



Obscene profits, obscene exploitation

Anna Pha

Whoever said the class struggle is dead should take another look at the present campaign being waged by the resources sector with the assistance of the mass media. "Resources boom falls to earth", "Growth hit by mining boom end", "We are ill set for exiting boom era", are typical of the flood of headlines. Below the gloom and doom headlines are grim warnings that "Australia's international competitiveness is at risk." And the main culprits, if you are to believe them, are overpaid workers and obstructive trade unions.

Billions of dollars of investment in liquefied natural gas, natural gas and petroleum and iron ore projects have been cancelled. As a result, they claim the Australian economy is at risk if the government does not act immediately and meet their demands.

"We remain optimistic about the Australian investment environment, but it requires significant national leadership to improve our international competitiveness including fiscal stability, increased productivity and industrial relations changes that focus on Australia's long-term interest," warns Chevron Australia managing director Roy Krzywosinski

"Our country's attractiveness as a place to do business in a highly globalised industry is slipping due to a combination of rising costs, declining productivity, increasing regulation and new taxes," from the Minerals Council of Australia CEO Mitch Hooke is another typical claim.

The rising costs are wages, capital investment (which has a labour component) and government regulations such as approval processes and environmental protection. They want to operate in a totally deregulated environment where they can carry out drilling and mining anywhere they like, regardless of the impact on local communities, existing businesses and farms, water resources and other environmental consequences.

The reference to "declining productivity", although no such evidence is produced, is boss-speak for labour costs. They want lower wages, longer working hours, unpaid overtime, loss of penalty rates and other entitlements and short cuts on health and safety. In other words they want to increase the rate of exploitation of workers, which is already the highest of any industry in Australia.

They are also anxious about attempts by trade unions to restrict the use of 457 Visa workers and to prevent their employment conditions undercutting industry standards. Employers have



been exploiting them as a vehicle for undermining union negotiated collective agreements and award rates.

The Australian Petroleum Production and Exploration industry organisation claims the cost of wages paid to Queensland Curtis LNG employees, is about 30 percent more than East Africa. That gives an idea of how low they want the wages to go and the sort of employment conditions they are after in Australia.

To achieve their goals, they would like to rid their projects of trade unions and bring back individual employment contracts. The Coalition's Policy to "Improve the Fair Work Laws", a softer sounding rehash of Howard's WorkChoices, promises to deliver for them, in particular its "Individual Flexibility Agreements". They are campaigning for the abolition of the right of entry for trade union officials, outlawing of all strikes, pickets and all other forms of industrial action with harsher penalties.

The anti-union, building industry police force, the Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC), would have its powers increased and extended to cover the Maritime Union of Australia which is active in relation to oil rigs.

With unions out the way, and a completely deregulated environment, then the sky's the limit when it comes to exploiting workers, gouging Australia's resources and profit-making.

The complaint about new taxes is a direct reference to the mineral resources rental tax, which was designed by the Big Three mining

corporations – Xtrata, BHP and Rio Tinto. It is hardly a burden! It is more about the principle, the hide of a government to introduce such a tax, that they are complaining about. To them it is a dangerous precedent and could always be amended to ensure they really return some of the wealth they extract to the people of Australia who own it.

Another demand from the mining CEOs is a "stable fiscal environment". Essentially they do not want to pay taxes because this eats into profits. They fiercely object to any measures that might close tax loopholes or reduce tax credits. They are also highly critical over the government's failure to carry out previous commitments to further reduce the taxation of their profits.

Every round of corporate tax cuts means less money for the government to spend on social welfare, education and health. These tax cuts hurt people – ultimately they come out of the pockets of students, the unemployed, pensioners, workers and their families. They are all affected whether it be cuts to universities, longer hospital waiting lists, failure to increase the dole, cuts to benefits or lack of public transport.

Just as the wages struggle in the workplace is an economic form of the class struggle so too is the demand for lower taxation of company profits.

The rise in the Australian dollar and falling commodity prices have also contributed to the decline in resource sector profits, but the same CEOs who want to starve workers are not so

vocal on this issue. They support deregulation of the financial sector and "free markets". They want workers and the community to pay for the higher dollar and the end of the mining boom so that their obscene profits are maintained and increased.

Some of these companies are making a gross profit of \$1 million per worker per annum. Others only half a million.

Gina Rinehart, last year ranked the richest woman in the world, has seen her wealth take a hit as a result of the boom phase of the business cycle taking a downward turn. Her estimated accumulated wealth fell from \$29 billion to \$22 billion, according to the *Business Review Weekly's* annual Rich 200 list. No wonder the poor woman has taken up the political struggle to protect her interests!

