



<b>Editor's Note – Alasdair</b>	<b>Front Cover</b>
<b>Black Swan Aims and Principles</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>A Short Introduction to Anarchism – Jesse</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Income Management – Pas</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Report Back on Public Welfare Meeting – Pas</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Interview With Kathy Lee – Jarred</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Black Swan Constitution</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>The 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Zapatista Uprising - Alasdair</b>	<b>11</b>



## Editor's Note

The Global Financial Crisis that first emerged in late-2007, and is still being felt today, has led many in the mainstream to question the hegemony of the capitalist economic system. Capitalism, by its very nature, creates periodic crises, making it an inherently unstable economic system over and above not functioning for the common good. Since the Global Financial Crisis, sales of Karl Marx's writings have skyrocketed from their fairly consistent sales of the previous two decades. Moreover, important movements have emerged that seek to challenge the current economic system. For example, the Occupy movement, and most famously the Occupy Wall Street branch of the movement, burst onto the scene in the United States over the outrage of the Obama administration bailing out the banks that were 'too big to fail' using taxpayer money, without any constraints placed on how they spent that money, without any renewed state regulation over the economy, and which resulted in record bonuses for many banking CEOs and managers coupled with mass layoffs of average workers. For many this highlighted the intimate relationship between big business and democratic state system, where control was not in the hands of the people (the 99%) but concentrated in the clutches of a financial-governmental elite (the 1%). In Europe, where the effects of the economic crisis have perhaps been the most profound, movements have spontaneously arisen to fight against the financialization of the economy (Iceland), to prevent the imposition of austerity measures by foreign government (Greece and Spain), and to demand a greater social security net to help those struggling to survive in countries with record levels of unemployment. Many countries of the Middle East also experienced uprisings that began in late-2010 (some of which continue to this day) and were in part caused by neoliberal economic policies forced upon those countries by the international financial institutions (IFIs) and their compliant Western-backed rulers. It is in this period of capitalist crisis that a new anarchist group – *Black Swan* – was founded in Adelaide in order to fight against damaging policies imposed by both the Labor and Liberal parties/governments, to help organise grassroots campaigns on the fronts of social welfare, environmental destruction, education, and refugee rights.

Black Swan, the group that publishes this newsletter, is an anarchist organisation located in Adelaide that believes in the achievement of an anarcho-communist society along the principles of mutual aid, solidarity, and the workers' direct ownership over the means of production. This newsletter – *Cygnet* – is our first attempt at writing political literature as a collective, and this first edition is, more than anything, an experiment. We believe that it can offer something that other publications on the Left cannot, namely an authentic, local perspective on issues and campaigns that effect Adelaide specifically. The general direction of *Cygnet* will be towards providing first-hand accounts of political, economic and social grassroots campaigns, interviews with influential people within social movements for their analysis or critique, debates between groups and individuals that deal with specific tactical and broader strategic perspectives, as well as many other areas of interest to those on the anti-capitalist Left. *Cygnet* is not a party publication: there is no accepted position on issues that must be adhered to (no party line); articles written by non-members will be considered, accepted and published if they meet basic ethical guidelines. It is in the spirit of the free exchange of ideas that all who have important

contributions to contemporary debates but have no other medium through which to express them can submit them for publication in *Cygnets*. Although *Cygnets* is published by Black Swan, due to the potentially wide array of contributors, it is important to note that the views, positions and arguments contained in published articles that appear in *Cygnets* are not necessarily the political position of Black Swan as a collective. Finally, *Cygnets* is a free publication; donations are welcomed in order to cover modest overhead costs, but are not required; freedom of information should be an important anarchist belief, and so the dissemination of *Cygnets* is free of charge to readers. With that being said, we hope to publish more issues of *Cygnets* in the future so please show your support by reading, providing feedback, and contributing articles or ideas you believe should be on the agenda of the Left in Adelaide.

