

# The SPARK

For workers' power and international socialism

ISSN 1177-0724

The Spark November 2011

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Monthly magazine published by



*The Spark* November 2011  
Vol. 21, No8, Issue No 248

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## Editorial

Byron Clark

At the end of this month New Zealand will hold a general election. While current polls might lead us to be cynical about voting, we need to remember that our right to vote was fought for by previous generations and shouldn't be taken for granted. Woman gained the right to vote in this country though a massive popular movement in the latter part of the 19th century. We should be aware that Kate Sheppard believed "All that separates, whether of race, class, creed, or sex, is inhuman, and must be overcome" and saw the gaining women's' suffrage as part of that struggle.

We should also remember that in addition to women being denied the vote, there was a time when most men were too. Originally voting was a privilege reserved for land owning men, a democracy only for those who made up the capitalist class. In New Zealand in the 19th century, this excluded Maori who owned land in common, and most of the largely itinerant working class- miners, shearers, sailors- who often had no fixed abode, let alone their own land.

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*The Spark* magazine is now in its 20th year as we continue the long-term fight for socialism. Readers and supporters may consider remembering us in their will with assets or money that will help the struggle in the long-term. If this is you please put in your will 'Workers Party, PO Box 10-282, Dominion Road, Auckland' as well as what you would like to leave to us.

## Unnatural disaster

Ian Anderson, Workers Party member, Wellington

The Rugby World Cup finally has a competitor for national coverage, but it's unlikely to inspire millions. Container vessel MV Rena recently ran aground off the coast of Tauranga; within a week, a 5-kilometre oil slick was killing wildlife. To say the least, this does not look good for the current government. In a mystifying sign of the times, capitalist rag the Dominion Post even ran the front-page head-line "People Power," covering clean-up efforts by citizens in light of reportedly negligent bureaucracy. However for all their populism, the right-wing press doesn't dare discuss the cause of the problem: a voraciously exploitative system that alienates the people from the land, for profit.

Like so many unnatural disasters, the spill lays class divisions bare. Rena is operated by the Mediterranean Shipping Company, which this year overtook Maersk as the largest global shipping line in terms of container capacity. In 2007 they were named shipping line of the year for the 6th time, due to their impressive capacity - this means fast, cheap, and plentiful commodities. To achieve this they must cut labour costs, and ignore ecological factors. Rena was a Flag of Convenience ship, meaning that it used a false national flag to dodge regulations, ignoring warnings from three inspectors before running aground. More than half the world's commercial ships use flags of convenience.

Maritime New Zealand, funded in large part by transport conglomerates such as MSC, shows no interest in challenging the flag of convenience system. Like many so-called 'regulators' in bed with their industry, MNZ is far better at PR than implementing anything significant. Only the International Transport Federation and their comrades in the Maritime Union of New Zealand challenge the flag of convenience system, as they have done for decades.

By bringing a stark reminder of the risks of oil, this disaster also further underlines the class division that produced the Mana movement. Maori Party MP Hekia Parata, Acting Minister of Energy and Resources, supports

greater investment in non-renewables including exploration for offshore oil-drilling. However communities particularly in the East Cape oppose exploration, and Mana opposes all further investment in oil.

In light of government negligence, many are volunteering to help with the clean-up. Anyone who wishes to volunteer can contact Elaine Tapsell at

etapsell@ihug.co.nz or 027 278 824.

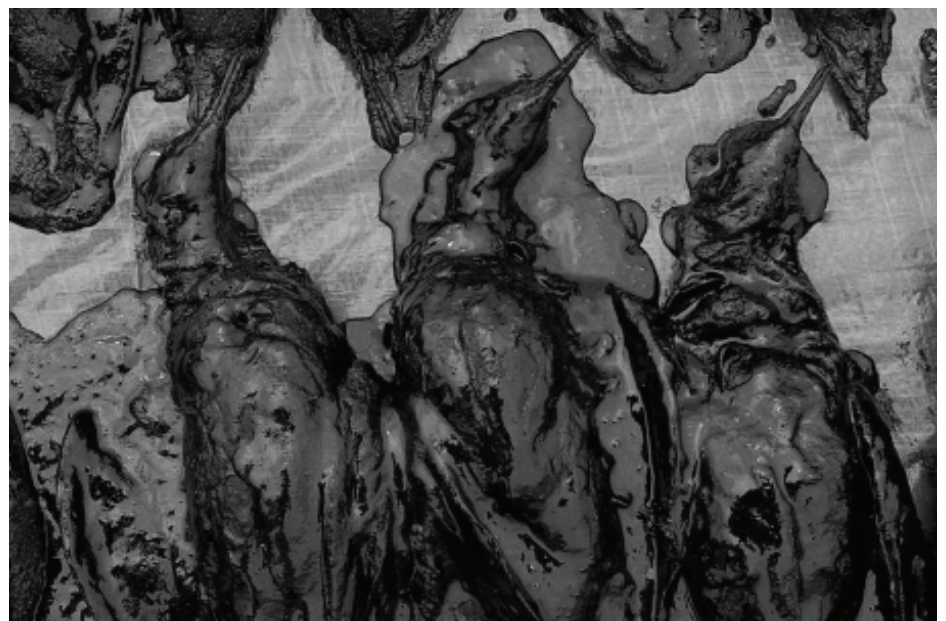
People wishing to help out should ensure they obtain access to PPE gear.

While solidarity efforts like this are crucial, they treat the symptom not the cause. Ultimately the coastline must be controlled by affected communities, and by the workers on its vessels. Anything less is armed theft.



Above, the container ship Rena, which became cast on the Astrolabe Reef October 5, about 14 miles from Tauranga Harbour.

Below, sea birds killed by oil leaked from the Rena.





# Pike River disaster

## Pike River Mine inquiry - troubling safety issues

The Royal Commission of Inquiry's investigation into the deadly Pike River mine disaster that occurred in November last year concluded in Greymouth on Friday, 23 September. It produced important revelations regarding inept police supervision after the tragedy, lax emergency response and planning by Pike River Coal, and misguided decisions that still have prevented the recovery of bodies of 29 dead miners.

