFTA investors in the three countries jumped from \$137 billion in 1993 to nearly \$300 billion in 2000.

However, the gains of these expansions have been concentrated among corporations, whose profits have increased many fold, and among favoured (typically urban) consumers with purchasing power.

In each NAFTA country, the net effect upon workers as a whole has been negative.

In Canada NAFTA has significantly reduced the bargaining power of workers vis-à-vis capital and has contributed to the erosion of social security systems that were among the best in the world. Real wages of Canadian workers have come down by 20 per cent over the decade.

Unemployment insurance and other social security provisions have been scaled back. Health care provision and other public utilities like water and electricity have been cut or privatised.

US corporations benefit

In the United States, NAFTA has brought about big increases in profits for certain corporations, especially those involved in making automobile and auto components, and agribusiness companies, which have seen profits rise by two to three times since NAFTA took effect.

Part of the reason for this

This has been interpreted to include any government act, including those directed at public health and the environment, which can diminish the value of a foreign investment. These cases are adjudicated by special tribunals, bypassing the legal system of all three countries. Already, suits with claims amounting to more than \$13 billion have been filed by large companies.

While the result of such provisions has been an alarming increase in environmental pollution, especially in the newly industrialising border areas of Mexico, it has definitely allowed US companies to reduce their operating costs and thereby increase their profits.

Unemployment is currently low in the US only because of the strong fiscal impetus provided by the Bush administration over the past two years, which has created more service sector jobs. However, despite the economic growth of the 1990s, real wages in the US are still below 1972 levels, while income inequality has skyrocketed because of the shift from manufacturing jobs

to employment in services, where wages are usually much lower.

Disastrous for Mexico

It may appear that Mexico therefore must be the country to have benefited from NAFTA – but precisely the opposite is true. The most disastrous effects of NAFTA are to be found in Mexico, with grave lessons for other developing countries tempted to enter into such trade deals with more powerful developed economy neighbours.

In the early years of NAFTA, there was some increase in both manufacturing output and employment because of investment by US companies to take advantage of lower labour costs. However, import penetration because of the trade liberalisation imposed by NAFTA

destroyed the domestic manufacturing sector which had catered to the home market, so that even in the days of the boom, net manufacturing employment barely increased.

Meanwhile, the overcrowding and environmental destruction characteristic of the exporting areas, the insecure conditions and worker harassment are hardly examples of the so-called benefits of free trade.

In Mexico, the manufacturing sector has not generated enough jobs to counter the effect of job loss in the other sectors, especially agriculture. Even in the service sector, small Mexican businesses, including petty retailers, have been badly hit by reduced access to credit, as all but one of major banks on Mexico have been sold to major US-based multinational banks that are not interested in such low margin activities.

However, it is agriculture that has experienced the worst effects of NAFTA, and underlined the unfair nature of the original treaty. The US continues with, and has even increased, its huge agricultural subsidies which allow large agribusiness corporations to sell produce in Mexico at prices well below actual costs.

Meanwhile, NAFTA has eliminated 99 per cent of Mexico’s agricultural tariffs. As a result, since 1994 the amount of US commodities dumped on the Mexican market has increased by 15 times. Other agricultural imports have also skyrocketed.

The resulting collapse in crop prices in Mexico has completely destroyed the viability of Mexican farming, even subsistence maize farming which was the mainstay economic activity in most of rural Mexico. Around 1.5 million farmers are affected badly.

At least 1000 people leave the Mexican countryside every day in search of work opportunities or simply the means for basic survival. They clog Mexico City as street vendors, or add to the flow of legal and illegal migrants to the US (now estimated to be more than 150,000 people every year), because they have no other means of subsistence left.

All this explains why the new slogan of several movements across the region is: “ten years of NAFTA is enough!”

People’s Democracy,
Communist Party of India (M) ✪



ist states of eastern Europe. They included a failure to adequately develop socialist democracy, a rigid over-centralised and bureaucratic economic planning mechanism, the distortion of the role of a communist party and its relation to state institutions, and a failure to apply Marxist theory to the ever changing situation and tasks.

*transformation of the
ves must also be in it.*

David Matters asserts that “To suggest that we have no theory and that we can develop a socialist revolution without theory reeks of revisionism”. Well, of course, it would amount to revisionism if Sitaram Yechury had made such remarks but there is absolutely no phrase or words in his whole article to justify such a conclusion. Quite the opposite.

Anti-imperialist movement

Sitaram Yechury concluded his speech saying: “Each one of us ... will have to work for integrating the worldwide anti-globalisation protests with the global anti-war upsurge into a mighty anti-imperialist movement.

“This requires, simultaneously, the intensification of the ideological combat within these movements that seek to obfuscate socialism as the only alternative available to humanity”.

This hardly suggests any abandonment of theory or of socialism or any compromise with imperialism. Peter Symon is the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Australia. ✪

the masses.”

Provisional Constitution finally signed in Iraq

On March 8 the Iraqi Governing Council created by the occupation forces and US Administrator Paul Bremer have finally signed the Provisional Constitution that comes into effect from June 30 until at least the end of the year.

The document, originally scheduled for signing on March 3, was postponed until March 6 as a result of three days of mourning decreed after two attacks that took the lives of more than 100 people.

Disputes among important Shiite figures on some of the clauses in the Provisional Constitution project prevented the ceremony going ahead on March 6. They included one clause granting the Kurdish minority the right to annul the application of the constitution in regions where it has a majority, and the type of presidency established in the document, which instead of being rotational, provides for two vice presidents (corresponding to the country's two main minorities).

The signed document, nevertheless, does not present any substantial changes.

The insecure atmosphere created by constant attacks on the occupation forces has generated

criticism of the United States for failing to guarantee safety in the country, whether that of the main Shiite religious authorities (the country's majority Muslim sect) or figures named by them to head the provisional civil government.

Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the highest national Shiite leader, accused the US forces of not providing security on Iraq's borders. In his turn, Bahr al-Uloom, president of the Administration Council named by the United States, blamed the authorities responsible for maintaining security for the lack of it.

In the international sphere, the latest events in Iraq prompted Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov to warn that the only possible way of resolving this problem is through the framework of a political solution guaranteeing total sovereignty for the Iraqi people.

Speaking from Rome, where he initiated a tour of Europe, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak warned of the possibility of the gates of hell being opened in the Middle East.

The US plan for the region could lead to a cycle of violence and anarchy, Mubarak warned.

In statements to the Italian



newspaper *La Repubblica*, Mubarak affirmed that reforms in the Arab world need to be effected by the Arabs themselves.

Granma ✪

Initial view of the Transitional State Administration Law

The following are excerpts from the editorial of *Tareeq Al-Shaab*, the central organ of the Iraqi Communist Party, giving an initial response to the Transitional State Administration Law approved Monday March 8, 2004, by the interim Iraqi Governing Council:

This important law will organise and direct political life in the country, determine the relationship between various authorities, chart the handover of power to the Iraqis, the ending of the occupation and restoration of independence and sovereignty, the building of democracy over the next two years, and prepare for the drafting of a permanent constitution and the holding of general elections.

It is not a permanent constitution but acts in place of one during the transitional period, and will have a significant influence on formulating a constitution in the future.

This explains the importance of this political, programmatic document in the life of the Iraqi people, both at present and in the near future. Depending on the proper implementation of this document

and abiding truly by its contents, a lot can be achieved by consolidating the rights and freedoms of citizens, groups and constituent parts of the Iraqi people, and ensuring that they are practised.

The document therefore helps to mobilise the efforts of all Iraqis and concentrates on whatever helps them to restore security and stability, restore sovereignty and independence, consolidate democracy and the rule of law, and build civil society, along with eliminating the legacy of all crimes committed by the defeated dictatorial regime (in political, cultural, national, religious, demographic terms).

The document is, of course, neither perfect nor ideal. It is the outcome of a consensus among forces, parties and figures of different ideological and political currents. It is an outcome of the conditions arising in the country which is living under occupation, the balance of forces and prevailing political climate (domestic, regional and international).

Despite some failings (such as the lack of popular participation in

discussing the document beforehand), and shortcomings in specific clauses (the weak role of the UN in supervising its implementation, the weak commitment by the state to provide social services and security, the lack of clarity regarding the role of foreign multinational forces during the transitional period, and others), the document remains positive in its essence and general concepts. It responds to the urgent and legitimate demands of the political, national, religious and cultural spectrum and constituent parts of Iraqi society.

It is, therefore, an expression of political reality, and a common denominator for the aspirations of various strata of our people under conditions which are the most complex and sensitive ever witnessed in their contemporary history.

The document is balanced in the way it deals with the country's identity, clear in specifying openly the rights and freedoms of citizens, in stressing equality, and in emphasising Iraqi citizenship.

In all events, it can be considered an acceptable compromise and settlement between various visions, opinions and interests of the constituent parts of our people. There is therefore no victor or vanquished, no winner or loser.

It provides the opportunity for wide and responsible participation in rebuilding the country politically, culturally and socially for all those who have at heart the interest of the homeland and the peoples' dignity, who reject oppression, dictatorship and its crimes.

The above brief remarks are no substitute for the need for a close reading and study of the document, with its nine chapters and 62 clauses. Let this initial reading launch wide discussion and serious study which aims, among other things, to ensure people's scrutiny and direct participation in supervising the proper implementation of this important document and abiding by its guiding principles. ✪

Government defeated in Greek elections

Parliamentary elections on March 7 resulted in the right-wing New Democratic Party (Nea Dimokrati - ND) defeating the social democrat PASOK Government. ND won 165 seats (an increase of 40 seats) and 45.38 percent (42.75% in 2000) of the vote. PASOK lost 41 seats, leaving it with 117 deputies from 40.57 percent of the vote (43.79% in 2000). The turnout reached 76.5% of possible voters.

The Communist Party of Greece (KKE) increased the number of its MPs, electing 12 compared to 11 in the previous elections. It did so with a total of 5.91 percent of the vote. The only other party to win seats was the left-leaning Synaspismos with six seats and 3.25 percent of the vote.

Dissatisfaction with PASOK was mainly directed to the New Democratic Party, with the combined vote of the two major parties remaining steady. A number of smaller parties, including extreme right and ultra left stood but failed to gain seats.

"Working people must hold no

illusions about the policy that the government of ND will implement. At the same time they have nothing to expect from the opposition of PASOK, since PASOK already offered its support and consent to critical issues", the KKE said in a short statement following the election.

"The strengthening of the mass popular movement and the rallying of popular forces around major fronts of struggle become today even more urgent and necessary tasks, in order to accelerate the building of the Anti-imperialist Anti-monopoly Democratic Front which constitutes the alternative for the people. KKE will contribute its utmost to these tasks."

Meanwhile, some 2000 security personnel, including 400 US soldiers, are set to start a two-week anti-terrorism exercise as part of the preparations for the Olympic Games. The government has refused to reveal the exact legal status under which the US military personnel will function. ✪

Humanitarian crisis in Lesotho grows

Lesotho is currently faced with a double humanitarian crisis. The World Food Programme (WFP) speaks of a "total failure" of this year's agricultural season, and, according to official government figures, the HIV prevalence rate among adult Basotho has reached 31 percent.

It is becoming increasingly clear that the small mountain kingdom of Lesotho is facing its most serious humanitarian crisis in decades. The rising AIDS numbers, extreme poverty and drought since 2001, and lack of international assistance, have taken the situation well beyond the limits of resistance of its people.