*Cygnets*'s first issue editor,

Alasdair

Black Swan website: [www.blackswansa.org](http://www.blackswansa.org)

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Submissions for *Cygnets* can be sent for consideration to: [info@blackswansa.org](mailto:info@blackswansa.org) Please title email as 'Cygnets contribution'

Black Swan meetings are held weekly. Membership of Black Swan is not required in order to attend meetings, although voting rights are reserved for dues-paying members. For further information please consult the Aims and Principles, and the Constitution of Black Swan published within this issue.



## Black Swan Aims and Principles

1. The working class and the capitalist class have opposing class interests. The vast majority of society have no control whatsoever over the decisions that most deeply and directly affect their lives, while the parasitical few, who own or control the means of production, accumulate wealth, make laws and use the whole machinery of the State to perpetuate and reinforce their privileged positions. There can be no peace as long as hunger, deprivation and boredom are found among millions of working people while the capitalists and the managers of society enrich themselves from our labour and their control of resources.
2. We advocate the abolition of capitalism, wage slavery and all economic systems of oppression and exploitation, through direct action, solidarity, and mutual aid. We aim to create a free and classless society, based on workers' self-management of the means and relations of production, distribution for need not profit, free association, mutual aid, and federation – libertarian communism.
3. We believe the state, like capitalism, cannot be reformed, and do not support participation in parliamentary elections. We advocate the abolition of all forms of government and the state and the replacement of hierarchical political structures with those based on direct, participatory democracy.
4. The only revolutionary body able to end capitalism is the working class itself, in the form of mass, self-organised struggle from below. Meaningful action, as pro-revolutionaries, is whatever assists in the building of a culture of self-organised struggle for improved freedom and living conditions. We advocate for mass meetings in workplaces, campuses and neighbourhoods.
5. We reject patriarchy and fight for the empowerment and liberation of women. We stand in solidarity with feminist struggles, and believe that actively challenging the personal and interpersonal manifestations of patriarchy is equally as important as working towards structural changes. Both need to happen together to create a new society free of male domination.
6. We reject compulsory heterosexuality and gender roles and support LGBTQIA struggles.
7. We work for the creation of a society that encourages cultural diversity. We reject all forms of racial and ethnic prejudice, nation states, nationalism and patriotism: we are not patriots, we are internationalists.
8. We reject the marginalisation of participants because of age, experience, mental or physical ability.

9. We recognise the ongoing history of Indigenous self-organisation and resistance to both capitalism and colonisation, and we support Indigenous peoples who wish to fight on their own terms with their own organisations. As a group that is focused on class and anti-authoritarianism, what we have to offer is a critique of corporate and representative approaches to social change. We aim to work alongside grassroots Indigenous struggle in Australia.

10. We recognise that our natural environment is under continual assault from the forces of excessive and unsustainable production. Instead, we envision a world where common ownership of the earth and the direct democracy of communities act as the guardian of ecological sustainability.

11. The forms and content thrown up by class struggle cannot be fully known in advance, therefore we aim to allow room for reflection, criticism and change within the group.

12. We operate on the free agreement between those who think it useful to unite and co-operate to achieve the goals above. Members have an organisational duty to support the enterprises undertaken as a collective (when decided by legitimate decision making). Members have an organisational duty to do nothing that would go against these accepted aims and principles.



## A Short Introduction to Anarchism

By Jesse

The common usage of the word anarchism today is a kind of vague rebelliousness, usually just meaning capitalist individualism. Few people today know about anarchism's origins in the anti-state wing of the revolutionary workers' movement, or anarchist's role in building many of the first unions and peasants' associations in many countries. The rich history of revolutionary organisation and culture is unknown to most people today and political struggle is portrayed by the mass media as being an activity carried out by great, noble leaders, the more 'peaceful' the better (although mass murder through war is still celebrated).

The most vivid image of anarchism that people have is of violence, from bomb-throwers of the past to modern 'black blocs' - groups at rallies dressed all in black smashing windows or fighting the police. The media obsession with black blocs has three purposes - to distract from the anarchist involvement in a wider range of activism and organising; to demonize any resistance to police brutality; and to portray any costly property damage as terrifying violence. Most people at a rally, no matter how 'normal', would prefer to witness the violence of a black bloc holding back the police, than experience the violence of police batons, tear gas, pepper spray, and purposefully brutal arrest.