Fortesque Metals Group Andrew Forrest has seen his fortunes fall by \$2.2 billion from \$3.85 billion and Clive Palmer down \$1.65 billion to \$2.2 billion. They too have extended their participation in the class struggle to the political arena. Palmer has set up his own political party – needless to say it is extremely reactionary, with workers, trade unions and environmental protection high on the hit list.

In the coming period, the political struggle will be imperative if trade unions are to defend existing rights and conditions, and the environment is to be saved. It will not be won inside Parliament; it depends on the building of a mass movement and a left and progressive alternative capable of winning wider public support. ★

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Electoral funding – buttressing the two party system

Tony Abbott blinked first. Both major parties looked like they were prepared to cop the backlash from the community over proposed changes to public electoral funding in return for some nice fat wads of cash. Labor had nothing to lose. It's facing a wipe-out at the federal election in September and could use some dollars to regroup for a long-term comeback. "We've got to support this measure," Labor's Anthony Albanese told the Left Caucus early last week. "The party's broke and we need the money." Abbott may well have been worried that the scandal could help to lose him the "un-loseable" election and withdrew his party's support.

A secret deal had been struck between negotiators from Labor, the Liberals and the National Party after more than a year of discussions. Candidates receiving more than four percent of the vote already receive \$2.47 for each primary vote at a federal election. The new legislation would have boosted that considerably. They would have received an extra \$1 per vote for "administrative" purposes. To sweeten the deal, the first of these quarterly payments would have been backdated to April based on 2010 election results.

This generosity on the taxpayer's behalf would have put \$50 million into the coffers of the major parties over the next three years. Parties having more than five senators or MPs (no prizes for guessing which ones they are) would have got \$300,000 a year in "compliance funding". The effect of these measures would have been to cement the old parties of capital in place and to raise the barrier to newcomers even higher.

It's true that the threshold for declaring individual donations was to come down from \$12,100 (indexed for inflation) to a flat \$5,000. This was a concession made by Gillard to independent MP Rob Oakshott in 2010 in return for support for her government. And it's true that public funding of candidates could reduce their dependence on donations from rich benefactors, including the corporate sector who expect a return on investment. But this package was not about making it easier for new, straight-shooting candidates to take their place in parliament. It was all about perpetuating the shady, cynical *status quo* as it enters a new and more turbulent era.

The outrage at the changes brought some of the more principled or more nervous players off the sidelines. Labor Senator John Faulkner said he was "no longer angry and disappointed but ashamed." Nationals Senator John Williams was more pragmatic when he told Fairfax Media that the deal was "not a good look, for sure." But as the furore subsided, it was down to business as usual. Independent MP Tony Windsor stirred up a hornet's nest last week when he claimed Nationals candidate for New England, Barnaby Joyce, was set to receive substantial donations for his campaign including \$700,000 from mining magnate Gina Rinehart.

Australians have always been sceptical about "politics" – the charade that passes for government at the state and federal level. People may not be aware of the forces that actually call the shots and set the agenda for Labor or the Coalition to implement but there is an awareness of the dishonesty of the political process in the country. The hostility has been heightened by decades of reports of fundraising dinners for thousands of dollars a plate, money paid for 15 minutes with a premier or minister, the revolving door between the upper echelons of government and big business, slush funds, indulgent overseas trips, and so on.

The problem is that, even while sensing this reality, voters keep voting for the very same parties involved in the corruption. Fortunes in corporate (and in recent times, public) money have been spent on shoring up the two-party system that has served big business interests so well. It may well happen that life for workers and other exploited people becomes so intolerable that all the slick media manipulation in the world won't save the traditional parties of Australian capitalism. But workers shouldn't sit idle and wait for such a development.

It would be difficult for left and progressive forces, with their current resources, to break the stranglehold of the major parties on parliaments in the near future. In any case, the fight-back must be waged in communities and workplaces before it becomes a question of parliamentary majorities. Patient, consistent work will set left and progressive forces up for success in the future but it is urgent that its intensity is lifted immediately. If the left doesn't rise to the occasion, "new" forces on the right certainly will.

PRESS FUND

Last week Tony Abbott enraged fellow Liberals with his unilateral endorsement of the proposed federal bill that would have given the two major parties lavish extra funding for election advertising. Not that the Liberal rebels were against public funding in principle, mind you, they just thought it would lose them votes at the ballot box! Both the two biggest parties will lose credibility from this grubby, greedy, abortive raid on the public purse. But speaking of funding, and on a more positive note, we really need your help to support production of the *Guardian*, so please send us a contribution for the next issue – and make it a regular practice, if you possibly can! Many thanks to this week's supporters, as follows:

Charlie Henry, in memory of Eddie Clynes \$50

D Cartwright \$20, Mark Mannion \$5, Alan Marbani \$20, "Round Figure" \$15

This week's total: \$110 Progressive total: \$3,180

Active and United for a Socialist Australia Statement on the leadership change

The Central Committee Executive of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) today announced that it has accepted a request by Comrade Hannah Middleton to be relieved of her responsibilities as General Secretary of the CPA. Comrade Hannah will remain active on the Party's Central Committee and other leading Party organisations.

