



Floods reveal twin scourge: Climate change and neo-liberalism

Bob Briton

Some communities in the eastern mainland states have begun the huge job of cleaning up following recent floods. Others are still reinforcing levees and waiting nervously for rivers to subside. The worst seems to be over but there are the rains expected in April to think about. People have rallied to help each other as they always do – filling sandbags or forming themselves into “mud armies”. The next challenge for many will be to get insurance companies to meet commitments to policyholders. That is never a foregone conclusion as companies cry poor and, on this occasion, state and federal governments are warning that the treasury cupboard is bare.

In best neo-liberal tradition, Australian governments are all sworn to slashing debt and producing a budget surplus. Prime Minister Gillard is making no commitments to the states or anybody else about reconstruction until floodwaters have receded to reveal the extent of the damage. The old refrain of “we will stand by communities and rebuild no matter what it takes” is no longer heard. The generosity shown to Queensland during last year’s floods has shrivelled.

NSW Premier Barry O’Farrell is unhappy about the change in attitude. There are more than 40 local government disaster-declared areas in NSW that should be entitled to state and Commonwealth help. Roads and other major infrastructure need reconstruction and, unfortunately for respective incumbent state treasurers, repairs will be complicated by decades of neo-liberal penny-pinching and outright neglect. Predictions were that the NSW deficit would blow out from \$185 million this year to \$321 million next year. That was before the floods. Expect the axe to fall on more government services as the repair bills come in.

Governments are keen to avoid that other neo-liberal shibboleth, taxes, to meet this kind of emergency. Brisbane Lord Mayor and would-be Queensland Premier Campbell Newman has outlined his rather unoriginal strategy to the media:

“Our approach is to balance the books, find projects to cancel or defer, find internal savings ... and then claim the maximum amount we are entitled to from the federal, state governments and our insurers,” he said.

Balance the books, cut services to the community and hope somebody else will take up the slack. But in these late capitalist times, who will that be? Insurance companies?



The NSW town of Holbrook was inundated by floodwaters.

The cost of climate change

Insurance companies are well aware of the cost of the extreme climate and climate-related events in Australia. Accounting firm KPMG reports that the sector is struggling to process over 300,000 claims arising from the bush-fires, storms, floods and hailstorms that have afflicted Australian households and businesses with increasing regularity in recent years. It is estimated that claims top the \$5 billion. The Commonwealth’s own National Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements nest egg has been depleted by \$3.06 billion since 2002. Of that amount, \$2.17 billion went to Queensland partly because, as KPMG points out, the state had not sought commercial insurance for government assets.

The idea of “self-provision” or that everybody should self-insure for the full cost of natural disasters is out there. Enthusiasm for that idea will take a hit as premiums continue to climb as a result of the sorts of natural disasters we have already been experiencing. If private insurance is to be the major source of post-disaster relief or even the only source, it will only be those who can afford the massive premiums who will be helped to put their lives back together.

Post-disaster living costs will be a further punishment on the disadvantaged. Food costs are expected to rise as agriculture recovers from crop and livestock losses.

Governments want out

The overarching strategy for governments in capitalist countries over the past few decades has been to shed more and more of their functions and turn them over to profit-gouging transnational corporations. No aspect of public service or enterprise has been spared this treatment, not even the most vital like public health and education. The process can be fast or slow. The more politically sensitive the objective, the more likely it is that the slow, piece-by-piece approach will be taken.

Political roadblocks to this agenda are sometimes cleared by a sharp turn of events; sometimes engineered politically or militarily and sometimes provided by nature. Canadian author and social activist Naomi Klein explored this aspect of neo-liberalism in her study entitled *Shock Doctrine*. Military coups such as in Chile in 1973 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003 cleared the way for “brave” neo-liberal experiments. So did hurricane Katrina in the US in 2005. Communities resistant to the introduction of privatised “charter schools” fell into line once the

disaster left low-income parents shell-shocked and disoriented.

“Believers in the shock doctrine are convinced only a great rupture – a flood, a war, a terrorist attack – can generate the kind of vast, clean canvases they crave. It is in these malleable moments, when we are psychologically unmoored and physically uprooted, that these artists of the real plunge in their hands and begin their work of remaking the world.”

Governments appear less and less able to carry out duties expected by communities. Every natural disaster in Australia in recent years has given rise to the legitimate demand for an inquiry into what went wrong; why government services were so lacking. The results of these inquests are telling. The underlying reason for the multiple failures is that the role of government has been paired back as a result of deliberate policy over an extended period under both Labor and Coalition governments.

Recent floods will no doubt provide another cue for the neo-liberals to push their small government “medicine”. For working people it must be a spur to build the political forces that will put public assets back under public ownership and control and take urgent action commensurate with the problem of climate change. ✳

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The Guardian

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A fair go for their mates

"All Australians have an inherent right to be treated equally under the law regardless of our race or means or where we live. We are one nation, with a diverse and rich background." This fine sounding call for equality comes from an unusual source whose concerns are for a small minority who he claims are denied this right. Its source is Clive Palmer and the small minority the billionaires club. Palmer, whose personal wealth is more than \$5 billion and rising daily through the sweat and hard labour of workers, has joined mining magnates Gina Rinehart (beneficiary of Lang Hancock inheritance) and Andrew Forrest of Fortescue Metals in an all out offensive to unseat the Labor government and install Tony Abbott.

Palmer's references to being "treated equally" do not apply to the workers on non-union agreements, slaving long hours in difficult conditions in his mining operations. Nor are they based on concern for the low paid working poor in other industries. Far from it, he wants lower taxes, the abolition of the carbon tax and mining resources tax, less government spending and non-union workplaces.

Palmer has launched a vitriolic attack on Treasurer Wayne Swan, calling him "an intellectual pigmy" in an article he wrote for *The Age* (05-03-2012). Palmer said Swan "should not just be concerned with workers' rights but the rights and needs of all Australians". He was referring to an essay by Swan in *The Monthly* magazine, in which the treasurer said, "A handful of vested interests that have pocketed a disproportionate share of the nation's economic success now feel they have a right to shape Australia's future to satisfy their own self-interest." What Swan says is correct, but unfortunately, Swan is not fighting for workers' rights or to redress the gross inequalities in income.

In the *Age* article, Palmer, in true demagogic fashion, boasts about his patriotic family, what great Australians they are, and proclaims his readiness to protect "the precious democracy we value in this country." He is not only the champion of democracy but supports "a share society" – except he doesn't want to do the sharing himself.

"I truly believe in democracy and accepting the people's will," he says, while using his money and the power that comes with it to try to override democratic electoral processes and unseat the government. He is an ardent and generous financial supporter of the Liberal Party. His nomination by the National Trust (NSW) as a "National Living Treasure", based on a vote of *Women's Day* readers, has done a lot of damage to the Trust's reputation; it is not enough to save his reputation. He is a dangerous, reactionary, waging a war against the working class of Australia while wearing a cloak of equality, sharing and democracy.

Rinehart is all heart too. "Please consider the terrible plight of very poor people in our neighbouring countries in Asia. We should, on humanitarian grounds, give more of these people the opportunity of guest labour work in Australia, so that they can feed and clothe their families and pay for medical and other pressing needs". Her concern for the poor is just as phoney as Palmer's appeal for equality. The poor of Asia are a source of cheap, non-union, vulnerable labour to be imported, exploited on low wages, under appalling working conditions and then shipped off home for another batch if they show signs of demanding their rights. Gina, also, would like to be rid of Labor and a return to individual contracts and union-free workplaces.

Herb Elliott, deputy chair of Fortescue Metals, joined the fray. He accused Swan of inciting class envy. "Mr Swan's actions seem to be an attempt to polarise and incite resentment within our Australian community, turning mate against mate." Palmer and his company launched an advertising campaign with full page ads in the daily media, saying "Swan's attack" was "unfair, untrue and divisive" and saying how much Fortescue has done for Australia.

The big three magnates have launched an all out war to get rid of Labor and bring back the Liberals with their individual employment contracts. They want to take back even more past gains of workers' struggles and open the way for even lower taxes and larger profits. It is called the class struggle. The trade union movement has a long fight ahead of it. The CFMEU Mining Division has launched a satirical "Fair Go For Billionaires" campaign, with a sub-theme "Abbott Understands".

Videos can be seen on fairgoforbillionaires.com.au/fairgo

PRESS FUND

We like to bring you good news, to counteract the bad (of which there is always too much). The good news this week is that last week we received a wonderful amount of Press Fund contributions. Alas, this week the news is not so good, with only one contribution! So please, send us in something so that next week we can announce some more good news. We really need it, because we're not quite where we'd like to be, balance-wise, in terms of reaching our yearly target of \$14,000. However, many thanks to this week's sole supporter, the ever-so-reliable "Round Figure" for his \$10 contribution.

Progressive total: \$2,080

Victory at Botany for unions and unionism

MUA Picket at Port Botany March 10



The community picket at the Gates of DP World, Friendship Rd Port Botany where Maersk Brani was tied up at 6.30 am on Saturday March 10.

Denis Doherty

A dispute that had spread from NZ to Australia in the maritime industry has been resolved with a tremendous victory for the workers and the unions today (Monday, March 12). The dispute started when the vessel *Maersk Brani*, loaded by scabs in NZ, docked in Port Botany at 6.30am and Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) members refused to unload the cargo. The company Maersk has recognised the right of MUA members not to unload the cargo and has agreed not to go back to Port of Auckland till the union workers there have been reinstated.

A community picket formed on Saturday morning, March 10, and continued until Monday morning when the company resolved matters with the MUA. The union has declared this a tremendous victory. The community picket coordinated by Unions NSW drew a large crowd on Saturday and representatives from other unions and community groups including the CPA. Over the weekend at 2pm and 10pm on each day there were short rallies followed by a community presence and respect for the union picket.

The community picket at Port Botany was attended by members of the sacked workforce from Auckland. Their presence brought the reality of the Auckland struggle to Sydney.

The dispute in Auckland is several months old where the port authority is seeking to casualise the workforce. The authorities refused to negotiate with the union and then summarily sacked the 300 workers last week and employed scabs. On the weekend in Auckland a massive rally and march saw representatives of unions from Australia and USA supporting their colleagues in NZ, particularly the members of Maritime Union of NZ.

The combined unity of the national and international working class led to the victory at Botany and will lead to a similar victory in New Zealand. ☘

World Federation of Trade Unions Statement on International Women's Day

The massive bloody strike on March 8, 1857 of the female workers in the textile industries of New York who – demanding the reduction of the work hours to 10 hours/day, equal pay for men and women and health and safety conditions in the work places – were brutally attacked by the government and the employers, motivated the 2nd International Conference of the Socialist Women in Copenhagen in 1910. It was held with the initiative of the great German communist Clara Zetkin to call for the celebration of the March 8 as International Day of Women.

This year we celebrate International Women's Day during a deep global capitalist crisis, which has multiple facets in the financial, economic, social, labour, environmental and political level. This deepening capitalist crisis is combined with an effort of the bourgeoisie to minimise its losses by transferring the biggest burden to the working class and the popular layers.

