



HANDS OFF our post offices!

Anna Pha

Angry residents and business people took to the streets in Sydney last week protesting over the planned closure of their local post offices. Thousands of signatures have been collected demanding they remain open. Woollahra, Glebe and Turramurra in Sydney, three of 27 post offices on a list of closure released at the end of last year, are set to shut their doors on February 4. The closures are part of an ongoing process that has seen Australia Post (AP) transformed from an essential service to the community into a callous, profit-driven corporation.

For the past 20 years there has been a process of privatisation by stealth, loss of services, and undermining of workers' jobs, wages and working conditions. AP has been systematically selling off and leasing back its post offices. As a result, post offices such as Glebe see their income eaten into by large rental payments to the private sector for the use of a building that was once rent free. Australia Post refused to give *The Guardian* details of how much rent the Glebe Post Office was paying.

AP has not renewed its lease on the post offices set for closure, which makes the struggle to keep them open even more difficult.

AP claims that it is closing these post offices because they are running at a loss. No consideration is given to the services being provided to local communities or to social and economic consequences.

AP also attempts to justify its actions by pointing to other post offices within "close proximity" - within two kilometres in the case of Woollahra. The reality is that a number of these other "close" post offices are not easily accessible for many older residents or people with disabilities who rely on the post office for banking and paying bills.

Glebe Post Office, for example, is opposite a retirement village and is "a hub for the whole main street", local resident Jan Wilson said. It is always busy. It will shift a great deal of local business to bigger centres such as the very busy and less amenable Broadway.

In the case of Woollahra, locals will have to travel to post offices in Bondi Junction, Double Bay or Edgecliff - far busier and a lot of travelling. Local businesses are angry as it means staff wasting an hour travelling instead of a few minutes walking and longer queues.

Vital services

Post offices provide a wide range of services which older people, in particular, who are not linked to the internet or do not have credit cards, rely on. They pay bills, do banking, apply for passports, send faxes, buy a range of merchandise as well as use the postal services.

Australia Post is bemoaning a pre-tax \$103 million profit on which it paid only \$13.5 million in taxation to the government. The profit is down from a pre-tax profit of \$380.9 in 2008-09.

Continues on page 2



Woollahra Post Office, Sydney.

Don't let the floods' reconstruction bill curtail other spending priorities

ACTU statement

The Federal Government should not deviate from its spending priorities and should reconsider its plans to return to Budget surplus in 2012-13, given the magnitude of the rebuilding cost from the floods, say unions.

ACTU President Ged Kearney said unions were concerned that an over-riding intention to get the Budget back into surplus early could result in cutbacks to services or delays in much-needed spending commitments.

Ms Kearney said that with estimates that the full economic cost of the floods could be \$15-20 billion, there was no doubt

the Budget would come under considerable pressure.

"Whatever the final cost, there is little doubt the impact of the floods on agriculture and industry will constrain GDP growth in the short run, but the injection of spending into the economy for the reconstruction may boost growth down the track," she said.

"We acknowledge that the Federal Government has intended to return the Budget to surplus in 2012-13. However, in light of the impact of the floods, this target should now be reconsidered.

"Measured against any of the world's developed economies, Australia's deficit

projection of 0.8 percent of GDP in 2011-12 is low. No other major economy is planning to return to surplus as early as Australia, and importantly, the deficit is not putting any strain on the private economy.

"Australians understand that a modest deficit is an entirely reasonable way of funding nation-building infrastructure. No Australian would begrudge the government extending the deficit when the funds are to be used for rebuilding flood affected parts of Queensland.

"But it would be detrimental to Australia's long-term prosperity for the extra costs of the floods to result in a reprioritising

of important government spending initiatives including investment in infrastructure, or cutbacks to recurrent expenditures on health, education and other services.

"We urge the government to show caution in offsetting government services against that priority, as well as funding the reconstruction effort following the floods."

Australian unions and their members have donated more than half a million dollars to the Queensland Premier's Flood Appeal. These contributions include \$250,000 from the CFMEU Mining and Energy Division, and \$100,000 from the Australian Workers' Union. ✪

3
page
**Defending
Indigenous
Rights**

5
page

**Dangerous risk
of climate change**

6
page

**NATO,
World Police**

8
page
**WikiLeaks
- violation
of torture
conventions**

12
page

**India - challenges
of microfinance**

The Guardian

Issue 1486

January 26, 2010

Public, not-for-profit insurance needed

As the waters subside and the clean-up continues the tens of thousands of flood victims in Queensland, NSW and Victoria are now finding out whether their insurance policies are worth the paper they were written on. In addition there are many others who had no insurance cover – including those who were denied it by insurance companies or simply could not afford it. One of the main areas of contention with insurance companies is the question of flood coverage. Many insurance companies exclude flood coverage from standard policies and the definition of “flood” varies from company to company. This was not clear to many policy holders, and even those with “flood” coverage found their insurer’s narrow definition offered no protection.

CHU’s approach is fairly typical. It defines flood as “when water that is normally contained in a Water Catchment System increases because of rainfall or snow melt ... or is deliberately released by an authority, and water overflows onto land that is not normally covered by water”.

A water catchment system might be a creek, dam, reservoir, storm water channel or canal. “Flood” cover is not automatically part of CHU’s standard cover; it has to be requested at a higher (often prohibitive) premium and may be refused, depending on the property. Some companies automatically include it where the property is not considered to be at risk. If they perceive any risk, then they offer the option of cover at a far higher premium or refuse flood coverage.

The present crisis facing tens of thousands of flood victims brings home the failure of private insurance companies to protect people and small businesses. It also raises yet again the consequences of lack of planning and regulation by authorities that have allowed development or inappropriate development (even after previous disasters) of flood prone areas.

The Insurance Council of Australia has met and its members have taken a united stand to stick to the letter of the small print in their policies. Industry leaders also met with the government, and nothing helpful came from that meeting. The best Treasurer Wayne Swan could suggest was that victims whose claims were refused should exercise their right and go to the Insurance Ombudsman.

Insurance is big business. Insurance companies are amongst the most powerful, influential and profitable businesses in Australia. State and federal governments are even more reluctant to touch them than they are the mining industry. Their aim is profit maximisation. They achieve this by charging as much as they can get away with for premiums, investing this money and paying out as little as possible.

They price risk – sometimes right out of the market – and refuse coverage where they fear they might have to pay out. According to the Insurance Council of Australia, the 1974 Brisbane city flood resulted in \$980 million in damages but they only paid out \$68 million in insurance claims. Not much has changed, except the damage in the most recent floods is far greater, and the insurance companies are saying they are only faced with a “moderate” payout. Private insurance is not giving the public and small business the protection against natural disasters, accidents and other events that they need.

There are calls for a national scheme for flood coverage. That is not enough. An insurance company is needed that offers comprehensive insurance against floods, storms, earthquakes, fire, accidents, etc. A company that restores to insurance the original aim – the protection of people against costly incidents. The states used to have public insurance companies – Government and State Insurance Offices – and there were numerous, not-for-profit mutuals.

With private profit not their prime motive, they kept the lid on premiums and provided a far superior service than the privatised, demutualised and other private insurance companies offer now. The only way “protection” can be restored as the prime aim for insurance is by setting up a public, not-for-profit insurance company. The Communist Party of Australia at its 11th National Congress in 2009 called for the establishment of “a state-owned insurance company ... based on a strong and democratic social charter.” The behaviour of the insurance companies and their failure to protect flood victims highlights the need and urgency for such a public insurance company.

PRESS FUND

During the floods many towns were almost totally deserted in anticipation of the arrival of floodwaters. We certainly know that feeling of isolation, because for the second week in a row we have only received one contribution, i.e. \$10 from “Round Figure”, that ubiquitous but *lonely* champion of the Press Fund. Wake up, Guardian supporters! There are tremendous struggles afoot, regarding post-flood reconstruction, wage and salary justice, privatisation, the environment, Indigenous rights, peace and many, many other issues. *The Guardian* has a vital role to play in all these struggles, but it needs the support of Press Fund contributors to help fund production costs – so please, send us in something for the Fund before the next edition.

This week’s total: \$10 Progressive total: \$20

HANDS OFF our post offices!

Continued from page 1

AP blames a decline in letters and increase in social networking as the main culprit – revenue from domestic letters fell 3.8 percent – much of which was compensated for by increases in other areas of activity, including express post and parcels.

The main culprits eating into potential profits are:

- The \$150 million spent on redundancies (a meaner and leaner restructuring program), with more to come this year.
- The \$137.1 million in rental on 794 leased properties (many of which were previously publicly owned and rent-free).

AP still managed to pay a \$79 million dividend to the government, which is believed to have put management under pressure to return higher profits to help restore the federal budget to surplus.

It should also be recognised that the economy is still recessed, that while the GDP suggests recovery,

These latest post office closures are part of the restructuring and rationalisation process to make sure every element of the business turns a profit.

it reflects the mining sector and not the plight of ordinary working Australians, pensioners and the unemployed who are still feeling the squeeze.

But the key question is whether or not every area, every aspect of every service and every outlet makes a profit – one of the demands of neo-liberal, corporate ideology and AP management.

The primary consideration of AP should be service provision and people’s needs. Cross-subsidisation of less or unprofitable areas by more profitable ones is vital – whether it be a particular post office, a rural area or a particular essential service, universal access and affordability are primary considerations.

This used to be the approach prior to the introduction of Competition Policy and the corporatisation of AP – when postal services were seen as a basic, essential service to the community and business.

The government is responsible for the appointment of board members, which is stacked with leading business figures. For example, CEO Ahmed Fahour was head of corporate development for Citigroup (one of the largest and most powerful banks in the world) in New York and later its CEO for Australia and New Zealand. He was Australian CEO for the National Australia Bank and later Gulf Finance House in Bahrain.

Another board member Terry Sinclair was a senior manager at BHP Billiton. Ewen Stafford held senior positions in KPMG, Colliers Jardine, NLC and NAB. Chris Blake, appointed last year, held senior roles in banking and PricewaterhouseCoopers. Chairman David Mortimer is the former CEO of TNT (an AP competitor) and a director of Crescent Capital Partners, Leightons Holdings and other several other companies. There is no trade union representation.

“Getting down to business”

The approach of these leading business figures, mostly from the banking sector, is in AP’s overview of its 200-year history: the period 1986-2000 is headlined as “Getting down to business” and 2001-2008 as “A modern corporation” (200years.uspost.com.au).

The way was paved in the 1970s for the transition from a public service with the splitting up of the Post Master General’s Department to create separate postal and communications services.

Following the Bradley Inquiry in 1982, in the name of competition policy, the process of opening up AP’s services to other private outfits was commenced. Parcels were first. Then competitors were allowed to carry letters, but only at 10 times the charge of the standard letter rate. A standard letter was considered any letter up to 500 grams. Later this was

giving some indication of the privatisation by stealth.

The way was being prepared for eventual privatisation and complete deregulation. AP began the process of selling off its real estate including post offices and renting them back from their private owners. Licensed postal outlets (small private businesses) gradually replaced AP owned outlets, franchising was also introduced as well as the use of contractors for parcel delivery and other work.

The unions had a battle on their hands trying to arrest these developments and save jobs, wages and working conditions. Bit by bit AP set about trying to remove the advantages that the publicly owned and run AP had had over the private sector.

The process set in train is very similar to the privatisation of Telstra. These latest post office closures are part of the restructuring and rationalisation process to make sure every element of the business turns a profit. It could also open the way for another corporation to step in and fill the gaps being created.