The Pike River Coal Ltd. explosion of 19 November – and five subsequent blasts in the days following – is New Zealand's worst mining disaster in 100 years and Royal Commission hearings are succeeding in illuminating serious malpractices that have no place in modern mining. This second set of three-week hearings that began on 5 September will be followed by a third phase in November.

The three-member commission heard testimony on time and information lapses in rescue and recovery between local and national police supervision. And they heard the frustration of an Australian Construction, Forestry, Mine and Energy Union (CFMEU) expert from the Queensland Mines Rescue team, whose team arrived at Pike River in the immediate days after the blast, only to be sidelined and kept out of the monitoring loop.

In other testimony, the panel heard from the New Zealand Mines Rescue general manager who said that off-site control by national police in Wellington resulted in "operational paralysis." One of the commission members, Stewart Bell, a state Mine Safety commissioner from Australia, asked a senior police commissioner, "How much time was wasted, training police officers, in mining matters when you could have had someone there from the word go that understood the word terminology from the word go?"

NZ Mines Rescue also was sidelined in the aftermath. The general manager said he advised the police and Labour

Department on 21 November to immediately seal the mine to prevent intake of air. They rejected the idea and within days five more explosions occurred. Sealing would have made it possible to recover the bodies sooner.

Whyte testified earlier that he was flabbergasted to witness a large ventilation fan positioned at a portal pumping fresh air into the shaft in the early stages of rescue and recovery.

Eleven of the 29 dead were members of ICEM affiliate Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU). The union's attorney questioned witnesses on safety practices of Pike River Coal Ltd. He heard testimony that the company failed to provide enough drift-runners to mechanically evacuate miners in event of an emergency. A control room operator, who lost his brother in the disaster and was manning internal and external

telephone lines at the time of the blast, testified that telephones into the mine sometimes worked and sometimes didn't.

A safety and training manager of Pike River Coal Ltd., who lost a son in the blast, admitted that he was always concerned that a long ventilation shaft served as the mine's prerequisite second escape route. It was revealed climbing the laddered shaft could take up to 45 minutes and Pike River provided self-rescuers with only 30 minutes of fresh oxygen.

In the final week of the Inquiry, last week, panel members heard from seven family members of the deceased who spoke on ineffective communication and outreach by authorities. November's third stage of the Royal Commission of Inquiry will deal with the cause of the disaster.



Entry portal to the Pike River mine

## The West Coast in New Zealand capitalism

Byron Clark, Workers Party Christchurch branch organiser

“Making a living here has always been hard. Mining, timber milling, farming, fishing ... They’re all hard yakker and they breed hard people.” That was the assessment of travel writer David Morris when writing about the West Coast. The statement seems accurate, since the frontier days of settlement the West Coast had had an economy based on resource extraction, mining being the most literal example of that.

The region is widely considered the birth place of the New Zealand labour movement, the Federation of Labour, the Labour Party, and the Communist Party were all founded there. While workers could earn a good living in the mines, it came at a high price. The Pike River disaster a year ago was not the first time massive loss of life occurred in a mining accident. In 1896 an explosion at Brunner Mine killed sixty-five people, and in 1967 an explosion at the

Strongman mine in Rūnanga killed nineteen.

Despite its abundance of natural resources, the region hasn’t developed much in the way of secondary industry, the coal is not even exported from a West Coast port, instead it is taken by train to Lyttelton near Christchurch. Traditionally young people have left to seek jobs ‘over the hill’ in Christchurch and further afield, and the area is the only region in New Zealand to have experienced a decline in population; from a high of 40,136 in 1936 down to 30,300 in 2001.

The 2006 census showed a slight increase, likely a result of coal and gold prices creating a renewed growth in mining. This seems to be what the region is pinning its hopes too, Grey District Mayor Tony Kokshoorn, himself the son of a coal miner, has called for the Pike River mine to be reopened as an open

cast mine, stating “If they [miners] can’t get in, that is when they would have to work around that area or in a different area away from the bodies.” While this comment may seem callous to those outside the region he stated “The families [of the deceased miners] want to see that mine go ahead. They know their loved ones left down there would want that.”

The way that capitalism has developed in New Zealand has meant that the West Coast (and certainly other regions too) today lacks the opportunities on offer for workers in the major cities. The region that once cradled so much hope for the future of the working class has now become a land of despair. A 2008 UMR poll found Coasters to be the most unhappy people in the country. In Blackball, where International Workers Day (May Day) is still marked annually, the atmosphere is one of wistful nostalgia for past glory.



Image of Brunner Mine workers, in 1896, after an explosion in the mine killed sixty five workers.



## Miners and the Labour Movement

Jared Davidson

From the arrival of colliers in the 1870s to New Zealand's biggest strikes, miners have played an active part in the struggle against capitalism. As Len Richardson points out, "coalminers occupy a special place in the history of industrial radicalism in New Zealand". Socialists of many shades considered them "a revolutionary vanguard destined to bring capitalism to its knees" — to employers they were troublemakers holding back the progress of modern development. Regardless of which brush they are painted with, there is no doubting the importance of miners in New Zealand's labour history.

Miners were some of the first migrants to New Zealand, transplanted from the English coalfields to the 'New World' in the late 1870's. Unfortunately for the colonial coalmasters these miners brought with them the 'twin evils' of Methodism and unionism, and in 1884 formed the first miners union in Denniston. They quickly went about organising their own Federations to accommodate the diverse situations of the coalfields — the Amalgamated Miners' and Labourers' Association in the 1880's and the more successful Miners' Federation of 1908. Meanwhile during the Maritime Strike of 1890 miners took strike action in support of the general seamen's strike.

The latter Federation was the result of a dramatic strike in the town of Blackball — long standing home of New Zealand radicalism. Growing militancy was stoked by the arrival of radicals like Patrick Hickey and the propaganda of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) — whose advocacy of direct action and revolutionary industrial unionism related to the miners' disenchantment with the labour laws of the day (such as the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act, which disallowed unions from striking). In 1908 the formation of a branch of the New Zealand Socialist Party signalled the rise of revolutionary ideas in the valley.

