



Don't cut workers' comp!



Photo: Anna Pha

Anna Pha

Thousands of workers are expected to rally outside NSW state Parliament on Wednesday June 13 against cuts to workers' compensation. The protest action, organised by Unions NSW, is being held the day after the state budget is handed down. Judging by the information revealed prior to budget day, it looks set to be a horror for workers. The NSW premier Barry O'Farrell looks set to outdo his Liberal Party peers in other states with a massive attack on workers' compensation, as well as jobs, wages and public services.

Workers' compensation is top of the list. The planned changes include:

- Slashing of payments – the current amount is 100 percent of ordinary pay for the first 26 weeks, then the statutory rate of \$432 a week. Under the changes, the most a worker could receive is 90 percent for 13 weeks before being reduced to the statutory rate (\$432 is approximately 70 percent of minimum wage)
- Cutting off all weekly income and treatment expenses after 2½ years (or 130 weeks) for those considered to be “partially injured”.
- Removal of cover during travel to and from work.

- No entitlements after nine years except for people who are “totally incapacitated”.
- Abolition of lump-sum payments for injured workers with “less than 10 percent whole-body impairment” (and therefore excluding payment for injuries such as a fused ankle or back and neck injuries not requiring surgery).
- Raising injury thresholds to a very high, difficult to meet 30 percent whole person impairment for work injury damages claims.

Barrister Bruce McManamey, a spokesman for the Australian Lawyers Alliance, said, “It’s the kind of stuff that will result in injured workers losing their homes.”

The majority of lump-sum payments are between \$6,000 and \$13,000. “If they abolish lump sums for injuries less than 10 percent, I think it falls into the category of mean and petty,” McManamey said.

NSW Greens MP and industrial relations spokesperson, David Shoebridge, described the cuts as “the harshest cuts ever proposed to workers’ compensation benefits in NSW”. If they became law, they would “force many injured employees straight into poverty”, Shoebridge said.

Some lawyers estimate that half of the 28,000 workers who currently receive benefits

and medical expenses will no longer receive a cent under the Liberal’s cuts.

The Australian Lawyers Alliance is concerned about mismanagement of WorkCover. NSW Director, Andrew Stone, said, “Payments made to scheme agents and insurers to manage claims has increased every year since 2001, despite the number of major injuries (those claims which require management) reducing by almost half over that same period!”

“The cost of managing the scheme appears to be completely disproportionate to the benefits provided for injured workers,” Stone said. This is one possible area of reform that would not hurt injured workers and reduce costs of the scheme.

However, the most humane and at the same time cost-effective approach is through prevention – reducing the number of injuries.

Employers want it both ways: low insurance premiums and no responsibility for sickness and injury (including deaths) caused by their negligence.

Employers have lobbied hard to reduce the rights of trade unions to take action in relation to occupational health and safety in the workplace. Unions and their members face heavy penalties for industrial action that protects the health and safety of members. At the same time government authorities do little to enforce the

limited occupational health and safety (OH&S) regulations that do exist.

Trade unions should have their full rights restored so that they can halt work or take other industrial action to ensure the workplace is safe. They should have their own OH&S officers trained on company time and with the power to shut work down when deemed necessary. They should not face the threat of fines of hundreds of thousands of dollars and damages action of millions of dollars for protecting lives.

Workplaces should be regularly inspected and jail penalties applied for company directors and management responsible for the injury and deaths of workers or for breaching OH&S regulations. Fines are peanuts to the big transnational corporations compared with the huge savings (profits) made by risking the health and safety of workers.

Injured and sick workers should not be driven into poverty as a result of the boss’s negligence. Benefits need to be improved and employers foot the bill.

Prevention means fewer injuries and deaths, as well as lower premiums in the long run. The only losers are the parasitic third party insurance companies whose profits might be hit.

As the Transport Workers’ Union says: “Prevention, not reduction in compensation, is the best way to reduce injuries.” ✪

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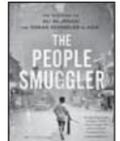
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Book Review

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The Guardian

Issue 1551

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A crisis of overproduction

The ruling class by no means shares the confidence of the federal government in the Australian economy. The Reserve Bank of Australia's (RBA) decision to lower the official interest rate for the second month in a row reflects this. RBA governor Glenn Stevens in his statement announcing the cut warns: "The ongoing trend is unclear and could be dampened by slower Chinese growth"; Europe remains "a potential source of adverse shocks"; the "United States continues to grow at a moderate pace"; "commodity prices have declined lately"; "financial market sentiment has deteriorated over the past month".

He said, "Europe's economic and financial prospects have again been clouded by weakening growth, heightened political uncertainty and concerns about fiscal sustainability and the strength of some banks." In Australia, "the housing market remains subdued. The exchange rate has declined over recent weeks, reflecting lower commodity prices, heightened risk aversion and expectations of lower interest rates."

The RBA's June decision cut the rate from 3.75 percent to 3.5 percent. In May, the reduction was larger, from 4.25 percent to 3.75 percent. The banks on both occasions failed to pass on to the public the full reduction. They are in total denial about the obscene record profits they have been raking in or the role they play in sending companies to the wall and turfing people out of their homes or off their land. They see the storm that is coming and are extremely worried that their profit levels will drop. They are only interested in making everyone else pay. They do not see themselves, with high loan rates and hefty fees, as a big part of the problem.

The retail companies are moaning that no one is spending. How can anyone on \$20 an hour pay \$300 a week on rent or a mortgage, buy clothes for their children, afford train fares of \$50 a week, put food on the table and pay an electricity bill of \$200 or \$300 and spend more? They can't. That is the problem. If their job is through a body hire company, casual or outwork at \$5 per hour, how can they spend more? And if there are a few dollars left at the end of the week, they have to save it for the next week in case there is no work or only a few hours at best.

The minimum wage is not a living wage. Students, pensioners, the unemployed and other welfare recipients would spend if they had enough income. They are battling for survival below the poverty line. Charities are overwhelmed with the increase in demand for their services. Forty percent of workers are in jobs that are not ongoing or secure. Demand for goods and services will fall as thousands of jobs are being lost every week in manufacturing, hospitality, education, the public service, tourism, housing construction and retail.

The mining and finance sectors might be booming, making record profits, but the rest of Australia looks more like it is sinking into a recession. The official unemployment rate of around five percent does not reflect reality. It counts one hour of work as being employed. Unemployment and chronic underemployment are closer to 10 or 12 percent and rising.

The employer offensive on trade unions and workers and neoliberal budget cutting have not only taken their toll on workers and welfare recipients, it is hurting the very employers who pushed that agenda. The economic equation is simple.

Karl Marx pointed it out more than 150 years ago. Reducing the amount people have to spend reduces the demand for goods and services. This creates a "crisis of overproduction", companies go bust, workers get sacked and the crisis deepens. This is exactly what is happening now. The ruling class response is classic – reduce wages, sack workers and boost productivity (output per worker). If fewer workers produce more goods, the surplus in production over demand only gets worse.

The international developments that are of such concern to the RBA are still to take their toll. The reduction in interest rates was a small step in the right direction. Much more is needed. Banks should make substantial reductions in their loan rates. The government must abandon its budget surplus. Military spending needs to be slashed. Pensioners should be given an immediate rise of \$50 per week plus unemployment and all other benefits brought up to the same rate. Job creation, secure employment, training, a living wage and stimulatory policies are required.

PRESS FUND

The conservative think tank the Grattan Institute believes people should work until they're 70, that the Goods and Services Tax should be extended to include fresh food, health and education, and that women (including young mums) should be given "incentives" (bet that means loss of welfare payments) to return to paid employment. *The Guardian* intends to fight any party that tries to adopt these vicious policies. However, we need your support by way of contributions to the Press Fund, so please send us in something for the next issue if you possibly can. Many thanks to this week's contributors, as follows:

Steve Cooper \$30, Brian McGee (*Guardian* tin Central Branch) \$133, "Round Figure" \$18, Shayne Talbot \$12

This week's total: \$193 Progressive total: \$2,983

Leichhardt Friends of Hebron – Building bridges not walls

Hebron-Leichhardt 2012 Refugee Week Festival of Friendship

Leichhardt Friends of Hebron is delighted to be able to invite our community to our third annual Refugee Week event. This will be another great day with delicious food, aromatic coffee, music from around the world, market stalls, a photo exhibition, a film, a discussion forum and more ...

Everyone is welcome to this multi-cultural event on Saturday 18 June from 12:00 midday to 8:00 pm at the Leichhardt Town Hall in Leichhardt, Sydney. Although we are raising funds to support pre-school education in the most vulnerable communities of the Palestinian city of Hebron, entry to the festival is free.

Catch a fashion parade of beautifully embroidered traditional Palestinian dresses (1pm) or admire the ceramics just arrived from the Hebron Glass and Ceramic Factory. Every one of these colourful pieces is hand-made then individually hand-painted according to a tradition going back centuries. For those who want one of these beautiful pieces for home or for that special gift, you will find the prices very reasonable and all proceeds are directed to the kindergarten project.

Browse our bookstall with hundreds of new and second-hand books of all types then sit back and relax with a coffee and a snack while our musicians entertain you.

This year our photo exhibition, with photos of ordinary people from Hebron and elsewhere in Palestine, going about their daily lives, has the title *Steadfastness* to reflect the quiet perseverance of people facing great adversity with quiet dignity.

There is the opportunity to learn more about the situation in Hebron by listening to the speakers in our forum at 3pm. We are thrilled to have such a great panel, with Randa Abdel-Fattah, writer and lawyer, human rights and social justice advocate; Kolin Thumbadoo, South African Anti-Apartheid veteran, former president of the Australian Anti-Apartheid Movement and Ghassan Hage, Future Generation Professor of Anthropology and Social Theory at Melbourne University leading the discussion. The moderator is Antony Loewenstein, the Sydney-based independent freelance journalist and author.

Leichhardt Friends of Hebron is grateful for the support of Leichhardt Council. We would like to thank the

Council officers and the Councillors who have been so supportive. We are particularly grateful to Mayor Rochelle Porteous, who will open the Festival and Photography Exhibition at 1:30pm.

Leichhardt Friends of Hebron works to support vulnerable communities in the Hebron region of the Occupied Palestinian Territories and raise awareness of the issues of human rights and international humanitarian law.

Funds from the 2010 and 2011 Hebron Leichhardt Refugee Week Festivals have helped complete a kindergarten in the Um Al Khair community near Hebron, and enabled construction to begin on another kindie in Khasam Al Daraj. This provides opportunities for early childhood education for even more children from the most vulnerable communities in the Hebron region.

To ensure full accountability, all funds raised this year will also be channelled to the kindergarten projects through the registered charity, Union Aid Abroad – APHEDA. ☺

Communist Party flourishing

Dr Hannah Middleton
CPA General Secretary

Contrary to an article on May 31 in *The Australian*, the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) is alive and working for the interests of all those members of our community hit so hard by corporate globalisation and the capitalist crisis.

Joe Kelly writing in *The Australian* confuses – accidentally or deliberately – the CPA with the Communists. The Communists (originally called the Communist Alliance) was an electoral alliance of which the CPA was one part, together with migrant Communist parties and progressive individuals from around Australia.

The Communist Party of Australia supported the Communist Alliance (CA) because it united a range of left political forces to fight for real change.

The Communist Alliance was registered as a party on March 16, 2009. A legal challenge from the Community Alliance, a conservative group in Canberra, forced the CA to change its name to the Communists. This group did not manage to meet the requirement

that it update its membership list in time and was recently deregistered by the Australian Electoral Commission.

A media release at the time of the CA's 2009 launch stated:

We oppose both major parties because of their welfare for the rich approach and their ties to big business interests.

But we have a longer term vision for Australia too.

The global economic crisis has shown the people of the world and Australia that capitalism has failed.