There is absolutely no reason why every element of such an important government utility should have to turn a profit. Cross-subsidisation is essential – there are some services, some customers who will never be “profitable”.

Politicians have hypocritically hopped on the bandwagon, attending protest rallies, calling for the closures to be reconsidered. Amongst them are federal Liberal MP Malcolm Turnbull, Labor’s Tanya Plibersek, state Labor MP Verity Firth and Opposition leader Barry O’Farrell. Communications Minister Stephen Conroy publicly asked Australia Post to give further consideration to the impact the proposed closure will have on residents.

Conroy should stop his pathetic bleating and tell the board what to do. If it doesn’t listen then he should sack the lot of them and appoint a new board. Legislation is required to change the charter of AP to ensure service provision takes priority. There are other measures that could boost AP’s operations. The government has the power to halt the closures.

Public first

Firstly, the community and universal service obligations should be extended to parcels. The sale of post office buildings should be halted.

AP has the largest network of outlets in Australia, reaching into local metropolitan, regional and rural areas. It filled the gap in many metropolitan suburbs, regional and rural centres when banks closed their doors.

Its business could be boosted by using it as the basis for the establishment a national, publicly owned People’s Bank. Instead of politicians hypocritically complaining about outrageous interest rate hikes and obscene fees, a People’s Bank could provide real competition and a service that actually serves local communities, small business and farmers.

Likewise, the postal network could be used for a publicly owned, national insurance company that provides universal services to the people of Australia (see Editorial).

Readers are encouraged to visit Australia Post’s website and lodge a complaint about the closures, lobby their MPs and do the usual campaigning through talkback radio and social networks. ✪

Privatisation by stealth

By 1997, AP had hired 4,741 mail contractors within its networks. In 1985 the services of contactors cost just under \$93 million. By 1995-96 it had risen to \$208.4 million and in 2009-10 had risen to over \$1 billion

Defending Indigenous Rights

Resolutions from the Defending Indigenous Rights conference 2010

We, the people in attendance at the Defending Indigenous Rights conference held in Alice Springs stand in solidarity with Aboriginal people of the Northern Territory to condemn the NT Intervention. We call on all political parties to call for the abolition of the NT Emergency Response legislation and return rights of self determination and restore control over Traditional lands, including remote communities, homelands, and town camps.

Women's Statement

To Prime Minister Julia Gillard: We, the women, mothers, grandmothers, aunts, sisters in support of our men who are the shared caregivers of the NT wholeheartedly demand the NTER be abolished immediately.

The media has heralded your promotion to PM as a breakthrough for women. All this talk is a slap in the face for Aboriginal women whose communities are being devastated by this government's racist intervention.

For three years the removal of our human rights has been justified with lies about protecting women from violence and feeding our children. We are living proof of the damage it has caused to us as Indigenous peoples of the NT who are trying to survive, live and practice our way of life. Shame on you!

We call on you, and Federal Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Jenny Macklin, to abolish this law that takes away our human rights as Indigenous peoples of this country.

Minister Macklin consistently claims that women support Income Management and the Intervention. This is not the truth. Under current policies we have no choice and no change and now a big cloud is covering our struggle and journey. The Working Futures policy is about closing our homelands and communities. This is damaging and destructive to our families, our language, law, culture, everything that is important to us. This is our identity, passed down through generations, and this is what makes us the oldest unique culture in the world.

Income Management, cuts of the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP), the bi-lingual education ban in schools, compulsory five year leases over our land and housing - all these measures

The government is denying Aboriginal people our identity and culture through the bi-lingual education ban.



are taking away our control over our lives and our communities. Your legal discrimination against us has given a license to racists to abuse us in the street, in supermarkets and to attack our kids at school.

We call for the immediate end of the NT Intervention and the resignation of Indigenous Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin.

Jobs with Justice now

The Rudd government committed to halving the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in a decade. But due to a continuation of Howard era policies such as the NTER, the gap is becoming far wider. ABS data released in June 2010 shows that Indigenous unemployment has drastically worsened from 13.8% in 2007 to 18.1% in 2009. The employment to population ratio of Indigenous males in remote areas decreased 6% in just one year 2008-09.

Minister Macklin has promised to deliver "real jobs" for Aboriginal communities through the NT intervention. Instead, thousands of CDEP positions have been lost.

At the end of 2010, 500 "real

jobs" created to replace some of the lost CDEP positions in remote shire councils face the axe. The Commonwealth is refusing to release the \$8.5 million per year needed by the NT government to keep the jobs. Many Aboriginal communities serviced by these shires already suffer atrocious living conditions which shame Australia - 500 more job losses will be devastating.

Worse than WorkChoices

Under the new CDEP scheme designed by the Federal Labor government, Aboriginal people no longer receive wages. They are being forced to work providing vital services such as rubbish collection, school bus runs, sewerage maintenance, construction and aged care in exchange for quarantined Centrelink payments.

There are cases of people working between 25-40 hours a week for a base rate of approximately \$120 cash and \$110 on the Basics Card - that is \$4 an hour plus rations. Centrelink is threatening to cut off payment entirely if people do not participate in CDEP. This is far worse than anything the

Liberals inflicted on workers under WorkChoices.

Minister Macklin has referred these shocking revelations to a departmental enquiry and to Fair Work Australia. But this is not good enough. The gross exploitation of Aboriginal workers must stop immediately. The government is planning to spend \$350 million (over four years) to expand income management across the NT. This money is desperately needed to create real jobs in remote communities and ensure the provision of basic services.

We call on the trade unions, State Labour councils and the ACTU to endorse this statement, provide funds for its publication and help organise members to attend a national day of action in September to push these demands.

The government must act immediately to:

- Guarantee the 500 threatened Shire jobs
- End compulsory income management
- End current CDEP arrangements forcing people to work for the Basics Card
- Turn all CDEP positions into fulltime waged jobs
- Provide massive investment in job creation and service provision in all NT communities.

high impact projects like uranium mines and nuclear waste dumps in exchange for essential services which are basic human rights.

The Defending Indigenous Rights gathering calls for full government investment to provide services for all communities. The gathering supports the strong stance taken by the Electrical Trades Union in banning their members from working on nuclear projects and commends the support of the Maritime Union of Australia, Unions NT and the Australian Council of Trade Unions in solidarity with Muckaty Traditional Owners opposing the federal radioactive waste dump.

The gathering supports the upcoming Australian Nuclear Free Alliance meeting and will start work to support delegates to attend the conference.

We commit to immediate and ongoing protest actions in cities/towns and a blockade at Muckaty if the site is announced and the community calls for support.

Defend Aboriginal languages - scrap the bi-lingual education ban

Stop the erosion of Aboriginal language rights. The government is denying Aboriginal people our identity and culture through the bi-lingual education ban.

The Defending Indigenous Rights gathering calls on the Australian Education Union to pledge support for any teachers who refuse to follow the policy of assimilation being enforced on NT communities - the restrictions on teaching in Aboriginal languages. That all conference participants work to get signatures on the AEU petition against the Bi-lingual Education Ban and works with teachers around the country to build forums and protest actions. ✪

Pete's Corner



No to Radioactive Racism

The nuclear industry continues to have a disproportionate impact on remote and Indigenous communities in Australia and overseas. Nuclear projects leave a lasting legacy of environmental contamination and adverse social issues. The NT Intervention, NT government "Working Futures" and other regressive and paternalistic policies are stripping communities of funding and resources and pushing Traditional Owners and communities to consider

cpasa.blogspot.com

Official blog of the CPA South Australia

A letter on workers' comp

Dr Kevin Purse raises some very important issues about the way workers' compensation is administered in South Australia in his article "In My View" (The Advertiser 14.1.2011).

One of the main reasons that the Rann government could get away with slashing injured workers' conditions as it did in 2008 is because our society suffers from "compassion deficit syndrome" when it comes to the plight of injured workers. It is not surprising that the government was fully supported by the Liberal Opposition in watering down these entitlements.

Only Mark Parnell of the Greens spoke out strongly in opposing the inhumane measures being taken against South Australia's injured employees.

I think it is interesting to compare our society's attitude towards road accident victims and victims of workplace injury and disease. There is much sympathy for road victims, but precious little for injured workers.

Another factor we need to consider is that of prevention. Huge sums of money are spent by governments on preventing road accidents and enforcing the laws related to road use. There is not the same emphasis on prevention in relation

to occupational health, safety and welfare (OHS&W). Laws dealing with OHS&W are not enforced to the same degree and negligent employers, who cause death, injury or disease because they have not maintained safe and healthy workplaces mostly never go to prison.

One appalling example is the case of employers in the asbestos industry. Literally tens of thousands are suffering and dying early because of their workplace exposure to asbestos dust. Only in the past few years have the companies, most notably James Hardie, been made to account for the death and suffering they have caused. How many senior managers have gone to prison for their negligence and lack of care for the lives of their employees?

Currently, the Gillard government is standardising the OHS&W laws in every state and territory. The PM promised that her government would introduce best practice legislation, but the fact is that our OHS&W laws are being seriously watered down.

While there are many employers who are diligent in providing the best OHS&W standards, one of their key bodies, the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) has continually fought the most demanding health and safety laws.

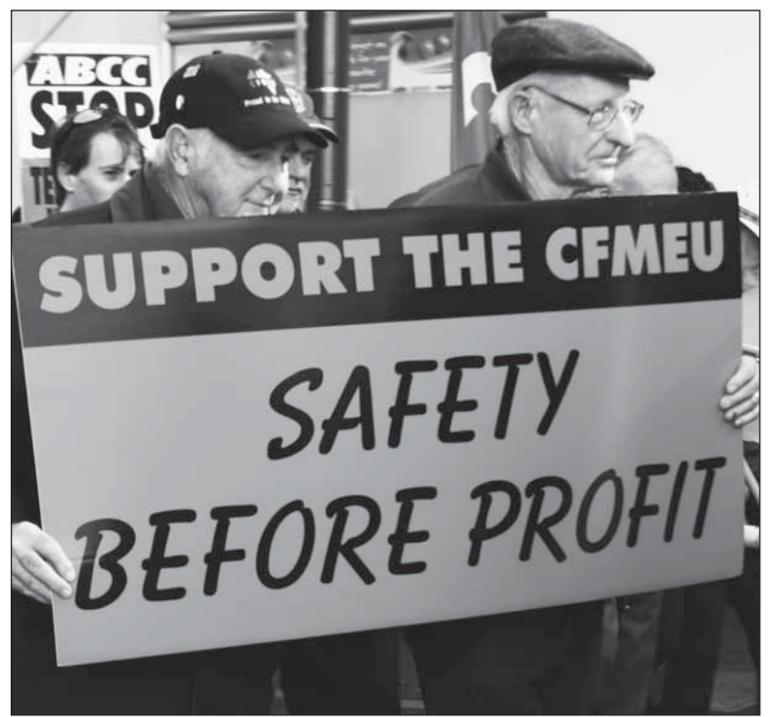
One of the main reasons they can get away with this attitude is that workers tend to be blamed when work-related injuries, diseases and deaths occur.

I agree with the three major actions that Kevin Purse suggests should be implemented to prevent greater suffering for injured workers and their higher suicide rate i.e. reinstating the conditions that were removed in 2008, improving rehabilitation and training programs and creating a truly supportive workers' compensation system.

However, I would also add that far more needs to be done to prevent the unacceptable incidence of deaths, diseases and injuries in Australian workplaces in the first place. Many companies make huge profits out of the industry of their employees. They, therefore, have a humanitarian duty to provide the most effective OHS&W standards in their workplaces and responsible governments have a duty to ensure that best practice laws are in place and that they are effectively enforced.