Comrade Hannah Middleton is the first female General Secretary of the CPA and has made a long and distinguished contribution to the advancement and consolidation of the Party during her period as General Secretary from 2009.

The Central Committee Executive today announced the appointment of Comrade Bob Briton as Acting General Secretary to lead the Party until the Central Committee meets in August.

The Party and the working class face great challenges as a likely conservative rightwing government takes power in Australia. The working class will face savage attacks on wages, conditions, rights and social standards. The development of the Party's future leadership in the lead-up to these

struggles is seen as a necessary and a practical step to ensure the Party operates effectively and can play its role as a revolutionary party.

Comrade Briton joined the Socialist Party of Australia in 1984. At that time he was active in the Australian Capital Territory in struggles for low-cost housing, against unfair dismissals and in solidarity with the peoples of Latin America. He was the youngest person to receive the service award from his union (the ACOA which merged into the CPSU) for his leadership of the campaign to remove asbestos from the National Library where he worked.

Since moving to South Australia he has remained active around the issue of political prisoners in Colombia, solidarity with Venezuela and Vietnam and is treasurer of the South Australian May Day Collective. He has served for many years on the South Australian State Committee of the CPA and became its secretary in 2001.

He became a journalist on the Party's weekly newspaper, *The Guardian*, at that time. He is a member of the MEAA. He was elected to the Central Committee in 2005

and has served on its Peace Sub-Committee. He is currently secretary of the CC's International Department. He has represented the Party at several international forums. He is highly regarded in the labour movement in South Australia.

Comrade Andrew Irving has been appointed the Party's Acting Assistant General Secretary.

They both join the leadership team of Comrade Vinnie Molina as National Party President and Comrade David Matters as Party Vice President.

These changes are occurring at a very important time for the Communist Party. This is our Congress year and comrades are currently studying the Congress documents and preparing amendments and contributions on the many areas of activity the Party has been involved in over the last four years.

The focus of this year's Congress will be the strengthening and building of Party activity in the community particularly the working class, making all of our Party organisations centres of political activity.

**Communist Party of Australia
Central Committee Executive
Sydney 1-2 June 2013**

Dos Rooney 1939 - 2013

Guardian readers will be saddened to hear of the recent passing of Dorothy (Dos) Rooney following a battle with cancer. Dos was a tireless worker for the Party in South Australia and a kind, supportive friend to all her comrades. She worked alongside her late husband Brian during his years of service as member of the Central Committee and SA State Secretary. She was the mainstay the Party's New Era bookshop on Sturt Street for many years and was, without doubt, the best treasurer a Branch ever had. She was direct and honest if you fell behind with your pledge but warm and encouraging at the same time. She never put herself forward or grizzled about the amount of Party work that fell in her lap.

You would think the organising skills of such an unassuming person would be overlooked. But nobody who saw her commitment to the Party's Pioneer camp for the children of members that took place outside Adelaide over the years could fail to notice what a dynamo she was. She loved kids. The family home in Ridgehaven was the scene of many fund-raisers and socials for the Party. The memorable tone of comradeship and enthusiasm was set, in large part, by Dos. She held her own in the political debates in the Party and carried a deeply-felt sympathy for the battlers in society.

Dos' funeral in Port Adelaide was packed with people touched by her warmth and humility. Her eldest son Allan's eulogy was full of memories like the sing-alongs with his father Brian playing the piano



accordion and Molly, Michael, Marce, Dos and his uncle Rex singing with gusto. But there was recognition that a life committed to such a mighty cause involved sacrifice. Money was tight. The Rooneys had four boisterous children under the age of seven when Brian travelled to the Soviet Union to study for nine months.

Dos' SA comrades will miss her

smile and loyal friendship. She was the salt of the earth. Dos was the loved mother and mother-in-law of Lynne and Chris, Kaye and Edly, Allan, Trevor and Lesley. She was the treasured nanna of Bouth, Joog (deceased), Lisa, Alana, Melissa, Nathan, Amy, Issac, Aiden, Brett and Nathan and great-nanna of Kylie, Jamila, Odessia and Zahara. ☺

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The competition to punish asylum seekers

Peter Mac

The behaviour of the federal government and opposition towards asylum seekers is beginning to verify the sardonic Broadway musical song "There's always one step further down you can go".