A recent release from the Lesotho Meteorological Services indicated that the agricultural season faces total failure. "Drought-like conditions have also had a negative affect on water supplies in dams, wells and rivers", WFP reports from Lesotho.

Villagers in the normally fertile valleys of Lesotho are seeing their cattle die due to lack of water. Agricultural production is going to be minimal, even less than last year. Despite rains in December

2003 and January this year, "the country continues to face serious drought conditions and increased vulnerability at the household level" the UN food agency warns. At least 600,000 people will require food aid this season, according to WFP, but the numbers are bound to rise even more.

More and more Basotho now rely on the little foreign food donations they get to survive. Food rations are however too small and are not reaching the people continuously due to lack of donations to the WFP. The UN agency has only received 15 percent of the funds it needs to assist the victims of the regional drought.

Around one third of the people in need of aid are additionally weakened by the HIV-AIDS pandemic, which has stricken the Kingdom especially hard. The disease is already causing the number of orphans to rise and the physical strength of potential workers to decrease.

Faced by the growing humanitarian crisis, the Maseru government has asked for international help. ✪



A protest in South Korea last December

From Chicago 7 to Cuban 5

MIAMI: Attorney Leonard Weinglass has taken on tough cases before. Known for his defence of the "Chicago Seven" – leaders of the protestors that interrupted the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago – Weinglass is now representing Antonio Guerrero, one of five Cuban and Cuban-American men unjustly convicted and imprisoned on federal charges.

Known collectively as the "Cuban Five", Fernando González, René González, Gerardo Hernández, Ramón Labañino and Guerrero were arrested in September 1998 for allegedly "spying". In fact, they were gathering information on anti-Cuba terrorists based in Miami, information that was shared with the US. Despite their efforts to protect both US and Cuban lives, in 2001 the Five were convicted and received extremely harsh sentences, ranging from 15 years' imprisonment to double life.

Weinglass and other Cuban Five defence lawyers were in Miami to argue an appeal to the case on March 10.

Accompanied by a delegation of US and international jurists and activists, Weinglass and the other lawyers submitted a 700-page brief to argue the appeal. The international supporters came from Italy, Argentina, Germany, Belgium and England. A distinguished group of Ecuadorians would have attended, but were denied visas by the US State Department.

A decision from the three-judge panel of the 11th US Circuit Court

of Appeals is not expected for months.

A key part of the appeal is that the trial should never have taken place in Miami. During the oral arguments, Weinglass cited prejudice in a community with 500,000 Cuban-Americans. Prejudice on Cuban issues was the same reason cited a year later by the Justice Department for trying to move a trial out of Miami in a lawsuit over the federal government's raid to seize the Cuban boy Elian Gonzalez, he told the court.

Celebrated as heroes in Cuba and among Cuba solidarity activists around the world, the five imprisoned men have sought to defend their dignity in the face of repeated efforts to isolate them from friends and family. One wrote a book of jailhouse poetry. There are some 235 solidarity committees in the US and around the world.

Responding to a virtual news blackout on the case, supporters of the Five placed a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* on March 3, signed by notables such as author Alice Walker, Detroit Auxiliary Bishop Thomas Gumbleton, and Nobel Peace Prize Winner Rigoberta Menchu. The ad explains the injustice surrounding the Cuban Five's case and calls on people to sign a web site petition to President Bush.

The campaign to raise US\$50,000 for the ad was launched last October. There was a great response with contributions from Germany, Spain, Belgium, Italy, France, Colombia, Argentina, South Africa,

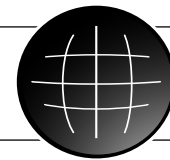


An action in San Francisco in support of the five

England, Puerto Rico, Ecuador, Canada, Australia and the US.

More than US\$10,000 was raised from the Cuban progressive community in Miami.

For more information and to see the advertisement (it is not possible to see it on the *New York Times* website) go to www.freethethefive.org. Acknowledgements to *People's Weekly World* and the National Committee to Free the Cuban Five. ☪



Global briefs

PALESTINE: Living conditions facing Palestinian women in the West Bank and Gaza – including their access to health, education, food and employment – have sharply deteriorated over the past several years. Palestinian women "have been deeply affected by movement restrictions, military incursions, and house demolitions, particularly in Rafah, where almost 10,000 Palestinians have been made homeless", because of Israeli actions, according to a report by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. The report says 52 pregnant women have given birth at military checkpoints since 2002, and that 19 women and 29 newborns died at those checkpoints between September 2000 and December 2002. Nearly 38 per cent of Palestinian mothers report that access to health services has become difficult, with 44 per cent attributing that to the Israeli siege and 28 per cent citing the lack of money to pay for health services.

SOUTH AFRICA: South Africa's Foreign Minister Ms Zuma says that if Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide has been forced from power against his will, it would have "serious consequences and ramifications for the respect of the rule of law and democracy the world over". She added, "the international community must not be seen to be wavering in its commitment to democracy and respect for the rule of law, particularly in the face of anti-democratic forces". South Africa fully supports the position of the Caribbean Community (Caricom) in demanding the United Nations investigate the Haitian President's removal.

CHINA: Two companies in northeastern China have developed a computer allowing the blind and partially sighted to access the Internet with a Chinese-Braille keyboard. The new computer is equipped to code and decode Chinese and Braille, and has voice software to read the screen to the user. Blind users can now learn to send and receive e-mails within two days, said the inventor of the Chinese-Braille keyboard. The inventor is a teacher of blind students whose own vision is limited. Some nine million people in China suffer serious eye diseases, and over five million of them are blind.