Since 1907 "Blackball miners and their employers had been on a collision course" over conditions, so when 7

miners were fired for taking 30 minutes 'crib-time' instead of the 15 imposed by the company it was the final straw — all 120 Blackball miners ceased work on 27 February 1908. This action was a deliberate challenge to the ICA Act and the Arbitration Court tried to intervene, but community solidarity was too strong. After 3 months the company gave in, sending waves of enthusiasm for direct action throughout the country. The resulting Miners Federation grew into the 'Red' Federation of Labour, whose preamble stated "the working class and the employing class having nothing in common". This "baptism of fire" did not end in Blackball however, for the 'Red Feds' soon found themselves involved

in two of New Zealand's most violent labour struggles: the Waihi Strike of 1912 and the Great Strike of 1913.

The Red Feds encouraged class struggle free of the 'leg iron of the working class': the ICA Act. Affiliated unions, including the miners' of the Waihi Trade Union of Workers, began to de-register from the ICA. So in 1912 when 30 engine drivers in Waihi re-registered under the ICA (reportedly encouraged by the bosses), the union struck in protest. On 13 May Waihi came to a standstill. However the strike failed — subjected to intense police repression and violence the balance of power shifted to the bosses. During what became known as the 'Black Week' the



The Miners Hall at Runanga, 1920.

Miners' Hall was stormed, striker Fred Evans was killed by a Police baton to the head (becoming the first worker to die in an industrial dispute in New Zealand), and unionists and their families were driven out of town as Police stood by.

On the heels of the Waihi Strike came the Great Strike of 1913, in which miners played an important part. In October Huntly miners called a strike when the company dismissed two union executive members, while in Wellington the watersiders struck when the Union Steam Ship Company refused to pay travelling time for shipwrights. Strike action soon spread — miners on the West Coast took wildcat strike action without waiting for official sanction, and shut down the ports of Westport and Greymouth. Fearful of the miners' militancy, explosives were shifted from the Runanga state mine to a private munitions magazine in Greymouth.

The Great Strike involved some 16,000 workers and resulting in a general strike in Auckland. Massive demonstrations and union control of the waterfront was eventually broken with 'Massey's Cossacks'—farmers enrolled as special police—and the hand of the state. Before long Naval ships in the port of Wellington had their guns trained on the city, machine guns lined the streets, and soldiers with naked bayonets protected 'free' labour to re-open the docks. By December strike leaders were arrested for sedition, the strike collapsed, and the government/employers coalition gained a complete victory. Miners, true to their fighting spirit, were some of the last to return to work.

After the Great Strike miners' battled employers over conditions and the contracts system, until the outbreak of the First World War threw up new a new issue: conscription. When the

government introduced a national register of men of military age, West Coast miners threatened industrial action to halt what was perceived to be the first-step towards compulsory conscription. A 'go-slow' was put in place in late 1916. The government promptly assured miners that if called up their appeals would be favourably heard, but nonetheless miners were refused exemption until coal production was back to normal rates. In April 1917 miners on the West Coast struck, demanding that all military conscription cease. A compromise was made—legal action against the strikers and the refused exemptions were dropped in exchange for a promise of no strike action for the duration of the war. Although radical anti-conscriptionists on the Grey Valley were unsatisfied, the miners accepted the government's terms.

Throughout the 20th Century miners were also heavily involved in revolutionary political groups. As well as the aforementioned New Zealand Socialist Party and the IWW, miners were members of New Zealand's first Communist Parties. West Coast Marxists were involved in the New Zealand Marxian Association (1918), the Communist Party of New Zealand (1921) and the West Coast Communist Federation (1922). In 1925 Blackball became the headquarters of the Communist Party, whose secretary in 1927 was also the secretary of the United Mine Workers—a federation of miners formed in 1923.

From the Alliance of Labour (1919) and the unemployed workers' unions of the depression years, to the 1951 Lockout, miners featured in the many struggles of labour against capital. However the defeat of 1951 signalled what Richardson describes as the "slow and lingering death of mining unionism and the communities that sustained it". Mining no longer played the crucial role it had during its development, technologies changed, and communities fragmented. Yet miners' struggles continued, and will continue as long as mining and capitalism exist—as recent as 2009/2010 miners at Stockton, Spring Creek, Rotowaro and Huntly East took industrial action against Solid Energy, showing that the struggles of miners in New Zealand is far from history.





## Right To Strike in Australia

Workers Party member Ian Anderson interviewed veteran Australian union activist Dave Kieran, on the recently launched Right To Strike Campaign.

*The Spark:* If you could start with a basic overview of the Right to Strike campaign, and how it started.

**DK:** The right to strike campaign began about a fortnight ago in its current form, where 6 unions attended a meeting to establish a national campaign, and to work practically towards resolutions in workplaces, up through unions and union executives, approach civil society and civil movements, faith-based communities etc seeking similar resolutions of support.

It's based very much on the International Labour Organisation (ILO) framework, which indicates that the right to strike actually underpins the will of the people; that is, all of our other rights are protected by the right to strike. Certainly industrially, things like the right to organise, right of entry, are protected by the right to strike.

To establish a bit of history, it was the move in 1977 in Australia against the right to take solidarity strikes that then led to the privatisations, deregulation of the banks, of the labour markets, basically the neoliberal agenda rolled out once the right for workers to show solidarity was made illegal.

*The Spark:* Why is the right to strike so important politically?

**DK:** In surprising ways. Given the rollout of the neoliberal agenda globally, there is so much about a representative democratic model that is obsolete. There are so many decisions that communities – regardless of how they vote – call for, that governments do not deliver.

Unions now have an even more important role to play, because if they had the right to strike during the neoliberal reforms, they could have taken action against the privatisations, against deregulation, against redundancies and so on.

*The Spark:* Has the right to strike ever actually been unrestricted in Australia?

**DK:** No, never. I don't know of any



country where that is the case. In Australia the right to strike is always something that was taken, and never provided by law.