Female unemployment has reached over 81 million women. More and more women are employed with "flexible" working

relations; part-time jobs, casualisation. Today, women represent the majority of the poor and illiterate population and millions of them have no access to education, healthcare, food, clean water and other basic needs. Millions of women lack maternity protection; thousands of women die from pregnancy and lack of medical care; millions of women are forced to emigrate; millions are victims of violence, abuse, human trafficking and sexual exploitation during armed conflicts and military interventions.

Additional pressure on women comes from the reduction, elimination and privatisation of public social services. This has an impact on the quality of childcare and elderly care.

The trade unions have a responsibility and a fundamental role in developing efforts to promote gender equality in the workplace, in our own unions, in our respective countries and globally not by the equal wiping out of rights but for the full satisfaction of the contemporary needs of men and women of the working class and the popular strata.

The WFTU supports all those who struggle for: stable work for all with decent salaries, protective measures for the unemployed, social security and pensions for all, maternity and parental leave for all the mothers or the fathers with full salary and social security rights, public and free system of education and healthcare, no privatisations and monopoly activity. Public and free nurseries, creative leisure centres and children summer camps.

The WFTU reaffirms its commitment to support these struggles that will not end until the elimination of the conditions that allow poverty, inequality and exploitation of man by man in the capitalist system. We call for strengthening the fight, class unity and international solidarity. We call on all working women to be on the frontline of the class struggle. We appeal on all the class-oriented trade unions to enhance the initiatives taken by the WFTU for the formation of an International Women's Committee with rich action in favour of the international working women's rights.

The Secretariat
Athens

Coal mining threatens Great Barrier Reef

Peter Mac

United Nations scientists recently visited Australia, with a view to listing the Great Barrier Reef as an endangered World Heritage List item. The Reef faces rising temperatures and pollution from mining and agricultural chemicals but also the threat of massive new coal loading developments along Queensland's northern coast.

Environmental organisation Greenpeace says one proposal at Abbot Point would involve dredging the reef to remove "enough material to fill the Melbourne Cricket Ground 67 times", to facilitate access for coal freighters.

Greenpeace has initiated a fund-raising campaign to mount a court case over coal and gas mining ventures. The campaign will enlist the support of farmers' organisation the Lock the Gate Alliance which opposes the mining of coal and coal seam gas in agricultural areas.

A double standard

The mining industry and its parliamentary representatives have accused Greenpeace of threatening the national economy by attempting to stop coal mining, acting recklessly with short-term thinking, and seeking to use the courts to delay new mining ventures. The government has threatened to cut its tax-free charitable status.

These arguments are phoney. For a start, the Greenpeace campaign is not aimed at shutting down mining altogether, but at limiting the growth of coal mining, with a view to phasing it out. It is not demanding the immediate cessation of coal mining.

The combustion of coal, principally in the world's power stations, is the major contributor to the emission of carbon dioxide, the most voluminous of all the greenhouse gases emitted by human industrial activity.

So-called "clean coal" technology, the collection, liquefaction and disposal of vast quantities of carbon dioxide emissions, offers no solution. Apart from technical problems, the extra cost would eliminate the economic advantage that coal-fired power generation enjoys over renewable energy power. The coal industry therefore has no motive for implementing the technology.



Secondly, the Greenpeace campaign is concerned with mitigating climate change, a major threat to this and future generations. In contrast, the coal industry is promoting the line that its new mines will create jobs and benefit the nation. The industry belittles scientific evidence over climate change, and attacks any organisation that opposes coal mining proposals.

The coal mining industry has consistently fought attempts by mine-workers to improve their conditions and pay, but neither the industry nor Australian governments have taken steps to retrain miners to take other jobs when renewable energy power production economically supersedes coal-fired power.

It is the coal industry and its backers, not Greenpeace, that's taking a short-term view and acting recklessly.

Thirdly, Greenpeace has certainly discussed the effect that court procedures would have in delaying proposed new coal ventures, including the proposed new Abbot Point coal port. The industry and its backers are themselves willing to use delaying tactics.

Nevertheless, Greenpeace would be well advised to avoid describing delay as their primary objective.

The coal companies could argue that Greenpeace is a "vexatious litigant" i.e. an organisation that takes matters to court even if they have little or no chance of winning their case, because of the damage that delays or court costs would have on their opponent. Vexatious litigation is a punishable offence, and a conviction would be damaging in terms of public support.

The central issue in taking legal action is to secure a decision against the Point Abbott scheme and other proposals. This would have significant implications for coal mining in general. Court decisions in the Mabo case and many others have proven crucial in altering government policy.

Coal's race against time

The only rule that's consistently applied under capitalism is: do whatever you can get away with in order to maximise the profit level. There are no friends in business. Nor is there any fixed loyalty to a particular form of production. If a new form proves more profitable, investors will desert the old in favour of the new.

At the moment the massive coal industry enjoys advantages

over the renewable energy sector because it is fully established, and has highly developed technology, amortised plants, greater economies of scale – and friends in high places. Technology is improving the efficiency of both forms of energy production. However, the development of coal-fired power generation is much less rapid than that of its youthful rival.

When the efficiency of power production from solar, wind or other renewable energy sources begins to pass that of coal-fired power production, investment will begin to move to renewable energy. As the margin increases that movement will become a flood.

Capitalists who find that the technology into which they have sunk their money is becoming outdated sell their shares as quickly as possible, or do whatever they can to protect their position – and that includes calling in favours from politicians, attempting to discredit the new technology, or even buying up patents to suppress its development.

If all else fails, they try to delay the development and implementation of the new technology. Where the technology represents a dominant economic force, political parties serve their interests.

Australia's two biggest parties are both keen to draw "green" votes, but their actions have been severely compromised by their subservience to mining interests. NSW premier

Barry O'Farrell has expressed a desire to ban all wind farms from the state. The federal government recently terminated a scheme of rebates for the installation of domestic solar-powered hot water systems, a very efficient means of conserving electrical energy.

Under pressure from farmers and rural communities over coal seam gas operations, O'Farrell has claimed that new legislation will protect the best agricultural land. O'Farrell's minister for energy, Brad Hazzard, says that all mining applications will be subjected to scientific examination of the land in question (presumably by soil analysis) to determine its quality.

That's just a stalling tactic. One of the most controversial proposals involves CSG mining under the wonderfully fertile Liverpool Plains. There is no need to subject this area to scientific testing; its productivity is proof of its agricultural value.

Greens MP Jeremy Buckingham has also pointed out that some areas which have poor soils have nevertheless proved to be highly productive for agricultural purposes.

The coal mining industry and federal and state governments are deeply concerned at facing a united front of environmental and farming organisations, left-wing and progressive political parties, community groups and concerned individuals. And so they should be. That sort of an alliance is really likely to upset the status quo. ☹

Pete's Corner



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Industrial action to cease

ANF statement

Members would be aware that the Australian Nursing Federation (ANF), the Baillieu government and the Victorian Hospitals' Industrial Association issued the joint statement below:

"The employers and the Australian Nursing Federation have come to an arrangement involving a fresh process for finalising an outcome with assistance from FWA expeditiously.

"Accordingly to enable this arrangement to proceed to a conclusion the ANF will ensure all industrial action ceases immediately.

On this basis the employers and the ANF will jointly seek to hold all legal action and options in abeyance.

"The employers and the ANF have committed to resolve all outstanding issues by 16 March."

This is a very big first step towards a resolution (of nurse-patient ratios and wages). The ANF is confident that constructive negotiations with the assistance of Fair Work Australia will result in a new enterprise agreement to take to members at the end of this process.

All industrial action should cease in all workplaces, including all standalone community health centres, Queen Elizabeth Centre, Tweddle Child & Family Health Service, Lyndoch, Jacaranda Village,

Darlingford, Indigo North and Ballarat District Nursing & Health Care.

Members who have been taking protected industrial action in public sector mental health workplaces which had successful ballots are encouraged to continue taking this action as part of your enterprise bargaining campaign.

The ANF encourages members to continue wearing their red campaign T-shirts proudly until there is a final resolution.

Federal Court

By agreement of the parties, and with the approval of the Court, the Federal Court proceedings have now been adjourned until Friday March 23, 2012.

Nurses and Midwives Hardship Fund

Many nurses and midwives have now had their pay docked for participating in the stoppages. If your pay has been docked as a result of taking industrial action and you are experiencing financial hardship you can apply for assistance from the Victorian Nurses and Midwives Hardship and Welfare Fund. ANF will be trying to ensure that the payment is made into your nominated

bank account within two business days. Please note that the ANF office will not be open over the Labour Day weekend.

There are two ways to apply for assistance from the hardship fund. All applications require a copy of your payslip. If your payslip does not identify the hours you have been docked a timesheet or roster to verify the docking may also be required.

The ANF advises that the Nurses and Midwives Hardship Fund has received, and is continuing to receive, many donations from members of the Victorian community who respect the work nurses and midwives do, and respect the commitment and sacrifice members have made to ensure Victoria retains a high quality public health system.

For more info anf.org.au



Abbott's public sector attack incorrect and offensive

Public sector workers have hit back at Opposition leader Tony Abbott after he suggested many of their jobs could be slashed under a Coalition government.

Speaking at a Victorian Employers' Chamber of Commerce and Industry conference today Mr Abbott asked "whether the federal health department really needs all 6,000 of its current staff when the Commonwealth doesn't actually run a single hospital or nursing home ... whether the federal education department really needs all 5,000 of its current staff when the Commonwealth doesn't run a single school."

Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) national secretary Nadine Flood said: "If Tony Abbott wants to be taken seriously on public sector issues he should get his facts right before he starts hacking into jobs and services.

"His comments are misleading at best – and in my view – offensive to the hard-working people in these agencies.

"Firstly, the health department Mr Abbott refers to is actually called the Department of Health and Aging (DoHA). It has 4,200 staff, not 6,000. They don't run any hospitals because, as Mr Abbott knows, that is a state responsibility.

"But they do perform crucial tasks including implementing the Coalition of Australian Governments' reforms to ensure we have a fair and effective national health system; ensuring there are decent national standards in aged care and nursing homes, and making sure we all have access to safe

medicine through the Therapeutic Goods Administration.

"Secondly, the education department Mr Abbott wants to slash is actually the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR).

"They have 4,300 staff not 5,000. They don't run schools because, as Mr Abbott knows, that is a state responsibility. They do critical work such as ensuring private sector employment service providers deliver value for money. DEEWR staff also run the General Employee Entitlements and Redundancy Scheme (GEERS) program which ensures workers get basic entitlements if their employer goes bust.

"Other DEEWR staff administer national school curriculum including the MySchool website as well as maintaining national standards and accountability in the childcare sector. They also oversee national standards across the tertiary education sector, Australia's third largest export earner.

"Does Mr Abbott really want to slash these services? As an alternative Prime Minister, Mr Abbott needs to provide more than just glib and inaccurate spin to the Australian community.

"Comments like this confirm that Tony Abbott is a clear and present danger to Australian workers and to public services. In coming months we'll be campaigning alongside Dave Oliver, and the ACTU and with community groups to ensure essential jobs, services and workplace rights are safe from Mr Abbott's negative agenda," Ms Flood said.