SOUTH AFRICA: "Joe Slovo was a unifier, a non-racist, an anti-racist, builder of the alliance and a proud patriot committed to all the people of South Africa", said Nelson Mandela when he addressed the launch of the Joe Slovo Election Trail at the Slovo's grave in Avalon Cemetery. The Joe Slovo Election Trail is the official election campaign of the South African Communist Party (SACP) in its support and work for an overwhelming victory of the African National Congress in the April 14 national and provincial elections. Joe Slovo was the National Chairperson of the South African Communist Party at the time of his death. SACP-led marches across the country will be exposing the exploitation and victimisation of farm and other vulnerable workers. The first march was held in Phalaborwa on March 13 to highlight the case of the man fed to lions by his employer. The SACP will be calling on farm workers to come forward to report their cases. The SACP will also be using the campaign to educate farm workers about their rights and to mobilise them to vote for the ANC.

Problems facing Czech trade unions

Since the overthrow of socialism in 1989, the Czech trade unions have undergone immense changes.

Ken Biggs in Prague

One of the principal aims of the Havel-led counter-revolution was to destroy the Revolutionary Trade Union Movement (ROH), set up in the closing days of World War II as Prague was about to erupt into open revolt against the Nazi occupiers.

The ROH was founded on May Day 1945 at an underground conference held in the Czechoslovak capital.

At the time of its dissolution in March 1990, it consisted of 17 industrial unions, a formidable force which had wielded considerable power during the 40 years of socialism.

Foreign industrial relations consultants like Price Waterhouse brought in during the "economic reform" of the 1990s admitted as much and master-minded the attack on trade union influence.

Fifteen years later the Czech

trade unions are much weaker in terms of both membership and influence – mainly because of the employers' success in destroying the principle of "one industry – one union".

This has been compounded by a variety of other negative influences. Since 1989, there has been the emergence of mass unemployment which currently officially stands at a record figure of well over 10 percent of the workforce. In reality it is an even higher rate as workers, especially women and older workers, have withdrawn from the labour market.

Workers also fear victimization, which in some well-publicised cases has obliged trade unionists employed by foreign companies to organise secretly.

The 1990 ban on political activities at the workplace; the massive privatisation of the state sector, a shrinking labour force; and the break-up of Czechoslovakia's traditional heavy industries and coal mines have also contributed to the weakening of the trade union movement.

Added to this is the failure of the Czech Confederation of Trade

Unions' (CzCTU) to give real leadership to its affiliated unions in the fightback against retrenchments.

There are now four trade union centres. Two – the CzCTU and the Confederation of Cultural Workers – are officially recognised by the government for the purposes of maintaining the fiction of post-1989 tripartite "social partnership".

Discontent with the CzCTU's role in facilitating "transformation" of the pre-1989 state sector-led socialist economy in the 1990s led to the farmworkers' and rail unions breaking away from the main centre and forming a third centre, the Association of Independent Unions (ASO).

The fourth centre – the Trade Union Association of Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia (OSCMS), formed in the early 1990s – is communist-led, but open to all workers regardless of their views.

Communist workers still active in trade unions often prefer to work in the CzTUC, where they are at least in direct touch with people of working age.

Trade union rights are under constant attack, especially in the private sector.

The right to strike exists only theoretically and is restricted to situations where negotiations on annual pay and conditions break down.

On the few occasions since 1989 when trade unions have called major strikes, employers have usually declared the strike "illegal" and tried to take the unions to court.

The Czech Labour Code mirrors EU industrial relations legislation, but at office and shop floor level, in the absence of strong workplace unions, many private employers ignore or flout it.

(Abridged) ☪

Workers also fear victimization, which in some well-publicised cases has obliged trade unionists employed by foreign companies to organise secretly.

Letters to the Editor
The Guardian
65 Campbell Street
Surry Hills NSW 2010



email: guardian@cpa.org.au

The Passion of the Christ

I was very interested to read Andrew Jackson's review of the film *The Passion of the Christ* (*The Guardian* 5/3/04). Although I have not seen the film, Andrew's review suggests questions which are important altogether apart from its artistic merits and its entertainment value.

We have to say that the film will be a great success after the publicity it has received. Religious fundamentalists, sadists and masochists, as well as many churchgoers of different denominations will flock to see it. To think of such a film as a purely religious phenomenon in the present world situation and in the present situation in Australia would be a mistake.

Two points made by Andrew, I think, call for some comment.

First, *The Passion* has been commended by Pope Paul II. The present Pope's political alignment is well known. He has shocked liberal and democratic people all over the world by his beatification of Stepinac, the Croatian archbishop and later Cardinal who welcomed Hitler into Croatia.

He has put Stepinac on an unstoppable road to canonisation, he was on the side of Pinochet in Chile and strongly condemned Liberation Theology.

Another comment by Andrew Jackson struck me with greater force. He states "Mel Gibson is affiliated to Opus Dei...". The

film must, in the light of this be taken more seriously – not just as a sure-fire pot-boiler to appeal to a particular audience, but as having a reactionary political motive.

Opus Dei is a religious organisation within the Catholic Church founded by a Spanish priest Jose Maria Escriva. Even while still studying for the priesthood he was noted for his extreme piety and his morbid use of physical mortification (e.g. self-flagellation to an extreme extent).

The organisation of Opus Dei grew very slowly at first, but during the Franco regime in Spain, Escriva played a prominent part in organising education, particularly tertiary education.

Escriva developed, after the Second World War, an organisation, operating largely but not entirely in secret, which grew rapidly in numbers and wealth.

In 1992, when Escriva was beatified by Pope Paul II, it had 80,000 members.

Although the Pope beatified Escriva, he did not seem to think of honouring Archbishop Romero and the six Jesuit priests murdered in Nicaragua, men whose martyrdom could not be disputed.

Opus Dei operates in Australia, and it is highly probable that it has members and certain that it has friends in Australian parliaments and in other influential positions, particularly ones associated with education.

Opus Dei might remind some of us of Santamaria's National Civic Council but there are three important differences:

(a) Opus Dei concentrates more on people who can or may be able to exert influence;

(b) it has the whole-hearted support of the Pope and almost certainly exerts considerable influence over him;

(c) it is a much more closely organised and harshly disciplined organisation than Santamaria's was

and it seems, without any human feelings.