We need radical change to protect our communities and create a world of peace and sustainable development. Ultimately we need socialism – a new system where people's rights are paramount and the people decide their own future.

While the Communists has been deregistered, CPA members will continue to stand in some elections. CPA members will be involved in the NSW local government elections this September, for example.

The existing system, in which government is alternately shared between the Liberal-National Coalition and the Australian Labor Party, obscures and protects the

dictatorship of capital over our economic and political life.

The two-party system, which has dominated Australia's political life for more than 100 years, does not allow for significant streams of political thinking in Australia to be represented in Parliament, particularly in the important lower houses of our parliaments.

The CPA campaigns for the repeal of the present Electoral Act and its replacement by a more democratic method of election. We call for a compulsory, proportional-preferential voting system which gives the people a wider choice of candidates through multi-member electorates and a choice of local members to whom they can take their concerns.

The Communist Party of Australia continues to exist and work. We work for a society in which publicly owned enterprises play the major role in the economy, which encourages the participation of people in democratic decision making and management, a society where Indigenous Australians, women, and migrants are treated equally and with dignity. We work for a society where the environment is protected.

The CPA advances an alternative political agenda before the people that puts the people's needs and interests first. In our vision of an alternative, the people's voice and participation are paramount. The purpose of our economy must be to fulfill people's needs, not to produce ever-increasing wealth for private corporations and the super-rich. ☺

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UNESCO warning prompts battle over Barrier Reef

Peter Mac

Last week the United Nations organisation UNESCO warned that if proposed developments along the Queensland coast went ahead, particularly those associated with the coal industry, it would consider placing the Barrier Reef on the list of endangered places of world significance.

Federal Minister for the Environment Tony Burke subsequently “stopped the clock” on the Queensland government’s application for federal approval of the proposed Alpha coal mining project in central Queensland’s Galilee Basin, because of inadequacies in the environmental assessment on which the application was based.

Queensland premier Campbell Newman was enraged, and called on the Prime Minister to rein in her “rogue minister”. He appears to have rubber-stamped the Alpha assessment, which was prepared for the proponents, a consortium of Gina Rinehart’s Hancock Coal and the Indian mining giant GVK. He also appears to have assumed that Burke would do the same thing.

The UNESCO warning

The UNESCO report concerned the whole range of development along the Queensland coast by the mining, agricultural and tourism industries, and the subsequent runoff of fertilisers, pesticides, coal dust and other pollutants into the waters of the Great Barrier Reef.

The report was particularly concerned about coal mining. Applications for 35 major new coal industry developments are to be considered over the next 18 months. They include seven huge new coal mines and a six-fold increase in port facilities, which will result in 10,000 coal freighters navigating the reef each year.

The Alpha project involves not just the huge Galilee Basin mine, but also construction of a 500-kilometre rail line to a vast new coal loading facility at Abbot Point. The largest in the southern hemisphere and potentially the largest in the world, its massive terminals would be run

by BHP-Billiton, Waratah Coal and Adani.

Other major port developments would occur at Gudeon Point and Gladstone, and a huge liquefied natural gas facility would be built at Curtis Island off the coast.

The UNESCO report stated that proceeding with a number of these developments without having appropriate strategic assessments and sustainable plans would “directly risk irreversible impacts” on the Reef, and would “provide the basis to consider inscription of (the Reef) on the List of World Heritage Places in Danger”. It declared: “The outstanding universal value of (the reef) is threatened and decisive action is required to secure its long-term conservation.”

The “Green tape” excuse

Prior to the Queensland elections Newman had promised to cut “green tape” (i.e. unnecessarily complex procedure regarding the environment) in order to halve the time it takes to get development approvals.

The federal government has also attempted to delegate responsibility for approvals to state government where possible. However, the Commonwealth has a legal responsibility to protect the Great Barrier Reef because Australia is a signatory to international covenants regarding areas of world heritage significance.

Burke’s letter of rejection specified areas of concern, including the impact of run-off from the port, railway and nearby rivers on the reef’s marine life, which appear to have been downplayed or simply ignored in the Alpha environmental assessment.

For Newman, “green tape” consists not only of a duplication of environmental approval processes at state and federal levels, but also of the need to scrupulously assess the impact of development on living species.

In fact, both processes are essential to protect the environment. The desire to implement industrial projects does not justify the loss of, or irreversible damage to a species. Nor does it justify ignoring environmental impacts in cases where acknowledgement might jeopardise the chance of

Abbot Point.



gaining government approval for the project concerned.

Moreover, the Alpha saga is demonstrating that approval at both state and federal levels is crucial for the protection of places of world heritage significance from ill-advised or corrupt government initiatives.

For her part, Prime Minister Julia Gillard backed Burke’s decision, which was certainly well justified. However, she noted that short-changing the environmental assessment and then engaging in a war of words would delay the approval process, implying that expediting the project was desirable.

She offered no criticism of the current mad expansion of coal and gas mining operations. She should have. Protecting the Reef doesn’t just involve pollution of the sea from coal dust run-off or other pollutants. The biggest long term threats to the Reef are rising sea levels, which will reduce the level of light reaching the coral polyps, and the rising sea temperature, which will exceed the level that polyps can tolerate.

Both these phenomena result from climate change. This is caused by increasing emissions of greenhouse

gases, particularly carbon dioxide, most of which comes from the burning of coal in power stations around the world. Yet no Labor or Coalition MP has ever suggested that coal production should actually be phased out, or even stabilised at current levels.

Big Coal heading for a reef

The Alpha consortium’s plans are now under threat from a number of sources.

The social media organisation GetUp is seeking donations for full-page Asian newspaper advertisements advising potential investors of community opposition to the project. Greenpeace is also campaigning against the project, as well as other Queensland coal developments.

Greenpeace program director Ben Pearson commented: “It’s disappointing to see the Queensland government falling over itself to please the

big miners instead of considering the long-term future of the 50,000 Queenslanders who rely on the Great Barrier Reef for employment. ... The scale and pace of proposed development is out of control.”

The Australian Conservation Foundation has also declared its opposition. Its chief executive Don Henry stated: “The UN report clearly shows how essential it is that our national environmental laws prevail over parochial state interests.”

Environmental groups are now taking mining corporations to court, for example in the current dispute over the proposed Wandoan mine in southern Queensland.

Newman sneered that Burke was just attempting to curry favour with Greens voters in Melbourne and Sydney. However, he is likely to find that voters everywhere will rise in revolt at the coal industry’s proposed rape of the Great Barrier Reef. ✪

Pete’s Corner



Construction Forestry Mining Energy Union WA statement Combined unions call off Gary Gray protest in view of new assurances

A protest planned for this Saturday outside the office of the federal member for Brand, Gary Gray over Enterprise Migration Agreements has been called off as a sign of good faith resulting from a new Federal government announcement.

An announcement issued from the offices of Chris Bowen, Bill Shorten and Kate Ellis has sought to give an assurance that companies and contractors recruiting overseas workers through EMA’s will now be required to use the new Jobs Board to demonstrate that suitably qualified Australian’s are given the first opportunity to apply for available jobs and training. The government will take into account the use of the Jobs Board when assessing EMA applications, including the

number of skills of Australian jobseekers registered with the jobs board.

The combined unions of the CFMEU, CEPU, MUA, AMWU and TWU will be seeking a rock solid commitment in relation the federal government’s announcement and as a sign of good faith will not picket or protest outside the office Gary Gray on Saturday June 16.

The unions are still planning a major rally for July 4, to secure a commitment from resource companies on the mandatory use of the Jobs Board and training as well as to bed down details and finer points of this announcement and to make sure, job and training opportunities are maximised for local workers, their families and communities. ✪

Native title reforms

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Mick Gooda has welcomed the native title reforms announced last week.

"I am heartened by these significant reforms which overall appear to indicate a more flexible and responsive approach on the horizon to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people negotiating the native title system," Commissioner Gooda said.

"The reforms have the potential to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in our efforts to have our traditional connection to, and rights and interests in our lands, territories and resources recognised but only if we are actively involved in negotiations.

"Overall, the reforms are a step in the right direction but we will need further reform to address inequities that remain in the native title system, such as reversing the current and onerous burden of proof provisions," he said.

Commissioner Gooda also

welcomed the proposals to allow parties to disregard the historical extinguishment of native title in areas set aside as parks or reserves.

"This reform will go some way towards overturning some of the entrenched dispossession and disadvantage caused by the breadth and permanency of past and current extinguishment practices," he said.

"The extinguishment of Indigenous rights to land by unilateral uncompensated acts is also completely at odds with Australia's human rights obligations, specifically the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples which Australia has formally supported for more than three years. I'd also like further consideration to be given to expanding the range of circumstances in which historical extinguishment of native title can be disregarded," he said.

Mr Gooda welcomed the proposal to legislate the requirements for good faith negotiations.

"Clarifying and strengthening the good faith requirements under the right to negotiate provisions in the

Native Title Act is long overdue," he said.

"We support the inclusion of explicit criteria for what constitutes good faith as these are one of the few procedural safeguards that native title parties have under the Act."

Commissioner Gooda said the interaction between native title and the income tax system has always been complex and uncertain and he welcomed the tax changes announced today.

"Native title payments, monetary and non-monetary, are in effect a form of compensation and should not be subject to taxation so I'm pleased to hear that income tax and capital gains tax will not apply to payments from native title agreements," Mr Gooda said.

"Tax exemption will provide certainty of treatment for those receiving payments but I'd like to see this eventually go further with the introduction of a new tax exempt vehicle for use by Indigenous peoples receiving and using native title payments." ✪



"I give a Gonski" campaign launched

Bob Treasure

President of the Australian Education Union, Angelo Gavrielatos, launched the multimedia "I give a Gonski" campaign last week.

The campaign aims to keep the issue of the Gonski Report on Schools Funding before the public gaze and pressure federal and state governments to adopt its recommendations, the most basic being that excessive funds to wealthy private schools be curtailed and Public Schools' investments be lifted by \$5.1 billion.

"According to a recent OzPoll cross-section of 1,000 Australians, 88 percent are supportive of Gonski's recommendations," Mr Gavrielatos said.

The Gonski Review took over two years to deliver its findings. It cost millions of taxpayer dollars to research and compile its findings. Teachers, parents, schools, in fact, all key stakeholders, including independent and Catholic schools, made submissions to the Review but now the federal government seems intent on sitting on its hands.

In the last Budget, Treasurer Swan handed out millions to parents to use for "expenses", all of which does nothing for the educational betterment of a single child throughout Australia.

"If we do not adopt Gonski's funding recommendations soon, public schools will have lost \$670 million by the 2015-16 financial year – the equivalent of 7,000 teaching positions in areas where they are desperately needed," Mr Gavrielatos said.

"At the same time, rich private schools would receive an extra \$1.3 billion which they do not need. I believe the Labor Party is inching towards some kind of action this year, since both Swan and Education Minister Garrett promised legislation by September or October of this year."

Legislation is one thing, but real money another. If funding for Gonski's reforms comes through in next year's budget, it may only last a few months, till the federal election. Opposition spokesman Christopher Pyne has promised to revoke any funding changes and return the system to "... the way it was".

Meanwhile, NSW teachers have approved a publicity campaign against Premier O'Farrell's 'devolution' agenda, designed to slash job security and fob off financial/educational responsibility onto individual Principals.

"The struggle has only just begun," they said at a statewide stoppage and Council meeting. ✪

Vic teachers and principals strike in unprecedented numbers

An unprecedented number of Victorian public school teachers and principals stopped work last week in further pursuit of reducing contract employment, lowering class sizes, lifting salaries and addressing workload issues.

Up to 10,000 Victorian teachers and principals are expected to attend a stopwork rally at Melbourne's Hisense Arena, with regional rallies also to be held in Mildura and Wodonga.

AEU Victorian branch president Mary Bluett said the strong support for the rally sent a clear message to the Victorian government that it must invest more in public education.