After days of heavy rain, the sun shone down on participants in International Women's Day March and Picnic in Sydney on Saturday. The Australian Services Union headed the march with its banner calling for Equal Pay for community sector workers. Issues taken up on the many placards included paid parental leave, childcare, the Right to Choose, secure employment, as well as supporting the rights of Indigenous, immigrant and Palestinian women. (Photo: Maria)

Food processing issues confronted

Food workers from across the country descended on Canberra earlier this month to urge federal parliamentarians to take action on the issues threatening Australia's food processing industry.

Gippsland Food Company process worker Jenny James said the group of Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union (AMWU) delegates had raised the topics of the super-market duopoly, unfair trade barriers and weak food labelling laws.

"Many of them (politicians) have been receptive and have listened to what we've had to say. Our meeting with Senator Gavin Marshall was particularly good.

"He has promised he would take up our issues with the Prime Minister. I think he recognises more needs to be done by the government for manufacturing workers."

Ms James said she was particularly passionate about Australia's

weak food labelling laws (food manufactured and processed overseas can be labelled as "Made in Australia" if packaged here).

"I'm a mother and I'd like to think the food I was buying my children was made in Australia. I do a lot of quality assessment at work. When it comes to food processed overseas we don't know the standard or quality of food, yet it's often labelled 'Made in Australia'."

She said many of the politicians were aware of the issues, including the anti-competitive practices of the Australian supermarket duopoly, but "seemed too scared to do something.

"We've made a number of practical suggestions, including the idea of giving the ACCC more powers to tackle the practices of the duopoly. Some have committed to taking our suggestions on board."

The group, including workers

representing Mars Confectionery Ballarat, Simplot Ulverstone, Heinz Echuca and Cerebos in Sydney have highlighted the consequences of not confronting the issues.

AMWU National Food and Confectionery Division secretary Jennifer Dowell said the union was now keen to engage in a dialogue with the community.

"This isn't just about the future of food processing; it's about jobs in food production, packaging and printing, logistics and maintenance. We'd like to raise further awareness about what's at stake here.

"We've had some very constructive meetings and some undertakings of support from representatives of all political parties. But now we need to capitalise on this campaign and see some concrete changes."

Action call at Canberra rally

Aboriginal people from the Northern Territory and Bankstown in Sydney rallied in Canberra last week demanding that the Senate rejects the proposed Stronger Futures legislation.

Outside Parliament House, campaigners described the proposed new laws as discriminatory and the consultation process as a joke.

Activist Barbara Shaw from the Mt Nancy town camp in Alice Springs said the legislation should be withdrawn, saying billions of dollars had already been wasted on the first Intervention.

"These laws continue the demonisation of Aboriginal people and culture," Ms Shaw said. "The untold story is the ever-increasing incidents of attempted self-harm and suicide that are occurring.

"We've had a 40 percent increase in Indigenous incarceration and these figures will get worse with harsher alcohol laws. More and more Aboriginal children are being removed from families.

"There is a deteriorating social situation in the larger towns, as people move in from the bush due to loss of autonomy, resources and opportunities that will continue under 'Stronger Futures'."

Bankstown Elder Daphne Lake said the proposed laws would control what people buy and ban alcohol.

"It's like the Welfare Board back again. And with income management they may as well be handing out rations," she said.

Little understanding

Stop the Intervention Collective spokesman Paddy Gibson said it was extraordinary that the legislation had been able to pass through the House of Representatives with so little debate and so little understanding amongst the MPs about what was at stake.

He said the protest was to confront politicians with the reality that after five years of resistance under the NT Intervention, Aboriginal people now faced a further ten years of management if the legislation becomes law.

The rally was part of a campaign, Stand for Freedom, which has been launched online. At the time of going to press, 4,672 people had signed the petition, which calls on the government to withdraw the legislation.

"It has been developed without the free and informed consent of Aboriginal communities and it will give the government ten more years of control over Aboriginal people and their lands," the petition says.

In a letter to Prime Minister Julia Gillard, Opposition Leader Tony Abbott, and other ministers, the policy underlying the legislation is described as reflecting the "assimilationist and paternalistic views of government towards Aboriginal people from the 1890s to 1960s".

"Furthermore, the legislation seeks to deal with complex social and economic disadvantage through government regulation and the undermining of individual freedom."



Auntie Isabell Coe surrounded by supporters at the Canberra protest.

Photo: Joseph Mayers, courtesy of Koori Mail

More information about the Stand for Freedom campaign is available at www.standforfreedom.org.au
Koori Mail

Port Hedland residents in redevelopment battle

Richard Titelius

In the north west of Western Australia there is a mining boom under way in which the good wages paid by large mining resource companies bring workers from all parts of the state, other parts of Australia and even the world.

Mining and energy resource companies such as Fortescue Metals Group, Rio Tinto, Chevron, Woodside and BHP Billiton believe that when workers come to live in the Pilbara they will stay an average of two years to work hard, play hard, acquire savings and then be on their way.

The last thing these mining and energy companies want (apart from well resourced and militant trade unions defending workers rights) is that residents develop a sense of community and ownership of the towns where they live. This would also seem to be one of the reasons these companies and especially FMG prefer Fly-In-Fly-Out workers.

This was demonstrated recently in Port Hedland when a group of residents received word from BHP Billiton of its proposal to commence within weeks, to build a multimillion dollar boat pen at Hunt Point opposite where the concerned residents live in Richardson Street on the Port Hedland foreshore. The company needs the residents to vacate and is offering them amounts of close to \$3 million each to do so.

But residents such as Bill Dziombak, Ina Bozuric and Darryl Brown, as reported in the *West Australian*, on February 25, want to stay put as they like the aesthetic

and sense of community and place which they have lived in for some time – up to 48 years in the case of Mr Brown.

Many are also upset by the tokenistic and cavalier approach by representatives of BHP Billiton in its attempt at community consultation. The plans for the significant expansion of the harbour to build a tugboat pen for up to 24 vessels were mostly kept from public scrutiny in the private offices of BHP Billiton. The plans however, included the company's desire to have several residents in Richardson Street, Port Hedland vacate and to this end they were offering millions so that they could proceed with their making of billions.

The expansion of the port, says a public relations manager from BHP Billiton, is necessary to prepare the port for a significant increase in the shipping of iron ore from the Pilbara hinterland to satisfy the demand for the production of steel in China, South Korea and Japan – and then shipping a lot of it back to Australia.

This development at-all-costs attitude by mining companies not only irks the locals who feel that people don't matter to them, but will also throw up other long term problems not the least of which is, where is all the water and power going to come from to sustain all this resource development.

The state Greens Upper House MP Robin Chappell last year revealed plans by the Liberal government of Premier Colin Barnett to mine coal in the pristine wilderness area of the Kimberleys and ship it to Port Hedland to provide power to run at least one and

possibly three desalination plants, as existing surface and ground water supplies in the Pilbara are barely able to keep pace with existing demand – let alone a proposed doubling of the mining of iron ore in the Pilbara.

At that rate all of the residents of Port Hedland may need to be vacated to South Hedland to escape not only the red iron ore dust but also toxic black coal dust and pollution from its use in a power station.

Another reason why Port Hedland residents who like living there may not be tempted by the large sums to vacate their houses, is the high cost of taking up alternative accommodation in Port Hedland or almost anywhere else in the Pilbara, as the prices even for a 3 bedroom 1 bathroom house can start at \$700,000 and a 4x2 residence is over \$1.2 million. By comparison a 4 x 2 residence in Perth can be purchased for as little as \$330,000 and for \$1.2 million one can buy a mansion in the genteel southwest region of Margaret River.

The Communist Party of Australia commends and supports the struggle by the residents in Port Hedland to remain in their homes against the greedy and cavalier attempts to dislodge them to make way for the expansion of the port facilities to substantially increase the capacity of the port to serve their mining interests.

The tug boat pen can be built somewhere else in the harbour, in some other way or in a scaled down version so that the amenity of the location and the lifestyles of the residents, which they have enjoyed for long, is not lost.

Capitalism no-more

Trying to humanise or reform capitalism, is an awfully bitter lesson in futility. The trouble is really easy to identify, the problem is at capitalism's core. It's too destructive, unjust and beyond redemption. For those of us wanting fundamental social change, don't despair, if you truly care about the people and the planet, the real solution is revolution.

Steven Katsineris



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The crisis is a crisis of the capitalism

Socialism is the future!

Communist Party of Greece (KKE)

Opening remarks (abridged) made by Aleka Papariga, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Greece, to the 13th International Meeting of Communist and Workers Parties held in Athens from December 9-11, 2011.

With the first signs of the crisis in our country, we found ourselves ideologically and politically prepared to face, with a very rapid adjustment, our heightened duties, to specialise our strategy and tactics, to contribute to the rallying and increase of the militancy of the working class and popular forces with radical demands and advanced forms of struggle.

... there was no political issue of greater or lesser importance, and especially no working class, popular socio-economic problem on which we did not try, through work at the base, to rally forces on a social-class basis. To widely enlighten the people concerning the crisis, its character and the way out, to organise and escalate the class struggle in all its forms from top to bottom and inversely so as to draw in new working class and popular masses.

There was a relatively unprecedented attempt to organise the resistance collectively with new forms of struggle and slogans of disobedience and defiance so that the people do not pay tolls on the summer weekends, the tickets to enter privatised beaches. Recently the property tax included in the electricity bill which is accompanied by the unacceptable and unprecedented threat to cut the electricity, regardless of whether the amount that corresponds to the electricity consumption has been paid.

The main front of struggle is directed, of course, against unemployment, against the reduction of wages and pensions, dismissals in the public and private sector, against the abolition of collective bargaining agreements, against temporary and flexible forms of labour. Against the overwhelming reduction of funding of the social-security funds, education, health prevention and welfare, against the serious cuts at the expense of people with disabilities, against the reduction and abolition of maternity provisions, the funding of nurseries etc.

Today we place emphasis on and monitor very closely the danger of a relatively more generalised military conflict in the geo-strategic area of the Black Sea, the Middle East, the Eastern Mediterranean. Of course we elaborate the specific position against the imperialist war, regardless of the pretexts which will be used, and we especially elaborate the strategy of transforming the war into a struggle for power.

The bourgeois class of our country will be found at the side of one or the other imperialist axis or pole with the aim of taking part in the re-distribution of markets, so that it does not find itself at the margin. The people must not shed their blood for the interests of the imperialists, for their own one or others. The same is true for the other peoples.

Impasse

It is even more apparent today that there is an impasse in the bourgeois management of the crisis. The classic recipes cannot be implemented even as they were implemented with difficulty in the past; the management of the consequences of the crisis is impossible particularly of unemployment and poverty. We assess that the recovery when it comes will be anaemic and perhaps there will be a new crisis cycle before it arrives.

The labour movement and its allies, particularly the self-employed without staff, and the other poor small businessmen who face bankruptcy, the poor farmers with small holdings, must demonstrate endurance in the face of the toughness and complexity of the struggle, in the face of the intransigence of the enemy. The defensive stance today has no result, because we are in the conditions of an assault which aims to abolish gains won in the 20th century particularly after the Second World War in Europe.