After all, healthy and safe work environment is a basic right of all workers.

Yours sincerely
Andrew (Andy) Alcock ✪



Sunbus offer – 20 cents a year

The Transport Workers' Union (TWU) has confirmed Townsville bus drivers will hang up their keys again to protest a proposed pay increase of 20c a year. The TWU said yesterday it had filed two applications with Fair Work Australia seeking bargaining orders against Transit Australia Group (TAG), parent company for Sunbus.

The action follows a 48-hour strike in Townsville over the new year after ongoing negotiations over the drivers' new enterprise agreements soured.

Union secretary Peter Biagini said the company's proposal of 20c a year over five years was "scandalous".

He said the applications to Fair Work Australia related to enterprise agreements for drivers in Townsville and the Sunshine Coast.

"One working day after our drivers exercised maximum goodwill by voting to place a moratorium on protected industrial action,

TAG broke off negotiations," Mr Biagini said. "I have never experienced such wilful duplicity from a company."

Mr Biagini claimed the company had failed to meet good-faith bargaining obligations, withholding financial information and refusing written requests for further meetings.

Mr Biagini said an offer of \$1 over five years was an "outrageous insult".

"If TAG says it can't afford to pay the drivers a fair wage, we say prove it," he said.

"It has done nothing in that regard, and its behaviour, in failing to negotiate fairly, is actively sabotaging a resolution of this dispute."

Mr Biagini said the Fair Work Act 2009 imposed good-faith bargaining obligations, including a commitment to attend and take part in meetings at reasonable times.

A hearing date for the union's applications has yet to be determined. ✪

MUA welcomes court ruling against Patrick

The Maritime Union of Australia last week welcomed the Melbourne Magistrate Court findings that Patrick Stevedores was guilty of discrimination against a health and safety representative under the Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004 – SECT 76.

The court found in favour of Workcover for three of the five charges that Patrick was guilty of an indictable offence for discriminating against an OHS representative for raising safety issues on the job.

Frank Carroll, a former Patrick employee, MUA Geelong safety representative and key witness during the hearings, was suspended, reprimanded and threatened with the sack for raising safety

breaches where workers' lives were at risk.

Three waterside workers were killed on the Australian wharves last year alone.

The court ruling comes as EBA negotiations resume with Patrick in Melbourne over key safety issues, including the lack of training and high casualisation at bulk and general operations.

"The court decision is a vindication of the protected action our members have taken at Patrick bulk & general cargo facilities in recent weeks," said MUA national secretary and president of the International Transport Workers' Federation Paddy Crumlin.

"Some commentators have been quick to label the MUA's strikes as somehow being

ideologically driven – nothing could be further from the truth," said Ian Bray, assistant national secretary. "Our members are suffering at these facilities. Suffering intimidation and suffering indignity at the hands of indifferent management."

"Our concerns over safety are absolutely legitimate – as are our concerns over a management culture that would enable this sort of 'illegal' intimidation of an OHS representative," said Victoria state secretary Kevin Bracken. "Management have little respect for their workers, so little they're willing to compromise on safety and put lives at risk. This is not sustainable and Patrick must take action to redress this culture of intimidation." ✪

Scrooge spirit at Upper Hunter coalmine

There was not much festive spirit on display from the management of an Upper Hunter Valley coal mine last Christmas. Some drivers at the open cut operation (run by a big Australian company associated with Newcastle's now defunct steel industry) got presents and some very pointedly did not. A lamp that attaches to vehicle drivers' hard hats was handed out to workers directly employed by the company while contract drivers missed out. So did workers who had been on the payroll for less than 100 days.

It wasn't as if some workers had been "naughty" and others had been "nice". All of the vehicle operators had been involved in the improvement to workplace safety that had

prompted the company to hand on the bonus. The Lost Time Injuries (LTIs) for the work had been held at zero for 100 days and the lamp was to be seen as a reward. Instead it is a reminder of the glaring inequalities in the treatment of workers at the site.

Drivers engaged through labour hire outfit Tesa are paid \$21 an hour compared to the \$28.36 paid to a company driver. They do the same work as permanents. Some have worked there for years but the discrimination persists.

Trainees working through their two-year traineeships drive the same bulldozers, front end loaders and trucks (including the big mechanical drive vehicles) as their workmates. Their pay starts at \$14 an hour for

the first sixth months before inching up to \$18 and then \$21 an hour.

Zero LTIs at the mine are now approaching the 150-day mark. This is not just a matter of pride for the operator or a modest saving on the payroll. The company gets easier access to finance for its operations if it can show a low rate of lost production through workplace injury. The finance may come from the parent company but it still counts.

All of the workers at the Upper Hunter Valley mine were involved in the notable workplace safety achievement. All should be rewarded. The bigger issue of the different pay rates handed out for the same work must be sorted out. The discrimination cannot be justified. ✪

NSW Health delivers an offer on ratios

NSW Health has delivered an offer to NSW Nurses' Association (NSWNA) that would deliver ratios to the majority of nurses in NSW hospitals but not to all specialties nominated in the Association's claim.

The offer proposes that ratios be recognised as equivalents to Nursing Hours Per Patient Day (NHPPD) in the award. This is a seismic shift from the position taken by the government and the Department over many years.

In many areas the offer is better than in Victoria.

The offer on ratios is in addition to the pay increases tabled late last year. There is no trade-off on pay for ratios.

The state-wide strike and the bed closures members successfully implemented were pivotal in moving the government and the Department

from a pay only offer to a pay and ratios offer.

The pay offer is for three years and is the same amount reported to members in the November *Lamp*:

- 3.9% back paid to July last year
- 3% from July 2011
- 2.5% from July 2012

The Department has withdrawn its contentious trade-off on workers' comp. The removal of the sock and stocking allowance is still part of the offer.

In the areas of Community Health and Community Mental Health the government has been no offer. In the areas of Mental Health the union says the offer falls short of what has been offered in other specialties.

NSWNA Council will consider the progress of these negotiations this week, before deciding on the course of further action. ✪

Climate change: Developed countries put world at risk

Martin Khor

Huge rainfalls causing floods narrowly missed the climate change negotiators who met for another round of talks in Tianjin last October with disappointing results. Tianjin, a historical coastal town which is also China's industrial centre, just a half-hour rapid train ride from Beijing, was the host of that session in the United Nations' climate talks.

The 3,000 participants were impressed by the warm hospitality, courteous volunteers and the giant convention centre with super facilities. The Chinese put 2,000 people on the job to handle the logistics, and the meetings went on without a hitch.

But as the Chinese chief negotiator, Su Wei, reminded everyone in the closing session, it could have been very different. The first site that China chose for the meeting was not Tianjin, but Hainan, the picturesque island province in the South. The island was lashed with the heaviest rainfall since 1961, causing 1,200 villages to be submerged by floodwaters, with 1.6 million people affected and 210,000 evacuated.

"If our meeting had been held in Hainan, we would have had a deeper understanding of the effects of climate change," remarked Su Wei.

Climate change may indeed have contributed to the Hainan rains and floods. A United Nations scientist has linked the recent huge rainfalls, such as the big floods in Pakistan and landslides in China, to increased cloud formation arising from the rise in ocean temperature, which is a part of the global warming phenomenon. (We now have the unprecedented floods in Australia, Brazil, Sri Lanka, South Africa, Colombia and a number of countries in Europe.)

Indeed, throughout that week's meeting in China, many developing countries' delegates referred to the many extreme weather events that have caused devastating damage in many countries, a clear sign that the climate crisis is not a science-fiction scenario but a reality that is now upon us and will get much worse.

Consider that today the world is 0.8 degrees Celsius warmer on average than in pre-industrial times, and at current emissions rates the temperature will rise by 4 degrees or more, with devastating effects like the melting of ice caps and sea-level rise causing extensive flooding, and glacier melting causing water shortages in many countries.

Even restricting warming to 2 degrees, which is the target the political leaders agreed to, would result in a lot of damage. Some prominent scientists and many countries are asking for a goal of 1.5 degrees.

At the Tianjin talks, the results were disappointing. The delegates now have a new negotiating text containing different options in language and positions, which they were supposed to focus on to narrow differences.

The buzz-word at that meeting was the need to attain "balance" among the issues being negotiated, but there were different views on what that means. To the developing countries, the main stumbling block is the reluctance of many developed countries to commit themselves to deep cuts in emission reductions. Worse, it seems that many of the developed countries in the Kyoto



Protocol (only the United States is not a member) do not want to continue being in it.

Under the Kyoto Protocol (KP), the developed countries agreed to cut their combined emissions by 5 percent by 2012 compared to 1990 levels, and then to negotiate new emission reduction rates in a second period starting 2013.

The KP group meeting in Tianjin, was mandated to come up with an aggregate reduction rate for developed countries, based on what science says is needed to avoid global warming. Developing countries are calling for a 40-50 percent cut (by 2020 compared to 1990) while the most quoted

developed countries' emission-reduction commitments – whether the KP model of legally binding aggregate figure with adequate national reductions, or the voluntary pledge system with no aggregate number and no system of ensuring adequate numbers for each country.

In Tianjin, only Norway clearly indicated it wanted to continue with the KP, with the European Union also giving a lukewarm nod, provided conditions are met. Japan explicitly announced in Tianjin that it would not support a second commitment period in the KP. Other countries including Russia, Australia, New Zealand, Canada have also signalled they want

We now have the unprecedented floods in Australia, Brazil, Sri Lanka, South Africa, Colombia and a number of countries in Europe.

scientific estimate is 25-40 percent. Within this combined target, each developed country would then make a commitment which is adequate. All these national commitments must add up to the aggregate.

The problem is that many of the developed countries want to "jump ship" from the KP to a new agreement that would also include the US and the developing countries. However this new protocol, following the US approach, is of the nature of a voluntary national pledge system, with no top-down science-based aggregate figure, and there is no certainty that the national pledges will be adequate or comparable with one another.

According to the pledges already made, the developed countries altogether (including the US) will cut their emissions (1990-2020) by only 13-18 percent. If "loopholes" are included, that allow more emissions, the result may be only 4 percent reduction or even a 4 percent increase in emissions. This is on track to global warming of 3-4 degrees, a disastrous situation.

The biggest battle in the negotiations is over the model of the

to do away with the KP.

This has caused the developing countries to accuse them of intending to kill the KP, the only legally-binding climate change agreement for emission reduction. With this development, the developing countries find it outrageous that the developed countries are insisting that they agree to an intrusive system of international "monitoring and verification" of their mitigation actions.

The good news coming from Tianjin is that some progress was made towards creating a new Climate Fund inside the UN climate convention. The United States indicated it would not allow a decision on the fund unless developing countries agreed on a "robust" system for internationally monitoring their mitigation actions.

"It is disconcerting that the setting up of a fund is held hostage to other things," said Desima Williams on behalf of small island states. "It's unethical."