Anarchism, at its core, is the simple belief in people's ability to manage society justly without being driven by fear or the profit-motive, or being directed by a class of specialists. This belief is the basis for the anarchist vision of a stateless, socialist society.

The birth of anarchism as a unique movement is sometimes regarded as 15 September, 1872. Before this, the first anarchists were most active in the political parties and unions affiliated to the First International, which was known at the time as the International Workingmen's Association. The First International grouped together Marxists, anarchists, and other socialists. After the leading anarchists were expelled through political manoeuvring by Karl Marx and his followers, the anarchists and the organisations which followed anarchist principles met at a congress in St. Imier in Switzerland in 1872. This congress declared that "the aspirations of the proletariat [working-class] can have no other aim than the creation of an absolutely free economic organisation and federation based upon work and equality and wholly independent of any political government, and that such an organisation or federation can only come into being through the spontaneous action of the proletariat itself, through its trade societies, and through self-governing communes."

Anarchism's anti-state politics and emphasis on freedom meant many individualists were also part of the movement. These individualists did not have a vision for a future society and distrusted all organisations, believing only in the liberty of the individual. But to their credit, they still participated in the main anarchist movement, assisting in strikes, rallies and education.

Humanity came closest to the realization of an anarchist society in parts of Spain during the revolution and civil war of 1936-1939. There were large regions of Spain where the state was powerless. In many villages a form of voluntary libertarian communism was introduced where farming was collectively organized, and distribution and work were based on the principle of *from each according to ability, and to each according to need*. Whole industries were run by the workers, either as self-managed individual workplaces (where the anarchist movement was weaker) or by anarchist unions that co-ordinated the industry as a whole through elected delegates (where anarchism was stronger). The Spanish revolution was eventually crushed by attacks from all sides by Stalinist communists (with the support of the Soviet Union and the democratic republics) and fascists under the command of General Franco (with the support of Italy and Germany).

Today, anarchism, and radical (aiming to transform society from the *roots*) organisation in general, is small. This does not mean anarchism is merely a relic of the past. Anarchists were heavily involved in creating and maintaining the Occupy movement in the US, which still exists and carries out important but less sensational activism such as resisting evictions and assisting with debt. Anarchists in South Africa have put a lot of effort into creating community gardens in poor neighborhoods. Anarchists across the globe have been setting up Solidarity Networks – a way for people to win small battles against rip-off employers in industries where unions are weak or limited by regulations. In any revolutionary situation, people still turn to anarchist principles of mutual aid, direct action and self-organisation. An international free and equal society may not be created next week, but anarchists still need to maintain anarchist ideas and the lessons of the past; to slowly rebuild a culture of struggle for human needs against the needs of capitalism; and to re-popularise a revolutionary vision for the future.



## Income Management

By Pas

Imagine being told that you were only allowed to spend your money on certain items at certain stores -- that you were banned from buying alcohol, cigarettes, or gambling. Imagine having to do your shopping using a distinctive, recognisable card that identifies you to others, a card that tells staff and customers that 'I have trouble managing my money', 'I have serious personal problems', 'I have alcohol or drug issues'. How would that make you feel? Bitter? Embarrassed? Humiliated?

Welcome to Income Management: coming to a place near you. Income Management gives Centrelink the power to forcibly quarantine 50-70 percent of the payments of 'at-risk' welfare recipients. It has been operating in the NT since 2007, where it has caused significant hardship and stress to those affected (mainly Aboriginal people), and in 2012 it was extended into Playford in Adelaide's northern suburbs, and several other "trial" sites.

Politicians from both major parties claim Income Management helps people to manage their money but there is no evidence that it works. It makes no sense to teach people to become responsible with their money by taking responsibility for their money away from them.

Services like financial counselling and money-management programs can help struggling people learn to budget but Income Management does not build the skills or strengths of clients. It controls people -- and by taking power away from people, makes them dependent on others to manage their finances, making them more rather than less vulnerable over the long-term.