Unfortunately, what unions did in the '70s was to believe that unions could duck and weave the anti-solidarity laws. If you had a dispute in Factory A, and there was a dispute in Factory B, it would be maintained that they actually had nothing to do with each-other. In the end, that meant we could be painted as partaking in fraudulent behaviour. Those of us that were younger leftists back then warned the unions, said "don't go down that road," but popular wisdom at the time was that we could duck and weave

the laws. But the laws were extended, and we're more and more corralled.

In so many ways, workers and unions are unequal before the law. It's illegal for workers to show solidarity with another group because a second employer might be hurt, whereas in an industrial dispute the employer can continue to operate with second, third and fourth employers to their best possible advantage, to achieve an industrial outcome. Employers can employ scabs during a dispute, a secondary labour force – the scab is a secondary partner to achieve an industrial outcome. So we are simply demanding equality before the law.



# Interview: Australian unionist

*The Spark:* And how do you plan to advance this campaign?

**DK:** We initially need to build unity in our movement. That initially means the broadest possible discussion and analysis at the workplace level, with resolutions coming through, similar resolutions coming through civil society, through social movements, for example the environment movement – which is always calling for Green Bans to be applied again, but maybe not as cognisant as they could be that the current laws don't allow for that unlike in the '70s. The fact is now that unions can't even show solidarity with each other, let alone taking action on an environmental claim by the community.

So it's a matter of building that solidarity infrastructure, so we work towards a day when we pick the appropriate (or inappropriate) employer, and simply announce that we are coming for you. Whilst you are willing to act in such undemocratic and inequitable ways, we are organising to come for you.

But initially we must have the discussion with our communities, because our communities had such a job done on them that they do see strikes as

a destructive thing. So it's the discussion, resolutions, choosing the appropriate target, and then taking strike action.

*The Spark:* What are the risks of taking strike action?

**DK:** Well there's this myth that we have the right to strike – but it's only within an Enterprise Agreement, and even then it can be called off by a third party. So if you break those constraints, the penalties for unions are enormous.

If they strike with a view to actually close down a workplace or an industry, the unions can be fined hundreds of thousands of dollars a day, workers can be fined hundreds for each day of the strike – whereas an employer can close down an entire workplace or industry, move offshore and there are no penalties.

*The Spark:* Can you talk about Union Solidarity, and how that is connected.

**DK:** I should say from the outset that Union Solidarity is gone. It was an attempt by community members to take action where unions could not; so if they wanted to trade with a secondary employer, or employ scabs, then we

would hit their secondary employer. We would close them.

It was an organisation that unlike unions had nothing to lose, and would go the whole way. My suspicion under Abbott is that this will be coming from a multitude of directions and organisations.

*The Spark:* How do you plan to orient to non-unionised workers.

**DK:** Well, in Australia as in New Zealand, unionisation is around 20% of the workforce and less in the private sector. So you have a lot of people in the service sector who know if they lose, they can lose their job. You can't guarantee victory without the right to strike.

*The Spark:* Are you forming any international links?

**DK:** Yes, one of the features of this is to move through the various international organisations, for example the International Transport Federation, and demand that all laws be framed by the conventions that we're signatories to. We have to demand that in the first second and third worlds, the right to strike is unrestricted.

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# Occupy movement

## Occupy New Zealand

On October 15th New Zealand cities joined the global “Occupy” movement which as of this writing is taking place in 1500 cities in over 100 countries as a protest against wealth inequality. The December issue of *The Spark* will include further coverage of the movement; here we publish the statements issued by the occupations taking place in Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin.

### Auckland

[Occupy] Auckland is a leaderless resistance movement with people of many colours, genders and political persuasions. We are the 99% and we believe in people and the planet before profit. We will no longer tolerate the greed and corruption of the 1%.

We are also in solidarity with <http://www.OccupyWallStreet.org>, <http://www.OccupyTogether.org> and all of the

Occupancy movements around Aotearoa New Zealand and the world.

We will be occupying Aotea Square from the 15th of October and encourage the use of nonviolence to maximise the safety of all participants.

We recognise Aotea Square as Ngati Whatua land and that it is also a public space. Ngati Whatua have kindly consented to us ‘occupying’ this land.

General Assemblies will be run to make group decisions and to build our

movement. They are open, participatory and horizontal.

### Wellington

This is the Wellington extension of the global movement that started with Occupy Wall St. We want a return to real democracy, a government by the people for the people & an economic system that works for 100% of the people.

‘We are occupying Civic Square as part of the global occupy together



March up Queen Street in Auckland, as part of the Occupy movement there





Occupy demonstration in Civic Square, Wellington.

movement. We are unaffiliated and opposed to all forms of oppression, especially economic inequality. We are an inclusive, family friendly, alcohol and drug free space. Join us. Together we are the 99%.'

## Christchurch

We stand in solidarity with the growing Occupy Wall Street movement, and other occupations taking place in over 1,500 cities around the world, including Auckland, Wellington and Dunedin.

Our intention is to create a society of true equality. We are acting to educate ourselves and the wider community about pressing issues that face our world.

The drive for profit has outstripped basic human and environmental needs, such as education, healthcare and the simplest of things like food and clean water. Excessive corporate influence

has degraded our political system into governments composed of weak or corrupt representatives who support profit before people and planet.

We intend to release statements in future which discuss local, national and global challenges, with these factors in mind.

Our gratitude goes out to the lovely crowd who came to our opening rally on Saturday October 15th, the day called "United for Global Change". Approximately 300 people peacefully marched down Riccarton Road in solidarity with our friends across the world, before returning to Occupation Corner for a great evening of music, dance and discussion. We would also like to thank the local authorities for recognising our peaceful intent and interacting with us in a friendly way. We hope that Christchurch recognises the importance of opening up channels

of communication to help our city, our world and its people return to their feet.

We make our decisions through consensus in daily General Assembly meetings at 10am and 8pm, where everyone is encouraged to speak in an open and welcoming setting. We encourage you to join us for a meeting and participate in an inspiring true democracy. During the day we hold discussion workshops and welcome passers-by to join us in thoughtful exchange.

We respect the area where we have chosen to base ourselves, and we are doing everything we can to minimize our environmental impact. We clear the wider area of rubbish each day and regularly move our tents to protect the grass. We also seek to engage with local residents through daily activities in art, culture and sport. We are a safe and child-friendly occupation!