Escalate class struggle

What is required today is the planning and the escalation of the class struggle, to erect obstacles – as far as possible – in the way of the worst measures which are on the horizon, to delay new decisions and to buy time for the counter-attack, the outcome of which must be directed to the overthrow of the power of the monopolies, the bourgeois political system, for working class-people's power, socialism.

The measures which are taken in the name of the crisis or for the regulation of the crisis in favour of the monopolies, go beyond the crisis itself. They are measures which aim at the restarting of the profitability in the recovery period, as the capitalist states themselves do not predict that it will be stable and dynamic.

Greece is on course for a controlled bankruptcy, while an uncontrolled bankruptcy is very possible, as well as its exit from the Eurozone, or the use of a double Euro. An internally depreciated one and an external one which will be determined by the EU and IMF so that the creditors will be secured as far as possible.

No bourgeois political proposal, liberal, social-democratic, no "renewal", can constitute a pro-people way out, protect the people from destitution even in the short-term, even less so in the long term, unless it poses as a question of principle the rupture with the monopolies – industrial, banking, ship-owning, trade – that is to say rupture with capitalist ownership, its state institutions, its international alliances.

Distortion of reality

What is important today in our country and more generally in Europe is that the following are repelled from a class standpoint: the universal deception which the people are on the receiving end of that we are experiencing a debt crisis, a crisis of fiscal indicators, that the crisis came about due to bad management, the waste of money on social services instead of productive and other investments. That the productive model of development and the low level of competitiveness is to blame, that everyone, that is to say all the classes and social strata consume more than their income; that the bad architecture of the European structure is responsible, something that is promoted with small differences by bourgeois, reformist and opportunist parties.

All the abovementioned versions distort reality, conceal that it is a crisis of over-accumulated capital which expresses the sharpening of the basic contradiction in capitalism. They detach the economy from politics; they impede the development of radical anti-monopoly, anti-capitalist consciousness.

The workers in Greece, in the Eurozone, must reject the theory that makes the protection of the state from bankruptcy a national goal, and therefore that sacrifices are needed for such a goal which is indeed characterised as modern patriotism. The workers are not responsible and should not pay for the public debt.

The people's anger is not enough to bring about the people's counter-attack, if it does not acquire an anti-monopoly, in essence anti-capitalist content. The experience of the bourgeois class and its parties in defusing and diverting the people's discontent, something which was apparent in the instance of the so-called "Arab Spring" given the specific characteristics in the various countries must not be underestimated at all. Consequently the question "rupture or subjugation" is absolutely timely.

In the face of the impasses of the management of the system, something natural and predictable for the defenders of the capitalist

system happened: a coalition government was formed through the procedures of the parliament. This with the dynamic intervention of the EU, between the two basic bourgeois parties and a small far-right party [LAOS] which in recent years has carried out the dirty work of provocation and anti-communism on behalf of PASOK [social democrats] above all but also of ND [conservatives].

Today in Greece a lot of taboos and myths which had influenced the people have collapsed and we believe that this is valid for other capitalist countries, especially in the old capitalist world of Europe. Their main core is that the EU constitutes an inevitability, that it is inconceivable for a people not to seek accession to the EU or seek disengagement from it, or that the EU can be transformed into a Europe of the peoples through the emergence of left governments or coalitions of left and progressive forces.

Platform for struggle

Only the people's power can ensure the people's sovereignty and the real disengagement from the imperialist alliances such as the EU and NATO.

We promote the following platform with three axes: people's power, disengagement, unilateral cancellation of the debt. The disengagement without socialisation will also be destructive for the people, while the socialisation is impossible without disengagement.

Today the people can see, more than ever, that capital, the monopolies and their power do not share the same homeland with the people. They place profit over national language and cultural heritage. They form their alliances according to profit and sacrifice everything for it.

For that reason the term homeland acquires a substantial content for the people only in people's power, with the institutions of the workers' and people's participation, defence and protection.

We talk openly to the people about a socio-political alliance of the working class with the poor petty bourgeois popular strata in the city and the countryside; about the regrouping of the workers' and people's movement with a clear anti-imperialist anti-monopoly orientation, anti-capitalist in the final analysis. It should have a clear orientation to utilise every rift, every crack in the bourgeois governance for its weakening, for its overthrow.

The policy of alliances has objectively two aspects irrespective of the variety of the forms it can take on: it will either aim at the preservation and the longevity of the bourgeois political power or there will be a basic agreement for the conquest of people's power.

Every rift in the political system, in the mechanisms of the capitalist power, everything that weakens the bourgeois government and generally the bourgeois parties, contributes to the strengthening of the forces of the people's alliance for the radical overthrow of the system of capitalist exploitation, of the dictatorship of the monopolies.

Social democratic views

We systematically confront views like "the problems of the Greek economy were the super profits accumulated in the banking system or in the stock exchanges in opposition to the profit in industry, in production"; views that separate the profits into "legitimate" and "illegitimate", views that claim that allegedly healthy capitalism developed into "casino capitalism".

The reduction of imperialism to a foreign policy and to a type of interstate relations instead of a socioeconomic system, i.e. monopoly capitalism, needs to be dealt with specifically.

Another version of the social-democratic perception adopts the position on the need for the "rehabilitation" of capitalism, for its humanisation by means of controlling the most



parasitic functions of the financial system. They do not want and they cannot acknowledge that there is no company, no monopoly group, which does not activate the greater part of its capital as foreign, i.e. borrowed capital and not its own, its shareholders'.

In conditions that the average rate of profit has the tendency to fall these businesses have difficulties in borrowing and thus the expansion of production becomes difficult and a recession appears. In addition, they do not want to recognise that the banks do not merely lend, do not merely invest in the money market but they also buy or participate in industrial capital. They do not accept the cohesion of industrial with banking capital.

It is clear for us that in conditions of a crisis there are definitely possibilities for a sudden sharpening of the class struggle, for a sudden entrance of broader popular forces without the necessary social and political experience.

We are conscious of the danger for the movement to find itself in a state of retreat since it experiences the barbarity of unemployment, impoverishment, destitution, the consequences of the state and employers' violence. Also the ideological influence of the bourgeois ideology, of reformism and opportunism, under the impact of anti-communism which is officially adopted by the state bodies and its ideological mechanisms.

Despite these difficulties, the campaign to intimidate the people in the name of the crisis, despite the intimidation in the workplaces, the impatience of the masses especially of those who come from the petty bourgeois popular strata, which so far have had a relatively good living standard, the KKE has remained firmly oriented to the necessity and timeliness of socialism.

st system



The sharpening of the economic crisis, the contradictions within the EU, the rising anti-capitalist consciousness contribute so that the people understand more easily that a radical fundamental change is necessary. Of course these processes do not lead automatically to the choice of confrontation, to a firm participation in the organisation of the class struggle.

Nevertheless, today there is a relatively more fertile ground for a deeper ideological-political confrontation in comparison to previous years when the deterioration of the position of the working people was evolving more slowly compared to the current storm.

The KKE calls on the people to fight so that the concentrated means of production in industry become the people's property, for the socialisation of land, of the big enterprises in agriculture and the concentrated trade. On the basis of these relations agriculture must be reorganised according to incentives for its concentration, initially, in productive cooperatives.

Only central planning can overcome the unevenness in the development of regions within a country. Only the people's power can realise mutually beneficial trade agreements with other peoples, other economies and eradicate the phenomenon of the imperialist competitions over the utilisation of the natural resources in sea and land.

Of course there is no revolutionary situation in Greece so as to pose in practice the overthrow of the capitalist system as an immediate duty but all things show that if the workers' movement, the most radical section of the people, does not direct the struggle to the workers' power it will be trapped in the various versions of bourgeois management and it will lose every opportunity of escalation.

The solution for the people is not to align with a section of the domestic bourgeois class, with one of the imperialist centres abandoning another one at a time when their contradictions have sharpened. Neither is it a solution to support new bourgeois parties against the old ones, coalition governments instead of one-party governments.

The solution lies in organised struggle which will have at its core the workplaces, the trade unions, and will be oriented towards the conflict and the rupture with the monopolies, the parties, their governments and their imperialist alliances in the prospect of their overthrow. This is the only realistic line of struggle.

In the next months, in the next year the mass participation in the assemblies in every large workplace, in the people's meetings in the workers' and people's neighbourhoods, in the organised resistance and counterattack against the consequences of the anti-people laws, against the taxes and the cuts in salaries and pensions, in the struggle for unemployment benefits and the operation of medical, educational welfare units, for the protection of the families [from popular strata] must be multiplied.

It is obvious that the current developments, the capitalist crisis and the imperialist aggressiveness impose the strengthening of the struggle of the international communist movement for the interests of the working class, the popular strata, for the overthrow of the capitalist barbarity intensifying its efforts for a unified revolutionary strategy. The KKE deploys its forces in this direction.

The full text of her speech is available at www.solidnet.org and will be published in the forthcoming issue of the *Australian Marxist Review*. ✪

Unfulfilled promises may come back to haunt Obama

Mark Engler

In June 2007, on a warm Sunday in San Antonio, Texas, presidential candidate Barack Obama rolled up his white shirt-sleeves and addressed a crowd of 1,000: "We're going to close Guantánamo. And we're going to restore habeas corpus," he said. The assembly cheered.

The senator repeated his vow the next month, and in subsequent campaign stops: "As President, I will close Guantánamo, reject the Military Commissions Act, and adhere to the Geneva Conventions."

In November 2008, after being elected, Obama went on the news show *60 Minutes*. "I have said repeatedly that I intend to close Guantánamo," he stated, "and I will follow through on that."

It is now 2012. The US detention facility at Guantánamo Bay in Cuba – which has held hundreds of prisoners without trial and has been the site of torture and abuse – remains open. In December, President Obama signed into law a National Defence Authorisation Act that, according to the *New York Times*, will "make indefinite detention and military trials a permanent part of American law".

We have now reached that season when our New Year's resolutions have been broken. It seems like only a few Facebook status updates ago when we virtually vowed to better ourselves. And yet those neglected promises already feel quaint.

Of course, we know that by the year's end, the consequences will catch us. We'll pay when we still haven't gotten into shape, still haven't quit smoking – when the change we seek remains at the bottom of a lost to-do list.

In political life, Obama has also broken resolutions. The question is, will they likewise cost him at the end of the year?

It's not just the issue of detentions. Candidate Obama railed against the "devastating" impacts of the North American Free Trade Agreement. But this past fall, the president signed NAFTA model agreements with Panama, South Korea and Colombia – a country with an ongoing history of violence against union

organisers. He abandoned the Employee Free Choice Act, labour's top priority. And he stunned greens by delaying new smog regulations because they would "burden" polluters.

One cannot blame those who had high expectations for the administration and now feel betrayed.

To point out such failings is not to say that Obama is identical to his conservative rivals. It is facile to hold that the two parties which have perpetuated corporate rule in the United States have done so equally, or that their differences on social issues are inconsequential.