Besides, Income Management assumes that people on welfare struggle with their money because they are incompetent or irresponsible. In fact, they struggle because they do not receive enough money. There have been significant cost-of-living increases and payments have not kept up with these increases – in real terms, Newstart has not been increased since 1994.

An Australian Council of Social Service report from 2010 noted rises of 91%, 58% and 63% in electricity, housing and health costs over the past decade.

An Anglicare Victoria survey from 2009 found only 4% of recipients' payments was spent on alcohol, cigarettes and gambling, whereas 70% was spent on necessities like groceries and housing.

How would you survive on \$250 per week (the full rate of Newstart)? How much would you have spare after rent or mortgage repayments are taken away? Newstart is now several thousand dollars per year below the poverty line. It is sometimes implied that Income Management is a good policy because it helps make people work-ready by teaching them responsible habits. This suggests that anyone who wants to work can find work; barriers to employment are mainly character flaws of welfare recipients or their poor attitudes.

It is convenient for business and government to suggest it is the character of those on welfare, irresponsibility or lack of motivation, that prevents them from securing work, not the character of the labour market.

But there are simply not enough jobs for everyone who wants to work. There has never been under capitalism. Zero unemployment never even existed during the so-called golden age of capitalism, the period of sustained economic growth between the late '40s and early '70s.

This is desirable for capitalists because sizeable pools of desperately poor, unemployed workers gives employers more power by increasing competition for jobs, pushing down wages, and keeping workers disciplined and (for low-skills jobs) easily replaceable.

Eva Cox's analysis of data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics from March last year suggests there is one job for every six job seekers.

Available jobs generally favour the well-educated, whereas half the long-term unemployed have less than year 12 qualifications. Cox identified 100,000 jobs for managers/professionals, 30,000 for technicians/trades-persons, 44,500 administrative positions and only 18,251 jobs for those with limited qualifications or experience.

This, sadly, is compounded by well-known prejudices of employers against single mothers, people with disabilities, older unemployed and long-term unemployed (even when they have recently had training), documented in a 2008 federal government survey of employers.

Income Management is a fake solution, wasting funds that could provide more community services, like anti-addiction programs, jobs training, financial and personal counselling, services for young parents, and other supports. After six years, and over \$500 million spent nationwide, the evidence suggests that Income Management is not working and might be doing more harm than good.

\* An Equality Rights Alliance survey of 180 NT women on income management found 85% had not changed what they buy, 79% no longer wanted to be subject to it, and 74% felt discriminated against.

\* Research by the Menzies School of Health found that there was no evidence that Income Management decreases sales of alcohol, cigarettes, junk food, or soft drinks, or increases sales of fresh fruit and vegetables.

\* Income Management can actually worsen health outcomes. The Australian Indigenous Doctors Association found that feelings of humiliation and powerlessness generated by income management can cause long-term mental health impacts.

\* Reports by the Australian Law Reform Commission fear the prospect of being subject to income management will discourage many victims of domestic violence from disclosing their situation to Centrelink, and claiming extra assistance like Crisis Payments, making it harder for them to leave relationships. Domestic violence can be one of the triggers for being deemed 'at-risk' and being forced onto Income Management.

The Abbott Government is looking to expand Income Management next year to new categories of people and new locations, including new areas in Adelaide. Our best shot at stopping this cruel, heavy-handed scheme is a sustained, nationwide campaign linking indigenous and non-indigenous communities, welfare recipients and welfare sector workers, unions, ethnic and migrant, religious, and women's organisations.



## Report Back on Public Welfare Meeting

By Pas

On November 16th outside Government House, North Terrace, 50 people gathered for an afternoon of conversation, networking, and strategising. The focus of the event: How do we fight the brutal attacks on those on Centrelink payments? How do we struggle for policies that provide those on welfare payments with enough money to meet their needs, and treat them with dignity and instead of as second-class citizens?? How do we combat the ugly myths and stereotypes behind welfare-bashing?