# Occupy movement

Our diverse group includes people with a range of jobs, education, ages,

family and friends just like you, and we are thoroughly enjoying engaging with a

group of friendly and forward thinking people.



Occupy protesters have maintained a presence in Hagley Park, Christchurch

In Dunedin Occupy protests have been occurring in the Octagon, below.



## Dunedin

The time has come to show your support for injustices against the New Zealand people and the crimes of the Government!

Let us unite and stand as one and show the world what we can do!

We stand in solidarity with the Wall St Protesters and the many other protesters standing around the world that say 1% will not continue to steal from the 99%, which is happening right now.

NZ is being stripped NOW!

EMPOWER YOURSELF! You are the one you have been waiting for! There will be change. There will be justice!



## ‘Occupy Melbourne’ savaged by riot police

The following article by Socialist Party Australia (SPA) member Kirk Leonard, was first published on the Socialist Party website [www.socialistpartyaustralia.org](http://www.socialistpartyaustralia.org)

Occupy Melbourne protesters were brutally assaulted by riot police wielding pepper spray and police on horse back on Friday, 21 October. The British Queen’s visit next week is clearly linked to the timing of this attack.

The occupation of the ‘City Square’ in Melbourne began last Saturday 15 October as part of the global ‘Occupy’ movement. This magnificent movement is inspired by the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt and the mass occupations in Spain, Greece and the US which have taken place this year.

One thousand people took part in the launching of the protest camp on 15 October with between two and three hundred continuing the occupation daily. These numbers are significant in a country which has not yet been severely impacted by the global economic crisis.

Even though Australia has not reached a stage of mass unemployment yet, ordinary people understand and sympathize with the idea of the 99% versus the 1%. Most passers by were positive about the occupation.

Despite the widespread sympathy for the occupation the Lord Mayor of Melbourne, Robert Doyle, served an eviction notice on the occupiers at 7am on Friday. At 9am a fence was erected around the occupiers and their camp.

The response of the occupation was to link arms in a tight huddle and try to defend the camp. Hundreds of protesters also rallied outside the fences to support those inside. Members of the Socialist Party have been involved in the occupation daily and they played a key role in arguing to move the occupation onto the streets.

From lunchtime onwards Swanson Street, a major street in the middle of the city which is essential to the tram network, was blockaded.

The occupiers made a brave and disciplined stand in the face of extreme police violence. In packs of up to eight, police picked out and charged at



Riot police and mounted police intervened in the Occupy Melbourne protest, October 21, and assaulted protesters.

individuals, grabbing them by the head first and ramming them into the ground. Occupiers managed to hold the space in the face of this assault for three hours.

Even after the eviction from the square was complete the occupiers refused to give in. For the following six hours hundreds of occupiers moved very slowly, en masse, through the central streets of Melbourne. They managed to blockade a key intersection for an hour and a half late in the afternoon. The tram network in Melbourne was thrown into chaos.

Police used horse charges to try and clear the streets. This incredibly dangerous and reckless tactic put hundreds of people in danger of serious injury or even death. Not since the anti-globalization protest against the ‘World Economic Forum’ in September 2000 has such a violent, large scale police

operation been witnessed in Melbourne.

The occupiers held a general assembly late in the afternoon. They made the decision to hold a rally the following day in which about 600 people attended. Discussions are now taking place about how to strengthen this movement. It is absolutely imperative that occupiers not allow the state and police thugs – who are the defenders of the ‘1%’ – to dictate when, where and how protests can be held.

The ‘Occupy Melbourne’ protest is part of the global movement of people who are fed up with the capitalist system. The widespread latent support that the occupation has elicited amongst layers of ordinary people in Melbourne is indicative of a changing mood in society. This process will continue as the crisis of capitalism deepens.

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# Commentary

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## Death of Steve Jobs; The church of commodity fetishism and the order of Saint Jobs

Byron Clark

In Marxist theory, commodity fetishism describes the mystification of social relations between people to objectified relations between things. While the actual value of a product is equivalent to the amount of labour that went into it, products are seen to have a greater value than they actually does. It's because of this that products can be sold at a price much higher than they cost to produce, the difference between the actual use value of a product and its price is surplus value, value that is expropriated by the owners of the means of production.

Marx took the term fetishism from the concept of objects being seen to have some mystical proprieties, such as those objects used in religious ceremonies. There are situations where commodities seem to embody both these

types of fetishism; "These products have significant emotional value, they have sentimental value, they're connected, if you will, to the bloodstream of the person who's likely to be the purchaser," those were the words of Michael Bernacchi, a marketing professor at the University of Detroit Mercy commenting on Apple products after the death of CEO Steve Jobs.

One wonders if the workers who assemble Apple products feel that emotional connection. Two years ago it was revealed that as many as 137 workers at Wintek, a Chinese factory that manufactures products for Apple, had been poisoned by n-hexane, a toxic chemical used in touch screens that that can cause muscular degeneration and blur eyesight. The workers wrote

to Jobs but received no response from him or anyone else at Apple. "Steve Jobs was indifferent to our poisoning and evaded his responsibility," said one of the workers, Jia Jingchuan, in a statement released by the Hong Kong labor group Students and Scholars Against Corporate Misbehavior (SACOM).

In the time since the Wintek workers were poisoned, Foxconn, the factory that makes the majority of Apple products, has seen a spate of worker suicides, 17 deaths and other attempts that have been prevented by co-workers. Foxconn now requires new employees to sign a pledge saying they won't attempt suicide, and nets have been installed around buildings to catch employees jumping from the roofs. SACOM found that at Foxconn excessive overtime was rife - one



Workers inside the Foxconn factory - where the majority of Apple products are made



payslip showed a worker did 98 hours of overtime in one month- and during peak periods of demand for Apples iPad workers were made to take only one day off in 13. Badly performing workers were humiliated in front of colleagues and workers were banned from talking and are made to stand up for their 12-hour shifts.