Last August the Gillard government claimed its new "no advantage" policy would ensure that asylum seekers who arrived by boat would not have their applications for asylum processed more quickly than if they had remained in a transit country awaiting a humanitarian visa.

This is in effect a recipe for discrimination against those who arrive by boat, because there's no way of accurately predicting how long it would take to receive a visa in those conditions. The government's current "estimate" is up to five years, but the period is actually indefinite. Moreover, the government seems to be making good on its "no advantage" threat, because not one of the 19,760 people who have arrived since the policy was introduced has had their application examined yet.

Under the policy, those arriving by boat were to be detained on off-shore centres on Nauru and Manus Island, but this has proved impossible because of the numbers involved and the logistical difficulties of preparing the necessary facilities. As a result, the majority of the no-advantage detainees are being moved to mainland detention centres.

The government has released 16,477 detainees on bridging visas since October, for reasons of economy. However, in a particularly cruel and stupid twist the government has decreed that no-advantage detainees released on bridging visas (7,256 since October) are prohibited from working.

Instead, they are to receive an astonishingly miserly allowance of 89 percent of the Newstart payment, or approximately \$220 per week, and as a result are now having to rely on charities for basic food and accommodation. As examples, social workers have reported a seven-month pregnant asylum seeker found sleeping on a concrete floor, and a couple living in a garage with no toilet.

However, the charities are unable to meet the demands already placed



on them, not least because of the government policy of transferring single mothers from the Parenting Allowance onto the Newstart pittance.

Moreover, the number of arrivals has vastly exceeded the number predicted by the government. The anticipated number of arrivals for the 2012/2013 financial year was 5,400, but the number that arrived between July last year and May this year actually reached 22,500. The policy has made no difference whatsoever to the number boarding the boats.

ASIO in retreat

The Gillard government's policies have forced one group of asylum seekers to remain in indefinite detention, i.e. in effect under a sentence of life imprisonment, as a result of secret security assessments by the Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation (ASIO). After widespread criticism the government has now allowed asylum seekers to appeal against ASIO's assessments, under a review process headed by Justice Margaret Stone.

But before the review process has even started, ASIO has reversed a previous finding that an asylum seeker and her six-year old son were terrorists. Ian Rintoul, spokesperson for the Refugee Action Coalition, commented:

"ASIO has systematically refused repeated requests to make reassessments of any of its adverse findings against refugees ... [unless] ... requested by the Immigration Department.

"... It is now beholden on ASIO to reveal what has changed that Manokalo is no longer a risk, or was their assessment wrong 18 months ago. ... Manokalo and her son have been detained for 18 months for nothing. It has been heart-breaking for her; it has been heart-breaking watching her struggling to cope with the injustice inflicted on her and her son.

"ASIO's reversal has thrown more doubt on the validity of assessments of all the ASIO negative assessments. This is exactly what happened when things got too hot for ASIO in 2006. That year ASIO suddenly reversed

its assessment of Mohammed Faisal who had been detained on Nauru for five years.

"There now needs to be an independent assessment of ASIO and its procedures to make these reviews in the first place. The government needs to move urgently to establish equal rights for refugees to review ASIO assessments."

Crushing the vulnerable

A BBC journalist recently asked a Syrian woman who has been forced to flee with her children how she felt about having been forced to work as a prostitute in Jordan. She replied: "How would you feel about your child having no food or water? When you answer my question I will answer yours."

Many asylum seekers have found themselves in situations more appalling than most Australians are ever likely to face. Nevertheless, both the government and the opposition continue to treat them as criminals, and to frame immigration policies as instruments of punishment for asylum seekers who arrive without notice and without immigration documents.

The Liberal/National coalition has now confirmed its position of "turning the boats back", a policy whose effect has been described as equivalent to piracy, and has also said that if the coalition was elected to government in September, ASIO's findings would no longer be subject to review.

The government's policy of forbidding "no advantage" detainees from working is a violation of the UN Human Rights Convention, framed by former Labor Party leader

Herbert "Doc" Evatt. However, the coalition has now indicated it would introduce an even more vindictive policy under which "no advantage" detainees would have to work in order to gain the pitifully small government allowance.

The effect of the government's no-advantage policy is to create a social class, currently numbering about 100 people, who are forced to live in extreme poverty. However, the effect of the coalition's policy would be to impose a system of slavery on those people.