The rally/public meeting had three key demands, though other issues were also raised: 1) Lift all Centrelink benefits to the poverty-line; 2) Scrap Income Management; and 3) Scrap Work for the Dole. Many different community groups were represented, including the Single Parents Action Group SA, the United Sole Parents of South Australia, Stop Income Management in Playford (SIMPla), the Education Action Group, Black Swan (an anarchist group), and many others.

What made the event distinctive was that instead of following the usual format where the crowd passively listens to speakers and then disperses, the event was designed to be empowering and inclusive for everyone. After some opening speakers, small but lively discussion-groups were established based on areas of concern, to allow everyone to contribute ideas. These included groups for single parents fighting the cuts to Parenting Payment by the Gillard Government that led to thousands being shifted onto Newstart Allowance (many losing over \$100 per week); an Income Management group that concentrated on building the hardworking campaign by SIMPla (Stop Income Management in Playford) against the policy "trial" in the northern suburbs; and an education group that discussed the cuts to universities and student services, and student poverty.

Numerous proposals and suggestions were raised, and there was support for organising follow-up public meetings in the

suburbs, especially the more low-income outer-suburbs (where people would find it difficult to travel to the City). The most important outcome was the decision to form an alliance fighting for everyone on Centrelink payments, whether they are single parents, unemployed people, students, Aged or Disability Pensioners, would be formed: the Anti-Poverty Network.

Other ideas raised include working more closely with trade unions, emphasising that workers have an interest in a just, strong welfare system (and that those on Centrelink are not the enemy of those who work), and using more diverse tactics to build awareness, like banner-drops, hiring cheap billboards, sit-ins, and other creative actions. The family-friendly nature of the event attracted many who had not previously been involved in activism, including many sole parents. A hearty lunch was provided from donations of time and money from SIMPLa, Black Swan and Food Not Bombs, with leftover bread from the Adelaide Day Centre for Homeless Persons donated to those on low-incomes. There were also games and face-painting for children.

With the Abbott Government likely to expand Income Management to new locations around Australia, including new areas in Adelaide, and unlikely to combat the growing poverty faced by welfare recipients (Newstart has not been increased in real terms since 1994 - even business groups argue the payment is too low), it has never been more important for campaigners and different groups on Centrelink benefits to join forces.

Further Information: [antipovertynetwork.sa@gmail.com](mailto:antipovertynetwork.sa@gmail.com) or phone 0421 944 452.



## Interview With Kathy Lee, Founder of Single Parents Action Group

**This interview was recorded by Jarred late last year for a university assignment. Reproduced with permission. Transcribed by Jesse.**

**Jarred: To start off, if you can just introduce yourself, talk a bit about your background, and just your experiences, I guess, on welfare.**

Kathy Lee: Hi. Well. I'm Kathy, I'm 55, I was on supporting parents payment since '95 until the beginning of this year when it was changed over to Newstart. It was hard enough when I was on the single parents payment to get by each week but it's even harder now on Newstart.

**Jarred: And then, you started up the Single Parents Action Group (SPAG), can you explain what spurred you to create that?**

Kathy: Well I started Single Parents Action Group in November last year after I got the phone call from Centrelink saying that I was being moved over onto Newstart and I just thought, if I'm devastated and scared and unsure of what the future's gonna hold, I'm sure that there are many, many others out there the same. And I was angry so I thought, 'No I'm gonna do something about this' and I started Single Parents Action Group on Facebook and it just sort of exploded from there and now we've got well over a thousand, country-wide, as members.

**Jarred: And what was the response that you received, initially when you started this off at the time?**

Kathy: Well initially it was like, how brilliant it was that there was somebody else out there that feels the same way as me, this is what I kept getting continually from other people, 'I'm so glad I found you', 'I was lost, I didn't know what to do, now I have a reason to fight'. And it has just kept going from there. Probably now though, with the new government, people are disheartened, they're not sure that fighting is going to work. They're worried about so many other things as well. It's virtually gone from anger to survival now, trying to survive is more important than anything else.