When Jobs died there was little in the media making reference to him as a sweatshop baron, instead words like “visionary” and “creative genius” were splayed across the pages of major news websites and technology blogs, TechCrunchTV even went so far as to call him “one of the greatest Americans in history”. Steve Jobs was one of the few people who can be pointed too as proof of the American Dream, an ‘everyman’ who built a computer in his garage and three decades later was one of the world’s richest individuals. The reality of course is different. While Steve Jobs was no doubt talented he was at best the equal of the anonymous engineers and developers who work in large firms and universities. Similar technology to that of the early Apple Computer was being developed at the Palto Alto Research Center (PARC), an institution that received funding from NASA and DARPA, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (so

much for the free market) and a number of former PARC engineers took jobs at Apple in the early days.

The myth that surrounds Jobs and the mystification of products prefixed by a lower case I might explain why Apple hasn’t been taken to task by their own consumers. Recently Greenpeace led a successful campaign to get major retailers to stop stocking toilet paper that couldn’t be traced to a sustainable source, and in 2009 students at the University of Canterbury achieved the status of a ‘fair trade’ campus, requiring all coffee to be sourced from sources with better labour

and environmental practices. These are local examples of global campaigns. It seems society sets higher standards for cafes and supermarkets than it does for a corporation that is both the worlds largest consumer electronics company and the worlds largest music retailer. If we are going to have a more just society for the international working class, or even just the small reforms offered by ideaslike ‘fair trade’ we need to stop thinking of commodities as mystical objects, and CEO’s as prophets.



Suicide prevention nets around the Foxconn building.

## Conversion

Actor Mike Daisey, a one time Apple devotee, has been touring the world with his new show *The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Job* in which he draws attention to the harsh reality behind Apple’s electronics. Daisey believes that even people who aware of the conditions in which their gadgets were made had “grown to accept the situation” and engaged in a “sort of denialism”, telling themselves things like this is the way it’s always been in China. “It’s a lie we tell ourselves because it would be inconvenient if we had to actually do something about it.” Steve Wozniak, the manwho co-founded Apple Computer will jobs, told media that he would “never be the same” after hesaw Daiseys show.

## Censorship

Apple maintains exclusive control over what software can be run on its iPod and iPhone devices. In September it removed an application from its online store. The game was called “phone story” and put the player in a cartoon version of real world events in the manufacturing cycle of a phone; frommining in the Congo to factories in China, and the environmental damage caused by the planned obsolescence of consumer electronics.

Paolo Pedercini, the game’s developer said Apple cited sections of its guidelines that ban apps that depict violence or abuse toward children, “excessively objectionable or crude content” or paid apps that solicit donations to causes. (the game raised money for workers’ groups and other non-profit organizations) In response, Pedercini has said he’s planning a new app that “depicts the violence and abuse of children involved in the

electronic manufacturing supply chain in a noncrude and nonobjectionable way.”

## Overlooked death

Exactly one week after Jobs’ death Dennis Ritchie also passed away. Ritchie was the creator of the C programming language and a Co-Creator of the Unix operating system. C and its successors form the basis of many modern computer applications, and variants of Unix run the bulk of computers delivering websites and online services, as well as supercomputers used for scientific modeling. While Ritchie’s contributions to the field of computing are highly significant, he was never a captain of industry like Jobs, and his death has gone virtually unnoticed

# Australian Labor Party: “They’d send police to fight the unions that supported them.”

Workers Party member Ian Anderson interviewed Steve Jolly, a leading member of the Socialist Party Australia, on the Australian Labor Party and recent union elections.

*The Spark:* Socialist Party recently committed to helping with the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) election, can you tell me why that was?

**SJ:** The Victorian branch of the ETU is probably the most militant trade union in Australia. When Dean Miles the current state secretary took over in the 1990s, workers on building sites were almost embarrassed to admit they were electricians. Now they’re the highest paid, best organised, and work the shortest week of any construction workers in Victoria – in an industry that’s 100% unionised, so that’s quite something.

And secondly, he’s taken the union out of the clutches of the Labor Party. The leadership organised an internal referendum to ask the members if they wanted to stay affiliated and by overwhelming majority of over 80%, they said no, we want to be independent of the Labor Party. At election time the ETU give election funds sometimes to the Greens, sometimes to what they consider better Labor candidates, and also to the Socialist Party.

We think they should go one step further, and work to create a new workers’ party.

*The Spark:* What limitations does Labor affiliation bring?

**SJ:** First of all, the obvious one is financial. You’re used as an ATM every election time. For example the CFMEU, Australia’s most powerful union, hand over millions at every election to the Labor Party. On election here in Victoria, the Labor Party gave out contracts to the most anti-union companies, and when that led to a picket line they’d send the police to fight the unions that had supported them.

But also when a union is affiliated to the Labor Party it signifies a whole



Steve Jolly



# Interview: Australian socialist

ideology; a softness, or reformism, an unwillingness to take on Labor governments, an unwillingness to take on bosses actually.

**The Spark:** What did the Socialist Party do to help out, and how did the election go?

**SJ:** We don't have any members who are electricians, so we helped out by way of ring-arounds of members in Victoria and nationally. The result went very well in Victoria, they won 80% of the vote. The Labor Party tickets got smashed in the Victorian elections.

Nationally, which has been a stronghold of the right in the ETU, the Victorian elements almost won. Which shows the big dissatisfaction that exists inter-state.

**The Spark:** What are the alternatives to Labour affiliation?

**SJ:** We don't think having no affiliation to any political group is viable in the long-term, but no real mass workers' party exists, so the Socialist Party is saying that as a holding position, unions should disaffiliate from the Labor Party and support candidates on the basis of their working class record and policies.

But that's a holding position, what we need to move for is a coming-together of progressive unions, community organisations, public housing organisations, left-wing individuals, student organisations and so on – to talk about the need for a new mass left party that's democratic in organisation, radical and anti-capitalist in character, which allows different platforms to exist.

**The Spark:** Is there any interest in a new political formation in the ETU or elsewhere?

**SJ:** Well on the most militant, best organised and largest site in Australia, the desalination plant in Worthaggi, we've got members there and there's been a lot of interest in the idea of a new workers' party.