Republicans have pushed even more aggressively to curtail civil liberties, and they opposed any attempts Obama made to abide by his campaign pledges. Given the chance, they would erase the Environmental Protection Agency and stack the Supreme Court with reactionaries.

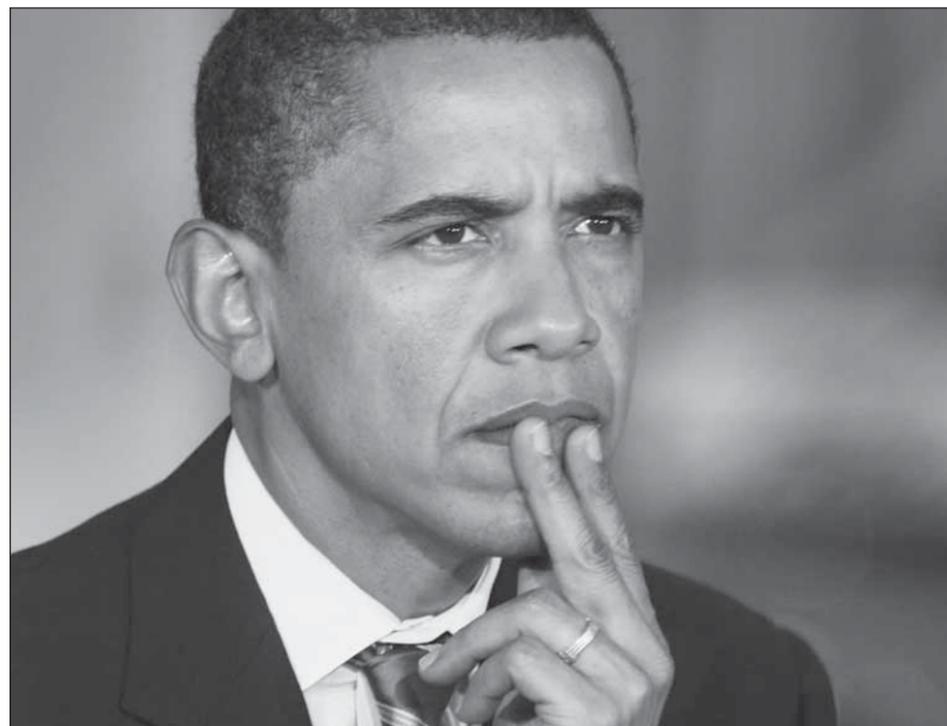
Still, one cannot blame those who had high expectations for the administration and now feel betrayed. Maybe we should have been more cynical, more aware of Washington's limits and more distrustful of the senator's neoliberal advisors. But Obama, remember, told us not to be. He appealed to idealism. He based his campaign on hope.

On January 11, the 10th anniversary of the start of US detentions at its shadowy Cuban prison camp, I joined protesters who chanted in drizzling rain outside the White House in defence of due process. They were ardent, but not about getting Obama re-elected. It struck me that he won't be able to run on hope again.

A week earlier, I sat with conservatives at the Iowa caucuses. There I saw a Right that is full of passionate intensity. Newt Gingrich tells determined crowds: "This election is the most important election since 1860." Mitt Romney says it is about "saving the soul of America".

Obama's defenders believe that progressive support will return once his opponent is set and the campaign begins in earnest. Maybe it will. For now, the president's broken resolutions hover uncomfortably.

Don't believe in the "enthusiasm gap"? Spend some time with the rightwing faithful. Then stop by a protest against Guantánamo. *New Internationalist* ✪



Intensifying class struggle

Statement Communist Party of Greece (KKE)

A life of hell for the working class, for all the people who toil is being prepared by the black front of the coalition government-Troika-plutocracy. Their agreement on the measures which have been announced is only the precursor for infinitely worse measures, which they will bring with their "new agreement" by June 2012.

The new memorandum of impoverishment which was voted on February 12 includes amongst others the following measures:

Salaries

- Reduction of basic salaries by 22% (National General Collective Agreement-NGCA, sectoral and professional agreements).
- The basic salary for the newly hired workers will be further reduced by 10%, besides the 22% reduction i.e. a reduction of 32%.
- Abolition of sectoral bargaining agreements.
- Freezing of wages until 2015.
- Full time employment will be converted to part-time employment, upon the decision of the employers.
- Automatic wage increases based on seniority are suspended until unemployment falls below 10%, in fact they are abolished.
- Collective bargaining agreements will last for maximum three years.
- All collective bargaining agreements which apply today will expire one year after the adoption of the new memorandum.
- Review of the new NGCA by the end of July in order to align with the basic salary in rival countries (Portugal, Turkey, Central and Southeastern Europe).
- Abolition of one-sided recourse to arbitration.

Pensions, social contributions

- Reduction of pensions by 300 million Euros annually. The new cuts will affect both basic and auxiliary pensions.
- Further cuts in basic pensions of several pension funds which will apply retrospectively from January 1, 2012.
- Merging of all auxiliary pension funds by June 2012 and the beginning of "a sustainability factor that adjust benefits to promptly eliminate any future imbalances should they occur" which will lead to new cuts to



- auxiliary pensions as well as to retirement compensations.
- 2% reduction of the social contributions of the employers through the abolition of the contributions for the Workers' Housing Organisation and social benefits. The respective organisations will close down.
- New reduction of the contributions that the employers pay for IKA (the biggest pension fund of private sector workers) from January 1, 2013 by 3%.

Employees in public sector- Former state-owned enterprises-Banks

- Abolition of permanent employment in former state-owned enterprises and banks and reduction of salaries.
- New dismissals of 15,000 employees in public sector in 2012, through "labour reserve".
- Reduction of employees in public sector, who work with temporary contracts, by means of not renewing contracts.
- Cuts of 636 million Euros on the salaries of the employees in public sector who are paid

- according to special wage scale by the end of July 2012.
- New cuts on the salaries in public sector by means of revising the wage scales.
- Reduction of the number of public sector employees by 150,000 till 2015 and employment in line with the rule of 1 recruitment for 5 exits.
- Reduction of the overall intake in academies (military, police) that guarantee automatic employment in public sector.
- Closure of public organisations and entities by June 2012.

Additional measures in 2012

- Reduction in the sector of healthcare and pharmaceutical spending by 1.1 billion Euros.
- Cuts in a series of social benefits, by enacting criteria based on income.
- Reduction of benefits for families with more than three children.
- Reduction of operational and consumption spending of the state by 300 million Euros.
- Cuts on several entities supervised by the ministries of Education and Culture by 200 million Euros.

- Reduction of expenditure on the overtime of doctors in hospitals by 50 million Euros.
- Reduction of Public Investment Programs by 400 million Euros.
- Reduction of expenditure on military equipment for the defence of the country.
- A new tax system in June 2012 which will abolish a series of tax breaks which have remained for sections of the workers. Larger tax exemptions for big capital.

The myths regarding the crisis must be rejected

This massacre of working class-popular gains which are being implemented by the memorandum of February 12 as well as Memorandum 1 (2010) and the so-called Medium-term program were not discovered now, they were clearly described from the Maastricht Treaty to the "Strategy for the Euro 2020" which were agreed on by all the governments in the EU before the crisis. The crisis is of the capitalist system itself and not of the debt as various bourgeois and opportunists claim.

The capitalist crisis is the opportunity and pretext for the imposition of measures now which have been already scheduled and are necessary for the competitiveness and profitability of the European monopolies. These are reactionary measures which have as their urgent goal extremely cheap labour power and the mass eradication of small and medium-sized businesses.

Without radical changes at the level of the economy and power, as long as the capitalist monopolies are dominant everywhere within the EU there cannot be a pro-people solution.

The various so-called pro-people funds, the utopian humanisation of the European Central Bank, the various loans which will again be paid for by the people either through Eurobonds or through renegotiation or through the separation of the debt into allegedly moral and odious debt which again means that the people will pay.

Such management proposals serve

capitalist profitability and incriminate the people, so they must be rejected.

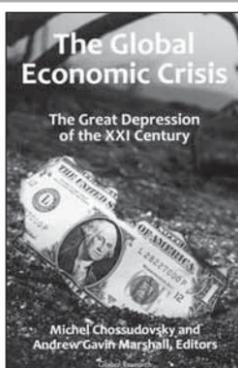
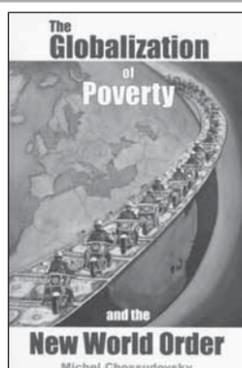
The response of the KKE

The responsibility now lies with the people. It is necessary for the worst to be prevented. For this to be realised, the basic direction of the people's movement must be the overthrow of capitalism. The only way out is the working class popular power with disengagement from the EU and unilateral cancellation of the debt. There is no other solution for the people.

In this course of intensifying class struggle, the overthrow of the government and elections will be a link in the class struggle and beneficial for the people, provided that they use it as a weapon to cause an even greater rupture in the political system. Now the question for the people and every worker, for the unemployed, the self-employed, the poor farmers, for young people and women who belong to the popular strata, for every individual is not just their liberation from the parties of the plutocracy, but their support for the KKE. In this way will the rupture be substantial.

Any other political choice does not frighten them, does not make life difficult for them, but facilitates a political solution which will come in succession so that the massacre of the people can be implemented. It will facilitate the promotion of new reserves for the bourgeois political system, possibly of new parties or party alliances, which will seek the most effective deception and subjugation of the people.

Only the alliance with the KKE can serve the people's interests, because a pro-people political line can exist only in people's power. But this is not enough; today workers must not consider themselves merely as voters. They must be active, contribute to the unions on a daily basis, to the struggle committees in the workplaces, to the people's committees concerning every problem of the people so that the anti-people offensive meets a practical answer until the final confrontation for power. ✪



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NATO forces operating covertly in Syria: Wikileaks

Stephen Lendman

On March 6, the BBC reported Obama saying Washington won't intervene in Syria unilaterally. At the same time, he stopped short of ruling out joint Western aggression. In his first 2012 news conference, he said:

"The notion that the way to solve every one of these problems is to deploy our military, that hasn't been true in the past, and it won't be true now.

"We've got to think through what we do through the lens of what's going to be effective - but also through what's critical for US security interests."

Since taking office, Obama launched more belligerence than all his predecessors. He's not shy about initiating more. As a result, his comments ring hollow, especially given his record as a serial liar. Believe nothing he says.

On March 5, *Russia Today (RT)* headlined, "Stratfor leaks: NATO commandos in illegal special ops in Syria," saying:

"According to hacked Stratfor emails released by WikiLeaks, NATO forces already operate covertly in Syria. The company's analysis director, Reva Bhalla, wrote them for internal use."

They discuss "a confidential Pentagon meeting in December". Allegedly, senior US, UK and French analysts attended. Western powers categorically denied involvement. It's known they've been supplying opposition forces with heavy weapons for months.

Syrian National Council leader Bassma Kodmani admitted it. Moreover, Assad's forces intercepted smuggled supplies and uncovered internal caches.