That terrible prospect is a logical outcome of the Liberals' ideological commitment to minimise workers' wages in order to maximise the profits of their employers. On past performance the Labor government is also likely to adopt this policy, as it has with regard to other conservative policies so often in the recent past.

People are seeking asylum here and elsewhere because of terrible overseas wars or oppressions, in many of which Australia is either directly involved or at least has a vested interest. Yet the attitude of both parties is to punish the asylum seekers for having dared to seek asylum here, in order to discourage others from doing so.

Where is the end to this mad competition between the major parties? Hopefully, the September poll will result in the election of left and progressive candidates, and their influence combined with public pressure will at last result in the introduction of more humane asylum seeker policies.

They'd better, because the current policies are beginning to carry the unmistakable whiff of neo-fascism. ✪

Pete's Corner



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Stop the income management trials!

A group of protesters gathered recently in front of the electorate office of federal Labor MP Nick Champion in the northern Adelaide suburb of Munno Para. Their banners and chants drew a lot of attention and support from locals, many of whom had stories of hardship to tell. One of the main speakers at the event was **Sheeree Clay** of the Single Parents Action Group which, along with the Stop Income Management on Playford (SIMPla) group and others, has been campaigning against the increased levels of official harassment of welfare recipients over recent years. Her (slightly abridged) speech is reproduced below.

We are here today to ask that Nick Champion, federal member for Wakefield, call for an end to the income management trials and teen mums trials in Playford; to stand up for single parents and back the \$50 raise to Newstart.

Many of you may be interested to know that Nick's electorate of Wakefield is the second largest electorate of single parents in Australia.

When the people of the Wakefield elected Mr Champion into office they did so in good faith. We, the people of Wakefield, gave him our trust to stand up for us and protect us; to make the right decisions and do the right thing by us as a community. He has broken that trust by lobbying the federal government to bring the income management trials to Playford, for supporting the discriminatory and sexist teen mums trial, by not sticking up for single parents in parliament and by refusing to back the \$50 raise to Newstart.

His reason for not backing the Newstart raise was that "the best form of welfare is a job". A large percentage of his electorate, struggling families and the unemployed, desperately need that \$50 raise to Newstart. The government's discriminatory cuts have made it impossible for people to manage and many are ending up homeless or struggling to meet electricity and other essentials' high prices.

Newstart is 77 percent below the poverty line; 77 percent! That is straight out disgusting and shameful. It's an embarrassment for us as a country, which claims to be one of the strongest economies in the world, to have one of the smallest unemployment benefits in the OECD. How is anyone supposed to live on such a measly and inadequate amount of income, let alone a single parent with dependent children?

It's true that Newstart is inadequate. It is so inadequate, in fact, that children are suffering and having to go without life's essentials – sports, school excursions, birthday parties – the list of sacrifices our children are making is endless. They are suffering and missing out because of corporate and elite greed. The cuts to single parents are a result of corporate and elite pressure on the government in the wake of a global financial crisis. Single parents in poverty, forced out of studies and into low paid dead end

jobs, this not only generates income in taxes but it keeps the corporate elites' shareholders happy.

When did it become acceptable in this country to victimise, discriminate and smash with a fiscal fist our most vulnerable people, our most vulnerable women and children? Real men protect and stand up for vulnerable women and children; protecting the most vulnerable in his community instead of contributing to vilifying them into a life sentence of poverty by backing the fiscal policies punishing so many in our community.

As Christine Milne stated in her budget reply "that's dumb and mean".

The UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights and the UN Working Group on Discrimination against Women expressed serious concerns that cuts to payments to single parents may be a violation of Australia's international human rights obligations. In response to an urgent complaint co-signed by the Human Rights Law Centre and other welfare groups in October 2012, the UN experts requested that the Australian government explain its decision to shift tens of thousands of single parents – 90 percent of whom are women – off parenting payments and onto Newstart, representing a decrease in weekly payments of up to \$110.

According to the UN experts, this legislation represents potential violations of Australia's human rights obligations, including the rights to social security, the right to an adequate standard of living, the prohibition of non-discrimination in the enjoyment of these rights and a number of obligations contained in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. The Australian federal government have never replied to this letter.

When Terese Edwards, CEO of The National Council Of Single Mothers And Their Children and deputy vice president of ACOSS and I met with Mr Champion, we raised the issue of the letter sent by the UN and asked why Labor have not responded to the letter yet. Mr Champion laughed in our faces and told us that that no one responds to



Photo: Bob Briton

the United Nations, no one takes the United Nations seriously and that they are a joke. During this meeting we also stated that the cuts were discriminatory toward women seeing that 90 percent of single parent are women. He refused to acknowledge it as a gender issue or discrimination. When we raised the issue of human rights, Mr Champion said that human rights are an excuse used to avoid social and employment obligations.