"Victoria is at the bottom of the class when it comes to resourcing our public schools. The Baillieu government continues to spend less per student on education than any other state or territory government and over the past 12 months has

been responsible for over \$2 billion in cuts and broken promises.

"We are already experiencing teacher shortages and we have an increasing number of teachers leaving the system each year, which places pressure on schools and forces many teachers to work outside their area of qualification or expertise."

Ms Bluett said the need was to attract and retain quality teachers to ensure every Victorian student receives the education they deserve.

Close to half of public schools still have classes of over 25 students which makes it almost impossible for teachers to provide each student with the individual attention they need.

Further, almost one in five teachers (18%) are currently on short-term contracts. This figure increases to 47% for beginning teachers. This is particularly discouraging for those looking to enter and stay in the profession.

"Despite the Baillieu government's repeated promise to make Victorian teachers the highest paid, they are now backflipping and leaving our teachers lagging behind other states.

"Teachers in Western Australia and New South Wales at the top of the pay scale are paid \$7,441 and \$2,822 respectively more than Victorian teachers for the same role.

"The decision to take action was not taken lightly and we acknowledge and apologise for any inconvenience caused to parents and guardians. For the long term gain, we believe this is a necessary step.

"We call on the community to show their support for our public school teachers and principals by joining the campaign and sending a letter to the Premier via myschoolneeds.com.au," Ms Bluett said. ✪

Union slams customs job cuts in regional Australia

The union representing Customs Officers has slammed a decision to cut 37 out of 153 positions from Customs District Offices including Port Hedland, Cairns, Broome and Dampier. According to a briefing paper sent to Customs staff, the job losses are a response to cuts imposed in the recent federal budget.

Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) national secretary Nadine Flood said: "This is a bad decision and we oppose it. It's a slap in the face for the hard-working men and women in the Customs workforce who have some of the most dangerous and challenging jobs in the public service."

Ms Flood said that despite management assurances that the cuts

will be managed by targeting back office functions and areas with less high risk activity, staff are deeply concerned that operational capacity will be reduced.

"These ports may be low risk but that doesn't mean they're no risk.

"The Thursday Island office is losing 6 of its 14 positions and in Dampier the current team of 24 is being reduced to 18. How can that not affect operational capacity? These officers perform crucial work keeping Australia's ports secure. Their duties include checking cargo on the docks, performing surveillance and searching for illegal items such as guns and drugs.

"The job losses confirm that it's simply not possible to slash billions of dollars from the public sector without

reducing essential services and jobs," said Ms Flood.

The union also warned public sector budget cuts are hitting regional areas hard, pointing out that two thirds of federal public servants are located outside Canberra.

"In many parts of regional Australia the federal public sector is a crucial employer," said Ms Flood.

"It is vitally important that every effort is made to maintain public sector employment in regional areas where good jobs are hard to find," said Ms Flood.

"The public sector is not an inexhaustible source of savings for governments. In many departments there is little or no fat left to cut, all that is left are the staff that run vital programs." ✪

World Refugee Day Rally

War and oppression creates refugees. Capitalism creates war and oppression. Refugees are workers who are running from bombs and running from starvation. They go to countries like Greece, the United States, Egypt, Malaysia and Korea where they are constantly being threatened with deportation. They come to countries like Australia in boats and are locked up in immigration detention centres. 2012 marks 20 years of mandatory detention of refugees arriving in boats in Australia.

World wide, workers will be marching in defence of refugees.

Join us in protest on World Refugee Day

PERTH: Saturday 16 June 2012 at 1pm Wesley Uniting Church, 97 William Street

CANBERRA: Saturday 16 June 2012 at 1pm Carousel, Petrie Plaza, Canberra City

BRISBANE: Saturday 16 June 2012 at 1pm Brisbane Square, top of Queen St Mall

ADELAIDE: Saturday 16 June 2012 at 1:30pm Parliament House steps, North terrace

MELBOURNE: Sunday 17 June 2012 at 12 noon Gather State Parliament House, Spring Street

SYDNEY: Sunday 24 June 2012 at 1pm Sydney Town Hall, 483 George Street

aawl.org.au/content/world-refugee-day-rally

Gillard in damage control

Bob Briton

Prime Minister Gillard's decision to back the importation of at least 1,700 foreign workers to extract iron ore from Gina Rinehart's Roy Hill project looks like being the final nail in the federal government's coffin. Latest polls show the ALP's primary vote slipping to just 26 percent. Workers are horrified that a Labor government could allow such a "foot in the door" for an assault on local wages and conditions, particularly at a time of high unemployment in the slower lanes of the Australian economy.

The ALP has been working hard to limit the damage. The mining corporations have stood shoulder to shoulder with the government. Opponents of the decision are labelled as xenophobes; it is being said they won't face up to the issue of labour shortages in the resource sector; Australians are too soft and won't head West to follow the jobs, and so on. That's the strident side of Labor's defence – an attempt to browbeat workers for trying to defend their pay and conditions and the training of local workers for jobs on big mining and infrastructure projects.

Words lifted from the Gillard's speech to the recent Minerals Industry Parliamentary Dinner are being spun into a tough-talking attempt to put mining magnates back in their place.

"And here's the rub. You don't own the minerals. I don't own the minerals. Governments only sell you the right to mine the resource. A resource we hold in trust for a sovereign people. They own it and they deserve their share. I think we've been crystal clear since the Budget.

We want growth and then we want the benefits of growth to spread to all," the PM said in a widely reproduced excerpt.

Gillard noted that some industry heavyweights in the room that night may not like the "spreading the benefits of the boom" language used to sell last month's federal budget. That could be interpreted as saying the federal government is introducing the Mining Resource Rent Tax – the much-diluted "super profits" tax – and that the mining corporations should suck it up. That's unless you heard or read the rest of the speech.

The PM took the opportunity offered during Minerals Week to assure the mining industry that it is "our economy's strong right arm", that the Australians holidaying overseas should thank the resource sector for the high exchange rate of the Australian dollar that allows for the privilege. She likes the directness of the representatives of the industry. "Straight talking is the Australian way," she said.

Gillard even drew a comparison between the diggers at the Eureka Stockade and the industry reps sitting down to their parliamentary dinner. "The first 'diggers' were miners – it was miners who raised the first truly Australian flag and who beneath it swore to stand by each other and their rights," she said. The irony is that most of the diners are implacable enemies of the workers who proudly carry the flag first flown at Ballarat and stand by one another in the true spirit of Eureka.

The rest of the speech was given over to presenting the government's neo-liberal credentials – a budget surplus no matter what, support for austerity at international forums, commitment to private ownership

and massive financial rewards for the already wealthy. "Australians don't begrudge hard work and we admire your success," she said.

"But I think we also both know that there there's a whole productivity agenda that we do share and where we can make a huge difference: in skills, innovation, infrastructure, business regulation, trade," the PM continued.

"And you know that when industry and government work together on the world stage we get results together too."

Music to the transnationals' ears! The productivity agenda is capitalist speed-up, reduced wages and conditions, fewer outlays for training, health and safety, lower corporate taxes (despite the "super profits" rhetoric), privatisation and the neutering or destruction of unions. The vision presented at the Minerals Industry Parliamentary Dinner wasn't one of wealth held in common and developed for the people of Australia; it was a far more traditional one of smoothly running state monopoly capitalism or even a corporate state.

The awareness that the federal government is beholden to the big mining transnationals is hurting Labor. So is the fact that the country's non-renewable resources are being ripped out of the ground in a reckless manner and obscene private fortunes are being made.

It's not that the Opposition would do anything to turn that situation around – quite the opposite! But in Australia, in the absence of a united, substantial left alternative, voters will probably choose to punish the ALP with a vote for another force supporting big capital – the Liberal/National coalition. The screaming urgency is to build the left and progressive alternative to the big parties of capital. ✪



Prime Minister Gillard.

Asia-Pacific: Pumping up the next military conflict

Bruce Gagnon

US Secretary of War Leon Panetta is making a tour of the Asia-Pacific where he is pumping up the next military conflict. Yesterday I heard he was in Vietnam trying to close a deal to allow the US Navy to once again have access to the base at Cam Ranh Bay.

Before leaving on this trip Panetta made the speaking rounds back home to consolidate US media and build public support for Obama's "pivot" into the Asia-Pacific. "One of the key projects that your generation will have to face is sustaining and enhancing American strength across the great maritime region of the Pacific," he told graduates of US Naval Academy at Annapolis, Maryland last week.

"China's military is growing and modernising. We must be vigilant. We must be strong. We must be prepared to confront any challenge," Panetta said.

While in Singapore Panetta stated, "By 2020, the Navy will re-posture its forces from today's roughly 50/50 percent split between the Pacific and the Atlantic to about a 60/40 split between those oceans. That will include six aircraft carriers in this

region, a majority of our cruisers, destroyers, littoral combat ships, and submarines.... to project power and operate in the Asia-Pacific."

He told an audience of Asian military officials that the US planned new investments in capabilities needed "to project power and operate in the Asia-Pacific" including radar-evading fighter jets, a new long-distance bomber, electronic warfare and missile defences. The message to them is essentially – play along with us and we will share a piece of the action with you.

The Pentagon has a name for this new strategy – it's called the AirSea Battle fighting "concept".

This strategy is our course the primary reason that the South Korean Navy, at the behest of the Pentagon, is building the Navy base on Jeju Island. The US Navy needs more ports to dock their warships.

Not everyone though is getting on-board this dangerous, provocative, and expensive Obama plan. "AirSea Battle is demonizing China," retired General James Cartwright, former vice-chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, said last week. "That's not in anybody's interest."

While Panetta was speaking at the US Naval Academy, Obama was at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colorado (also home of the Air Force Space Command). He was explaining the "pivot" to the future leaders of the Air Force.

Vice President Joseph Biden got the West Point gig and he told the Army cadets that the US would now "rebalance" its foreign policy with greater emphasis on the Asia-Pacific.

The Obama team is making the rounds to sell this new policy. They know the American people are "war weary" so they must begin to create the fear of a growing new threat in the Asia-Pacific – namely China.

Panetta put the name to it when he spoke to the Naval cadets in Annapolis. He called this new mission a "great challenge" and a "security burden to advance peace".

It's the old white man's burden stuff once again. American exceptionalism to the rescue. Bruce K Gagnon, Coordinator Global Network Against Weapons & Nuclear Power in Space. ✪



It is no secret that hospital emergency departments need lots of extra personnel to deal with the increased number of patients. What they really do not need is artificial timeframes as a measure of successful treatment. Figures released by the NSW Bureau of Health Statistics show that targeting the time spent in hospital emergency departments is crude and unworkable. The 4 hour target set for clinicians to move a patient out of the emergency department is not sometimes in the best interests of the patient. If doctors are forced to treat their patients according to politicians' artificial targets their main concern – treating a patient according to his or her condition for as long as it is necessary – will be undermined.

The Gillard cabinet cancelled the \$225 million purchase of 18 modified self-propelled South Korean K-9 field howitzers (they resemble tanks) for the Australian Army, ostensibly as part of defence spending cuts designed to help the budget back to surplus. It is believed that it has already cost Australian taxpayers millions of dollars. South Koreans are furious and talk about seeking compensation for the cancellation. They evidently spent tens of millions of dollars, including the cost of bringing the huge howitzer to Australia four times for test firings. South Korean defence companies are retaliating by cancelling plans to source metal shell castings in Australia; they are also threatening to pull investment out of Australia. You can understand their disappointment but as far as Australian taxpayers go – why should they be supporting big military corporations? The ongoing cost of war and war preparations.