The part played by Opus Dei in recent history is extremely complex and hard to uncover. A very good attempt at this task was made by Robert Hutchison in his book *Their Kingdom Come* (Doubleday 1997).

One feature of their work of some significance today is the Pope's concern about the advance of Islam in the religious field – talk of a crusade may be premature – but not if Opus Dei has its way.

There is one further aspect of *The Passion of the Christ* which must cause serious concern to many Australians, namely, is the film anti-semitic? Presumably it will be claimed that it is not, but this is no reassurance to many.

Any account of the crucifixion based on the New Testament story can be used in anti-semitic propaganda and I cannot see how this could be avoided without distorting the story told in the Gospels and echoed in the Acts of the Apostles and one or two of the Epistles.

In the Gospels, Christ celebrated the Passover just prior to his arrest and execution. In the old Czarist empire Jews celebrated the Passover, but never without the fear of a pogrom incited by gruesome Easter sermons about the crucifixion and often by more direct incitement to avenge the death of Jesus.

Tom Gill
Carlingford, NSW

Reason to be worried

The winds of change only occasionally blow with gale force, mainly they blow steadily (slowly) but consistently. And it is this slowness that deceives many people.

The vast majority of the world's people are at the moment confused, bewildered and worried.

Readers of *The Guardian* are worried too – and rightly so. When

you have men of unstable mind in charge of thousands of nuclear weapons it is something to be worried about. But they are not confused or bewildered. They are fully aware of what is happening and who is responsible.

First, *The Guardian* keeps them fully informed of the truth and is a counter to the lies and propaganda that spews forth daily from the capitalist media. We are fortunate that we have such a paper and we must make sure that it continues.

We are living in momentous times. The capitalist system is steadily but surely collapsing. The stench of corruption and rotten decay fills the air as the crisis of capitalism worsens day by day and the capitalists and their political lackeys flounder around with no idea at all of how to solve the problems their system creates.

The system is dying and they are dying with it and wish to take us with them. No thanks! Socialism is waiting in the wings and life and construction beckons! Forward the Communist Party and socialism!

Bert Appleton
Killcare Heights, NSW

Using your head

David Matters' letter (*The Guardian* 10/3/04) criticising Sitaram Yechury's speech on socialism, amounts to no more than an objection to people thinking with their heads.

Long before Marx and Engels arrived on the scene, working class and other oppressed people had dreamed of a better life. Dreaming is done inside the head, but it was prompted by the terrible material conditions they lived under.

Utopian socialists too were appalled at the oppressive and deprived material conditions the lower classes had to endure. They also did a bit of cogitating. Seeing the disgusting way capitalists

treated workers, they tried encouraging the capitalists to improve their ways. Of course, their schemes were not successful, because in their analysis of the world they latched on to the wrong bits of it as the keys to change.

By the time Marx and Engels appeared on the earth, we had a bit more knowledge about how it worked. Marx and Engels themselves studied their surrounds and came up with some very helpful insights, putting them together into a theory about how society works.

They also put their heads together and conceived in their minds the direction society is going to take, especially what comes next after capitalism. Having come to that conclusion, they did a bit more thinking about what was needed to help the working class take society in that direction.

When the first socialist society was established, it was only because people had first conceived it in their minds and decided they would take the steps recommended by Marx and Engels (and later Lenin) to bring it about.

Capitalism as a social system wasn't conceived in the human mind. The inhabitants of feudal society didn't sit down and think, "well, what'll it be next, capitalism or barbarism?"

Capitalism was another exploitative system. Socialism abolished exploitation – something new – so it had to be planned for, organised for, and fought for.

Yechury's right. Socialism was not a spontaneously evolved mode of production. It was "the first grand effort of mankind to transform a vision into reality."

David Matters needs to rethink. Analysing the world, then making plans (in your head) to change it is not "anti-Leninist". It's the very essence of the Marxist theory of knowledge.

Eddie Clynes
Woodford, NSW

Culture & Life

by Rob Gowland

Haiti: cocaine transit point

One question being asked about the US-run coup in Haiti is why would the US bother about such a poverty-stricken flyspeck? After all, according to Associated Press, after Haiti paid US\$32 million in arrears to the Inter-American Development Bank last July, it left just US\$3 million in the country's reserves.

Poor or not, however, Haiti has three strong points of appeal for the US Government. First there's the claim of tradition: organised crime and sweatshop business have both had a close link with the island for many years.

Under the Duvalier dictatorship, people who formed or joined a trade union or demonstrate an "anti-big-shot" bias would be dealt with by the dreaded Ton Ton Macoutes. Although they filled the same role as Hitler's Storm Troopers, the Macoutes were modelled more on Al Capone's hoodlum gangs.

Union organisers or just vocal union members would be hacked to death with machetes in front of their families. If workers became infected with progressive ideas about their rights, the Macoutes would burn out a group of workers' homes, to terrorise the rest into submission.

Far from intervening against this terroristic regime, succeeding US administrations supported it, just as they supported the military regimes that eventually succeeded it.

The people of Haiti were so poor and so terrorised that the country actually ran a lucrative trade in exporting blood! It has frequently been used for mass testing of new and unproven drugs for the US "ethical drug" industry.

The second point about Haiti to arouse intense US interest is its close proximity to Cuba. This is something of a double edged sword: while Haiti would be a convenient jumping off point for military or even terrorist attacks against Cuba, any developing ties between Haiti and Cuba could spread the Cuban "infection" throughout the Caribbean.

Under Aristide, Haiti had in fact developed strong ties to Cuba, with considerable benefits for the Haitian people. A 535-member Cuban medical brigade was distributed right across the country, bringing health care to some 75 percent of the population.