Before I go on to talk about teen mums I would also like to mention my opinion on forcing people to work for free, work for the dole, work experience, job placements and forced volunteering. There is only one correct name for these things and that name is slavery; forcing people to work for free is slavery, and slavery is a universal crime. You cannot count Newstart as a payment for such activities as it is welfare and welfare is a right given universally as stated in the declaration of human rights. The government must pay these people a wage or end such programs immediately. It is slavery, it is fascism and it is a crime!

In regards to teenage mothers in Playford, Nick Champion fully supports the Gillard Labor government stripping teenage mothers in disadvantaged communities such as Playford of welfare payments for failing to comply with compulsory "participation" obligations once their babies are just six months old. This attack on one of the most vulnerable groups in society is part of a raft of measures announced in Prime Minister Gillard's first budget aimed at forcing the disabled, the long-term unemployed and single mothers off welfare and into the workforce where they will become a new source of

cheap labour. At present one in three teen mums in Playford are being cut from their payments for refusing to part from their young babies.

These measures mark a new stage in the decades-long assault on the social security safety net which was fought for by the working class in the post-war period. Sole parent benefits were, in 1973, the last form of welfare payments introduced, following student, unemployment and disability benefits. They are now being targeted as one of the first to be eliminated as the corporate elite demands a social reversal in the wake of the global financial crisis.

The program affects teen parents in Playford, predominantly mothers, aged 19 or under who receive the Parenting Payment. When their baby turns six months old, they are required to attend so-called support and engagement interviews at the government's Centrelink agency. They will be forced to develop a "participation plan" which will include compulsory activities designed to ready them for the workforce, including placing their one-year-old infants in childcare while they finish secondary school, or engage in other training or paid work.

Attendance at regular interviews will be mandatory until the parent completes Year 12 or its equivalent, or their child turns six years old, when they will then be obliged to look for work. If the parents do not undertake any of these activities without a providing a "reasonable excuse", they will be "breached", resulting in their already inadequate payments being suspended, leaving them and their children without income for basic necessities. Only once they "re-engage" with Centrelink will they be back-paid their entitlements? In

order to satisfy these requirements, young parents face substantial costs, particularly for childcare.

A mere \$47 million has been allocated over four years to provide childcare rebates and to fund out-sourced case management assistance for those enrolling in and attending school, TAFE or other training, parenting classes and mentoring and support groups.

The Gillard government claims that these programs will provide teenage parents with the support they need to "go on and get a good job" to enable them to better provide for their children. This is a complete sham. One need only examine the abysmal social conditions in the areas chosen for the trials to understand the difficulties these young parents confront. In truth, the government's trial is designed to ensure that teen parents have the basic skill level demanded by employers for the low-paid, casual and dead-end retail and services jobs which are all that are on offer.

Young mothers are now forced to place their own babies in childcare regardless of whether either of them is emotionally or psychologically ready for such a separation, or whether they are satisfied with the quality of childcare available. In addition, young parents in such situations face practical challenges due to their restricted financial circumstances, such as limited access to computers and internet, textbooks and supplies, and suitable housing arrangements.

In order get their children to childcare and attend training, they have to use expensive, unreliable public transport services. Even a minor calamity causing them to miss a mandatory activity can trigger a payment suspension. The rationale driving the government's stated goal of "breaking the cycle of welfare-dependency" is not that of helping the impoverished, but of eliminating the basic right to welfare altogether.

It is up to us, the people, to stand up for our rights and to stand up for the rights of those who can't stand up for themselves. We must demand change and better government leadership as the current government are not leaders. They are dictators, fascists and oppressors. Once again, thank you all for being here, and thank you for listening. ✪

There is only one correct name for these things and that name is slavery; forcing people to work for free is slavery, and slavery is a universal crime.

Protection for land and sea

Mahala Strohfeldt

Traditional Owners gathered deep in the heart of Far North Queensland's Wet Tropics rainforest last month to dedicate more than 70,000 hectares of "bubu and jalun" (land and sea) as an Indigenous Protected Area (IPA).

Encompassing the Wet Tropics and Great Barrier Reef, Eastern Kuku Yalanji is the traditional home to the Jalunji-Warra and the Kuku Nyungkal groups, who came together with federal Environment Minister Tony Burke and non-Indigenous supporters to herald what was hailed as a new way of working on country.

Known as the Eastern Kuku Yalanji IPA, stage 2, Jalunji-Warra country takes in Cairns Reef in the north through to the mouth of the Daintree River in the south and extending to the eastern edge of the Great Barrier Reef, with Kuku Nyungkal country focusing on the upper Annan River.