And a bit more on a defence-related topic. The Defence Minister, Stephen Smith took a trip to China, ostensibly to allay China's concerns about Australia's deepening ties with the United States. A friendly visit, in other words. However, on the Defence Department's advice Mr Smith and his entourage left mobile phones and laptops in Hong Kong before proceeding to mainland China. They were issued with new phones for the duration of their trip. All this was done as a counter measure against electronic espionage. Curious that that kind of information made it to the front pages of daily newspapers here in Australia. So much for security!

Missile Defence: Is it working?

Speech given in Waterloo, Canada on May 20, 2012, by Bruce Gagnon, Coordinator, Global Network Against Weapons

One of the biggest questions in the space technology world today is will “missile defence” (MD) really work? Recently we’ve seen articles making a case that it does not work and never will. I would suggest that depending on where you are standing, a strong case could be made that MD is working quite well. It’s all a matter of perception and definition.

When looked at from the point of view of the Russians or Chinese one might consider that they view it very differently than some of the critics. Critics see scripted Missile Defence Agency tests while Russia and China see a hyperactive deployment program, which is directly connected to a larger US/NATO military expansion ultimately leading to their encirclement.

Critics might see the MD system today largely as a corporate boondoggle while the Russians and Chinese are looking toward 2020 and beyond when new generations of a well funded research and development program (now committed to by NATO’s 28 members) has delivered faster, more accurate and longer range interceptor missiles.

Critics in a sense can help demobilise opposition to the program. Some peace activists think it would be a waste of their valuable time and meagre organising resources to spend energy working against a program that has been labelled by experts as unworkable and an exaggeration. But viewed from a wider perspective, that includes US and NATO military encirclement of Russia as well as the Obama administration’s “pivot” of military operations into the Asia-Pacific, one may see an entirely different picture.

Encirclement

The US/NATO military encirclement of Russia and China puts a very different framework around the MD issue. Keep in mind the Space Command’s annual computer war game first-strike attack on China (reported in *Aviation Week*) set in the year 2016. The existence of MD becomes a crucial factor considering China’s 20-some nuclear weapons capable of hitting the west coast of the US. In the war game the Space Command launches another new speculative space technology, called the military space plane that is now under development. This system helps to deliver the initial attack on China’s nuclear forces. When China fires its remaining nuclear missiles in a retaliatory strike it is then that the US MD systems, now being deployed throughout the Asia-Pacific region, are used to pick off these nuclear weapons. Today ground-based PAC-3 interceptor systems are being deployed in Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, and Okinawa. In addition, the SM-3 interceptors on-board Navy Aegis destroyers are increasingly being ported near China’s coast. So China’s experience is that the war-game scenarios – which we presume, they always lose – come alive with each new deployment, each new military base, and each new Aegis destroyer positioned in the region.

Coupled with that is the Strategic Command’s mission of Prompt Global Strike (to hit targets on the other side of the planet in one hour with “non-nuclear” missiles) as another key element in Pentagon first-strike planning.

China will be forced to respond to these moves on the grand chessboard. Its decision to deploy several ballistic-missile submarines demonstrates a deep commitment to make its nuclear forces survivable against US first-strike attack planning. And in turn, Maine’s Congressional delegation, like those from other states, argue that we need to build more Aegis destroyers at Bath Iron Works because China is now expanding its naval forces.

China has long been a strong supporter of Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space (PAROS) at the United Nations Conference on Disarmament. Its reluctance to fully support the Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty (FCMT) is directly linked to US unwillingness to seriously negotiate around PAROS and thus is integrally connected to MD. China feels it can’t afford to forego its option to upgrade or build more nuclear weapons while its coastal region is

being sprinkled with MD systems. Chinese leaders nervously view the scene from space satellite imagery as the US essentially doubles its military presence in China’s neighbourhood.

Space-based systems

China is also concerned about possible developments of space-based MD systems that would undercut its strategic nuclear deterrent in even greater ways. With the infusion of funding for additional research and development that will surely come from a broader NATO-wide participation in MD one can understand China’s consternation.

Russia’s leaders, also long-time supporters of PAROS, are now questioning their continued participation in the new Start Treaty. They maintain that the Start Treaty and future nuclear disarmament negotiations are in jeopardy if the delicate balance between strategic offensive weapons and MD systems is destroyed due to an expanding US/NATO program.

Russian military chief Nikolai Makarov didn’t broach the subject of launching pre-emptive strikes against US MD sites in Eastern Europe several weeks ago because Russia views Obama’s Phased Adaptive Approach as – merely – a corporate pork barrel. At a two-day conference in Moscow, Makarov maintained that third and especially fourth phase deployments (Standard Missile-3 Block IIA and IIB missiles) would be capable of destroying intermediate-range missiles. When they are positioned in the Baltic and Black Sea regions this makes them able to take down Russian ICBMs.

These concerns largely come from the Obama administration promises to deploy Aegis based interceptors in the Black and Baltic seas in the years ahead.

US/NATO now has bases and/or military operations in Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, Lithuania, Estonia, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. At the same time NATO partnerships are expanding into the Asia-Pacific region to include the likes of Australia, Japan, South Korea, and very likely India. NATO expansion throughout Eastern Europe and into Asia-Pacific will further Chinese and Russian fears of containment.

Additionally, when a US interceptor missile launched from an Aegis warship in 2008 struck a falling American spy satellite orbiting over the Pacific Ocean, fears that these MD systems could be used as anti-satellite weapons also surfaced.

To be correctly understood MD must be viewed in a much larger context than is presently done by most critics. The current global competition for declining scarce resources is driving much of the world’s conflict today. Canada’s recent announcement that it will spend US\$35 billion to expand its warship-building program in coming years is clearly connected to the reality of melting ice in the Arctic regions, which makes it possible for oil and gas corporations to drill there. The US is already lining up Canada, Norway and other Arctic allies to stand against Russia in this push-and-shove for control of these resources.

The fact that Russia has the world’s largest supply of natural gas, and significant supplies of oil, indicates one likely reason the US and NATO are militarily surrounding her.

Haven’t we come to realise by now that the Pentagon’s primary job today is to serve as the resource extraction service for corporate globalisation?

China’s economy

In the case of China, while the US can’t compete with its economy, the Pentagon has apparently determined that controlling China’s access to vital resources would give the US the keys to its economic engine.

Historians have made the case for years that even though nuclear weapons have not been used since Hiroshima and Nagasaki, they have been strategically utilised in numerous incidents since 1945 as guns pointed at the heads of particular countries.

In the same way the mere threat of MD as a key element in Pentagon first-strike attack planning is a loaded and cocked gun pointed at



The historically important goal to rid the world of nuclear weapons hinges on serious negotiations and treaties banning weapons from, in, and through

the heads of Russia and China. Both of these nations have to assume the worst-case scenario and prepare and plan to respond. Perception informs and creates reality.

MD deployments indeed provoke military responses from Russia and China (and Iran and North Korea). Their responses are then used to further demonise those nations in the eyes of the citizens of the US and people around the world. These images of aggressive Russian and Chinese militarists are then used to justify even greater military spending in the US (and among NATO allies) in order to ward off their supposed aggression.

The public in the US knows virtually nothing about the Pentagon surrounding Russia and China with MD systems but they do know that US Secretary of War Leon Panetta hosted China’s Defence Minister at the Pentagon on May 7. The *Washington Times* reported at the time, “A key issue the US will explore is the objective of China’s ‘very robust and rapid’ military modernisation, especially in a region that is ‘at peace,’ a senior defence official told reporters.”

When Russia deployed nuclear missiles in Cuba in 1962 there was not much discussion about how well they would work or what their range and explosive capability was. The concern was over their close proximity to the continental US and the potential for misunderstanding and over reaction. The mere presence of these Russian systems, so close to the US, was almost enough to trigger a deadly nuclear war. In order to close the deal to remove the missiles from Cuba, President Kennedy secretly agreed that

it would dismantle all US-built Jupiter IRBMs deployed in Turkey and Italy.

It’s quite amazing that when the situation is reversed, when the US and its NATO allies are literally surrounding Russia and China that we might be surprised that they respond similarly to how the US reacted in 1962.

Given enough time and money it is possible to consider that some kind of MD systems could be made to “work”. If we’ve learned anything over the years it should be that technological advances in weapons development are a guarantee. Humans started out throwing stones at one another and graduated to the club. Then they moved on to the bow and arrow, the Gatling gun, nuclear weapons, stealth bombers, and now space scientists land rovers on Mars. True or not, who is going to believe that MD will “never” work?

The Pentagon always says, “We work on many technologies at once. Some of them work and some don’t. But we make progress along the way and are able to get something to work in the end by adapting various technologies.”

First strike

Russia and China see the development of MD and clearly understand the mission configuration. These systems are designed to serve as key elements in Pentagon first-strike planning. Whether one version of MD works or not is less important than the overall decision to build and deploy a first-strike offensive web of weapons systems surrounding Russia and China.

The historically important goal to rid the world of nuclear weapons hinges on serious

Space & Nuclear Power in Space



World of nuclear weapons
that must include
enough space.

negotiations and treaties that must include banning weapons from, in, and through space.

To say MD does not work is to miss the larger point. MD is working quite effectively to help destroy the system of international treaties that limits humanity's mad rush to extinction. The UN's Conference on Disarmament has largely been frozen for the past 20 years and one key reason is the space technology issue. The US and its NATO allies seek control and domination of space and the Earth below on behalf of corporate interests and investments. Why would the US be so adamant in its refusal to seriously negotiate on PAROS unless it still maintained hopes and plans to create a space-based MD first-strike attack system?

I would hope that critics of MD would use this current controversy over US/NATO military expansion eastward to help the public understand the larger issues in play. We miss the key issue of our time when we do not see that MD, and all other military systems being used to surround Russia and China, are obstacles to nuclear disarmament, serious negotiations on PAROS, and true peace.

We have real problems today called climate change and growing global poverty. We cannot afford to stand by and watch the dismantling of international treaties and institutions like the United Nations while US and NATO push an aggressive campaign to further militarise the world. Future generations remind us that we should oppose not just some of the technology systems, but that we stand against the policies of endless war that are tearing the world to pieces. ✪

Domestic solution for thousands of climate-displaced Bangladeshis

Scott Leckie

Much of the world knows little about Bangladesh other than threatened coups, George Harrison's Concert for Bangladesh in 1971, the annual monsoonal floods and perhaps, the Grameen Bank, changing lives one microcredit loan at a time. But it should also be known that this country's grassroots groups, like the Association for Climate Refugees and Young Power in Social Action, among others, are quickly becoming the vanguard leaders in solving the growing challenge of re-homing Bangladeshis affected by climate displacement.

Backed by seed funding from Switzerland and Sweden, a local network of Bangladeshi civil society organisations including Association for Climate Refugees and Young Power in Social Action have focused efforts on acquiring viable land for resettlement as a key means of solving climate displacement caused by sea-level rise, tropical cyclones, riverbank erosion and flooding across the country. Under the rallying cry of "new land for lost land, new homes for lost homes", this people-led movement is one of the world's first efforts to fix what climatic events have destroyed.

These efforts, though only at an embryonic stage, are in stark contrast to the efforts of many international agencies, NGOs and commentators who are content to describe and debate the parameters of the climate displacement crisis, but are far less willing or able to propose – let alone implement – actual, concrete solutions for people displaced by climatic events.

This resistance may in part be due to the notorious difficulty in proving the precise links between climate change, natural

hazards and displacement. However, in Bangladesh this need not be an excuse for inaction. It is well documented that the regular natural hazards that besiege the country have led to considerable displacement. It is also well documented that all of these natural hazards are expected to increase in both frequency and severity as a result of climate change leading to the almost inevitable displacement of many millions more across the country.

In January 2012, the people-led "new land" initiative acquired the latest in a series of pledged land parcels that will be used to provide climate-displaced communities with a new start. To date, more than 3,500 acres of private land have been pledged to help solve the nation's displacement crisis. All of the land offered to date has been given free of charge by Bangladeshi citizens concerned by the plight of the climate displaced and convinced that their contribution can make a difference to many lives. The land pledged so far will allow more than 16,000 climate displaced people the opportunity to move from vulnerable and exposed coastal and river basin areas to more than 20 sheltered and safe land plots across the country.