In the areas covered by the Cuban doctors, the mortality rate for infants under 12 months dropped from 80 to 28 per 1000 live births, and that for children under five from 159 to 39 per 1000 live births. The maternal mortality rate dropped from 523 to 259 deaths per 100,000 live births.

More than 370,000 Haitians – 80 percent of them children – have been vaccinated by the Cuban teams. It is estimated that nearly 86,000 human lives have been saved by the Cuban health workers in Haiti.

Cuba also established a School of Medicine in Haiti, staffed by Cuban professors, to train Haitians to continue the work begun by the Cuban medical teams. At the time of the coup, 247 young Haitians were studying there. Another 372 are studying medicine as scholarship students in Cuba itself.

Moreover, a radical Cuban-designed literacy program that uses radio was successfully introduced with the help of 20 Cuban literacy specialists. To date, under this program, 110,000 Haitians have learned how to read and write.

In addition, the Darbonne sugar mill complex was rebuilt with Cuban technical help, and at the time of the coup was working on its fourth sugar harvest with the help of 30 Cuban experts. The complex generated employment and guaranteed electricity during harvest time for the area's population, who previously did not enjoy that service.

None of this would have gone down well in Washington, where the concept of giving aid without strings simply doesn't make sense.

Which brings us to the third point about Haiti that would make it of interest to the US: its position as a transshipment point in the oh-so-lucrative drug trade.

The drug trade indeed is a hugely profitable source of capital, a multi-billion dollar business that links organised crime and "legitimate" business in the funding of commercial takeovers, political parties and clandestine intelligence operations alike.

It is an indispensable source of finance for developed capitalist countries and not one that they are going to leave under the con-



Haiti developed strong ties with Cuba under Aristide

trol of others. Just as Afghanistan and Kosovo are "crucial links in the transit (trans-shipment) of narcotics from the Golden Crescent, through Iran and Turkey, into Western Europe" (Michel Chossudovsky, Centre for Research on Globalisation), so Haiti is an important link in the cocaine transit trade from Colombia to Florida.

The US already has troops in Afghanistan, Yugoslavia (Kosovo) and Colombia. Now it has them in Haiti.

Wherever there are strategic or highly profitable resources, there you will find the US seeking to gain control over those same resources. Whether it is heroin produced in Afghanistan or cocaine produced in Colombia, the US aims to control it for greater profit.

The close integration of the US

intelligence community, organised crime and the drug trade has been an open secret for years. It became a scandal only when it was revealed that the CIA had bought the support of the Nicaraguan Contras by aiding them to introduce crack cocaine into black communities in the USA.

Even then, it was quickly swept under the carpet and the journalist who uncovered the story, Gary Webb of the *San Jose Mercury News*, was ultimately forced out of his job.

As Michel Chossudovsky has noted; "The protection of this trade [the cocaine transit trade] has a bearing on the formation of a new narco-government [in Haiti], which will serve US interests" (*US Sponsored Coup d'état: The Destabilisation of Haiti*). ☛



Sun March 21 ~
~ Sat March 27

The ruling class is invariably fascinated by tales of rich young aristocrats like Francis of Assisi who renounce their wealth and privileges in order to live among the poor. The very idea is so weird to the bourgeoisie that they have either to assume that the fellow is a total nut or else concede that he is "carrying out the work of God".

Members of the Catholic Church were frequently reminded that Christ had been less than enthusiastic about people amassing private wealth. Giving up your riches for a life of pious poverty had a long tradition, and probably guaranteed your entry into Heaven.

People like Francis of Assisi allowed the members of the ruling class to feel good about themselves: see what good people we are underneath, really? As long as these converts to religious poverty contented themselves with feeling sorry for the poor, they would be canonised and held up as examples for us all.

The embracers of poverty who are so highly exalted by the ruling class, from St Francis to Mother Theresa (now to be a saint herself, of course) have one thing in common: they never called on the poor to take back the wealth the rich had so obviously stolen from them in the first place.

No. Poverty was part of God's plan and had nothing to do with the wealthy. No wonder the ruling class made them saints!

Lost Worlds: Francesco (SBS 7.30pm Sundays) is a four-part

drama series that recounts the life (yet again) of Francis of Assisi. For those who are interested in that sort of thing.

According to *Cutting Edge: Straddling The Fence* (SBS 8.30pm Tuesday) in the past three years more than 100 Palestinian suicide bombings have killed nearly 900 Israelis.

The program does not acknowledge that the suicide bombings are the last resort of a people driven to desperation by unceasing Israeli aggression that has claimed the lives of tens of thousands of Palestinians.

Now Israel is building a huge wall (on Palestinian land, not Israeli, mind you) to keep the Palestinians out. Together with continued Israeli settlements in Palestine, the wall will mean the end of any chance for a separate Palestinian state.

This program is a "report" on the wall by *New York Times* columnist and three times Pulitzer prize winner Thomas Friedman. All Mr Friedman's various interviews, with supporters and opponents of the wall, show one thing (although in many cases inadvertently): the enormity of the aggressive, racist apartheid mentality behind its construction.

In fact, one interviewee, lawyer Muhammad Dahleh, sees a campaign for "one person, one vote and majority rule" as the eventual logical solution for the Palestinians as it was for the South Africans, for, he points out, within a decade Palestinians will, in terms of population, outnumber Israelis in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza.

If only the programs about archeologists uncovering traces of ancient civilisations that litter the National Geographic Channel and the History Channel could all be like *The Big Picture: The Secret of Eldorado* (ABC 8.30pm Wednesday).

Made by the BBC's *Horizon* team, it is intelligent without being pretentious, revealing without pretending to be about to uncover AMAZING FACTS and encounter INCREDIBLE DANGER every five minutes (apparently to accommodate US commercial breaks).

It has a scientific approach to



Ethel Barrymore and Carry Grant in a revealing and sensitive film (*None But the Lonely Heart*)

its scientific subject and is intensely interesting as a consequence.