**Jarred: Do you have any thoughts as to why single parents were targeted, or why the changes were brought in?**

Kathy: Well I believe single parents were targeted because we're a minority group and we're already a group that has been stereotyped and stigmatised and I don't think that the government thought we'd fight back.

**Jarred: And when you did start fighting back, what was the response from the government or from those within the government?**

Kathy: Shock. I mean, I went to Canberra in February and met with a lot of members of parliament in February and a lot of them just didn't realise that we would be game enough to fight back I think. And a lot of them never understood the policy in the first place. They didn't know what they'd agreed to.

**Jarred: You said you was one of the people who was affected on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January when it came in. Would you mind explaining just what it was like trying to survive on a single parent payment to what it became then trying to survive on Newstart?**

Kathy: Well, surviving on a single parent payment I could afford rent, I could afford food every week. I just couldn't afford a lot of extras. I could actually afford to – we'd go out for dinner, birthdays, or just simple things like going to the beach we could afford to do. Then when I went on to Newstart I lost two hundred and ten dollars a fortnight, gone were going out for dinner, for birthdays, gone was even talking about birthdays. I have to double think going to the beach, because it means I don't drive so I've gotta get on the bus so it means two bus fares, 'Well, I don't know if we can afford that'. I've gone from living in my own rental accommodation to actually having to share with my niece to be able to afford a roof over our heads. It's been a huge difference.

**Jarred: Obviously single parents payments were changed as of 1<sup>st</sup> of January, there's also other welfare changes being made – there's income management which is another issue as well. Do you believe the different welfare issues are related at all or are they still separate?**

Kathy: I believe they're all related now. I believe everybody needs to be thinking about each other because it's all inter-laced now and we all need to fight to stop the problems. I believe that every single section of welfare is going to be attacked sooner or later.

**Jarred: And what do you see in the future of welfare or society in general over the next couple of years if not a decade?**

Kathy: I really don't see a future. I see just devastation. And I see the rich getting richer and the poor getting left behind and totally forgotten about.

**Jarred: What message do you want to pass on to people who might not be affected yet but in the future may be so?**

Kathy: The message I'd give them would be think about what could happen to you. Nobody can see into the future, nobody has a crystal ball, you're life could change in a blink of an eye, and I really believe that you should be standing up and fighting for everybody now.

# Black Swan Constitution

## **Membership:**

A person becomes eligible for membership after attending 3 of the group's General Meetings, events or supported events; such as a film, reading group or rally.

A person becomes a member by approval at a General Meeting, after a brief personal introduction.

A member must agree to the Aims and Principles of Black Swan, and do nothing which goes against these.

A member must pay dues of \$5 per month. If a member cannot pay the dues, the dues shall be waived until they are able to (a member can express their inability to pay to any member of the organisation, who can tell the treasurer). Unpaid dues in the period the member cannot afford them will not accrue.

## **Suspension and expulsion:**

A member can be suspended or expelled by a majority vote at a General Meeting. Grounds for this include stalking; rape; sexual harassment; domestic violence; violence or assault; intimidation; discrimination (on the basis of race, gender, sex, sexual orientation, class, religion); theft of possessions; harassment & bullying.

## **Roles:**

These should be occupied for no longer than 6 months. Roles are recallable at any time at a General Meeting.

### *Secretary:*

Responsible for word processing and e-mailing minutes.

Responsible for the organisation of General Meetings.

Responsible for maintaining a membership list.

Responsible for maintaining a contact list.

### *Treasurer:*

Responsible for the collection of dues.

Responsible for issuing membership cards.

Responsible for keeping group funds safe.

### *Web & Social Media person:*

Responsible for maintaining the group website.

Responsible for maintaining the group social media pages.

All edits to the website must be ratified by a General Meeting.

Posts to social media pages can be recalled by a General Meeting.

### *Bookshop Person:*

Responsible for stocking and staffing the book stall.

Responsible for handling bookshop money.

Items in the bookshop must be approved at a General Meeting.

### *Calendar Person:*

Responsible for maintaining a Diary of upcoming group events.