In recent weeks, the donation of a 52 acre plot in Fuluar Char was confirmed and the process of transforming legal title to climate displaced communities was begun. The next step is for this initiative to turn this plot of land into a community land trust, to ensure that the site remains in ownership of climate displaced persons in perpetuity. Construction has begun at the site with houses, water wells and latrines; the first steps towards a genuine and durable solution for the many climate affected individuals and families across the country.

The government of Bangladesh, rather than focusing on domestic solutions, is looking outward and is increasingly demanding that the countries responsible for climate change have an obligation to accept climate-displaced people as "climate refugees". But this approach is premature and could backfire as potential host countries, already too reluctant to accept refugees fleeing conflicts and human rights abuses, feel forced into a reactive, defensive posture leading to closed borders.

Climate-vulnerable countries must focus their engagement on how the international community can assist with domestic solutions and only rely on international resettlement solutions when domestic ones are no longer tenable.

Community-led efforts to acquire new land to fix climate displacement like those in Bangladesh demonstrate that domestic solutions are not only possible but that they may also be more likely to be rights-based, effective and durable.

Early successes like these should be studied as one viable way to protect the housing, land and property rights of climate displaced people across the globe. Waiting until 2020 for the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) to stop global warming by limiting global carbon emissions is not good enough for the millions already living in displaced misery because of climate change.

For the moment at least, taking guidance from people's efforts in Bangladesh as climate carnage increasingly takes hold may be the best form of inspiration for solving the emerging crisis of climate displacement the world over.

New Internationalist ✪



On the events in Syria and the Portuguese government's stand

Statement by the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP)

With respect to recent events in Syria and the Portuguese government's decision to consider the Ambassador of Syria accredited to Portugal as "persona non grata", the PCP:

1 – Condemns the terrorist massacre perpetrated in Al-Houla, Syria, that claimed the lives of over one hundred innocent civilians, most of them women and children. This brutal outrage, consisting of shootings at point-blank range and cutting of throats, is the continuation of a wave of violence with several other massacres and bombings. It has laid bare the terrorist nature of the armed gangs' action – some of which are admittedly armed and bankrolled by foreign nations – are undeniably components of a campaign to domestically destabilize Syria, that has been going on for over a year.

2 – Calls attention to the fact that this massacre must necessarily be analysed taking into consideration the strategy of militarisation, subversion, aggression and war being implemented by the self-styled "friends of Syria group" – whose membership consists of the major imperialist powers plus the fundamentalist dictatorships of the Persian Gulf.

This strategy – unabashedly asserted and widely publicised in international mass media – consists of financing, arming and training armed groups that continue to operate within Syria, groups that many sources identify as having links with terrorist networks.

3 – Alerts to the dramatic

Families stand in the front yard of a public school in al-Burj Kaai after fleeing Taldou, near Houla, following the massacre on June 2.



consequences that any attempt to embark on a "military solution" to the Syrian question, could have for the Syrian people, for the whole Middle East region, and even for the world.

The PCP rejects outright the statements made by USA and European Union politicians and military leaders concerning a possible foreign military aggression against Syria, with or without the backing of a UN SC [Security Council] resolution.

These stances objectively place them among those who work against the efforts that are in the meantime being made to keep the solution of the Syrian issue within the political

and diplomatic spheres, and above all, place them as opponents of the Syrian people's legitimate democratic and national rights, and specifically of their right to peace, sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity for their country.

4 – Reminds that it was based on campaigns similar to the one currently being waged against Syria (and that history has since shown to have been lies and setups involving allegations about massacres or stashes of weapons of mass destruction) that – from Kosovo to Afghanistan, from Iraq to Libya, bloody wars of aggression and occupation were started causing the death of many thousands, driving

many people into refugee status, destroying entire countries, breeding terrorism and creating new areas of tension from the Maghreb all the way to Central Asia.

These wars of aggression were hypocritically perpetrated in the name of "democracy" and "human rights" but their real motives were the major NATO imperialist powers' economic and geo-strategic interests, and the profits of the military-industrial complex and the transnational corporations attached to it.

5 – Also condemns the massacres of hundreds of civilians perpetrated by USA and NATO military forces in recent weeks in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Yemen among others, and in particular through the use of unmanned aircraft. These massacres were aggressions that were condemned by the targeted countries, but they did not merit a single word of condemnation, either from the major world mass media chains or from the USA's NATO allies.

6 – Alerts to the fact that events in Syria, in the Middle East and Central Asia – all of them elements of a single imperialist strategy of enhanced aggressiveness, warmongering and re-colonisation – are inseparable from both imperialism's goal of controlling these regions' huge natural and energy

resources, and the worsening crisis of capitalism.

7 – Deplores the Portuguese government's unacceptable and shameful stance – especially that of Foreign Affairs Minister Paulo Portas – of alignment with the major NATO powers' strategy of war, aggression and interference. One regrettable instance of this stance was the decision to consider the Ambassador of Syria, accredited to Portugal, as "persona non grata".

This stance is especially serious insofar as Portugal, as a UN Security Council member, should base its actions on the search for political and diplomatic solutions to conflicts. This stance is also a good example of the foreign policy being followed by the current FM [foreign minister], completely contrary to the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic and to the principles of the United Nations Charter.

8 – Calls upon Portugal's workers and people – as well as upon the unity-based movements that stand for peace and for the defence of peoples' national rights – to mobilise and make their voices heard, in support of the peaceful resolution of conflicts, against war, for peace and cooperation among peoples.

June 1, 2012 ☘

Putin wants Russia and China to join forces

Russian President Vladimir Putin arrived in China on June 5 for a two-day official visit to sign more than a dozen of various bilateral documents during his meetings with Chinese officials. On June 6-7, he took part in the Beijing summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, *RIA Novosti* reports.

During his visit to China, Putin coordinated the positions of the two countries on Syria and Iran. As for the SCO, the sides discussed the questions related to the penetration of Central Asia by extremists.

Putin made the trip to China against the background of the surging crisis on the financial markets and the increasing pressure that the West has been putting on Russia and China in terms of the Syrian and Iranian problems. To crown it all, the withdrawal of NATO's troops from Afghanistan may put the national security of the two countries at risk. The discussion of the most serious problems of international politics will have shown to what extent Russia and China are close to each other.

The two powers do not accept the policies of the West, the main goal of which is to change "non-democratic" regimes. China and

Russia share similar views on Syria and Iran. The same can be said about the role of the United Nations in international affairs. Moscow and Beijing stand against the interventions in Arab countries bypassing the UN.

However, Russia promotes integration via the Eurasian alliance, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation.

China's *People's Daily* newspaper published Putin's article prior to his visit to the Celestial Empire. During his presidential campaign, Putin presented his program in the form of seven lengthy articles in the press.

The article published in the Chinese newspaper says that the commodity circulation between Russia and China in 2011 set a record level – US\$83.5 billion. By 2015, Russia and China plan to reach US\$100 billion, and US\$200 billion by 2020, Putin wrote.

Even though Russian-Chinese trade has reached a record level, Russia is not happy with the structure of it. For China, Russia has become a supplier of raw materials and metals. In return, Russia imports technological products from China. It would not be correct

to blame China for that, though. Chinese investors are concerned about the unfavourable climate for foreign entrepreneurs in Russia.

China needs more natural gas. Nevertheless, the agreement about the pipeline transportation of gas, which was achieved last year, has not materialised. Vice Prime Minister Arkady Dvorkovich said that the two countries still differ on prices.

Putin did not leave this issue out of his article. He reminded readers of the launch of the Russian-Chinese oil pipeline, which already transported 15 million tonnes of oil last year. He also recalled of the long-term contract (25 years) for the shipment of Russia's electric power to China.

It is worthy of note that the role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation has been growing in the world over recent years. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad will be taking part in a conference of the organisation. Putin intends to hold a separate meeting with him. Putin will also have a meeting with Afghan President Khamid Karzai. pravda.ru ☘

Activists walk straight into Faslane base

Two anti-Trident activists walked through the north gate of Faslane submarine base last week triggering a lock-down of the facility as part of the Faslane Peace Camp's call for 30 Days of Action.

Mary Millington and Barbara Dowling, both in their sixties, entered through the open main gate of the Scottish base and were apprehended by guards.

The alarm was triggered, resulting in the base being locked down.

Campaign group Trident Ploughshares said the disruption was the first in a series of actions to mark the 30th anniversary of the founding of the peace camp.

Speaking after their protest Ms Millington said: "The dismantling of these weapons is long overdue. They are immoral and we have a duty to do whatever we can to disrupt the working of this base until Trident is scrapped."

Ms Dowling added: "The majority of people in Scotland are ashamed and embarrassed that we have to host these expensive and illegal Cold War relics."

"Instead of gearing up for the next generation of nuclear weapons the government should heed the call for disarmament."

Morning Star ☘

The human cost of the "War on Terror"

M Reza Pirbhai

In the early days of the "War on Terror", US General Tommy Franks declared, "We don't do body counts." He was referring, of course, to the dead of Afghanistan. That the names of 9/11 victims have been appropriately written in stone, only makes it doubly striking that the war waged in their names generates little interest on non-US or NATO civilian deaths. In fact, a war now in its 11th year, comprising the invasion and occupation of two countries, as well as the ongoing bombing of at least three more, has not produced any holistic studies on its direct and indirect casualties.

That a global war can rage so long with no official will to ascertain the number of "others" killed is indicative of the manner in which the cost of war is calculated by those states prosecuting it. Non-US and NATO dead, maimed, disappeared or displaced can't be part of the equation if official policy is not to count. That there appears to be little public will to change that policy speaks of a more broadly worrying attitude toward "others", particularly Muslims. The UN and some NGO's are attempting to count, however, mostly in the variety of local contexts engulfed in the conflict. Despite the hurdles of official obfuscation and public indifference, a catalogue of deadly consequences has begun to emerge.

Beginning in Afghanistan, most commonly cited studies on the 2001 invasion find that approximately 4,000 to 8,000 Afghani civilians died as a direct result of military operations. There are no figures for 2003-05, but in 2006 Human Rights Watch recorded just under 1,000 civilians killed in fighting. From 2007 to July 2011, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) tallies at least 10,292 non-combatants killed.

These figures, it should be emphasised, do include indirect deaths or injuries. Something of the scope of indirect deaths can be gleaned from a UK *Guardian* article – the most thorough journalistic report on the subject – which calculated that at

least 20,000 more died as a result of displacement and famine due to the disruption in food supplies in the first year of the war alone. As well, according to Amnesty International, approximately 250,000 people fled to other countries in 2001 and at least 500,000 more have been internally displaced since.

Moving to Iraq, the Iraq Body Count project records approximately 115,000 civilians killed in the cross-fire from 2003 to August 2011. However, the World Health Organisation's Iraq Family Health Survey reports a figure of approximately 150,000 in just the first three years of the occupation. With indirect deaths added, The Lancet Study placed the estimate at approximately 600,000 in the same period. Moreover, an Opinion Research Business study estimated 1,000,000 violent deaths to have occurred by mid-2007. In addition, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees reported approximately 2,000,000 Iraqis displaced to other countries and 2,000,000 more internally displaced as of 2007. There is no solid information on indirect death or injury rates, but the documented collapse of the Iraqi healthcare system and infrastructure more generally (foremost in the region before 1991) does not suggest anything less than another atrocity.

Beyond the two states under occupation, the "War on Terror" spills into a number of neighbouring countries including Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia. Prime weapons deployed in these theatres have been US drones, special operations groups, intelligence agents and the governments/armed forces of the countries involved. Given the often extra-judicial and covert nature of this theatre, calculating casualties is hampered by the virtual absence of independent data.