I think there's a low political level amongst Australian workers at the moment, a low level of class-struggle, there's no mass organisations explaining what's going on, but there's dissatisfaction that could turn into political action. We'd support the formation of a genuine workers' party that's democratic, a broad church if you like, where socialists and other anti-capitalists could advance their politics – and even those who wanted to reform capitalism. We'd have to deal with that, there'd be debates every day. But that's where we think things should head.



Electrical Trade Union members in Melbourne

Editorial continued from p2.

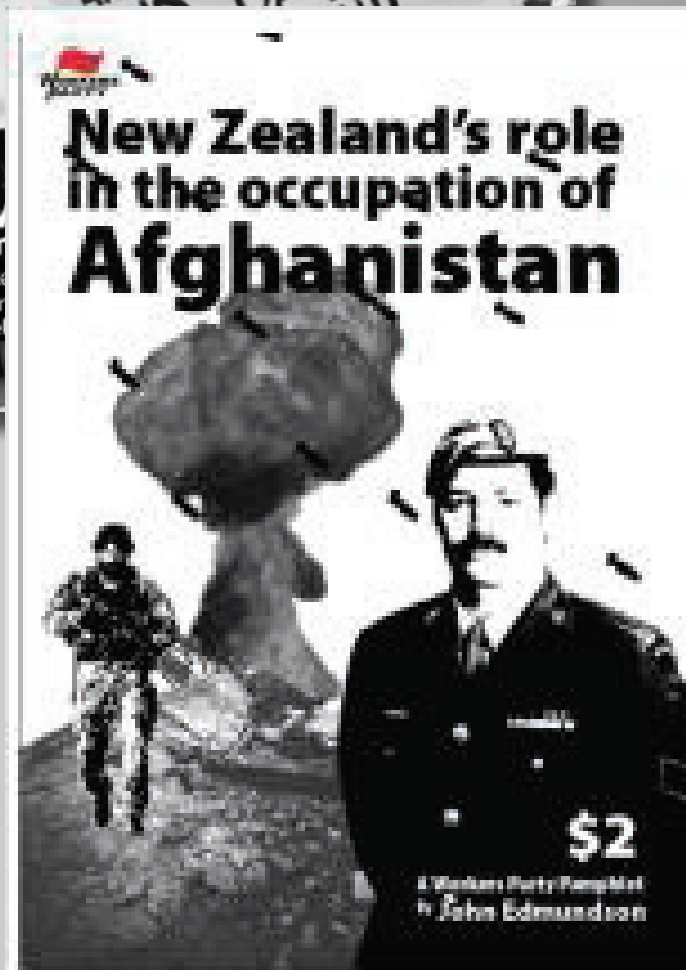
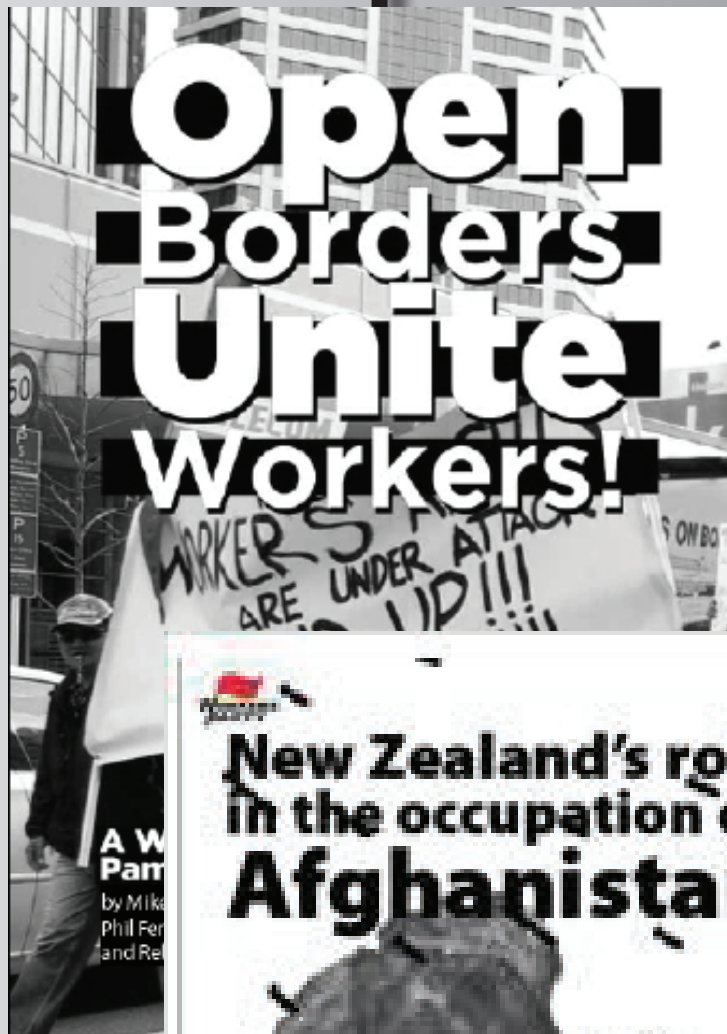
The right for working class men to vote in this part of the world was won by a rebellion of miners at the Eureka Stockade in Victoria, Australia in 1854. Fearing that a similar rebellion could take place on this side of the Tasman, the colonial government enacted Victoria's suffrage laws, and working class men could now vote. Perhaps it's fitting then that this issue of *The Spark* puts a focus on miners.

Marking the one year anniversary of the Pike River Mine disaster and the on-going official inquiry, we are publishing an abridged article from the International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers Unions looking at the safety concerns at the mine. Labour historian Jared Davidson writes about the role miners have played in the New Zealand labour movement and we examine the position of the West Coast- a region largely dependent on mining- in the context of capitalism.

Also looked at this month is the Occupy Movement, which began in the US (though no doubt inspired by events that began in North Africa) and in October spread around the world. We print the press releases from the occupations taking place in New Zealand cities and an article from the Socialist Party of Australia, looking at the police repression of Occupy Melbourne. It seems a century and a half from Eureka those who fight for democratic rights will still be met with state repression. Further coverage of the Occupy movement will appear in our next issue.