Its subject is the search for traces of a vast Amazonian civilisation that were reported to exist by a Spanish conquistador, Francisco de Orellana, in 1540. Subsequent expeditions a century later could find no trace of the civilisation he described.

Modern archeologists also scoffed, because before you can have a civilisation you must have developed intensive agriculture to support it, and the red clay soil of the Amazon basin is too poor to support a large population. Even with contemporary technology, the jungle is unproductive.

But discoveries of sophisticated pottery and burial sites – far beyond anything made by the jungle tribes today – lead archeologists to the realisation that there really was once a great Amazonian civilisation – one

that tamed the jungle and built huge towns surrounded by moats, all linked by canals and causeways.

It's a fascinating program.

There were, as the House UnAmerican Activities Committee would point out in horror a decade later, quite a number of Communist writers working in Hollywood in the 1930s and early '40s.

Some of them, like John Howard Lawson, were involved in founding and then running the Screen Writers' Guild, as well as writing films that supported Republican Spain, opposed Nazi Germany and supported the Soviet Union as a WW2 ally.

In films as diverse as *Tender Comrade* (written by Dalton Trumbo), *The Seventh Cross* (script by Helen Deutsch from Anna Seghers' novel) and *Body And Soul* (written by Abraham Polonsky), Communist writers and progressive writers influenced by the Party attempted to raise serious issues beneath the gloss insisted on by the Studio heads.

Some Communist writers however simply couldn't hack it in the phoney atmosphere of Hollywood.

One such was the great playwright Clifford Odets, whose time in the movie capital was unhappy and not very productive.

One film he did manage to script and then direct was *None But the Lonely Heart* (ABC 10.30pm Saturday) in 1944. Based on Richard Llewellyn's novel about a Cockney drifter and his mother, the film had detractors as well as defenders, but today is generally well regarded.

The American Film Institute noted that "the off-beat casting of Cary Grant as the Cockney wanderer Ernie Mott and Ethel Barrymore's sad and wonderful portrayal of his mother make this a revealing and poetically sensitive film of haunting moods and desperate yearnings.

"Grant is exceptional as 'the tramp of the Universe' – an amazing characterisation of bewilderment and arrogance."

The critic of *The New York Times* remarked at the time of the film's release that "this picture will not be widely accepted just now, but ... it will be remembered – and revived – long after many current favourites are forgotten".

Sydney

First anniversary of the invasion of Iraq Global Day of Action – Saturday 20 March

Vigil & collection for medical aid to Iraq 10-11am

George Street, just outside Town Hall Square
organised by Sydney Peace and Justice Coalition
(contact Hannah on 0418 668 098 if you can help)

Community memorial service 11 am - 12 noon

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 264 Pitt St Sydney (near Park St)
Speak out our grief, our vision and our commitment
organised by Sydney Peace and Justice Coalition
(contact Ann at annw@nsw.uca.org.au or 8267 4280 if you can help)

March & Rally – assemble Hyde Park North 12 noon

March through the city back to Hyde Park for rally
Speakers include John Pilger, Andrew Wilkie, Senator Kerry Nettle,
Saif Abu Keshek Music: MC Wire, Urban Guerillas
Organised by Stop the War Coalition

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Sydney

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Every Friday night 6pm – 7.45pm

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(across from the Chalmers St exit and Devonshire St tunnel at Central Station)

Dinner afterwards in the Royal Exhibition Hotel across the road

March 19

Divide and Rule – Return of the Wedge

Professor John Warhurst, Politics ANU (to be confirmed);
Phil Glendenning, Director Edmund Rice Centre

March 26

Reining in Economic Inequality

Louis Haddad, Economics, Uni of Sydney
Frank Stilwell, Prof. Economics, Sydney Uni

April 2

It's Our ABC - What Do We Do To Save It?

Prof Ken Inglis, Visiting Fellow, History Program, Research School of
Social Sciences, ANU, author of *Aunty at Seventy - a Health Report
on the ABC*;

Robyn Williams, Science Program ABC;
Gary Cook, President Friends of ABC

April 9

Good Friday

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Haiti again faces US military

Lidice Valenzuela

The latest dispatch of troops to Haiti is the third time the US military has intervened in the small Caribbean nation with its history of dictatorships, corruption and violence. Washington is also claiming there is nothing to investigate over Haitian President Aristide's forced resignation. With its imperial perspective, the United States is once again directing the fortune of Haiti and its eight million inhabitants who first witnessed military interference by its powerful northern neighbour in 1915, which now, as in the past, is assuming the right to trample on this nation's sovereignty.

For Washington – as demonstrated by its arrogance – the Haitian people are second-class citizens, unable to find solutions to their

Analysts believe that the arrival of approximately 1000 US soldiers in Haiti just a few hours after the leader's departure constitutes a threat for other nations in the Caribbean. Once again, the White House made its decision without taking into account the views of regional organisations such as the CARICOM, which was seeking a negotiated solution to the crisis and is now demanding an investigation into the circumstances of the former priest's "resignation".

However, faced with CARICOM's demands, on March 5 the Bush administration stated that there was nothing to investigate or discuss. Richard Boucher, state department spokesman, responded to journalists' questions by saying that, for him, the function of the United States was clear and that there was definitely no need for an

arrived at the former army headquarters occupied by the band the previous Monday and ejected them.

Phillipe left out

According to witnesses, the colonel told the former police chief to forget his plans to join the new government or head the armed forces, a situation that Phillipe was not expecting and one that, despite his later statement, was difficult for him to accept.

The former Haitian military leader – who had declared that he was prepared to proclaim himself the country's new president – reiterated to the press his disposition to lay down arms and withdraw with his men to the north, perhaps to Cap-Haïtien. He affirmed that he would keep to his word, but that his gangs would not disarm "and that's that", which would lead one to suppose that being left without a finger in the pie was not in his game plan.