Indeed, this is also a problem in Afghanistan and Iraq, but even so, considering only drones thought to have been used in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia, the numbers of strikes is agreed to be on the rise. To date, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism reports that at least 357 strikes have occurred in Pakistan between 2004 and June 2012 (more than 300 under

the Obama administration). At least 2,464 people have been killed, including a minimum of 484 civilians (168 children). *The Washington Post* adds 38 strikes resulting in 241 deaths (56 civilian) in Yemen. There are no figures for Somalia, but the *New York Times* confirms that operations have been ongoing since at least 2007.

Proponents of the war, official and public, will rush to retort that many of the citations in this article list most civilian deaths as the work of enemy combatants. But how can anyone confirm this when dependent on such a dearth of study? And as best highlighted by the drone campaign, how can anyone transparently distinguish between civilians and combatants, when the latter's assassins are also their judges? Indeed, even if accepted at face value, these attacks make the US government one of the most prolific, self-professed target killers in history.

Moreover, as a representative from UMANA commented on his study, "if the non-combatant status of one or more victim(s) remains under significant doubt, such deaths are not included in the overall number of civilian casualties. Thus, there is a significant possibility that UNAMA is under-reporting civilian casualties." In fact, such problems are admitted by the authors of every study.

Pasting this patchy set of statistics together, the bottom end of the total non-US and NATO civilian deaths exceeds 140,000. The top end easily reaches 1,100,000. That's 14,000 to 110,000 per year. To put these figures in some context, it is worth recalling that 40,000 civilians were killed by the Nazi Blitz on Britain during WWII.

As well, it should be recalled that in both low and high scenarios, figures for direct deaths in Afghanistan for 2003-5, and indirect deaths from



2003 to the present, are not available. Furthermore, civilian deaths caused by means other than drones, such as renditions and disappearances, are not counted from any arena, and casualties stemming from the military campaigns of proxies (e.g., the governments of Pakistan or Yemen) have not been tallied. The number alive, but injured, orphaned or otherwise disenfranchised, let alone those tortured in public and private prisons across the world, is also not tallied. And finally, the suffering of millions of displaced persons from Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan and elsewhere remains incalculable.

What has been counted here, even though tragically incomplete, illuminates the reason US and NATO officials are reticent to publicly do the same.

To consider the staggering human cost of the "War on Terror" would mean admitting that "terrorism" is a two-way street and states, not militias, drive the heaviest weapons. General Franks' preference not to count bodies is egregious, but unsurprising.

That his lack of interest is echoed in the public spheres of the US and NATO countries, exposes the more astonishing consent (manufactured or not) of general populations, at least in the case of these Muslim victims. Nothing less than this official and public indifference explains the absence of any holistic study on civilian casualties, particularly while mourning the nearly 3,000 civilians killed on 9/11 and in whose name the "War on Terror" is still waged.

Counterpunch ☘

Free Mahmoud Sarsak

Ramzy Baroud

On June 3, Palestinian national soccer team member Mahmoud Sarsak completed 80 days of a gruelling hunger-strike. He had sustained the strike despite the fact that nearly 2,000 Palestinian inmates had called off their own 28-day hunger strike weeks ago.

Although the story of Palestinian prisoners in Israel speaks to a common reality of unlawful detentions and widespread mistreatment, Sarsak's fate can also be viewed within its own unique context. The soccer player, who once sought to take the name and flag of his nation to international arenas, was arrested by Israeli soldiers in July 2009 while en route to join the national team in the West Bank.

Sarsak was branded an "illegal combatant" by Israel's military judicial system, and was imprisoned without any charges or trial.

Sarsak is not alone in the continued hunger strike. Akram al-Rekhawi, a diabetic prisoner demanding proper medical care, has refused food for over 50 days.

At the time of writing, both

men were reportedly in dire medical condition. Sarsak, once of unmatched athletic build, is now gaunt beyond recognition. The already ill al-Rekhawi is dying.

Physicians for Human Rights – Israel (PHRI), which has done a remarkable job battling the draconian rules of Israeli military courts, continues to petition the court to meet with both al-Sarsak and al-Rekhawi, according to Ma'an news agency.

Sadly, the story here becomes typical. PHRI, along with other prisoners' rights groups, are doing all that civil society organisations can do within such an oppressive legal and political situation. Families are praying. Social media activists are sending constant updates and declaring solidarity. Meanwhile, the rest of the world is merely looking on – not due to any lack of concern for human rights, but due to the selective sympathy of Western governments and media.

Sarsak, who has been a witness to many tragedies, is now becoming one. The 25-year old had once hoped to push the ranking of his national team back to a reasonable standing. If Palestinians ever

deserve to be called "fanatics", it would be in reference to soccer. As a child growing up in Gaza, I remember playing soccer in few minute increments, braving Israeli military curfews, risking arrests, injury and even death. Somehow, in a very crowded refugee camp, soccer becomes tantamount to freedom.

Palestine's ranking at 164th in the world is testament not to any lack of passion for the game, but to the constant Israeli attempts at destroying even that national aspiration.

Sarsak was a promising new face of Palestinian soccer. In times of Palestinian disunity and factionalism, it was the national team that kept a symbolic unity between Gaza and the West Bank – and indeed Palestinians everywhere. These young men exemplify hope that better times are ahead. But Sarsak's star is now fading, as is his life. His mother, who hasn't seen him since his arrest, says she thinks of him every minute of each day. "Why is there no one moving to save his life?" she asks. ☘

PLEASE SIGN A PETITION FOR PALESTINIAN FOOTBALLER MAHMOUD SARSAK!
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Letters to the Editor
The Guardian
74 Buckingham Street
Surry Hills NSW 2010



email: tpearson@cpa.org.au

Money can't buy respect

Re: "Successful, independent women: enough to drive the sisterhood mad": Janet Albrechtsen, *The Australian* (06.06.2012).

I happened to watch the ABC's Q&A program on May 28, the one which seems to have upset Ms Albrechtsen so much even though she has been on the show a number of times herself and given full rein to her unashamedly right wing and conservative ideas.

Ms Albrechtsen's article is long on expressions such as, "mock", "demean", "sneering criticism", "disparage" and "feral left wing critics" but nowhere does she mention two words which describe the speech devices used by Barry Humphries and Miriam Margolyes – wit and satire.

Contrary to what Janet Albrechtsen asserts in her article, Q&A compere Tony Jones did try and rein in some of the colourful though nonetheless still satirical remarks by a few of the panellists about Gina Rinehart.

I have not laughed so much in a long time like I laughed over some of the satirical humour gags used by these satirists and comedians.

As a Western Australian I had to endure the crass corporate hijinks of Gina Rinehart and Andrew Forrest as when they organised a rally in Perth against the Mining Resources Tax. Ms Rinehart addressed the rally calling on people to, "Axe the Tax"!

Gina Rinehart is by no means the only rich, "successful and independent" woman in Western Australia, just the only who thinks that money can buy respect and credibility.

So maybe, Ms Albrechtsen, the panellists who were having a go at Ms Rinehart did so because she deserved it and the audience laughed because they got the joke not because they were left wing, abusive or unappreciative.

Richard Titelius
WA

ABC smuggler of inaccuracy

In terms of the ABC *Four Corners* documentary (04.06.2012) by Sarah Ferguson nothing has been proven, only asserted. Nothing has been clarified, only presumed. I can make documentaries and write news articles too and come across altogether differently. Furthermore, an aspersion cast against one or the few should not be cast against the many or the crowd.

The ABC is a credible news agency however let us remind ourselves the ABC also got it wrong with major pieces which led to the NT Intervention, and also portrayed as Gospel testimony, later discredited, using interviewees who were not who they purported to be and which embarrassed the ABC.

How about waiting a while here and stepping back a little?

There are a number of portrayals in the *Four Corners* narrative which were inaccurate. The real story of Abu Ali Al Kuwaiti was not revealed and context was denied. His name is Abdul Khadem and people should learn and understand the abuse and victimisation of Abdul and his family at the hands of the Howard government.

He and his family were at the Perth Airport Detention Centre for far too long. In waiting they suffered horrifically – one of their children with a smashed knee that took forever to get him proper medical attention and which has left him disfigured – all of them endured much.

Four Corners portrayed Abdul as a people smuggler who arrived in 1999 when in fact Abdul was only accused and then charged with people smuggling a year after his arrival when he made decisions of the heart. He was charged only after he was considered a trouble-maker by the Department of Immigration because of his advocacy for his fellow humans.

He pleaded guilty because he had no other option even though he was not considered to be an organiser of

DO YOU HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY?

Write a letter to the Editor

the boat he arrived on! Mandatory sentencing has its myriad problems.

The ability to discover the truth is often outstripped by the capacity to manifest deceit.

Gerry Georgatos
WA

A price of war

Austerity measures are being imposed on European countries with millions of decent, hard-working people finding themselves in debt, in poverty, with bleak futures for their children. Youth unemployment is huge and provides fertile conditions for right-wing sentiments.

It is not a good picture. The financial crisis is being used as an excuse for cutting social spending and as a threat against any opposition to austerity measures and increased exploitation. One of the things that is off the radar for Europe is the price it has been paying for NATO aggression and intervention in other countries.

For more than a decade NATO member states have been spending billions of dollars on military

intervention. Since bombing Serbia in 1999 it proceeded to Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and now it has Syria in its sights. Every member state is required to make a 2 percent contribution of any given country's GDP. Besides, there is deployment of the military, equipment, transportation of those killed, disabled and wounded that need on-going treatment and care, etc.

In other words, the bills that every participating country has to pay are huge. And this is tax-payers' money. Corporations and private businesses do not pay – they get paid. There is a transfer of money from countries' budgets to NATO – and nobody knows exactly how much because it is considered to be classified information.

Never mind transparency and accountability. Never mind young families struggling to put food on the table. Never mind old people who have to choose between a meal and a necessary medicine. Never mind anybody who stands in the way of profit for aggressors and big business.

Mati English
Sydney

Culture & Life

by

Rob Gowland

Deaths at work and rockets on the roof

Australia is the driest continent on Earth. Britain is generally recognised in Australia as one of the wettest places on Earth. So it was with much ironic mirth that Australian media reported recently that southern Britain was in the grip of that most Australian of natural phenomena, drought.

What our capitalist media did not give any attention to was why such a wet country could be suffering from water shortages. GMB, the British general union covering water workers (amongst others), was not so inhibited. GMB has called on the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee of the House of Commons to demand that Thames Water and the other private water companies supposedly servicing the South East of England explain why they closed 25 bulk water storage reservoirs in the region, leaving rainfall running off into the sea while the area was being subjected to drought restrictions.

Despite being seemingly ever-present, less than one percent of Britain's rainfall is collected and stored for human purposes. GMB has also previously asked why Thames Water has not developed the disused

Severn Thames canal to bring water from the Severn River into the region. At present water in the Severn just runs off into the sea.

Gary Smith, GMB National Secretary for Water, told British media: "Storage and transfer are two of the main elements of water resource management: one to move water from times of plenty to times of shortage; the other to convey water from places where it is plentiful to places where it is in short supply

"It cannot be repeated often enough that there is no shortage of water in Britain."

Did you know that globally two million men and women die every year as a result of work-related accidents and diseases? Bosses and the governments that do their bidding tend to ignore these deaths or – if forced to acknowledge them – try to pass them off as the result of employee negligence (i.e. blame the victim) or as attributable to some other cause unrelated to their employment. But it won't wash.

Such a huge death toll can't be ignored or brushed under the carpet or buried under obfuscating paperwork and idle government promises. Internationally, there's even a Workers' Memorial Day each year devoted to this scandalous situation, with the motto "Remember the dead, fight for the living!"