Jabalbina Yalanji Aboriginal Corporation chairperson and traditional owner Robyn Bellafquih said that the IPA dedication ceremony was an acknowledgement and celebration of Elders past and present who had fought for the right

to exercise more control over their traditional land and sea.

"In 2007 we got some land back and our native title acknowledged," she said.

"But now throughout Eastern Kuku Yalanji IPA our bama (people) will finally have the capacity to take a lead role again in making decisions about our country and managing it like our old people did before."

Jalunji-Warra Traditional Owner and Indigenous advisory committee deputy chair Chrissy Grant said the IPA was a significant step towards cultural recognition, and would create rich cultural and economic opportunities.

"We've got world heritage all around us through the Wet Tropics and Great Barrier Reef, and there's not a real industry for Traditional Owners to get engaged in other than the tourism industry," she said.

"Through land and sea management, which is really important to maintain and look after those cultural values, having an IPA allows us to be engaged in that process. It allows the Traditional Owners to work on country through the ranger system, and that's through the Commonwealth and the State ranger programs.

Values

"While a lot of areas are under national park and world heritage, we have to work with partners to be able to maximise what we can do in maintaining not only the cultural values but also the biodiversity values. It's critical that we maintain both."

Ms Grant said the short-term vision would be to get rangers on the ground, and long term to have clan ranger groups working in their own IPA area.

Jalunji-Warra Traditional Owner Uncle David Solomon also welcomed the IPA and said that for generations to come Aboriginal people would be able to learn about country and take care of land the traditional way, as well as pass on those valuable skills and knowledge.

Environment Minister Tony Burke said the IPA would link world heritage with Indigenous conservation and management, and therefore create greater understanding of Indigenous culture.

"This is a great step forward. By using traditional knowledge alongside modern science, by having world-class management plans in place, we are doing our best to look after this crucial part of our country for future generations," he said.

Koori Mail



Traditional Owner Uncle David Solomon signs off on the IPA.

Photo: Koori Mail

March against Monsanto

Richard Titelius

On a mild Saturday afternoon several hundred people gathered on the steps of the Western Australian parliament in Perth to protest and make their voices heard against the actions of global agri-food giant Monsanto.

The protest in Perth was but one of over 420 that had taken place globally against Monsanto for its actions in trying to patent the seed of food crops around the world and for their role in promoting genetically modified foods and the associated chemicals that accompany their propagation.

Outside Parliament House Greens Senator for Western Australia Scott Ludlam addressed the rally and spoke about the farmers who were voicing their concerns in the community and standing up to Monsanto, in particular Kojonup farmer Steve Marsh who, had his non-GM canola crop contaminated by his GM cropping neighbour. He lost his ability to market his crop as GM free as 70 percent of it was contaminated. He has decided to take the bold step and sue his neighbour with the help of pro bono work from law firm Slater & Gordon and in the process take on Monsanto.

Ludlam advised the rally that the matter was listed for hearing in early 2014. If successful it will be the first time that a farmer has stood up to Monsanto and won. The action is not only about the right of farmers to grow non-GM crops but also in the long term about sustainable agriculture, reasserting our sovereignty over our food products and food security.

Other speakers included local Greens Legislative Council member Lynn McLaren who asserted, "Monsanto is challenging the notion that we can grow our own food and that the seed to grow our food can be corporatised. We are here to oppose that notion and to show that there are environmental, health and economic risks to allowing GM crops to enter the food chain."

Julie Newman of the Network of Concerned Farmers and a farmer from Newdegate in the state's Great Southern region spoke about how the dominant genetic material from GM plants can overrun the genetic material of naturally occurring varieties of plants.

Newman was concerned over the majority government owned food research organisation InterGrain being now 19.8 percent owned by Monsanto with the option to own up to 26 percent, which would give it considerable power and influence over what research would be conducted and what wouldn't i.e. that which didn't suit its bottom line.

In Western Australia, a number of farmers in the southwest have had their GM-Free certification revoked as their fields are contaminated, including a farmer from Cunderdin who after a deluge from a thunderstorm had GM canola wash over his land from a neighbouring farmer.

From parliament the protesters marched along St Georges Terrace, down one of Perth's busiest shopping malls, with their many colourful and informative banners, certainly catching the eyes and ears of the Saturday shopping crowd. And then through



Photo: Richard Titelius

Northbridge to Russell Square where others present swelled the crowd to over 1,600.

At Russell Square other speakers addressed the rally about the consequences of Genetically Modified Organisms entering the food chain, including chef Adam Duncan who spoke of the many food safety requirements he is required to comply with. These include measuring the temperatures of 17 fridges twice a day and recording the data on paper and keeping the record for seven years. But there is no requirement to indicate if the food that was being cooked and served to people had GMO.