Martin Khor is the Executive Director of the South Centre, an inter-governmental think tank of developing countries. ☺



Serco is a multinational company (believed to be worth \$5 billion) which runs Australia's detention centres. It has a \$400 million contract with the Department of Immigration – a bulky 700 pages long contract that states that Serco is responsible for language and cultural and recreational programs. One would have thought that for this sort of tax-payers money the company would find suitable people to run the programs. Not so. Serco paid about \$500,000 a year to a charity that recruits volunteers to run recreational activities at detention centres. The Australian League of Immigration volunteers has failed to provide a single financial statement since its formal creation in 2003. In addition, their employees working with vulnerable people have no training. Former volunteers expressed reservations about the organisation and suspected it of being connected to Scientology. Some detainees felt they should join the League because they thought it would help them with their visa application. In other words – quite a mess.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Mick Gooda demanded value for money in the Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure program. Mr Gooda was concerned about the waste in the program – for the Indigenous people, that is. Mr Gooda pointed out that one salary of \$894,700 for less than two years' work was being paid to a project manager in Wadeye, a remote Aboriginal community in the NT. The total Wadeye package – 105 new dwellings, 167 refurbishments and 28 rebuilds will cost \$65 million. The administration and establishment costs come to \$20 million – at 31.6 percent of the total budget. The going rate for the administration cost is generally 15 percent. "Here's all this money gone to waste and the public says we've spent all this money on Aboriginal people, but Aboriginal people don't get the benefit of it," said Mr Gooda. The unemployment rate among the young people in Wadeye is 80 percent.

For all those climate change sceptics, last year was the warmest on record, confirming a "significant" long-term trend of global warming, according to the UN's World Meteorological Organisation (WMO). WMO stated that the trend helped to melt Arctic Sea ice to a record December low last year. "The 2010 data confirm the Earth's significant long-term warming trend. The 10 warmest years on record have all occurred since 1998".

Reflections by Comrade Fidel

NATO, the World Police

Many people feel nauseous when they hear the name of that organisation.

Last November in Lisbon, Portugal, the 28 members of that aggressive institution, engendered by the United States, decided to create something that they cynically call "the new NATO".

NATO was born after WW2 as an instrument of the Cold War unleashed by imperialism against the USSR, the country that paid for the victory over Nazism with tens of millions of lives and colossal destruction.

Against the USSR, the United States mobilised, along with a goodly portion of the European population, the far right and all the neo-fascist dregs of Europe, brimming with hatred.

With enormous sacrifice, the Soviet people were able to keep nuclear parity and to support the struggle for the national liberation of numerous peoples against the efforts of the European states to maintain the colonial system which had been imposed by force throughout the centuries; states that, in the post-war period, became allies of the Yankees who assumed command of the counter-revolution in the world.

In just 10 days – less than two weeks – world opinion has received three great and unforgettable lessons: G-20, APEC and NATO, in Seoul, Yokohama and Lisbon, in such a way that all honest persons who can read and write and whose minds haven't been warped by the conditioned reflexes of the imperialist mass media machine, can have a true idea about the problems affecting humankind today.

In Lisbon, not one world was said that was capable of transmitting hope to billions of persons suffering from poverty, underdevelopment, shortages of food, housing, health, education and jobs.

Quite the opposite: the vainglorious character who is the head of the NATO military mafia, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, declared, in tones reminiscent of a little Nazi Fuhrer, that the "new strategic concept" was to "act anywhere in the world". There are quite a few in the world who remember the close relations of cooperation between the Danish government and the Nazi "invaders" during WW2.

NATO, a bird of prey sitting in the lap of the American empire, even endowed with tactical nuclear weapons that could be up to many times more destructive than the one that obliterated the city of Hiroshima, has been committed by

the United States in the genocidal Afghanistan war, something even more complex than the Kosovo exploit and the war against Serbia where they massacred the city of Belgrade and were about to suffer a disaster if the government of that country had held its ground, instead of trusting in the European justice institutions in The Hague.

The ignominious declaration from Lisbon, vaguely and abstractly states in one of its points:

"In the strategically important Western Balkans region, democratic values, regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations are important for lasting peace and stability. We will continue to actively support Euro-Atlantic aspirations in this region. We welcome the considerable progress that Montenegro has made on its road to Euro-Atlantic integration and its contribution to security in the region and beyond..."

Even Russia cannot forget it so easily: the actual fact is that when Yeltsin broke up the USSR, the United States moved NATO boundaries and its nuclear attack bases forward from Europe and Asia to the heart of Russia. Those new military installations were also threatening the Peoples' Republic of China and other Asian countries.

When that happened in 1991, hundreds of SS-19, SS-20 and other powerful Soviet weapons were able to reach, in a matter of minutes, the US and NATO military bases in Europe. No NATO Secretary General would have dared to speak with the arrogance of Rasmussen.

The first agreement on nuclear weapons limitations was signed as early as May 26, 1972 between US President Richard Nixon and Communist Party Secretary General Leonid Brezhnev with the aim of limiting the number of antiballistic missiles (ABM Treaty) and to defend certain points against missiles having nuclear payloads.

Brezhnev and President Jimmy Carter signed new agreements in Vienna, known as SALT II in 1979, but the US Senate refused to ratify those agreements.

The new rearmament promoted by Ronald Reagan, with the Strategic Defence Initiative, ended the SALT agreements.

The Siberian gas pipeline had been blown up already by the CIA.

A new agreement, on the other hand, was signed in 1991 between George Bush Sr and



Mikhail Gorbachev, five months before the collapse of the USSR. When that happened, the socialist bloc no longer existed. The countries that the Red Army had liberated from Nazi occupation were not even able to maintain independence. Right-wing governments that came to power moved over to NATO with weapons and baggage and fell into the hands of the US. The GDR (former German Democratic Republic – socialist, East Germany) which, under the leadership of Erich Honecker had made a great effort, was unable to overcome the ideological and consumerist offensive launched from the same capital that had been occupied by the Western troops.

As the virtual master of the world, the United States increased its mercenary and warmongering policy.

Due to a well-manipulated process, the USSR fell apart. The coup de grâce was dealt by Boris Yeltsin on December 8, 1991 when, in his capacity of president of the Russian Federation, he declared that the Soviet Union had ceased to exist. On the 25th of that same month, the red flag bearing the hammer and sickle was lowered from the Kremlin.

A third agreement about strategic weapons was then signed by George Bush and Boris Yeltsin, on January 3, 1993, that prohibited the use of multiple-warhead Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (IBMs). It was passed by the US Senate on January 26, 1993 with a margin of votes of 87 to 4.

Russia was the heir to USSR science and technology – which, in spite of the war and the enormous sacrifices, was able to bring its power up to the level of the immense and wealthy American empire – the victory over fascism, the traditions, the culture and the glories of the Russian people.

The war in Serbia, a Slavic country and people, had severely sunk its fangs into the security of the Russian people, something no government could allow itself to ignore.

The Russian Duma – outraged by the first Iraq war and the war in Kosovo where NATO had massacred the Serbian people – refused to ratify START II and didn't sign that agreement until 2000. In that case it was to try to save the ABM Treaty that the US were not interested in keeping. The US tried to use its enormous media resources to maintain, dupe and confuse world public opinion.

What is the essence of the agreement approved in April last year by the US and Russia? Both parties committed to reduce the number of strategic nuclear warheads to 1,550. About the nuclear warheads in France, Britain and Israel, all capable of striking Russia, not one word is spoken.

About the tactical nuclear weapons, some of them much more powerful than the one that obliterated the city of Hiroshima, nothing. They do not mention the destructive and lethal capacity of numerous conventional weapons, the radio-electric and other systems of weapons to which the US dedicates its growing military budget, greater than those of all the



An anti-Nato protest in Krakow, Poland.

Talisman Sabre 2011

Strong reasons to oppose war games



other nations together. Both governments are aware, and perhaps many of them that met there also, that a third world war would be the last war. What kind of delusions can the NATO members be having? What is the tranquillity that humankind can derive from that meeting? What benefit for the countries of the Third World, or even for the international economy, can we possibly hope for?

They cannot even offer the hope that the world economic crisis will be overcome, nor for how long that improvement would last. The total US public debt, not only of the central government but of all the rest of the public and private institutions in that country, now totals a figure equal to the world GDP of 2009, totalling \$58 trillion. Have the persons who met in Lisbon even wondered about where those fantastic resources would be coming from? The US still has veto power in the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Why didn't they discuss that in Portugal?

And what of Afghanistan? They will have to leave that country before they hand over power to the Afghan resistance, in defeat. The self-same US allies are beginning to acknowledge now what could happen decades before the end of that war; would NATO be prepared to stay there all that time? Would the very citizens of each of the governments who met there allow that?

Not to be forgotten is that a vastly populated country, Pakistan, shares a border of colonial origin with Afghanistan, as well as quite a large percentage of its inhabitants.

I do not criticise Russian President Medvedev; he is very correctly trying to limit the number of nuclear warheads that are pointing at his country. Barack Obama can make up absolutely no justification. It would be a joke to imagine that the colossal and costly deployment of the anti-nuclear missile shield is to protect Europe and Russia from Iranian rockets, coming from a country that doesn't even own any tactical nuclear devices.

Obama already admitted that his promise to withdraw US soldiers from Afghanistan may be postponed, and the taxes for the richest contributors suspended right away. After his Nobel Prize for Peace, we would have to award him with the prize for "the best snake charmer" that has ever existed.

Fidel Castro Ruz ✖

Talisman Sabre involves 18,000 US and 12,000 Australian troops, Talisman Sabre 2011 (TS11) is the next in the series of about nine US/Australian military exercises starting in 1994. It is to take place in the NT, north and central Queensland, the Coral, Timor and Arafura Seas, and the USA. In its Public Environment Report for TS11 (talismanSabre2011.com.au), the Australian Department of Defence lists TS11 activities as including firing of live ammunition and explosive ordnance; amphibious landings; artillery, armour and infantry manoeuvres; urban operations; air combat training; low-flying of helicopter and fixed-winged aircraft.

Also the use of unmanned aerial vehicles; air-to-air refuelling; special forces operations; ship-to-shore transfers and replenishments at sea; gun and missile firing; anti-submarine warfare, including use of high-power mid-frequency active sonar and sonobuoys to locate submarines; mine clearance; and science and technology projects (such as testing vehicle prototypes and communication systems) and advanced maritime operations. A nuclear-powered aircraft carrier and several submarines will be used; carriage of nuclear weapons will be neither confirmed nor denied.

The Shoalwater Bay Training Area (SWBTA) in central Queensland is pivotal to the Talisman Sabre military exercises not only because of its size and coastline, but because it has facilities of the Joint Combined Training Capability, a US/Australian network of management systems, headquarters and training areas (virtual and live). However, SWBTA's environmental value is pivotal too, highlighted by its inclusion on the National Heritage List, the Register of National Estate and the Commonwealth Heritage List, and by the international recognition of its wetlands under the international Ramsar Convention.

Undermining national security: The object of TS11 is to "improve training and interoperability between the Australian and US Armed Forces at the operational and tactical level" (Public Environment Report TS11), that is, to increase the combined capacity of the two nations to project military power beyond their shores. With this object, and in the context of the US/Australian military alliance and the aggressive defence policies of both nations, TS11 can afford no benefit to our national security.

The exercises are a display of military power, provoking other nations, including China, to build up their arsenals and war preparations. Such displays increase the likelihood of war and undermine the international cooperation urgently needed to curtail the risk to human welfare of global warming. Increasing arms races and the risk of war are sure ways of increasing risks to human and environmental wellbeing. Security comes with jobs, homes, education, health care, food, clean water, eco-integrity and democracy.

Indigenous rights: The land and waters of the SWBTA are traditional country of the Darumbal people. According to Defence's SWBTA State of the Environment Report 2008, it was not until the mid-1990s that Darumbal people were given limited rights to visit the SWBTA: ... "up to 12 access opportunities have been offered each year, although in some years of extended military training, that number has been much less".

Social and health risks: Military exercises involving large numbers of visiting troops can have serious health and social impacts on hosting communities. Increases in violence, drug taking, sexual assault, sexually transmitted disease and road accidents have been reported. Australian examples are assaults by US MPs on Aborigines in Ipswich during the 1997 Tandem Thrust war games and the case of two US servicemen tried for rape in Darwin in February 2004.