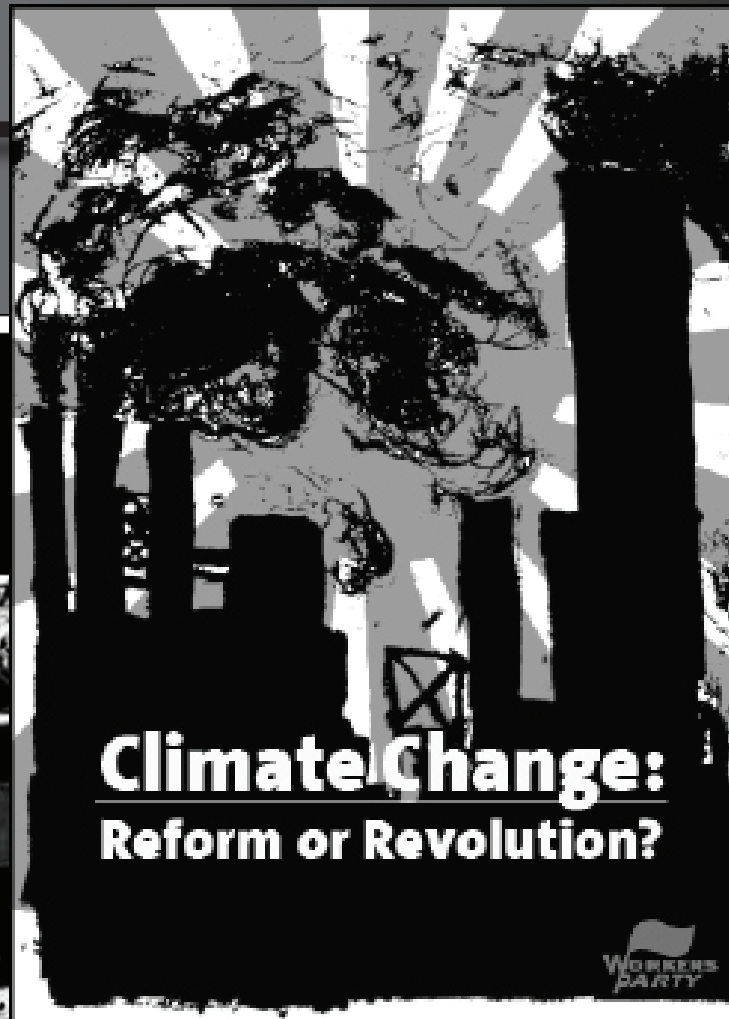
Elsewhere in these pages we cover the Rena Oil Spill, the New Zealand tour of S'bu Zikode, a leader of the shack dwellers movement in South Africa, the death of Steve Jobs, and the right to strike. The October issue, which features an article on each of the parliamentary parties as well as an article about the importance of retaining MMP in the referendum, will continue to be circulated between now and the election, and is available wherever you get *The Spark*.

# Check out pam line





# the Workers Party pamphlets you can read on- at [www.workersparty.org.nz](http://www.workersparty.org.nz)



# South African shack-dwellers movement leader speaks in Hamilton

Rebecca Broad, Workers Party, Hamilton

In September, as part of the 30th anniversary of the 1981 Springbok tour, Global Peace and Justice Auckland (GPJA) organised a speaking tour of South African S'bu Zikode. S'bu is the President of the Abahlali baseMjondolo Movement (AbM). A public forum was held in Hamilton, organised by Workers Party members in conjunction with MANA Hauraki-Waikato.

Around 30 people attended the meeting. The audience included MANA activists and kaimahi, students, and people who were active in the campaign against the 1981 Springbok Tour.

John Minto of GPJA gave a presentation that introduced S'bu and gave an outline of the economic and social conditions of South Africa today. He also discussed the 1981 Tour protests in Hamilton that involved storming the rugby pitch and played an important role in stopping the game there.

S'bu gave an outline of the movement he is involved in and gave commentary on the current conditions in South Africa. AbM represents the organised poor in that country. It operates to organise the poor, shack dwellers and unemployed, and fights for basic things like getting access to water and shelter, and around political issues. AbM is the major political movement to emerge in South Africa since the end of apartheid and the consequent disengagement from politics of the masses. It began six years ago spontaneously out of frustration amongst the disaffected mass in Durban, and developed to the extent that it was the largest political organisation outside the government. The movement self organises for things such as a more fair distribution of land and wealth and access to basic amenities. Through organising the unorganised, AbM became a significant threat to the ruling party – the African National Congress (ANC). The ANC then drove AbM largely underground by means of violence and intimidation, such as murdering activists, and burning down the shacks of



South African S'bu Zikode, leader of the Shack Dwellers movement there, speaks to a meeting in Hamilton.

leaders.

S'bu said his movement strives to gain respect and dignity for people to live as human beings, and that this was the message he was bringing to New Zealand. He touched on several things including the role of women in movements for social change and what this can tell you about the strength of the movement, and how in the face of such inequality and structural marginalisation that they face in South Africa, the need for actually creating a space for human dignity to exist as a basis and off shoot of being able to organise is very important. This really resonated with several members of the audience who could see clear parallels to the marginalisation of Maori and Maori oppression here in New Zealand.

S'bu made clear the extent to which division based on class exploitation has come to the fore in South Africa, and hence why the economic conditions for the majority have not improved since the

end of apartheid.

Around 40 minutes of discussion followed the speaker's presentations, and included contributions on internationalism, the primacy of a class analysis, rebuilding a fighting trade union movement in New Zealand, and women's participation in political activism and Maori liberation here.

On his return to South Africa after the New Zealand speaking tour, S'bu and other representatives of AbM attended a meeting with the Mayor of Durban, as a step towards positive communication with local government. At the meeting S'bu received threats of harm and intimidation from the ANC's Chairperson of the Housing and Infrastructure Portfolio Committee, Nigel Gumede. As well as other things Gumede said that the ANC is at war with AbM and that he has to go to the bushes for Zikode. In Zulu idiom this is a clear threat of ambush and attack.