And with capitalism trying to alleviate its declining profitability by cutting back on everything that does not directly contribute to profit, cutbacks to occupational health and safety staff and procedures are almost inevitable. To justify these cutbacks, capitalist governments in various countries are resorting to fudged figures and deception to hide the real situation.

The official figure for people killed in work related incidents in Britain last year, for example, was a mere 171. But the giant union Unite says that figure is "a myth" and puts the real number at closer to 1,400.

But of even greater significance, according to Unite, is the largely unreported number of people who die

each year from occupational diseases such as cancers caused by negligent exposure at work to hazardous substances such as asbestos, chemicals and dust. Estimates put this figure in Britain alone as being between 20,000 and 50,000 men and women.

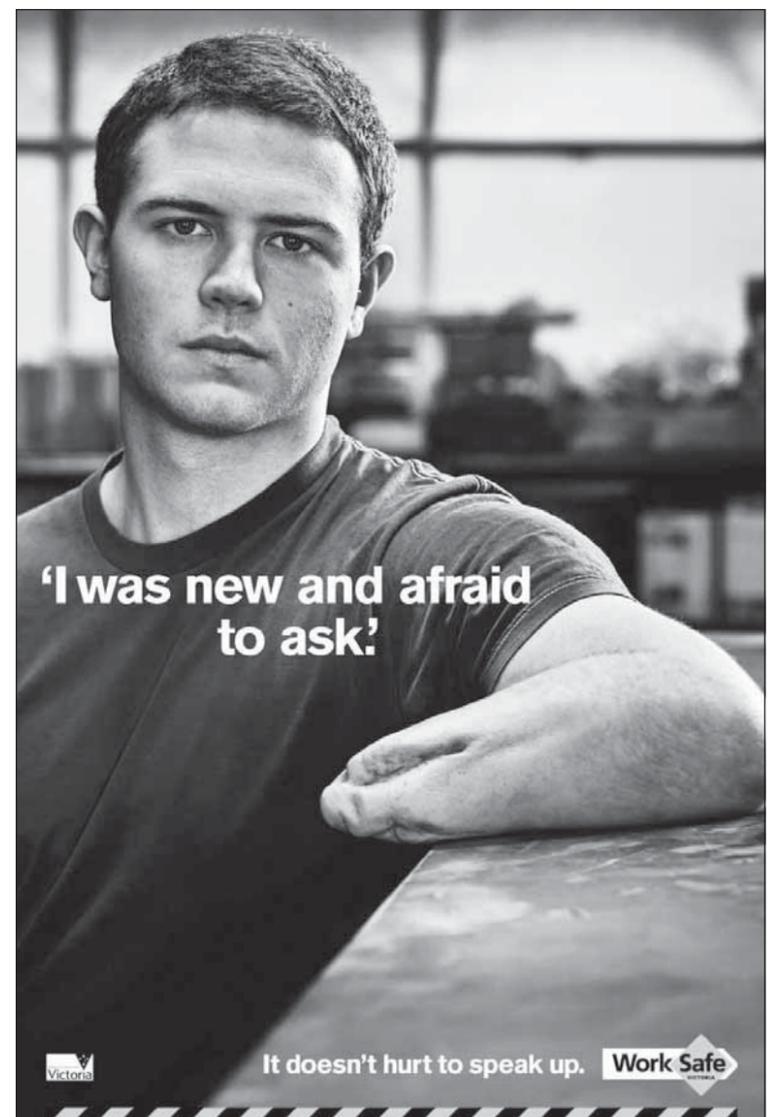
You've got to hand it to capitalism: it never misses a trick when it comes to cutting staff and providing a business opportunity instead. In civilised countries, people who are recently released from prison or those serving community service sentences are regarded as being on probation and are required to report regularly to their appointed probation officer. The latter checks up on how they are going, whether they are keeping themselves out of trouble or are experiencing trouble, and is expected to give help and advice calculated to help the person to not offend again.

It is a system fraught with flaws, but at least it is a system. In the US, a country with a dismal record in criminal justice, they are doing away with probation officers, replacing them with electronic machines. Hundreds of the "biometric reporting" machines are in use. People on probation report in by placing their hand in the machine which recognises their fingerprint. They don't get much in the way of advice or assistance, needless to say, but then that is no longer its role: it is basically just ticking them off on an attendance roll.

But it saves on wages by dispensing with probation officers, so it must be good, eh?

The system is now being introduced into England, under the reactionary Con-Dem government of David Cameron.

Cameron's government is also the one that recently leafleted residents of an East London housing estate advising them that it planned to install a "Higher Velocity Missile system" on top of their block of flats to protect against a possible terrorist threat to the London Olympics. The Ministry



'I was new and afraid to ask'

It doesn't hurt to speak up. Work Safe

of Defence leaflets assured residents the missiles posed no threat to people living on the estate, but some residents were unconvinced and wondered why the missiles – if really thought necessary – could not be sited on the roof of one of the multi-storey banks that tower over that part of London. Surely they would provide a much better vantage point?

I suspect their owners have more clout, however.

Of course, if Britain stopped trampling on the rights of people in

developing countries, stopped arming unpopular murderous regimes, and stopped trying to rebuild the British Empire on the backs of the poor countries of the world – pillaging their resources (as in Libya) and arrogantly trying to tell them how to run their lives (as in Zimbabwe), or helping the US to invade them (as in Afghanistan) – there would be no reason or excuse for terrorists to attack Britain.

But that is probably too subtle a thought for capitalism to cope with. ★



Sun 17 June –
Sat 23 June

This week on ABC2's documentary slot *Sunday Best* (ABC2 Sunday June 17 at 8.30pm) we have *The English Surgeon*, winner of the award for Best International Feature Documentary at *Hotdocs* in 2008. Directed by Geoff Smith it also won the Sterling World Feature Award at *Silverdocs*, the American Film Institute/Discovery Channel Documentary Festival the same year.

Impressive, eh? Well, only if you don't examine the subject too closely.

The English surgeon in question is Dr Henry Marsh, a well-respected neurosurgeon who (to quote the press sheet) "lives with his wife in their luxurious South London home".

The press sheet continues: "But Dr Marsh lives a double life – every year, for the past 15 years, the good doctor spends a few weeks in Ukraine, offering free medical consultations and performing brain surgery on tumours deemed 'inoperable' by Ukrainian doctors."

"In primitive conditions and without the proper tools, Marsh and his protégé, Dr Igor Petrovich, perform some of the most complex and dangerous surgeries for a poverty-stricken and hope deprived people."

So there you have it: it reads like Cold War propaganda, and yet it is dealing with *now* and it is several decades since socialism was overthrown in the Soviet Union, including in Ukraine. So what is going on?

When we first meet Dr Marsh, he is tearing his hair in frustration at having to deal with the British NHS and its numerous forms. Clearly he would be much happier if it were done away with. Although the film does not say so, one would have to assume that he is happy with Tory PM Cameron's present efforts to carve up the NHS and put the bulk of its budget in the hands of parasitic private companies.

Dr Igor Petrovich, his Ukrainian cobbler, is cut from a similar mould. During a discussion between them, a casual concluding remark "good, we have a plan" provokes much mirth and sneering references from both men to the Soviet era when "there were lots of plans". That those plans built up the country and its economy after years of civil war and later after the years of Nazi invasion and destruction, is not mentioned. Of course.

Petrovich has had trouble in the past from "the Ukrainian medical establishment", although just what the trouble was about is not explained. We get a clue later on, however, when Petrovich takes Marsh to show him an empty field. Petrovich has bought the land with capital loaned by a bank looking for a good investment: this will be the site of Petrovich's new private hospital. He may be a caring doctor, but he has no interest in a caring State: he is thoroughly committed to private enterprise.

There is a curious but enlightening scene in which Petrovich introduces a patient to his receptionist and tells her to try not to charge the patient because "these people are very poor". She gives the good doctor a pained look and comments that "the staff still have to be paid". And there's the rub: private enterprise is not state subsidised; it has to be "user pays".

Prior to Gorbachev's dissolution of the USSR, people in the country's various republics, including Ukraine, whatever their problems were nevertheless filled with optimism for the future: life was constantly getting better. Now, after the overthrow of



Sunday Best – *The English Surgeon* (ABC2 Sunday June 17 at 8.30pm).

socialism, and in the wake of massive disruption of economic life, imperialist-backed attempts at bourgeois "colour" revolutions in Ukraine, political disruption approaching civil war, and attempts by NATO to move into the region, there is a lot less hope than there was.

Of course, in post-Soviet, neo-capitalist Ukraine, as in much of the former Soviet Union, inequality and poverty are both rife, social services are in disarray, state enterprises are battling to compete with foreign combines and unemployment – previously unknown – is now widespread.

The film does its best to convey the idea that this is somehow the fault of the Soviet system, which is doubtless what both Marsh and Petrovich believe. Significantly, there is no mention from either of them at any time that in Soviet times medical treatment was free.

The film makes much of Dr Marsh's performing operations on

tumours that "Ukrainian doctors considered inoperable", but the only actual instance of this that is shown in the film would seem to confirm that the Ukrainian doctors knew what they were talking about.

Marsh recalls operating on a young girl with a tumour that the local doctors said could not be successfully dealt with by surgery. Marsh says "but how could you just leave her to die?", so he operated. In his own words, the operation went "catastrophically wrong", and she was left paralysed and brain damaged. Some time later, he operated on her again, and once again it "went wrong" and this time she died. Curiously, he does not at any time say that the Ukrainian doctors were right.

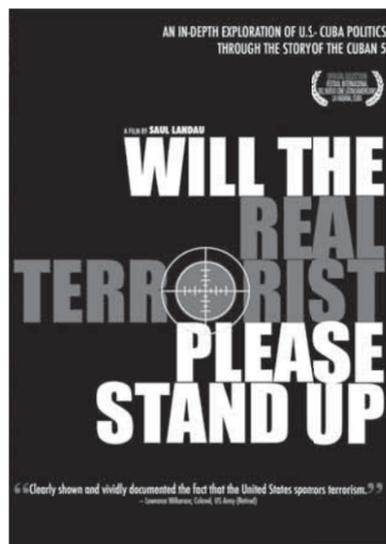
Even more curiously, later in the film, Marsh himself has a consultation with a woman and her child. The child has as a tumour, and Marsh has to tell the mother that there is nothing that he can do, her daughter will die.

Marsh and Petrovich come from radically different backgrounds, and they clearly share humanitarian impulses. But their class orientation is identical: they are both wedded to the superiority of "private enterprise", even as Marsh brings parcels of medical instruments to Ukraine explaining that they have been used once only and are perfectly good. In England they are wastefully thrown out after one use, which shocks Petrovich who observes that he has used one particular instrument for over ten years and it is still good. That this system makes lots of money for the manufacturers of medical instruments is obvious, but Marsh does not raise it.

The solution to the manifold problems confronting the people of the post-Soviet Ukraine is clearly socialism, but equally clearly, it will be some time before people of Petrovich's class will be won to it again. ☼

Perth Film screening – *Will the Real Terrorist Please Stand Up?*

4pm Saturday July 7 – The Activist Centre 15/5 Aberdeen St. East Perth (Near McIver Station)



A cutting edge film by Saul Landau exploring in-depth US-Cuba politics through the story of the Cuban 5, Landau is an Emmy-winning, internationally-known scholar, author, commentator and filmmaker. His film *Will the Real Terrorist Please Stand Up* documents a history involving the CIA, violence, and the five Cubans now serving long sentences in US prisons.

The film features an interview with Gerardo Hernandez, one of the Cuban Five, who is currently serving life imprisonment in Victorville Maximum Security Prison for "conspiracy to commit espionage." Landau also interviews Luis Posada Carriles, Orlando Bosch, and others who have acknowledged perpetrating acts of terrorism in Cuba.

Delightful surprises are appearances in the film by Fidel Castro and Danny Glover.