Economic impacts: The estimated cost to Australia of conducting TS11 is over \$100 million. The drain on the public purses of both Australia and US of these biennial war games deprives areas of essential social need of resources, as does all excessive military spending (2010 saw Australia's military spending grow to over \$70 million a day, the USA's over \$US1.8 billion a day). Military expenditure reduces public and private investment, including in civilian R&D, increases the current account deficit, and creates fewer jobs than does equivalent spending on civilian projects.

Environmental impacts: The waters of the training areas on the Queensland coast are contained by the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area, habitat for many protected species: the humpback whale, dugong, six turtle species, the estuarine crocodile, grey nurse shark, whale shark, 13 species of birds and several fish species. Defence is not legally obliged to undertake

a formal environmental impact assessment for TS11, only an internal self-assessment.

Defence admits that, even after mitigation measures, risks remain: 26 remain at medium level and four remain high (the latter being risks to marine life from accidental exposure of a nuclear powered vessel's reactor core; to migratory species and roosting birds from aircraft movement; to marine habitat and species of a major oil spill; and to flora and fauna from out-of-control hazard reduction burns).

Defence accepts that the biggest environmental risks of its activities are quarantine issues, particularly "the potential for introduction of exotic marine pests", yet for TS11 we are expected to be confident in the capacity of the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service to assess every lunch box, shoe, Velcro fastener, tyre tread, engine, ship hull and piece of equipment of the 30,000 troops.

Defence insists the US military is environmentally responsible and appears to be ready to permit US units to self-monitor their environmental performance during TS11! Given its global reputation, the US military does not warrant this level of trust. It has successfully sought exemptions to several US environmental laws and, according to media reports, has attempted to avoid clean-ups on 129 of its most heavily contaminated decommissioned home bases.

Defence states that the results of research on sonar effects on marine mammals are too nebulous for the precautionary principle to be relevant. Authors of a 2008 paper cite mounting evidence that cetacean behavioural responses to levels of sonar previously thought safe have the potential to produce detrimental effects that may be lethal and cause population decline.

Under Australian environmental legislation, Defence is not required to have its environmental management systems and its environmental performance monitored and verified by independent civilian bodies. Defence environmental assessments are undertaken long after they can influence decisions and planning. The public consultation processes for major procurements and activities is selective, often nominal, and the public is denied details of military decisions likely to effect public well being.

Talisman Sabre 2011 will be conducted from July 18-29. To become involved in the campaign against it phone Denis, 0418 290 663. ✖

WikiLeaks: Irish government knew they were in violation of torture conventions

Slowly but surely the entire shameful truth is coming out about Shannon airport, CIA renditions, and the lengths the Irish government went to avoid the evidence. One of the first Dublin embassy cables from WikiLeaks confirmed that the Minister for Foreign Affairs Dermot Ahern knew about the CIA's use of Shannon for its renditions. The latest Dublin cable shows that they knew this meant they were in violation of torture conventions. Yet they did nothing to uphold their legal and moral responsibilities, preferring instead to avoid political difficulty.

According to a cable released by WikiLeaks on January 14, an unnamed individual who met with the

US embassy's deputy chief of mission (DCM) in Dublin told the embassy - "Were a plane to include Shannon in an itinerary that also included transporting prisoners, GOI [government of Ireland] lawyers might be forced to conclude that the GOI itself was in violation of torture conventions".

So an Irish government minister was quite convinced that at least three flights involving renditions had refuelled at Shannon Airport before or after conducting renditions. The government's lawyers were telling them they were likely to be in violation of the legally binding Convention Against Torture. But what did our government do? They vehemently denied any involvement of Shannon

in the CIA's renditions program, and they went to the US embassy to make sure they were not found out. Or as the cable puts it, their main concern was that what they were saying would not be found "to have holes in it".

The person quoted in the cable who seemed to be speaking on behalf of the Irish government also said that there would be enormous political pressure on the government if it was discovered that the US were taking prisoners through Shannon.

It is shameful that the Irish government would put diplomatic relations with the US and their own political survival over the rule of law and the lives of people who were being kidnapped and tortured. They repeatedly asked for evidence, despite



Dermot Ahern – Minister for Foreign Affairs, Ireland.

being presented with it by activists at Shannon and organisations like Amnesty International. Yet the Gardai (police force) steadfastly refused to inspect suspect planes at Shannon. On one occasion a Garda (officer) even cited a "policy decision" not to inspect a plane when it was formally brought to his attention.

This policy decision is consistent with the policy of ministers at the highest level of the Irish government.

Meanwhile it is encouraging to note that the painstaking research and campaigning by a few activists at Shannon over the past decade has had some impact. "Parliamentarians [in Ireland] draw on allegations from journalists, activists' websites and tail spotters to suggest the US government has used Shannon for nefarious purposes" according to the US embassy cable. Giving the lengths that the Irish governments have gone to in order to avoid investigating CIA and US military flights through Shannon it is not surprising that the "allegations" are not dismissed. They

have been putting the government under pressure to stop telling lies and to end their complicity in human rights abuse.

It must surely make John Gormley, leader of the Green Party, and minister in the current government quite uncomfortable. In February 2007 he said: "There is no way Dermot Ahern is going to spin his way out of this. The government's reliance on diplomatic assurances from the US instead of active inspections is a farce".

He is now part of the farce.

Finally it is disappointing to note that the mainstream media in Ireland has once again avoided any coverage of the WikiLeaks cables that might embarrass the Irish government and the US. It therefore falls to the likes of this Shannonwatch website to inform the public about one of the greatest shames of Ireland's recent history, its involvement in international kidnapping, "disappearances" and torture.

Shannonwatch ☘

Baby Doc's strange return to Haiti

Emile Schepers

He has visibly aged since he was run out of Haiti in 1986. He still has the malevolent stare he inherited, along with the presidency, from his father, Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier, president of Haiti from 1956 until his death in 1971.

The return of former dictator Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier to Haiti on January 16, has further unsettled an already chaotic situation. Duvalier senior was one of the worst tyrants to rule in the Americas in the 20th century, and his son was a chip off the old block. Ruling through a super-violent militia called the "Tonton Macoute" (bogeyman), the Duvaliers, father and son, are thought to have murdered up to 60,000 political enemies. They stripped Haiti bare. But they were supported by the United States, because they were stalwart anti-communists.

When Baby Doc was finally overthrown in 1986, the Tonton Macoute and military stayed behind, protecting the interests of a tiny opulent minority. A radical priest, Jean Bertrand Aristide, swept the presidential elections of 1991, but was quickly overthrown by the military. In 1994, the US administration of Bill Clinton intervened to return Aristide to power, exacting trade concessions that harmed Haitian small farmers. Aristide was elected again in 2001 but was overthrown once more by the Bush administration in 2004.

Then came a United Nations intervention that has been resented

by the Haitian poor, last year's earthquake and a cholera epidemic that has killed 4,000 people. Billions in earthquake reconstruction aid has been trickling in at a snail's pace.

Haiti's November 28 election was marred by fraud and disorganisation. Aristide's party, Fanmi Lavalas, was barred on the basis of ridiculous technicalities. Many could not vote. A panel from the Organisation of American States is calling for the Haitian government to change the results so a runoff, as yet not scheduled, would be between Mirland Manigat and Michel Martelly, instead of between Manigat and the current government's favourite candidate, Jude Celestine. Both Manigat and, especially, Martelly have Duvalierist connections. The government so far has resisted this demand.

People are asking, "Who facilitated Baby Doc's return?"

Is some powerful country backing Duvalier?" He travelled on an expired diplomatic passport. The French government says it was not aware of Duvalier's plans. Haitian Prime Minister Max Bellarive simply remarked that all Haitian citizens have a right to be in their homeland.

"Really?" asks former President Jean Bertrand Aristide from exile in South Africa. Aristide's overthrow occurred reportedly at the instigation of the French and US governments who were angry, partly because Aristide kept needling the French to repay Haiti \$21 billion for money they had extorted at

gunpoint during the 19th century. Aristide, who says he has medical problems that cause him discomfort in South Africa's sometimes chilly winters, has not ceased to demand the right to return, but the government of his former ally, President Rene Preval, refuses to renew his passport.

Trey Wilkinson of the *Los Angeles Times* speculates that Duvalier's timing may have to do with personal finances. When he left Haiti, Baby Doc reportedly cleaned out the treasury and absconded with hundreds of millions of dollars, which he stashed in Swiss bank accounts. He lost most of this in legal actions, especially his divorce. What remains was frozen in Switzerland, but may be handed over to the Haitian government on February 1. So Duvalier may want to be in Haiti to try to recapture that money.

Runoff elections have not been scheduled. Preval must, by law, leave office by February 7. Perhaps Duvalier and his supporters hope to use a power vacuum to stage a comeback.

Duvalier was going to give a press conference last week, but instead was briefly arrested and interrogated, then released. The Haitian government says it may prosecute him for embezzlement and theft, but says nothing about murder and the violation of human rights. Lawsuits are being filed by individuals who suffered at the hands of his Tonton Macoute.

People's World ☘

Tunisia: New government already in crisis

The Tunisian transitional government, which held its first Cabinet meeting on January 20, is already facing protests for keeping within its ranks members of overthrown President Ben Ali's administration. "The most important point we will consider," says a government source, is "the plan for general amnesty," announced on Monday by the prime minister. The other important business of the day will be application of the principal of the separation of the state from the former ruling party, the Constitutional Democratic Rally (CDR), which, according to some, must disappear from the political landscape altogether.

The three ministers belonging to the central labour party, the Tunisian General Labour Union (TGLU), stepped down the day before, at the request of their organisation, in order to denounce the continued presence in the government of members of Ben Ali's CDR. Opposition member Mustafa Ben Jaafar, the Minister of Health, suspended his participation in the government.

In an attempt to pacify Tunisians, interim President Foued Mebazaa and Prime Minister Mohammed Ghannouchi broke with the Constitutional Democratic Rally party.

"It is not enough. I don't think the

population will accept it. People want to see a definitive end to the CDR," declared Abdellatif Abid, a member of the political bureau of the Democratic Forum for Labour and Liberty.

These announcements take place in the context of a vigorous backlash against the composition of the new government, in which eight members of the former dictator's administration - all members of the CDR - were once again admitted to key positions. This step roused massive protest and led to three ministers from the TGLU to step down.

Thousands of Tunisians showed their anger in Tunis and in several other cities, notably Sfax (eastern central Tunisia), the country's economic capital, and Sidi Bouzid (western central Tunisia), the cradle of the "Jasmine Revolution."

In Sousse (eastern central Tunisia) and Tataouine (southern Tunisia), protesters climbed the facades of CDR headquarters to remove and destroy flags and symbols of the party.

In the capital, Tunis, police used clubs and tear gas to violently scatter a thousand protesters, including, for the first time, Muslims.

"We can live with just bread and water, but we can't live with the CDR," chanted the protesters.

L'Humanite ☘

The Special Tribunal for Lebanon: Independent investigation or US-Israeli cat's-paw?

Mike Whitney

In August 2010, Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah presented "intercepted Israeli reconnaissance footage" and "the recorded confessions of Israeli spies" at a news conference in Beirut to support his claim that Israel was responsible for the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri. The aerial footage, taken by Israeli unmanned drones, showed the same route taken by Hariri's motorcade on the day of the assassination, suggesting that the ex-PM was being pursued.

Nasrallah's revelations were compelling but, unfortunately, they were ignored by the western media except for the *Christian Scientist Monitor* which compiled the information in an article titled "Is Hezbollah right that Israel assassinated Lebanon's Rafic Hariri?"