Bhalla claimed US officials "said ... SOF (special operations forces) teams are already on the ground, focused on recce (reconnaissance) missions and training operations forces."

She also said the December meeting focused on possible US air strikes. Comments included saying Washington has "high tolerance for killings," but won't initiate attacks without "enough media attention on a massacre" like the falsified one attributed to Gaddafi on Benghazi.

Attacks are "doable, (but) the air campaign in Syria makes Libya look like a piece of cake." At issue, is Syria's ballistic missile capability and alleged chemical weapons.

US army experts said "the idea 'hypothetically' is to commit guerrilla attacks, assassination campaigns, try to break the back of the Alawite forces, elicit collapse from within."

On March 4, the Syrian Free Press claimed 100 foreign mercenaries were captured after regaining control of Homs. Most were French. Others were from Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and other Arab states. They had weapons supplied by America and Israel.

On March 5, 13 French officers were captured. *RT* said Lebanon's *Daily Star* newspaper reported it.

On March 7, *RT* said Mossad, CIA and Blackwater elements are operating inside Syria. In addition, according to Lebanon's *Al-Manar*, "around 700 gunmen were recently

arrested in the former rebel stronghold of Babar Amr."

They came from Gulf states, Iraq and Lebanon. Qatari intelligence operatives were with them, as well as fighters from Afghanistan, Turkey, France and other European countries.

Syrian forces said American, Israeli and European weapons were seized. "The Syrian army also uncovered tunnels and equipment," as well as "advance" Western and Israeli arms not net tested in real time.

"The Syrian security forces have documents and confessions that could harm everyone who conspired against Syria, and could make a security and political change, not just on the internal Syrian level, but also on the regional level."

Stratfor's email suggested covert NATO forces operating in Syria. Internal security reports confirm what's been known for weeks, perhaps months. However, Syrian authorities won't reveal all they know, but called their evidence "high value."

For months, many independent analysts said, Western-supported foreign killer gangs operated in Syria. China and Russia said so.

On March 7, *China Daily* contributor MD Nalapat (an Indian geopolitics professor) said "NATO behaves like a law unto itself," and now is involved in Syria.

"Armed gangs are being encouraged to kill not just security forces but elements of the population that favour the recognised regime in Damascus. And while NATO may gain from such unethical actions, the rest of the world is the loser.

"But everything done by NATO

indicates that it has set itself up not only as the enforcer of international law, but also the law itself."

Washington's again trying to strong-arm through another anti-Assad Security Council resolution. While paying more attention to opposition violence, Russia said the document remains unbalanced.

A draft demands Syria grant "unhindered humanitarian access (and) condemns the continued widespread, systematic, and gross violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms by the Syrian authorities."

It also demands Assad "immediately put an end to such violations."

The hypocrisy is galling. Assad's more victim than villain. Washington, Britain, France, Turkey, Israel, and rogue Arab League allies bear main responsibility. Assad responded to violence their killer gangs initiated.

The draft merely called on "the armed elements of the Syrian opposition to refrain from all violence only after the government forces" cease attacks. Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Gennady Gatilov called it a "slightly renewed version of the previous document" Russia and China rejected.

Russia's Foreign Ministry added: "We would like to warn our American and European partners from wishful thinking. Russia's stance on the Syrian settlement has never been subject to any short-term considerations and wasn't formed under the influence of electoral cycles, unlike that of some of our Western colleagues."

Syria's SANA news agency quoted Assad saying:

"The Syrian people, who have in the past managed to crush foreign plots... have again proven their ability to defend the nation and to build a new Syria through their determination to pursue reforms while confronting foreign-backed terrorism."

RT also said Washington plans more aggressive intervention, including more aid for Syria's opposition. An unnamed US official said America is now helping opposition forces overthrow Assad.

Admitting it signifies a significant change in US policy. Is direct military intervention next, putting a lie to Obama's latest denial of planned aggression?

Iran's Fars News Agency says Tehran has "corroborative evidence to prove US involvement in arms smuggling into Syria."

Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for Arab and African Affairs Hossein Amir Abdollahian said thousands of weapons and mercenaries have entered a number of Syrian border towns and cities.

Saudi Arabia and Qatar said they're prepared to help opposition forces. Of course, they've been doing it all along with Turkey, Jordan, Washington, Britain, France, and Israel.

Kuwait's parliament passed a non-binding resolution calling for the provision of weapons to opposition forces and the breaking of ties with Damascus.

Washington's dirty hands want Assad replaced by a pro-Western regime. If current methods fail, expect war to follow.

Information Clearing House ♣

Patriotic March for real change in Colombia

Bob Briton

A major political development in Colombia was foreshadowed recently with the announcement of the launch of the National Patriotic Council, the Patriotic March and the Open Meeting for Independence. The ambitious, ongoing project to reshape Colombian politics will be started on April 21, 22 and 23 with a convention to be held in the Colombian capital of Bogotá.

According to the movement's organisers, "The Patriotic March and Open Meeting for Independence have been called to initiate a process fed by social organisations, popular, student, labour, peasant, Indigenous, Afro-Colombian, women, workers, unemployed labourers, street vendors and many others.

"It is a process that is taking shape in the heat of the commemoration of 200 years of struggle for independence. It is a longing that arises in the context of US military invasion of Colombian territory, colonial celebrations of stateless persons who are kneeling before our executioners, amid official encroachment of the commemoration by the heirs of those who left unfinished our emancipatory process begun more than 200 years ago, a memorial in the middle of the most heinous crimes by the state and the looting of our natural resources."

Colombia declared its independence from Spain over two centuries ago but its sovereignty has long been undermined and its political process corrupted by dominant US economic interests and the presence of US military bases. Colombia is out of step with most of Latin America, which in recent times has opted for left-leaning governments and a break from dependence on the US.

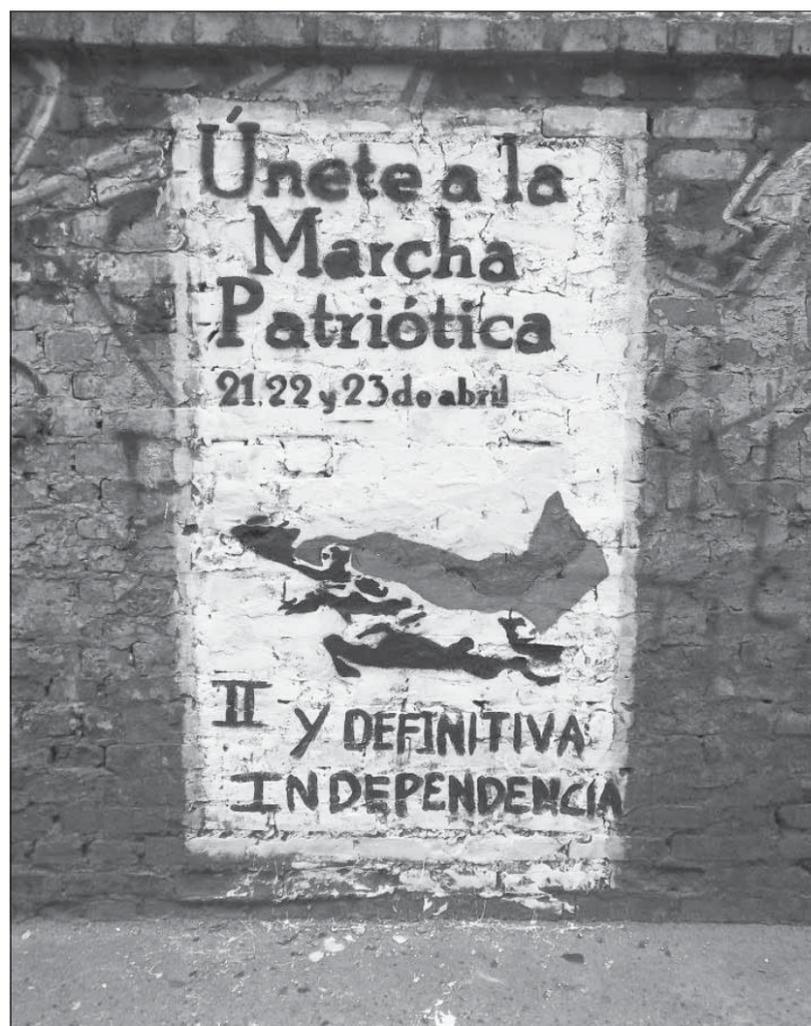
China is fast replacing the US as the major trading partner of the countries of Latin America. Integration through institutions such as ALBA (Bolivarian Alliance for Latin America), UNASUR

(Union of South American Nations) MERCOSUR (Common Southern Market) and other regional organisations is continuing apace. There is a growing rejection of the US-dominated OAS (Organisation of American States). Going against this trend, Colombia has made no progress towards what has been termed its "second and definitive independence". Its government recently concluded an unpopular free trade agreement with the US, for example.

"In the three days of the march we confirm that this new and full independence must be based on the recovery of national sovereignty, through a new patriotic government to break with all forms of explicit and veiled foreign domination and grant the Colombian people their central role as the holders of state power. A new, full independence is conceivable only through the structural transformation of the social inequalities that are unchanged from colonial times. Independence, land, a decent and dignified life for all Colombians! We proclaim this new and full independence as the only way for a political solution to armed social conflict, which for decades has bled our families.

"The call is to organise until a new power is created to completely eliminate political corruption, patronage, the delivery of natural resources and to restore sovereignty and achieve peace, promising to be true representative of the desire of each and all Colombians.

"Do not expect anything of the establishment. We call upon citizens to strive through the National Open and Permanent Meeting for respect for national sovereignty, redistribution of wealth, truth, justice and reparation for victims of forced displacement, disappearances, arbitrary detentions and all other crimes of state. We call on the Colombian people to regain their role in governing the country, taking direct control, seeking to resolve the problems hatched by the elites who have usurped our government for over 200 years." ♣



Letters to the Editor
The Guardian
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Surry Hills NSW 2010



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Landmark report anniversary on smoking

On the anniversary of a landmark report that changed the cultural values about smoking, Australia's leading physicians are calling for further action.

March 7 marks 50 years since the release of the *Smoking and Health* report by the Royal College of Physicians (UK). The report was endorsed by Australia's largest specialist medical college, The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP) upon its release in 1962.

The RACP and the Australasian Faculty of Public Health Medicine (AFPHM) have acknowledged the impact of the report in establishing smoking as a major health issue requiring change.

The report has led the way in introducing measures that have

changed the environment for tobacco and smoking.

While it was a significant turning point in the perception of smoking, 50 years on, the challenges and opportunities remain.

Since the release of *Smoking and Health*, smoking rates in Australia have fallen consistently and significantly with a particularly dramatic decline in the past 20 years.

Plain packaging is necessary to counteract the marketing and promotion of tobacco products so that it is no longer regarded as normal to smoke cigarettes.

Smoke-free environments are a basic right, and will go a long way to reduce the harm caused by exposure to environmental tobacco smoke.

There is an untapped capacity among physicians for advocacy to reduce the morbidity and mortality due to tobacco smoking, and we look forward to working further with all levels of government to continue to address tobacco in Australia.