Responsible for announcing Role elections.

### *Grievance Officers:*

There will be two grievance officers, one male and one female.

Responsible for conflict resolution, external and internal.

Responsible for conciliation with the interested parties separately, and in confidence.

In the event that an agreement cannot be reached between the conflicting parties, a General Meeting will decide their fate.

In the event that a GO has a Conflict of Interest, a new GO will be elected at a General Meeting.

### *Consensus Adviser:*

Responsible for educating themselves on consensus decision making, then educate the group.

## **Principles of decision making:**

Meeting Quorum is 50% of financial members.

Quorum is 70% of members for constitutional or Aims and Principles changes or financial decisions over \$100.

We use consensus decision making. Per 10 people, we tolerate two consenting with reservations and one abstention. If consensus cannot be reached in a General Meeting:



- 1) The proposal will be sent back to the proposer or;
- 1a) The proposal will be workshopped by a working group;
- 2) The proposal will be brought to a second meeting.
- 2a) If consensus cannot be reached at the second General Meeting, the proposal is voted on by 70:30.

In the case of a proposal with a deadline, the proposal will be workshopped by the proposer or working group during the General Meeting.

### Meeting Conduct:

At the beginning of a General Meeting, the following must be chosen:

*A facilitator*; keeps discussion on topic; cuts-off speakers who take too much time; actively engages meeting participants who haven't spoken; actively engages meeting participants who have spoken too much, by informing them of this; engages meeting participants if their behaviour is offensive, disrespectful or rude.

*A minutes taker*; arranges agenda according to priority; records the business of the meeting and any decisions made or actions taken. Must provide hard or electronic copy to the Secretary.

*A time-keeper*; works with minutes taker to set time-limits on agenda items; alerts the meeting to how long they have spoken for. If an agenda item or meeting runs over-time, there must be a formal decision by the meeting to continue on that item or meeting.



**Sydney  
Anarchist Bookfair  
2014**

**Sat 22 March**  
Gumbrorra Hall  
Addison Road  
Community Centre  
Marrickville  
10am - 5pm

Stalls  
Workshops  
Food  
Childcare

[www.sydneyanarchistbookfair.com](http://www.sydneyanarchistbookfair.com)



## The 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Zapatista Uprising

By Alasdair

A date has recently passed that should hold special significance for socialists throughout the world. New Year's Day 2014 marked the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the emergence of the Zapatistas (EZLN) on the world stage with their bold seizure of the major colonial-era town San Cristobal de las Casas in the Mexican state of Chiapas. It also marks 30 years since the original group of revolutionaries from Mexico City travelled to Chiapas with the explicit goal of establishing a guerrilla *foco* (a small fighting force), similar to other Latin American armed revolutionary guerrilla movements; and 10 years since an agreement between the Zapatistas and the Mexican government for the autonomy of Zapatista communities in Chiapas. Mid-2013 to mid-2014 therefore marks a triple anniversary of sorts.

With no external support and self-bought and self-constructed weapons, a guerrilla force emerged on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1994 from the mountains surrounding San Cristobal to occupy the town, seizing the police station, city hall, the hospital, the markets, and establishing road-blocks on both sides of the main highway. An assault was also led against the Moncada military barracks, but proved unsuccessful, despite the numerically inferior but better-armed garrison. Once it became apparent to the Zapatistas that they were militarily inferior to the troops of the Mexican government, the goals of the movement changed radically from an initial plan to overthrow the Mexican one-party dictatorship of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), to the goal of achieving regional autonomy for the indigenous Mayan population of Chiapas.

The ideology of the Zapatistas, commonly referred to as 'Zapatismo', is a mixture of anarchist-communist and indigenous political philosophies. The inability of the guerrillas to subdue the Moncada barracks during the initial seizure of San Cristobal forced the radical rethink of strategy and tactics, and quickly led to the rejection of any possibility of seizing control of the state apparatus along traditional Marxist-Leninist lines. Strategy swung more toward the libertarian-anarchist end of the socialist spectrum, placing a great deal of emphasis on regional and local autonomy; a weakening of the influence of the central state and the empowerment of the indigenous inhabitants of certain areas of Chiapas.