Here's an excerpt from the *CSM*: "Israel has the capability to carry out this type of operation, such as Hariri's assassination and the other assassinations that targeted Lebanon during the past few years," said Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, adding that Israel's motive was to cast the blame on its enemies, Syria and Hezbollah.

Nasrallah's damning evidence is especially important now that the prosecutor for the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) has issued his draft indictments. For now, the contents are being kept secret, but it's widely

Rafik Hariri, but that doesn't seem to be the case. Nasrallah has dismissed the STL as an "American and Israeli project" designed to label Hezbollah as a terrorist organisation. The STL has culled all information that does not comply with its primary objective.

Thus, the fact that more than 100 people in Lebanon have been arrested in the last year "on charges of collaborating with the Mossad ... including one who said his Israeli handlers instructed him to delude the late prime minister into thinking Hezbollah was out to kill him (Hariri) and so allow the agent to alter the route Hariri's motorcade would take that fateful February day", or that Lebanon's "telecommunications network had been infiltrated by Israel, compromising all its communications" ("The Hariri Assassination: All Eyes on Lebanon", Ranni Amiri, Global Research) will undoubtedly be omitted from the investigation's final report.

Here's more from Ranni Amiri's article:

"According to the Lebanese daily *As-Safir*, Qazzi confessed to installing computer programs and planting electronic chips in Alfa transmitters. These could then be used by Israeli intelligence to monitor communications, locate and target individuals for assassination, and potentially deploy viruses capable of erasing recorded information in the contact lines. Qazzi's collaboration with Israel reportedly dates back 14 years. (Note: Charbel Qazzi was head of transmission and broadcasting at Alfa, one of

general's comments were seen as momentous particularly that he made them in front of a committee involved in Israel's strategic policies."

So, why is Ashkenazi speculating on the STL indictments way back in July 2010, and why would he bring it up at a meeting devoted to "Israel's strategic policies"? Does this explain why there are reports of increased military activity on Israel's northern border? Is there a broader strategy to use the indictments to resume hostilities between Israel and Lebanon?

And why is Secretary of State Hillary Clinton so deeply involved in the activities of the so called "independent" tribunal? Clinton put the kibosh on a Syria-Saudi team that was trying to find a resolution between the rival factions in Lebanon's ruling body.

Why? And why did she tell "Saudi King Abdullah and Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri that the US would reject any settlement at the expense of the UN tribunal." Saad Hariri has reluctantly acquiesced to Clinton's demands, but what does that mean? Should we assume that Clinton cares more about finding out who killed Rafik Hariri than his own son?

The loose ends and unanswered questions abound. The case that's being made by the STL may seem convincing, but there is an equally cogent narrative that supports Hezbollah's position. Here's how British politician George Galloway summed it up in a speech in Edmonton in November 2010:

"I believe, and I don't know anybody who is objective in this matter who does not believe, that Hezbollah are absolutely innocent of this crime, and it is time that the tribunal looked to the people who benefited from this crime ... in Israel.

"Any law student here knows, the first thing you do when confronted with a crime is ask the question, *cui bono*, who benefited?"

"Did Syria benefit from the killing of the Sunni leader in Lebanon? Syria lost everything.

"Did Hezbollah benefit? Would Hezbollah benefit from destroying forever the respect and admiration that the Sunni Muslim population, not just in Lebanon but throughout the Arab and Muslim world, had towards them? No! They would lose everything.

"But Israel gained everything from this crime. It deepened the schism between Sunni and Shia in Lebanon. It deepened the schism between Sunni and Shia throughout the Muslim world. They plunged Lebanon into absolute chaos, and may do so again in the next few days and months.

"If this tribunal issues this indictment and anyone seeks to implement it, there will be war in Lebanon and there will be war almost certainly between Israel and Lebanon, and all of us will be dragged into it one way or another." ("Galloway unedited: 'Special Tribunal for Lebanon' should have asked 'who benefited?'" www.rabble.ca)

Is that the goal, another war in Lebanon to create the "New Middle East" that Bush and Condi used to opine about? It's too soon to say, but it's not looking good.



Why is Israel's chief of staff, General Gabi Ashkenazi, making predictions that the political situation in Lebanon will progressively deteriorate?

Information Clearing House ✪



Global Briefs

SPAIN: After 50 years of violent conflict and a four-month cease fire, the Basque separatist group ETA on January 10 declared the ceasefire permanent. Press conference spokespersons invited international verification. One quoted by the *UK Guardian* promised a "firm commitment towards a process to achieve a lasting resolution and towards an end to armed confrontation". As its price for a ceasefire, the clandestine group is demanding negotiations and recognition of Basque self determination in Spanish and French territories. Spain's government rejected the proposal, calling upon ETA to "lay down arms definitively". Any verification would be carried out by state security forces, the government said. Observers say that with 550 members in Spanish and French jails including recently arrested leaders, ETA was responding to pressures from within its formations by announcing the cease fire.

AFGHANISTAN: After nine years of war in and around Afghanistan death toll statistics are as bleak as ever. Official Afghan figures indicate 2,043 civilians, 1,292 police, and 5,225 Taliban combatants died during 2010. The 10,081 total of deaths last year also included 810 Afghan soldiers and 711 international troops – for the latter, the war's heaviest annual toll to date. Global Research cites the Pakistan-based Conflict Monitoring Centre to report that CIA drone attacks over Pakistan's tribal areas killed 938 people in 2010. Last year's 132 drone attacks exceeded the total of the previous five years. Meanwhile, Afghanistan's Human Development Index ranks in 181st place in world rankings. In 2007 Afghanistan ranked in 176th place, with a life expectancy at 43.6 years.

SOUTH AFRICA: After helping to bring about Jacob Zuma's election to the presidency, the COSATU labour federation, concerned about rising unemployment and slow progress in social programs, has criticised Zuma, leader of the ruling African National Congress. Zuma made a speech on January 8 at the ANC's 99th birthday celebration, attended by 45,000. Zuma's call for job creation was well received as was his insistence on unity within the ANC, COSATU and Communist Party tripartite alliance. Extolling the ANC, Communist Party General Secretary Blade Nzimande pointed to "the single biggest threat that faces our revolution today, the politics of money, the politics of selfishness, the politics of greed".

"The first thing you do when confronted with a crime is ask the question, *cui bono*, who benefited?"

expected that members of Hezbollah will be charged in Hariri's murder. Nasrallah has warned that he won't allow members of his militia to be arrested, so if warrants are issued, fighting will surely break out. Already, many schools in Beirut have been closed and Lebanese security forces have been put on high alert.

At the same time, the Obama administration has been working behind the scenes to influence key members in Lebanon's government to support the US-Israeli position. In fact, Lebanon's Foreign Ministry summoned US Ambassador Maura Connelly to explain why she had met with Lebanese lawmaker Nicolas Fattouch over the weekend. It appears as though the US is meddling in the country's internal affairs in an effort to discredit Hezbollah. Connelly has not yet explained what she was up to.

The Special Tribunal for Lebanon is supposed to be an "independent" investigation into the assassination of

Lebanon's two state-owned mobile service providers."

So, the question arises: Who had the communications systems, aerial drones and explosives capable of killing Hariri? Who knew the route of his motorcade? Who had the motive?

And why is Israel's chief of staff, General Gabi Ashkenazi, making predictions that the political situation in Lebanon will progressively deteriorate following the STL's indictments? Here's a clip from the political-theatrics website:

"The Israeli Chief of Staff told the Knesset's Foreign Committee that 'with lots of wishes and a little bit of information' the situation in Lebanon will probably deteriorate following the issuance of an indictment by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL)..."

"Although the date of issuing the indictment has not been set yet, Ashkenazi predicted it will be in September and insinuated that it will implicate Hezbollah. The Israeli

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



email: tpearson@cpa.org.au

International Women's Day has a proud history

This year will see world-wide celebrations with particular vigour as it is the 100th anniversary of the event.

In Sydney the traditional march starts off from Sydney Square, right in the centre of the city near Town Hall. The first one took place in 1972. It may be the last time that the march will take off from that point – all thanks to the Sydney diocese under Archbishop Peter Jensen. It turns out that the square mostly belongs to the church and it has put the IWD organisers on notice that they would not be able to use it as a gathering point in the future.

Many people have become complacent lately about defending their

rights, women included. The numbers at IWD have dropped though there are more than enough issues to raise and fight for. It might be a good opportunity to have a closer look at the church which degrades women by telling them to submit to the "leadership" of men in church and in marriage and is so mean and spiteful that it denies women their traditional gathering space. What a disgrace!

**Mati English
Sydney**

WikiLeaks and GM

No matter what you think about WikiLeaks it provides a rich source of information. Much of what is becoming public we have had suspicions about but it is nice to have proof and facts.

One of the most dangerous developments in world agriculture was the aggressive introduction of genetically modified seeds by such multinational giants as Monsanto. The public was on the side of caution and wanted to make sure that it was safe both for the environment and human consumption.

In many countries, especially in Europe, there was a very strong resistance to GM crops. Now US diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks

reveal Bush administration plans to retaliate against the countries that Monsanto was unhappy with. Craig Stapleton, the former US ambassador to France specifically asked the US government to retaliate against France and cause it some harm throughout the European Union for refusing to use genetically modified seeds.

We see the United States joining in with Monsanto and in effect acting as Monsanto's agent to push its products onto the rest of the world. The US State Department mainly focused on developing countries – easier to twist their arms, I suppose. But apart from pushing GM products into Africa they also used the Secretary of State's chief adviser, Nina Fedoroff (scientific adviser) in India and Australia for the same purpose.

In essence, a state representative is dealing with another state on behalf of a private company, doing that company's bidding. In some cases they are winning when they manage to weaken existing safety protocols and overtake regulatory authorities. Do you hear much about this collusion between multinationals and states? It has been clear for some time that multinationals are running many states – now we have it in writing.

**T Southern
Brisbane**

Flood questions need answers

Like all who live in Australia I am appalled at the devastation and saddened at the loss of life in the recent Queensland disaster. The positive response of the people in coming to the aid of each other emphasises the power of community and the simple words of "are you alright" and "do you need some help" restored hope to many.

As this most immediate and necessary response fades other questions will come to the fore, such as how can this be stopped from happening again. To get to this we need to look at not just flood mitigation but at water management and public planning. Some of the recent flood may have its origins in the "drought".

Much more water was held in the Wivenhoe flood storage than was

planned for, the Traveston Dam may have been the wrong choice and cut-backs on drainage may have contributed to the problems of Toowoomba (suggestions that stormwater pipes were below capacity and led to the build up of water for the Tsunami are being made).

A report on these questions can be found online under the title "A curious Drought" by JV Hodgkinson.

The politicians have closed around the two party system and deny that this tragedy could have been prevented. It is owed to the people that have been killed and those who have lost their homes and livelihoods that the questions should be asked: should it have happened, and what actions taken and not taken contributed to this tragedy.

**David Matters
Brisbane**

DO YOU HAVE
SOMETHING TO SAY?

Write a letter to the Editor

Culture & Life

by

Rob Gowland

Between a rock and a hard place

When the struggle against apartheid in South Africa was at its height, a global blockade was implemented, to make South Africa's isolation tangible and clear. Several countries – and quite a few capitalist firms – sought to thwart this blockade but few dared to do it openly because of the world-wide abhorrence of the blatantly racist apartheid system.

One state that did not hesitate to give aid (especially military aid) and succour to the South African racists was Israel. South African gold helped make Israel one of the world's major arms manufacturers and suppliers.