Despite the heavy presence of troops from the United States, Canada and Chile – plus those that are to join them from seven other countries – occupying Port-au-Prince, disorder and chaos still reign in this city, where there is only one hospital.

This facility is being managed by Cuban doctors who are continuing to give support and solidarity to the Haitian people having freely decided not to abandon the suffering population to its fate.

Haiti remains virtually without government. Boniface Alexandre, the interim President, has been virtually hidden away in the residence of a US diplomat since he assumed the post on February 29, and has only made one decision to date: appointing Leonce Charles – considered by Washington a trustworthy individual – as head of the police force, the only legitimate armed force in the country.

Likewise, the return of Mario Andresol – a former official exiled in the United States – to Port-au-Prince, has generated rumours regarding his appointment as Minister of the Interior, given that he boasts a personal profile and style that is to Washington's liking.

Heavily protected by the US Army and without any apparent power, Yvon Neptune, Aristide's former Prime Minister, decreed a state of emergency and the subsequent suspension of press freedom and the right to hold demonstrations. However, the anticipated re-establishment of law and order in the wake of Aristide's departure would seem to be a long way off.

Meanwhile, a hastily assembled tripartite commission representing national and foreign political forces continues working towards its sole objective: to create the conditions for forming a new government in Haiti.

This team is to appoint an Advisory Council of up to nine members, responsible for naming a new prime minister and a government acceptable to all the factions involved, who will subsequently convene early elections.

This would appear somewhat difficult in a situation in



US marines in Port-au-Prince – the third US intervention in 100 years

The powers involved in Aristide's overthrow are precisely those who supported the 1957-1987 dictatorships of the Duvaliers...

many serious and diverse problems; problems that are precisely the result of the support afforded by wealthy countries to a series of corrupt and dictatorial governments.

In the name of supposed democracy, on February 29 the imperialist power sent in its marines to deliver the coup de grace to the constitutional government of Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

In 1915, the United States bombed Haiti after a series of popular uprisings and invaded the western part of the island that this nation shares with the Dominican Republic. That occupation lasted 20 years.

Later, in 1994, 20,000 US soldiers returned to the impoverished Republic to reinstall Aristide (overthrown in a traditional military coup), following a secret deal that the White House had agreed with General Raoul Cedras.

The second occupation cost US taxpayers US\$1 billion. For Haiti, whose annual budget is US\$300 million, that sum could have resolved or alleviated its extreme poverty or the pressure of the nation's foreign debt.

Third US military intervention

And now comes the third military intervention of the last 100 years, precisely when Haiti is commemorating the bicentenary of its constitution as the first independent republic in the region.

Shortly before pressure from US and French diplomats to resign, President Aristide announced that he would continue to seek the road of dialogue with the opposition, a position that was unattractive to Washington officials, interested in installing a traditional puppet government in Haiti.

investigation. That statement came a few days after the US Congress asked for an explanation of the administration's actions in Haiti.

When the crisis began on February 5, the Haitian Government headed by the Lavalas Family Party, came under extreme pressure from opposition supporters calling for a general election in the wake of alleged cases of fraud during recent parliamentary assemblies, and also charging the President with corruption. Aristide agreed to talks in order to find a way to resolve the situation.

But the agreement was paralysed due to the revolt by former military personnel under the command of Guy Phillipe, the ex-police chief who had already tried to overthrow Aristide in 2001, and who had returned from exile in the neighbouring Dominican Republic in order to speed up the head of state's departure.

Nevertheless, having paved the way for the United States, four days after his entry into Port-au-Prince, Phillipe – self-proclaimed leader of the armed forces – was sidelined from the national political game via a Washington decision.

A State Department communiqué on March 4, cited by a diplomatic source, indicated that the rebels are not being considered for the new government. It stated that an orderly and constitutional process was underway to assure the country's political transition and that Washington was in favour of holding talks with the Haitian opposition, but not with the rebels, armed gangs, criminals or former members of the army or death squads.

Members of Phillipe's armed gang, the National Reconstruction and Liberation Resistance Front, began to leave the capital after a heavily-protected US colonel

which counter-posing interests predominate.

Despite all these political manoeuvres in the interests of restoring what the United States has described as "a lost democracy", observers state it would be very difficult for Phillipe – an ambitious man who has demonstrated his capacity for taking the country to the brink of chaos and a humanitarian crisis – to resign himself to a quiet retreat.

Humanitarian aid continues to arrive in devastated Haiti, whose month-long war has cost the nation a total of US\$300 million, the

for men and women stands at 49 and 50 years respectively. The country lacks healthcare, sanitation and educational infrastructures. The exodus to the United States is massive, as is the subsequent return of the industrialised nation has no interest in illiterate blacks, even as a source of cheap labour.

When Aristide won the 2001 elections, the United States believed that it would be able to reach a swift agreement with the President in order to wipe out the ever-latent threat of a mass wave of Haitian immigration – in 1991, 40,000

The country lacks healthcare, sanitation and educational infrastructures.

equivalent of the annual national budget.

The powers involved in Aristide's overthrow are precisely those who supported the 1957-1987 dictatorships of the Duvaliers, a family that stole US\$900 million and left the Haitian people in the most appalling misery, without resources and further castigated by a blockade imposed for being unable to honour their financial commitments to creditors.

Eighty percent of the Haitian people live in dire poverty; 45 percent are illiterate; life expectancy

people left the island – without having to involve itself in economic co-operation as a contribution to the country's reconstruction.

Certain media channels are questioning whether the Haitian people are in fact the losers waiting for a sweetened re-colonisation, this time in the guise of "humanitarian interference". Some have recalled that 200 years ago they made a revolution and are daring to predict that many things could happen in the next few months. We can but wait and see.

Granma (slightly abridged) ☺



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