Kate White
The Royal Australasian
College of Physicians

National Indigenous Times goes weekly

The National Indigenous Times launched as the first ever national weekly Indigenous specific newspaper in Australia last September

after publishing as a fortnightly newspaper the previous 10 years.

Our journey since going weekly has been both exciting and challenging. Our paid circulation has accelerated to 16,500 copies a week according to the latest Audit Bureau of Circulations report and our coverage has continued to win the praise and support of a growing number of people and organisations dedicated to promoting the cause of Indigenous Australia.

But it is also true we need continued support and higher readership if we are to have a truly effective voice in helping change poor government policy on Indigenous issues.

The higher the circulation the more the politicians will listen. The purpose of this letter to you is to seek your active support by you subscribing to *The National Indigenous Times*.

By subscribing you can help us deliver a voice on Indigenous issues government must listen to. Without your support government will continue to feel they can ignore us all. We are unashamedly pro-Indigenous Australia. We believe they should have the same rights and opportunities as anyone else in Australia.

We need your help to force government to listen and act.

Please help us give Indigenous Australia a voice government will listen to. Our prices for a 12 month subscription is \$100 if you want the printed version and access to our

website. Alternatively, there is a fee of \$88 for a 12 month subscription for the printed version only.

You are welcome to go to our website at www.nit.com.au where you can order a subscription online.

Stephen Hagan
Editor
National Indigenous Times

Treasurer Wayne Swan a Communist

In the days following the remarks by the Treasurer Wane Swan about how there were those mining magnates who sought to skew informed public debate on increasing the taxation of mining resources companies, there has been much uncritical commentary from many in the community. This includes former Prime Minister John Howard about how these remarks reflected the social and even communist intentions of the Treasurer and the ALP.

There is nothing communist or socialist about Federal Treasurer Wayne Swan's remarks about the wildly irresponsible comments of three of Australia's richest mining magnates. They are trying to skew debate on social and environmental policy pure and simple to further their own interests and they can do so as they have the financial resources to achieve this aim.

For those who watched *7.30 Report* on the ABC (March 6), in which presenter Chris Uhlmann grilled ... I mean interviewed Greens leader Bob Brown relentlessly about why he was not more charitable towards the actions of the three mining magnates Gina Rinehart, Andrew Forrest and Clive Palmer. It was mostly about how the present actions of the mining companies will cause huge negative impacts on this nation which their present profit levels would only begin to solve ... i.e. massive increases in carbon emissions which will contribute to global warming and diversion of resources away from development of renewable energy.

Instead I would be so bold as to say that those who are against the Mining Super Profits Tax and the Mining Resources Rent Tax, that they are supporters of fascism where the state acts in cohort with the corporate sector to achieve aims that are not for the benefit of all sectors of society, but that the state is to be run to only suit the interests of capital. That if there are any interests of the people which are satisfied then they are incidental.

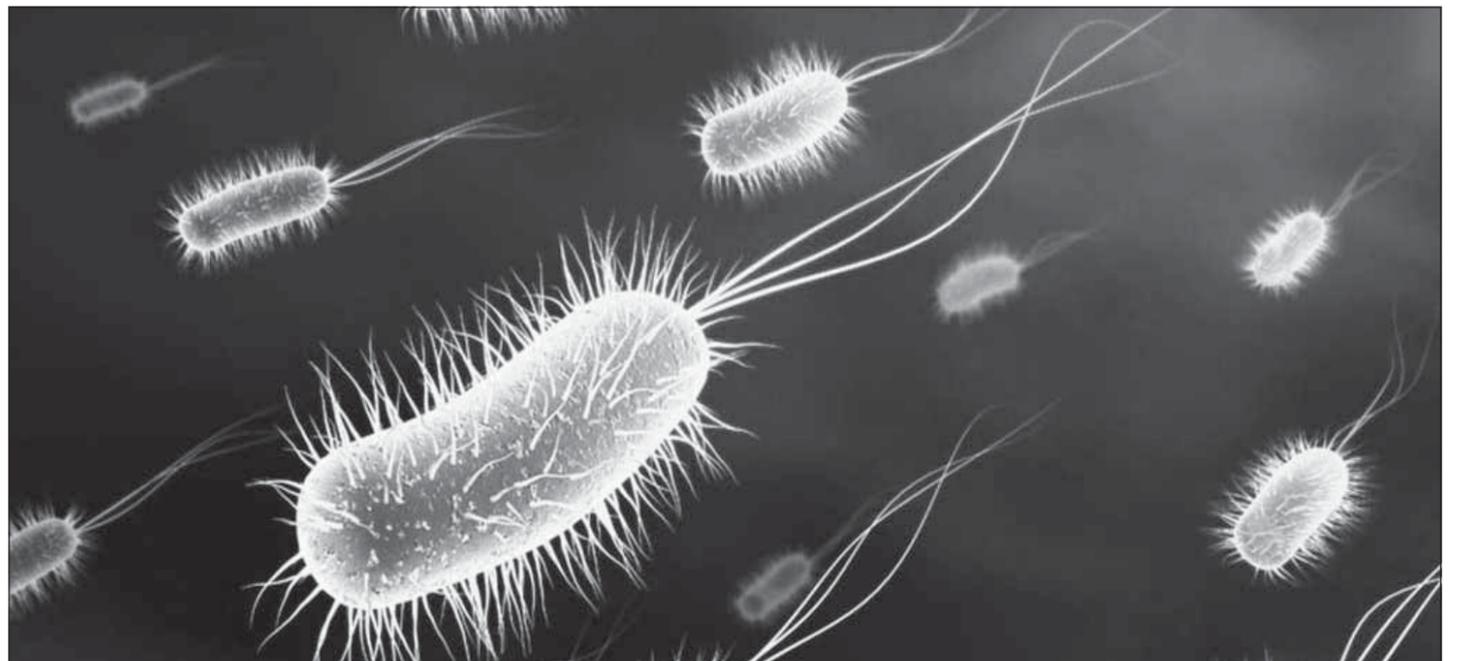
In the meantime the people are given bread, circuses and a rosy picture of the world as painted by the media who act in the interests of capital.

Richard Titelius
WA

Culture & Life

by Rob Gowland

Germs and the global bully



Did you see the reports of the top level meeting last month in Geneva between flu experts and US security officials? It seems researchers in the Netherlands and Wisconsin have been successful (if that is the right word) in genetically modifying the H5N1 virus (the bird flu virus) to make it transmissible through the air to ferrets. Ferrets are considered a good model for how the virus would behave in humans.

The H5N1 strain of flu is one of the most lethal strains of flu ever detected. More than 60 percent of humans who have contracted it have died. Dr Graham Bugess, a microbiologist at James Cook University, says if the virus hit Australia more than a million people would die.

US security advisers have tried to suppress publication of the research, to keep it secret. They have sought, for example, to pressure Dr Bruce Alberts, editor of *Science*, not to publish extracts from the research work. But he is quoted on *Pravda.ru* saying "it is important to get the research out quickly to scientists and health officials who need to know and need to protect their populations and to design new treatments and vaccines".

This seems so glaringly obvious that it raises questions as to why the US would be trying to suppress the information. And not just trying. The website *Pravda.ru* reports that after the meeting in Geneva "a WHO official said a deal had been reached in principle to keep details of the controversial work secret until deeper risk analyses could be carried out!"

That sounds like just the kind of open-ended

caveat that could delay publication for a very long time indeed. And just why are the Yanks so keen on keeping this research under wraps?

Their security people told Dr Alberts it was because of US concerns that it could help terrorists to develop a biological weapon. Terrorists are the bogeyman of choice for imperialism today, being even harder to disprove than the previous favourite, the "rogue state".

And of course, imperialism's leaders have absolutely no qualms about lying in their teeth on these matters, as witness former British PM Tony Blair telling the House of Commons all about Saddam Hussein's alleged weapons of mass destruction to justify invading Iraq. Blair was very eager for Britain to secure a slice of that action. That the "weapons of mass destruction" were imaginary didn't bother him at all.

If imperialism was going to seize Iraq's oil, then British Petroleum (BP) was going to get its share.

Setting terrorists aside, the US has actively been interested in developing biological weapons for its own use at least since the end of WW2. That was when the US army sent people into China (before the victory of the Chinese Revolutionary forces) to secure the services of as many of Japan's military scientists who had been secretly working in Japan's Chinese bases on gruesome biological warfare experiments. Not to try them as war criminals but to "rescue" them and put them to work for the US.

In the Korean War, a few years later, the US experimented with dropping germ-laden canister

bombs over North Korea and across the Yalu River in China. These were not very effective and the Western media dutifully laughed the photographic evidence off as "Communist propaganda", but it showed where imperialist thinking was going.

In the Vietnam War, the US made extensive use of chemical weapons, from napalm to nerve gas (they were very proud of both of these "refinements"). They were ever on the lookout for a weapon that would kill people but leave property undamaged (every warmonger's wet dream).

They thought they had it with the neutron bomb: they actually *boasted* that that was precisely what it would do. They seemed surprised that global world opinion so categorically condemned the super new bomb.

The fact that the Russians were also capable of producing neutron warheads probably helped to give them cause to look elsewhere.

Now, of course, the US is investing heavily – very heavily – in drones. They have thousands of these pilotless planes, many armed with missiles. The early models were used for reconnaissance but the newer armed models are used for assassinations and terror strikes on civilians deemed to be "hostile". The latter may be no more than neighbours of someone who is opposed to US actions in their country. That is enough for the modern US military state to order their deaths.

And of course, the pilotless drones have another great advantage: no body bags going home to upset the voters. Lately we have seen

the resurfacing of the material about the real origins of AIDS, its deliberate development through gene splicing in US defence labs, looking for a way to thwart what notorious racist and anti-Communist J Edgar Hoover called "the coming Black revolution in the United States".

Exposed originally by scientists in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), who even named the US Army facility at which the research was carried out, the AIDS exposé was derided and vehemently rejected by US propagandists. Rejected so vigorously in fact that people were put in mind of Shakespeare's line: "Methinks thou dost protest too much!"

Despite the scope of the West's campaign to bury the GDR material, the actions of the US government and military over the last three decades can only have given extra credibility to that material.

And now we have bird flu. With its unfortunate track record, it is most unlikely that the US would *not* be extremely interested in a virulent strain of influenza that might make a potent weapon against an economic rival with a large population (like China, say?). And the US would not want other countries to have information about it.

If the US government, military and intelligence services want the world to think of it as innocent in these matters then it needs to radically change its behaviour: you cannot be a global bully and thug and at the same time pose as a mild, peace-loving, law-abiding citizen. Not successfully, anyway. ☼



Sun 18 Mar –
Sat 24 Mar

In 1918, when Major Robbins of the American Red Cross mission in Russia went to the Kremlin to see Lenin, the Soviet leader introduced him to “our expert on the nationalities question”, a young Georgian named Josef Stalin.

Ninety percent of the country’s population were illiterate, but the new Soviet state was going to embark on an unprecedented literacy campaign, to teach the whole population to read and write – in their own languages. The members of the numerous national minorities in the former Tsarist empire could all speak their own language, but under Tsarism many of those languages had never even had a written form. Stalin’s task was to turn that situation totally around.