The universally-condemned South African policy of segregated areas or "bantustans" for the black population of the country today forms the basis for Israel's policy in illegally-occupied Palestine, with Palestinians substituted for Africans.

For half a century the US, with an eye to securing control over Middle East oil and at the same time countering Arab unity and possible Arab power, has given Israel open and unstinting support, using military might and UN veto to provide a shield for Israeli aggression.

Israel has been the USA's big stick in the region, and a mighty useful big stick it has been. In the meantime, on the strength of this special relationship, the Zionist "Israel Lobby" in Washington has flourished, attaining extraordinary influence and consequently power.

They have forged strong relationships with right wing US politicians, particularly in the Republican Party. The new chair of the House Foreign



Affairs Committee, for example, is Ileana Ros-Lehtinen from Florida. Her main individual campaign contributor is Irving Moskowitz, a major funder of the most militant settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

Not surprisingly, Ros-Lehtinen is less than partial to the Palestinian cause.

With people like Ros-Lehtinen on board, the Israel lobby must have seemed impregnable. But in the face of Israel's blatant, racist aggression, and the *scale* of that aggression, the popular tide is turning against the Israeli propaganda machine. The feeble excuse that Israel is only defending itself (against the puny and largely ineffectual rocket attacks from Palestine) simply won't wash anymore.

According to Washington commentator Jim Lobe, who has a blog at www.lobelog.com, even the USA's own experts are beginning to press the White House to change its Middle East line. "Some four dozen former top US diplomats and prominent policy analysts", according to Lobe, are urging the US administration to support (or at least not to oppose) a Security Council draft resolution that condemns the Israeli settlements in

Palestine as illegal under international law and an obstacle to peace.

The diplomats include George Bush Sr's UN ambassador, and Reagan's national security adviser and defence secretary, as well as several former US ambassadors to Israel.

The resolution should go before the Security Council in February and, unless it is vetoed by the US, Britain or France, is expected to reaffirm the illegality of Jewish settlements in the Occupied Territories.

For all their concern over the dangers inherent in present US policy towards Palestine and Israel, the US former diplomats and ambassadors seem to be sadly out of touch with the reality of how US policy is perceived in the region, and indeed throughout the world. In a letter released to the media, they actually warn the Obama administration that "America's credibility" in the region would be at stake if the US vetoes the resolution. "Our seriousness as a guarantor of international law and international legitimacy is at stake," they went on (I kid you not).

The US, remember, is the country that tried to get Israel to accept a paltry *three-month* suspension of settlement building in the occupied

territories by offering it a bribe of *billions* of dollars worth of new warplanes, various security guarantees, and a US pledge to veto any Security Council resolution critical of Israel over the next year. Israel, confident that the US has no alternative but to support its belligerent Middle East proxy, in effect told the US to go take a running jump.

The letter from the former diplomats and advisers is deemed daring in the official US context, where questioning the line of US foreign policy is regarded as virtually disloyal. But amongst the American people, the letter's assertion that "America's credibility in a crucial region of the world is on the line" was met with derision, probably because the letter couldn't resist describing the Middle East as "a region in which hundreds of thousands of our troops are deployed and where we face the greatest threats and challenges to our security".

A typical comment was: "The United States has not had the respect of the rest of the world since World War 2, and has been the laughing stock of the rest of the world due to our government's arrogance, hubris, stupidity, inefficiency, and domination of the rest of the world." Which

doesn't leave you anywhere much to go, does it?

Meanwhile, there has been a sharp increase in Israeli settlement construction on the West Bank and demolition of Palestinian property in East Jerusalem over the last six months, as Israel thumbs its nose at a US administration it sees as powerless to stand up to it.

When Obama, desperate to get some credibility in the Middle East, asked Israeli PM Netanyahu last year to freeze all settlement activity in the Occupied Territories, including in East Jerusalem, he got embarrassingly rebuffed.

On the other hand, Palestinian diplomacy has been gaining support from states in various parts of the world for a Palestinian state based on the 1967 boundary. At the same time, a number of other countries have upgraded their diplomatic relations with the Palestinian Authority.

Virtually all the world's nations and the World Court have regarded Israeli settlements in territory conquered during the 1967 war as illegal under the Fourth Geneva Convention. The US for its part finds itself lodged firmly between a rock and a hard place. ☺



Sunday January 30 –
Saturday February 5

This week's episode of the beautifully photographed series *South Pacific* (ABC1 Sundays at 7.30pm) is called *Strange Islands* and is basically a quick survey of the way life on the thousands of isolated islands of the South Pacific has evolved to take advantage of the various niches caused by that same isolation.

In one area, the local skinks have evolved into a larger form with prehensile tails, allowing them to move into the trees as a reptilian substitute for the possum. On other isolated islands, the absence of predators has resulted in such phenomena as the evolution of parrots that have given up flight in favour of growing fat, penguins that live in forests and bats that burrow in the ground.

The isolation that has allowed these animals to occupy vacant evolutionary niches has also left those same animals vulnerable to introduced species competing for those same niches. As the program shows, throughout the South Pacific European settlement in particular has resulted in the introduction of cats, rats, stoats, goats, pigs, foxes, deer and other non-native species.

On many islands, the native fauna has been unable to survive. Humans, responsible for the catastrophe are

belatedly trying to reverse the devastation, but for many species it is too late.

The crying need for greatly increased investment in this area is glaringly obvious to anyone who is not blinded by profit.

A factory manager who placed a large, powerful and potentially deadly piece of machinery in the charge of an 18-year old youth with no previous experience and minimum training – and very little supervision – would be regarded as at best careless and “asking for trouble”. And that’s for a stationary machine.

But we routinely give 18-year-old youths “their own car” to drive around in unsupervised, risking injury or death not just for themselves but for others as well. And the risk is not minor: the biggest killer of young Australian males aged 18 – 25 is the road.

Drive (ABC1 Monday January 31 at 9.30pm) is a sober, chilling study of the culture of nihilist risk-taking among the male youth of the region with the dubious distinction of having Australia’s highest rate of road fatalities: north west Tasmania.

What is interesting is that their risk taking is not restricted to or dependent on using cars. They are just as disregarding of their safety or of the consequences for their families and friends when they are on their skateboards.

The young people on display in the program clearly feel that their lives have no purpose and no meaning. It is not, as you might suppose, because they have no jobs: some at least do have jobs (one is an apprentice butcher). Their lives, jobs included, provide them with no satisfaction, no sense of achievement, nothing they can be proud of.

So they take pride in their painfully acquired mastery of difficult stunts on a skateboard or in a speeding car.

Of course, accidents involving loss of control of skateboards are more likely to produce skinned knees and chipped elbows than multiple fatalities, especially among bystanders.

Capitalism tries to make every scientific advance into an opportunity for profit, tries to render every new discovery into a commodity that can be marketed. That deplorable situation should not lead us to eschew scientific advances simply because capitalism makes money from them.

Nor should we assume that scientists are automatically corrupt just because many of them work for corporations, and the bosses of those corporations are to some extent or other almost certainly corrupt.

Confusing scientists with the corporations that employ them is overly simplistic, and has led to people in those countries where corporate power is strongest and most abused becoming suspicious and distrustful not only of privately employed scientists but of all scientists, indeed of science itself.

Vaccines are one of the greatest achievements of modern medicine. Vaccines have largely eradicated terrible diseases like smallpox, polio and diphtheria. But despite numerous studies indicating vaccine safety, in some US communities large numbers of parents have been rejecting vaccines altogether, raising new concerns about the return of vaccine-preventable diseases like measles and whooping cough.

In the excellent documentary **The Vaccine War** (SBS1 Tuesday February 1 at 7.30pm), made by the US Public Broadcasting Service, a leading woman advocate for rejecting State immunisation projects argues that immunisation against polio is unnecessary in the US because they don’t have polio there any more. (Because of the immunisation program, but she does not say that.)



South Pacific
(ABC1 Sundays at 7.30pm) – Kagu – flightless bird found on New Caladonia

The fear of “big government” whipped up by the Republicans also plays a part, as scientists in the program try to get parents to acknowledge that they have some responsibility for the health of others in the community not just themselves. No one in government is going to tell us what is good for our kids. People on the Internet, however, can tell us all manner of nonsense and we’ll believe it because it is not from “the government”.

A fascinating study. **A** BIG construction job, whether it’s the Aswan High Dam or the Thames flood barrier, is a potentially fascinating and even exciting subject for a documentary, and has been ever since Joris Ivens made *Komsomol* in the Soviet Union in 1932 about the construction of the Magnitogorsk blast furnaces, and then *New Earth* in Holland two years later about reclaiming the Zuider Zee from the ocean.

Mega Builders (ABC2 Saturdays from February 5 at 7.00pm) is a US-made series showing major modern construction jobs, beginning

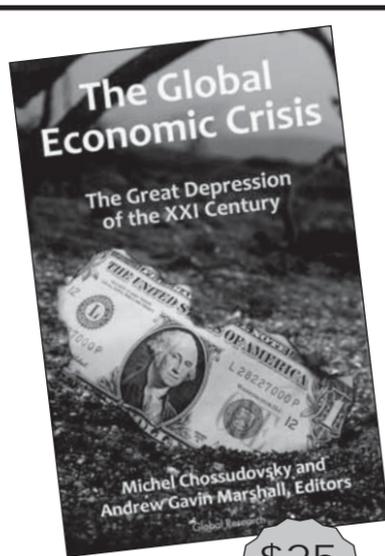
with the construction of the first new swinging bridge across New York’s Harlem River in a century.

Based on episode one, the series is an appalling waste of an opportunity. The makers of the film appear to be unaware – or to believe that TV viewers are unaware – that anything big has ever been built anywhere else in the world, ever.

Some of the technology on display is impressive (the 288-wheel machine for lifting and turning the bridge span, for example), but the program comfortably assumes that its viewers are just too dumb to grasp anything complex and so does not bother to say much about it (perhaps because it is Canadian and not “made in the USA”).

The music is raucous and insistent, everybody shouts at everybody else (must be a terrible way to work), and bureaucracy dogs them every step of the way. Hurrah for the free enterprise system!

This is documentary without vision and without much to recommend it, either. ☹



\$25 plus \$6 p&h

The Global Economic Crisis The Great Depression of the XXI Century

Editors: Michel Chossudovsky and Andres Gavin Marshall
Publisher: Global Research, 390 pages

This just published compilation of articles by 16 researchers, authors and others on the left gives a comprehensive analysis of the present economic crisis. The book is divided into five parts: The Global Economic Crisis; Global Poverty; War, National Security and World Government; The Global Monetary System; and The Shadow Banking System.

The book is rich with detailed information that digs beneath the surface and exposes the lies and distortions of media, politicians and bourgeois economists. The language is very accessible, technical terms such are explained clearly. Links are made between the economic, political, military and social developments. It exposes the myth of economic recovery, who was behind the crisis, who benefits and the horrendous impact it has had on millions of people around the world.

It is a must read for political activists, trade unionists, peace activists and anyone else wishing to learn more about the global economic crisis and 21st century imperialism.