Australia Cuba Friendship Society

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POLITICS in the pub

June 15

RESERVE BANK – IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST, OR THE PRIVATE INTEREST, OR THEIRS?

Joe Nagy, Finance & Economic Coach;
Michael Janda, ABC

June 22

AUSTRALIAN POLICE CULTURE – TASERS, GUNS, DEATHS

Michael Kennedy, Dr, Head of Policing Policy Programme, UWS;
Cameron Murphy, President Council Civil Liberties

June 29

ISRAEL & IRAN – WARMONGERING, NUCLEAR THREATS & HYPOCRISY

Noah Bassil, Dr, Macquarie University;
Antony Loewenstein, freelance journalist, author *My Israel Question*

July 6

DEFENCE DEPARTMENT – THE UNCONTROLLABLE & UNACCOUNTABLE MONSTER

Dennis Doherty, Sec. Anti Bases Campaign;
Wayne Reynolds, Assoc. Prof. History, Newcastle University

July 13

UNIVERSITY STAFF CUTS – CORPORATE CULTURE TAKES OVER

Jake Lynch, Director Centre Peace & Conflict Studies, Sydney University;
Freya Bunday & Emma Dall, Sydney University Students

July 20

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Book Review by Mark Goudkamp *

The People Smuggler

by Robin de Crespigny

It is December 2010. After finally being released from the Villawood detention centre, a refugee and his mother watch TV in horror as an asylum boat smashes into the rocks off Christmas Island.

He follows the "debate" that follows, where "evil people smugglers" are blamed, and Julia Gillard and [Immigration Minister] Chris Bowen coin the phrase: "the people smugglers' business model".

"They declare they are going to smash this mysterious identity by any means. I laugh out loud when I hear it. Do they think there are men in suits sitting around boardroom tables somewhere devising strategies? Has no one told them people smuggling is an amorphous rag-tag network run by word of mouth and mobile phones? There are no records or bank accounts. No spreadsheets or business plans. They pop up wherever people are trying to escape and disappear when they are no longer needed."

Ali Al Jenabi's words come at the end of *The People Smuggler*, the epic life story of this Iraqi refugee turned smuggler. Originally conceived as a film, Robin de Crespigny's wonderfully written book projects Ali's brave and authentic voice in a way that is captivating and compelling.

The book is subtitled "The Oskar Schindler of Asia" – referring to the German industrialist who saved many Jewish lives by employing them in his factory at the height of the Holocaust. But unlike Schindler, Ali himself has to flee persecution, and in many ways his story is even more convincing.

Ali's odyssey is full of both personal tragedy and political insight, and his contagious sense of humour despite immense ups and downs also makes it entertaining. Written in the first person, the book invites the reader to travel in Ali's shoes and to ask themselves "what would I do in the same situation?"

If MPs and media commentators bother to read it, many will be forced to hang their heads in shame – firstly for the myths they eagerly promote about people smugglers (each and every one of which Ali shows up as fanciful and politically motivated); and secondly for the cruel and vindictive treatment Ali has received at the hands of successive Australian governments since his extradition.

The book is divided into three main stages: Iraq (1970-1999); Indonesia (1999-2003); and Australia (2003-2011) – and thankfully it includes useful maps of the Middle East and Southeast Asia.

Ali's childhood in 1970s Iraq is cut short when he assumes paternal responsibility for his six younger siblings. His outspoken father had been arrested, detained, and released

a broken man. Following Saddam Hussein's crackdown on the Shia uprising in 1991 – which the US abandons – Ali is sent to Abu Ghraib prison. His harrowing description of doing time there alone ought to be enough to soften even the most hardened anti-asylum seeker heart.

Upon his release, Ali heads to Iraqi Kurdistan to work for the resistance. He hopes a popular revolution can bring down Saddam, but is soon disillusioned:

"It is becoming clear that the movement is driven not by patriotism but finance, and is divided because there are so many different interests bankrolling each party. The Iranian intelligence, the American CIA, the UK, Syria, are all in there with big money."

After a plot to kill Saddam fails and the regime starts wiping out the resistance, Ali's only option is to flee. His attempt to reach Europe ends disastrously, when his group is caught in Istanbul and deported.

Yet Ali is desperate to reunite with his mother and siblings – some of whom have fled to Qom in Iran without him. He and his friend Mustafa hire Fadi – "a tough, swarthy Kurdish Iranian" – for US\$200. They are broke, but Fadi accepts the \$50 they have upfront, trusting them to pay the remainder on arrival (so much for Kevin Rudd's "vilest form of human life!"). Ali writes: "I wish I had more to give him extra. I had misjudged him. He is wily, diligent, clever and professional. Getting us here seems to matter to him more than the money. 'Thank you,' I say, shaking his hand with admiration and respect. 'You are some smuggler.'"

In Iran, after meeting an Iraqi who has successfully applied for refugee status via the UNHCR in Pakistan, Ali is eager to pursue this option for the whole family.

"At last we have found the right way to do things ... It is liberating to feel we are following the correct procedure and it make me realise the toll it has taken to be always on the wrong side of the law".

Yet after seven months of waiting and with a growing fear that the thaw in Iran-Iraq relations might land them back at Saddam's feet, he travels to the UN office in Pakistan to check their application. But on the way, he is told: "Forget it, it's like a lottery. You will never get there if you try to do it the right way, my friend".

So Ali heads to Indonesia to try and get to Australia but is betrayed and left on the beach when the boat he'd paid for a spot on sails without him. When offered a deal by the same people smuggler – to put one of his family on each boat for free if he works for the smuggler – he accepts as it is the only way to get

his family out. But he soon realises he can do it better.

"My mind keeps returning to the calls on Omeid's phone from desperate Iraqis, their families torn apart, trying to escape Saddam like I had. If you empathise with these people's plight, refuse to play games, and really want to help them, the job wouldn't be too hard."

Ali's operation is far from the picture of criminal smuggling syndicates that our politicians speak of. Children travel half price or free on Ali's boats, and (like Fadi who smuggled him into Iran) he is often giving passengers greatly discounted rates with promises of the remainder on arrival.

He gets seven boats successfully to Australia. But by now it's 2001, when John Howard's "increased hostility" towards asylum seekers is in overdrive. Interpol are after him, and the AFP's boat disruption operations are more aggressive. They ask Haidar, one of Ali's employees, to spy on him: "Great", Ali replies. "Spy on me. Give them the right details, just the wrong days".

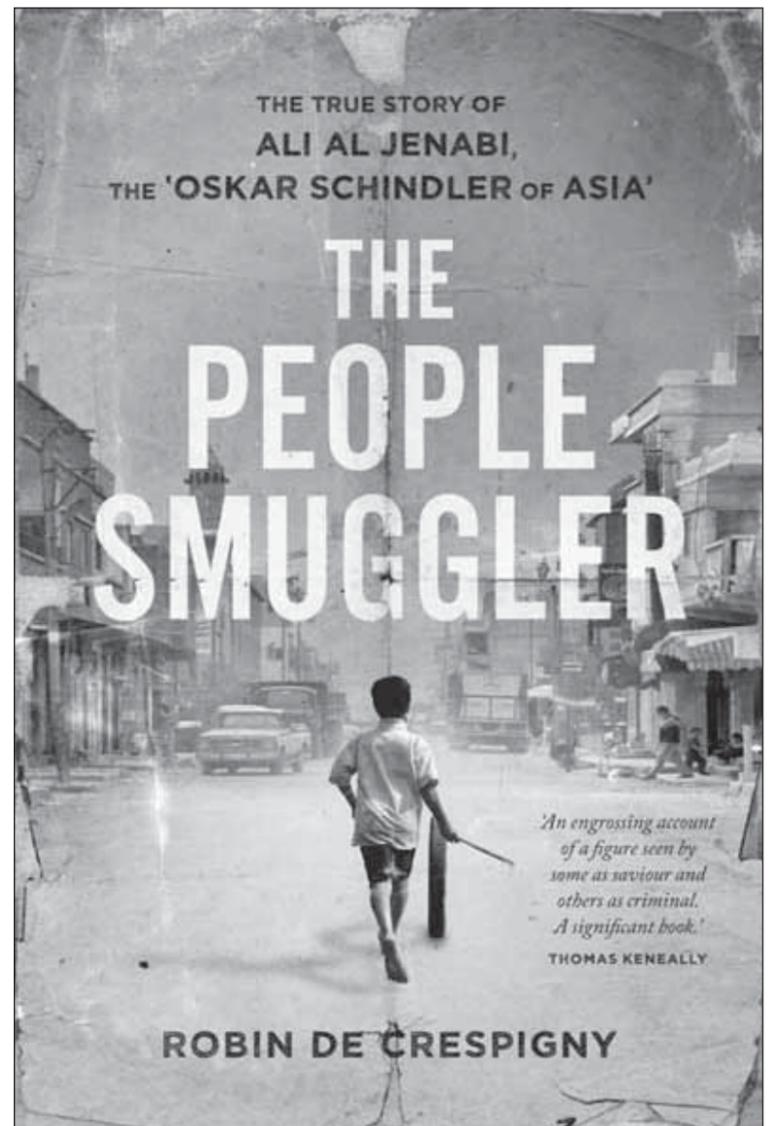
With the noose rapidly tightening, some less scrupulous smugglers take risks to get those in limbo out quickly. The overcrowded SIEV-X of Abu Qassey goes down, and Ali's boat, which departed a day earlier, is intercepted and towed back to Lombok by the Australian Navy. He sends the returnees \$4,000 but can do little else as he goes into hiding.

Ironically, it is when a friend asks him to come to Bangkok to be a partner in his expanding restaurant that he is caught. Unlike Indonesia, Thailand has laws against people smuggling, and somehow the AFP are waiting for him on arrival.

After almost a year in a Thai jail cell that reminds him of Abu Ghraib, Ali is sent to be tried in Darwin. When strip-searched, he remarks: "Even in Abu Ghraib, you were only stripped for torture." But this pales compared to the 35 years he might face under Australia's people smuggling laws, which mandate five years per boat.

"I am the first smuggler to be extradited to Australia, and the government will prove how despicable I am by the money I have made out of human misery. They are evidently saying I charged \$US10,000 per person, which is laughable when I think of how many came for less than a thousand, or on promises that were never paid..."

It is a twisted irony that at the time of the invasion of Iraq, Ali is rotting in an Australian jail: "We have lived under Saddam's repression for over two decades without any show of concern from the West ... And who is going to take the wave of refugees the war in Iraq



will create? Not Australia, according to him (Howard). He claims he has stopped the boats."

At Ali's committal hearing, 108 of his former passengers are flown in to testify against him. But while they identify him, their testimonies don't match up to the orchestrated campaign of demonisation run by parliament and the media.

However, in sentencing, Justice Mildren accepts that Ali "was not solely motivated by money, but was largely motivated by the need to get his family to Australia come what may".

Shamefully after nearly two years in Villawood Ali is released by the now Labor Immigration Minister Chris Evans on a Removal Pending Bridging Visa – a decision which his successor Chris Bowen has endorsed and which applies to this day.

Ali and Robin have spent the last three years digging up every detail of Ali's remarkable life. Launched at the Sydney Writers' Festival, it was highly ironic that in the session that followed them, Kevin Rudd launched

the book of someone with genuinely vile ideas – Bob Katter.

"Stopping the boats" hurts asylum seekers and there is often no other way for them to reach safety other than to seek out unauthorised travel agents like Ali. And if such voyages were decriminalised, it would make their passage far safer.

Despite the constant barrage of anti-people smuggling rhetoric, there has been an outpouring of concern for the hundreds of Indonesian asylum boat crew held in Australian jails. The more widely Ali's story is read, the better the placed the refugee movement will be to campaign against the demonisation of smugglers like Ali, Hadi Ahmadi and others, and to start challenging Australia's people smuggling laws.

And let's hope that it's not too long before we can see Ali's story on the big screen.

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