The key was seen to be language and education. In particular, education given in the students’ own language. In many cases this required that before people could be taught to read in their own language, the young Soviet state had to begin by creating an alphabet for that language.

For the first time, pupils at school received lessons in their own tongue. Teachers were often only a few classes ahead of their pupils, but the vast undertaking was entered into across the huge country with humbling enthusiasm.

As the population were taught to read and write in their own language, newspapers and publishing houses in those languages followed, as did efforts to conserve folk music and dance.

Stephen Fry does not mention the experience of the USSR in this regard when he deals with efforts to either preserve or destroy minority

languages in this week’s episode of *Fry’s Planet Word* (ABC1 Sundays at 9.30pm). Instead he takes his examples from Ireland (where they now belatedly teach Irish in schools) and France, where a pompous git from the Academie Française dismisses concerns about the disappearance of ethnic minority languages with a wave of his hand.

Global communication is increasingly conducted in only two languages: English and Mandarin Chinese. That may be convenient for business, but it embodies an impoverishment of human culture. Already, most English speakers are unable to read the great classics of 19th century English literature because the language is “too difficult”.

Fry’s series is sometimes infuriatingly discursive, but it still makes informative, intelligent television.

The ABC TV news team of journalist Paul Lockyer, cameraman John Bean and chopper pilot Gary Ticehurst were killed in a helicopter crash at Lake Eyre last year. The ABC has edited footage and commentary from their 2009 documentary *Lake Eyre – Australia’s Outback Wonder* and their 2010 production *Return To Lake Eyre* into a 90-minute commemorative program *Lake Eyre* (ABC1 Tuesday March 20 at 8.30pm).

The film covers the extraordinary scenes of the breaking of the drought, water flowing through the Simpson Desert, the Murray-Darling system finally reaching the sea after not doing so for years.

What it does not cover is any consideration of whether the effects of the drought were aggravated by the rapacious use of Darling River water for cotton and rice crops.

John Robinson is a congenital amputee. That’s a fancy way to say he was born with arms that stopped at the elbows and lower legs that are attached at his hips without thighs or knees. Consequently he is only a little over a metre tall.

Amazingly, he is a keen golfer and sometime hiker. Happily married, he is a successful sales rep.

Like all films about people with disabilities, *Get Off Your Knees: The John Robinson Story* (ABC2 Wednesday March 21 at 8.30pm) is described as “inspirational”, although



Miss Fisher’s Murder Mysteries (ABC1 Fridays at 8.30pm) – Miss Phryne Fisher (Essie Davis) and Detective Inspector Jack Robinson (Nathan Page).

just what such films inspire you to do is seldom made clear.

But there is no doubt that John Robinson has not let the deficiencies in the hand that he’s been dealt get him down. In fact, a more together guy would be hard to find.

The title is taken from a typical self-deprecating story from his college days: standing in a slow-moving queue in the cafeteria, a woman behind him looked down at him and said – “You know, if you got up off your knees this line would move a lot faster!” When he returned to his table and told his friends they all broke up.

The new cop show *The Shadow Line* (ABC1 Fridays at 9.30pm from March 23) is described by the ABC as “a sophisticated conspiracy thriller in seven parts”. I think the best comment I can make is to reprint the synopsis:

“Harvey Wratten, the head of one of the UK’s largest crime organisations is found dead, shot at close range. He had only just been released from jail – under the very rarely obtained Royal Pardon – having served two years of an 18-year sentence for his part in importing 11 million pounds’ worth of heroin.

“Assigned to investigate Wratten’s death is Detective Inspector Jonah Gabriel (Chiwetel Ejiofor), on his first case since being shot during a botched police operation which left his partner dead. To his superior’s chagrin, he remembers nothing about what happened, because of a bullet lodged in his brain which could kill him at any time.

“And £250,000 has gone missing from the evidence room. It’s not surprising his colleagues regard him with suspicion.”

There is actually more, but I think

we can say already that as far as plot goes, the writer (Hugo Blick) has left no cliché unused.

The show immediately before it, the Australian-made *Miss Fisher’s Murder Mysteries* (ABC1 Fridays at 8.30pm) also has its share of clichés, but it has few pretensions to be anything else, and its clichés of plot and character become part of its charm rather than being perceived, as in *Shadow Line*, as an insult to one’s intelligence. I know which one I’d rather watch. ✪



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Stephen Blanks, Secretary, NSW Council of Civil Liberties;
Clinton Fernandez, Dr, Political Program UNSW Canberra

March 23
SUPERANNUATION REFORM – BONANZA FOR THE RICH, RIP-OFF FOR THE REST
Eva Cox, feminist, social activist, commentator;
Brian Toohey, economic journalist;
Michael Rafferty, Workplace Research Centre, Sydney University

March 30
WEST PAPUA – INDONESIAN VIOLENCE, AUSTRALIAN INDIFFERENCE, WEST PAPUA HOPES
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Colombia's political prisoners – growing pressure for freedom and justice

Bob Briton

There were mixed signals for the prospects of success for the Colombia Behind Bars forum as delegates gathered in the Colombian capital of Bogotá on February 26 and 27. The FARC-EP (the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia guerrilla group) had replied to a letter from a group of prominent Latin American and European women agreeing to release another group of prisoners of war unilaterally. On the eve of the conference, pressure was mounting for the government of President Juan Santos to respond.

Colombia's minister for justice was on the speakers' list for the gathering but failed to appear. He later told representatives the above-mentioned Women of the World Acting for Peace that a proposed international commission made up of forum delegates to visit political prisoners would have to be greatly reduced in numbers. The number of prisons to be inspected would have to be cut back. Ultimately, the offer was withdrawn completely – there would be no commission for the verification of the human rights situation of Colombia's political prisoners on his watch.

In view of reports of continuing neglect and abuse within Colombian prisons, there is still a glaring need for such a commission. The attitude was not unexpected. While it projects a softer image, the Santos government has taken up where its predecessor under President Álvaro Uribe left off. It has been pursuing the goal of complete military victory over insurgents under a policy called "Democratic Security". Though Santos has formally

just days after the forum came as a bolt from the blue (see story page 9). Liliany has been an outspoken critic of the human rights record of the Colombian government and had languished in the Buen Pastor (Good Shepherd) women's prison in Bogotá for the past three and a half years despite a vigorous international campaign for her freedom. She had never been convicted on the politically motivated charges of "rebellion" or raising finances for "terrorist activities".

While the government will insist that the decision was made independently by the judge presiding over her case, there's little doubt the convening of the international gathering in Bogotá led to the breakthrough.

Tales of horror ...

I was one of the guests invited to attend the *Colombia Behind Bars* forum as a representative of the International Network in Solidarity with Colombia's Political Prisoners, INSPP (www.inspp.org).

That organisation coordinates some of the work of activists in Australia, Canada, Colombia and the US. I had never visited Colombia. I had heard about the wretched human rights situation in the country from Colombian friends and through contact with Liliany Obando during her visit to Australia in 2007. I had heard accounts of the horrors inflicted on rural communities by brutal paramilitaries as they seek to seize land on behalf of mining corporations and other developers. Over four million Colombians have fled their homes to escape the violence of the ongoing land grab.

During one of the sessions of the



Liliany Obando on her release.

Photo: Kevin Neish (Canada)

and ambition of men in suits working for transnational corporations with headquarters in shiny tower blocks across the globe should haunt us all.

... and inspiration

The presence of a Basque and a Philippine delegate was a reminder that the issue of political prisoners is not restricted to Colombia. Marie Hilao-Enriquez from the Alliance for the Advancement of People's Rights pointed out a number of close parallels between the experience of the people and the political prisoners of the Philippines and Colombia. Her optimism shone through despite the grimness of the struggle in her country. Thirty-seven of her human rights advocate colleagues have been killed in recent times.

manner and seemingly tireless attention to their work.

Ex-senator Piedad Cordoba is a human dynamo and an icon for progressive Colombians though she comes from the same Liberal Party of former President Uribe. Her leadership was evident through much of the February conference. She has been vilified by the corporate media, kidnapped and briefly forced into exile by paramilitaries and lived through several assassination attempts.

Cordoba was made a suspect in the "FARC politica" (FARC politics) stitch-up that arose from information allegedly retrieved from computer equipment that supposedly survived a deadly bombing attack on the camp of the late FARC commander, Raúl Reyes, in 2008. She has been forced

against the left in the 1970s and '80s. Xiomara Castro de Zelaya, wife of illegally ousted Honduran president Manuel Zelaya, made a number of very optimistic contributions at the forum.

Ever-present threat

The forum finished on an unmistakably high note but the realities that the delegates would be leaving behind were evident during the event. Piedad Cordoba noted that two plain-clothes security agents were photographing delegates at the Gabriel García Márquez Auditorium on the opening night. Delegates reported four men with guns showing in their belts walked through the foyer of the hotel where most of the international guests were staying. On the second day of the event several NGOs received a letter from the Black Eagles threatening that the members of the group of prominent women and the international delegates should leave Bogotá or face dire consequences.

Liliany Obando was duly released from prison but into a very uncertain security situation. The government has not committed adequate resources to ensuring her safety prompting an international campaign to obtain guarantees from authorities – go to www.justiceforcolombia.org. She could be taken back into custody as the politically motivated trial grinds on.

Colombians working for social justice, peace, freedom for all the political prisoners or even a humanitarian exchange of prisoners on both sides of the conflict will continue to face these sorts of immense challenges day in and day out. Their creativity and energy will triumph in the end but the international community owes it to those brave activists to extend their solidarity to them. ✚

Over four million Colombians have fled their homes to escape the violence of the ongoing land grab.

recognised an armed struggle exists in Colombia, his government continues to insist there are no prisoners of war and no political prisoners with special rights under international conventions. There are only "terrorists", "delinquents" and their supporters. There are now over 8,000 such people held in Colombian prisons.

Given this intransigence on the part of the government, the announcement of the conditional release of political prisoner Liliany Obando

forum, family members gave accounts of the loss of loved ones in this war on the people of Colombia. One woman held a photo of her nine-year-old daughter who had been taken from school by paramilitaries to be raped, tortured and finally suffocated and dumped. The perpetrators have never been brought to justice.

The impact of such first hand accounts will stay with me for a long time. The knowledge that such horrors are unleashed as a result of the greed

The lawyers of the Lazos de Dignidad (Ties of Dignity foundation) representing Liliany Obando have their own stories of commitment and survival. Three of the young women who looked after conference guests were forced to leave their hometown on Colombia's Caribbean coast for the relative (though still precarious) security of Bogotá as the result of increasingly immediate death threats from paramilitary groups. You would never know it from their cheerful

out of her senate post for her work in seeking a negotiated settlement to the armed struggle raging in Colombia.

Among the other members of the Women of the World Acting for Peace present at the forum was Mirta Baravalle of the Mothers of the Plazo de Mayo organisation. Those women maintained a long protest against Argentina's dictatorship demanding to know what had happened to their sons and daughters after they had disappeared during the dirty war



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