Chiapas is the poorest state in Mexico, as well as the highest indigenous population, and has historically been ignored by the central government in Mexico City, essentially condemning Chiapas to despotic rule by state governors, in collusion with a small land-owning, cattle-ranching elite, riddled with corruption, nepotism, and a severe lack of practical infrastructure. The Zapatista's rebellion stems from the failure of the central government to reform the rancher's despotic political monopoly or to provide infrastructure for the betterment of the population, such as roads, medical facilities, irrigation and clean water sources.

The impact of the Zapatistas on international anti-capitalist politics is astounding. Coming as they did after the fall of the Soviet Union, the Zapatistas were the first post-Cold War social group or movement to gain any meaningful international attention. Their abandonment of Marxist-Leninist rigidity and strategy opened the way for a new, reinvigorated, alternative anti-capitalist politics. Their newfound strategic and tactical flexibility was perhaps the most important reason behind the groundswell of international support in the wake of their (somewhat failed) uprising. Their anti-vanguardist approach was the first in what became the norm amongst much of the global anti-capitalist movement. Finding inspiration in the Zapatistas, many socialist activists explicitly mentioned their contribution in their own decisions to reconstruct the international socialist movement in radically different form, away from the Marxist-Leninist vanguard party and the Comintern, toward a more anarchistic, networked, non-party movement; this shift would come to be known as the anti-globalization movement. In effect, the Zapatistas were the catalysts for the worldwide anti-globalization movement.

Popular worldwide support quickly materialised for the Zapatistas for a number of reasons including their reinvigoration of the post-Cold War Left, their political message of Zapatismo which emphasised indigenous self-determination, regional political autonomy, and anti-capitalism. Of great importance in expressing this message to a global public was the Zapatista's Spanish-speaking non-indigenous spokesperson, Subcomandante Marcos, who fused philosophy, political idealism, poetry and story-telling into a coherent narrative of the plight of the Mayan indigenous dating back to the original invasion of the Americas that began in 1492.

International support halted any opportunity the Mexican government might have had to quickly destroy the Zapatistas before they grew in strength, if only by focusing unprecedented international media attention on the region, ruling out the possibility of a 'dirty war', the method usually employed by Latin American governments to destroy Leftist insurgencies. This international support was important for other reasons, most importantly it created a global network of anti-capitalist activists and sympathisers, a network which would solidify and in the space of a few years emerge as the anti-globalization movement with the protests against the World Trade Organization in Seattle 1999. It is in this sense that we can say that the Zapatistas were the catalysts for the transformation of the radical Left after the Cold War.

To celebrate the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the emergence of the movement, the Zapatistas recently invited a host of activists, academics, journalists and others from around the world to Chiapas. I myself was disappointed not to have been able to return for the celebrations after my travels throughout Chiapas and having visited a number of Zapatista communities between December 2011 and January 2012. Despite the diminished international focus that they receive compared to the heady days of 1994 as romanticism of the initial revolt has given way to the real work of running their own communities in the face of regular government attempts to undermine their influence, the Zapatistas remain important figures for

[Zapatista mural on opposite page taken from [http://haileerustad.blogspot.com.au/2010\\_04\\_01\\_archive.html](http://haileerustad.blogspot.com.au/2010_04_01_archive.html)]

the global Left, if only as a node of solidarity unifying the anti-globalization/anti-capitalist movement. Two key Zapatista quotes we on the Left should always keep in mind are: 1. "To change the world without taking power"; and 2. "I shit on all the revolutionary vanguards of this planet" (Subcomandante Marcos). The reason I chose these two quotes is to emphasise that revolutionary vanguards have been tried before and have usually resulted in establishing some of the worst systems of totalitarianism and tyranny over the past century. The anarchist and libertarian traditions have historically dismissed vanguardist approaches and instead pursued workers' direct control over the means of production, and direct democracy within political communities so that they may determine their own path toward emancipation.