One of the many books available at

Shop@CPA

74 Buckingham Street, Surry Hills, NSW 2010 Ph 02 9699 8844 shop@cpa.org.au
Please make all payments by Cheque or Money Order out to “CPA”
Credit Card – minimum purchase \$20 (include card type, name, number & expiry date)

Special offer subscription to **The Guardian**

10 issues: \$10* 12 MONTHS: \$88 (\$80 conc.) 6 months: \$45 (\$40)

NAME: _____

ADDRESS: _____

POSTCODE: _____

Pay by Cheque Money order (Payable to “Guardian Publications”)

Phone in details on 02 9699 8844

Or send to: Guardian Subscriptions

74 Buckingham St, Surry Hills, NSW 2010, Australia

or by credit card: Mastercard Visa *\$20 minimum on cards

Card# _____

Amount: _____ Expiry Date: ____/____/____ Date: _____

Signature: _____

The Guardian

Editorial Office
74 Buckingham St, Surry Hills, 2010
Ph: 02 9699 8844 Fax: 02 9699 9833
Email: guardian@cpa.org.au

Editor: Tom Pearson

Published by
Guardian Publications
Australia Ltd
74 Buckingham St, Surry Hills, 2010

Printed by Spotpress
24-26 Lilian Fowler Place
Marrickville 2204

Responsibility for electoral comment
is taken by T Pearson,
74 Buckingham St, Surry Hills, 2010

Sydney POLITICS in the pub

February 4

THE EMPOWERED GREENS AND PROGRESSIVE POLITICS

John Kaye, Greens NSW MP;
Tad Tieze, Dr, political commentator & former Green

February 11

CLIMATE CHANGE & THE FORGOTTEN PEOPLE OF THE PACIFIC – WHAT IS AUSTRALIA’S RESPONSIBILITY?

Phil Glendenning, Director Edmund Rice Centre;
Maria Tilmon Kiribati, representative Pacific Call Partnership

February 18

HOLDING ISRAEL ACCOUNTABLE – BOYCOTT/ DIVESTMENT/SANCTIONS (BDS) CAMPAIGN

Samah Sabawi, Human Rights Campaigner;
Sally McManus, Secretary Australian Services Union

February 25

WIKILEAKS – PERSECUTION: ASSANGE – COURAGE, POLITICIANS – COWARDICE

John Pilger, independent journalist & filmmaker;
Stuart Rees, Director, Sydney Peace Foundation

March 4

THE IMPACT OF RISING INTEREST RATES ON HOUSING AND JOBS FOR YOUNG AND OLD

Mary Rawlings, President Lane Cove Retirement Unit Assoc;
Alan Morris, Dr, Housing Analyst Social Policy Research Centre UNSW;
Louis Christopher, real estate analyst, Principal SQM Research

March 11

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO MENTAL HEALTH UNDER THE GILLARD GOVERNMENT?

Ian Hickie, Professor, Director Brain Mind Institute University Sydney;
Anne Deveson, filmmaker, author of *Tell Me I'm Here*, story of her son’s schizophrenia

Every Friday 6pm 'til 7.45

Gaelic Club

64 Devonshire Street Surry Hills

Pat Toms 02 9358 4834
patandbruceatoms@gmail.com
www.politicsinthepub.org.au

India:

Microfinance and its emerging challenges

Archana Prasad

The recent debate on the rise and regulation of Micro Finance Institutions (MFIs) has put the focus squarely on the neo-liberal model of microfinance, being followed by the government since the beginning of the economic reforms. The early 1990s saw the emergence of microfinance as a major strategy of poverty alleviation by the neo-liberal state, especially in the wake of the reduction of public spending on welfare programs.

The formation of self-help groups (SHGs) and their links with banks and government schemes was seen as a way of offsetting the problems of the limited outreach and of mobilising capital for self-employment and other income generation programs. Many of these schemes targeted poor women, who were largely dependent on the informal sector credit from moneylenders. Thus the self-help groups formed under the bank linkage program attracted many women and more than 70 percent of the bank and government linked groups were formed by women.

Perspectives on the SHGs

It was for this reason that the democratic movement and its organisations were not only forced to take this development seriously, but also develop their own perspective on SHG formation, while recognising the limitation of the neo-liberal model of microfinance.

The main critique of the neo-liberal model was built around the fact that it was largely designed to mobilise the savings of the poor for providing liquidity to banks and also for mobilising the savings for self-employment programs in which the government had started to invest less and less money. In this situation, the formation of the SHGs was becoming a way of absolving the state of its own responsibility towards poverty alleviation programs. At the same time, many communal organisations and profit seeking commercial enterprises had also started to use these SHGs for their own narrow ends.

In stark contrast to this, the alternative perspective of the Left led governments saw the SHGs as a way of increasing the outreach of the government as well as channelling the government funds to the people.

In West Bengal too, SHGs were given loans at subsidised, low interest rates, and they also received adequate training and marketing support. This showed that the democratic movement's model of SHGs was concentrated on the democratisation of governance rather than on the

withdrawal of government support. By the same measure, democratic organisations working for women's rights saw the formation of SHGs (for instance, MALAR federation in Tamilnadu) as providing a window of opportunity to mobilise women on social, economic and political issues.

Roots of the rise of MFIs

The recent rise and growth of microfinance institutions has only made such SHGs all the more vulnerable in the present scenario of economic distress. According to the State of the Microfinance Sector report of the ACCESS alliance, the MFI operations expanded by 13 times in four years to end the year 2009 at \$2.6 billion in outstanding loans.

Of its 26.6 million borrowers, poor women and disadvantaged sections form one of the largest sections of the clientele. Whereas there was only one for-profit MFI in the country in the middle of the 1990s, this number had spiralled to 149 registered micro finance institutions by 2009. Of these, about 11 per cent of the large microfinance companies had a disproportionately larger share in the credit market, having 82 percent of the clients and controlling about 88 percent of the loan portfolio.

This reveals the emergence of new corporate entities and private finance companies who have started to exploit the credit needs of the poor by charging high interest rates. An investigation by a reporter from the *Down to Earth* magazine in Andhra Pradesh revealed that whereas bank linked self-help groups were charging interest rates of about 15 percent from their borrowers, the interest rates charged by the MFIs were at about 60 per cent. This clearly showed that a space had been created for exploitative financial intermediaries for entering the rural and urban credit markets.

That this phenomenon was linked to the refusal of public sector banks and the state to extend the outreach of its formal credit infrastructure is evident from the fact that most of the MFIs are concentrated in the 256 districts where the poor have a demand for credit, but the formal banking system is not able to meet this demand. Of this Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka have the greatest density of micro finance institutions, and more than 50 percent of the outstanding loans are in the southern states.

This meteoric rise of the MFIs has its roots in the liberalisation of the banking system and its failure to meet the demands of the rural poor, especially women. Initially the MFIs were started in response to the program of financial inclusion. The SHG-bank linkage program was started by the



More than 70 percent of the bank and government linked groups were formed by women.

National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) where non-government organisations (NGOs) and not-for-profit institutions played an intermediary role in promoting and facilitating the link between self-help groups and banks.

Thus many MFIs started as not-for-profit NGOs and then began to expand their operations to make direct contact with the clients. Thus SKS Microfinance (which is the largest MFI in the country today) started as a not-for-profit institution and converted itself into a non-banking financial company in 2004. Similarly, Sampdana, another of the MFI giants, started with 500 clients and increased its clientele to about 300,000 in the period between 1998 and 2004 when it became another for-profit company.

This conversion of not-for-profit institutions into MFIs was a result of a state policy that increasingly facilitated the penetration of big private capital in this sector. International institutions like the World Bank supported the funders of the MFIs like Basix and the NGOs like PRADAN and SEWA in order to facilitate the demise of public sector banking.

Weakness of the neoliberal model

Such policies only exposed the weakness and inability of the current government and bank driven programs to meet these challenges. Women participating in the bank linkage program faced difficulties in getting access to bank credit despite the fact that it is they who had formed the SHGs.

Thus around 1,000 SHGs under the bank linkage scheme are yet to be credit linked even though they have formed the group under the linkage scheme.

Further, the bank linkage scheme

itself operates in two ways: first where the SHGs are supported directly through the banks on the one hand and, second, where banks lend to the MFIs for onward lending to the SHGs. They believe that this will only increase their outreach. But it is precisely this strategy which has also created the space for a replacement of the banks with the MFIs in some regions.

Thus NABARD's own report on the Status of Microfinance, 2009-2010 shows that while the rate of growth of direct bank support to the MFIs went up by 8.1 percent during the last year, direct support to the SHGs only went up by around six percent. This shows that the banks found it easier to give bulk loans to the MFIs rather than strengthen their direct links with the SHGs. Further, the ACCESS alliance report shows that the operation of the MFIs expanded by 83 percent in the last two years whereas the expansion of banking operations was only half that rate. This shows that the roots of and rise of the MFIs lie in the slow growth of public sector banking and their reluctant and tenuous links with the SHGs.

The second important factor that led to the rise of the MFIs was the failure of the poverty alleviation programs that relied on the SHGs as the main mobilisation strategy. The Andhra example is well known in this regard. Here the withdrawal of low interest rate based self-employment programs has led to the increasing operation of the MFIs.

Further, in governmental schemes like the SGSY or the Urban Self-Employment Schemes, subsidies were linked to the ability of the SHGs to get loans from banks. The design of many of these schemes was such that applicants had to get their loans sanctioned before they could avail of even

the inadequate and reduced subsidy (which in most cases did not exceed 35 percent of the entire project).

This was accompanied by inadequate infrastructural, training and marketing support for such employment opportunities. Thus, even though many of these schemes were targeted at the poorest of the poor (those below the poverty line), the rural and urban poor were not able to avail of these schemes adequately.

Need to resist the current trend

The democratic movement has been raising demands based on their experience with women's SHGs and the government programs of the Left ruled states. It recognises that the MFIs can only be countered if the government supports the SHGs through increased subsidies and low interest credits. The direct links of public sector banks with rural and urban poor and their SHGs need to be strengthened by expansion of the banking infrastructure and provisioning of low interest rate credit at a repayment rate of four percent. In such cases, the government may require to provide interest subsidies to these groups.

But along with this, political mobilisation for the regulation of the MFIs needs to be strengthened. For-profit NGOs and MFIs need to be stopped from expanding their operations in this sector on an urgent basis. It is no surprise that the finance minister has already stated that the government does not want to "strangle" the microfinance sector. The intention of the government is thus clear and large scale political mobilisation is urgently required to stop its devious and anti-people design.

People's Democracy ✪



Communist Party of Australia

Website: www.cpa.org.au
Email: cpa@cpa.org.au

The Guardian

Website: www.cpa.org.au/guardian
Email: guardian@cpa.org.au

Central Committee:
General Secretary: Dr Hannah Middleton
Party President: Vinnie Molina
74 Buckingham St, Surry Hills, 2010
Ph: 02 9699 8844 Fax: 02 9699 9833
Sydney District Committee:
Tony Oldfield
74 Buckingham St, Surry Hills, 2010
Ph: 02 9699 8844 Fax: 02 9699 9833

Newcastle Branch:
303 Hunter St
Newcastle NSW 2300
Ph: ah 02 4926 1752
Riverina Branch:
Allan Hamilton
2/57 Cooper St Cootamundra 2590
riverinacpa@live.com.au

Melbourne Branch:
Andrew Irving
PO Box 3 Room 0 Trades Hall
Lygon St Carlton Sth 3053
Ph: 03 9639 1550 Fax: 03 9639 4199
West Australian Branch:
Branch Secretary: David Fox
PO Box 98 North Perth WA 6906
Ph: 0410 410 592 Email: perth@cpa.org.au

Brisbane Branch: David Matters
PO Box 33, Camp Hill, Qld 4152
Ph: 0419 769 129
cpabris@live.com.au
South Australian State Committee:
Bob Briton, PO Box 612, Port Adelaide BC,
SA 5015 Ph: 0418 894 366
www.cpsa.blogspot.com
Email: sa@cpa.org.au