After the rally I also spoke to one of the leading organisers of the Perth rally and March

Against Monsanto, Janet Grogan of Foodwatch.

She said that the numbers at the rally had really surprised her and the other organisers and she attributed this interest to social media such as Facebook which had 1,800 hits by the morning of the rally. There was also another rally attended by 250 people in Albany, on the states' south coast.

Finally, Grogan spoke of the need for improved food labelling, especially when the government's organisation Food Standards Australia New Zealand does not independently assess the data by Monsanto but relies on the assessments supplied by the corporation.

When the next federal election comes up, Grogan said it was important for all voters to ask their

elected representatives where they stood on food labelling, especially as to the presence of GMOs and where they stood on GM crops and ultimately on sustainable farming practices, our food sovereignty and security.

The CPA recognises the risks to food sovereignty and security but that the close ties which many capitalist food corporations such as Monsanto have with governments make it difficult for governments to act in the genuine interests of the people. It is up to the people's actions to make governments accountable and transparent on our agriculture and food production and these rallies are a visible and vocal first step towards putting governments and corporations on notice. ✪

Notes on violence against women in the neo-liberal age

In the neo-liberal era, while violence structures the lives of the poor across the world, the injustice of these lives is profoundly gendered, writes **V Geetha**. It is the poor and marginal woman's body that bears the burden of both keeping her family together as well as labour for very low rates, thereby making sure wages stay depressed at all times. In the bargain, her children, her kin, in short the community that she makes with her labour of care, are also doomed to reproduce the self-same cycle of exploitation.

As I write this in the third week of February, I see all around me signs of the latest global campaign to protest violence against women: the One Billion Women Rising (OBR) event coordinated by the playwright Eve Ensler from the United States who went viral with her provocative play, *The Vagina Monologues*. Ending violence, the campaign proclaims, is as important as ending poverty, fighting climate change and global warming, ending wars.

Known worldwide as VAW, that is, violence against women, this phenomenon appears so given that even attempts to describe it, such as the acronym VAW itself, only end up naturalising it. In other words, this violence appears irrevocable, almost inevitable, as the statistics that come attached to these campaigns tell us: in this instance we have been told that one in three women on our planet can expect to endure physical hurt in her lifetime.

However, the act of violence is seldom singular – it is not a single act, merely, which a man commits and a woman endures. Sexual violence or more generally violence against women informs and expresses the very essence of authority: to harm and assault a woman in the most casual sort of way, be it by powerful ruling-class men, or men from socially dominant classes or by personnel of the state, appears to be the very hallmark of impunity. It is this impunity which produces sexual harassment, makes for highly exploitative workplace cultures, renders state personnel opaque to criticism, and places women in such vulnerable and risky positions whenever the societies they are part of experience major crises or disruptions, such as we are witnessing in places like Syria and Libya, and closer to home in Sri Lanka.

In this sense sexual violence is one of the most acute expressions of power that takes itself for granted; from the man on the street who stalks a woman to men in a nation's armed forces, they are all equally convinced of women's inferior status, of her being an object available for male pleasure, and it is this conviction which renders their position on gender unassailable.

However, I do not wish to dwell overmuch on what makes for the existence of impunity that is fundamentally gendered – it is something that many of us across the world live with, endure and resist. Instead I would like to rethink the problem of sexual violence from another position, which is not unknown but does not nearly get the same critical attention as singular acts of violence, as is evident from the OBR campaign against violence.

Violence as structure

Whether inevitable or not, violence structures the lives of the poor across the world: the violence of dispossession, hunger, malnutrition, long hours of unremitting labour and discrimination and humiliation which are built into their work and life environments. In this world, men as well as women survive precariously, though drawing on different skills and solidarities and clearly accessing options and resources available to them albeit on an unequal basis.

This is what the world is like for women across the global South – be it in South Asia, South America, Africa or the countries of the Balkans – where the biggest challenge is the expansion of what may be called predatory capital, which has produced a global market that appears to know no rationale except its own profits, and is willing, therefore, to sell, market and ultimately destroy everything precious to human existence, including water, trees, grain. Faced with this pitiless logic of expropriation, whether by multinational mining, iron and steel businesses or companies that

market water and air, women in poor, peasant, nomadic and working communities across the globe, but particularly in the global South, have had to work very hard and ingeniously to both confront challenges as well as circumvent them.

Predatory capital: Resistance and responses

What do a global profiteer and his national colleagues – global capital co-exists with and with the support of national governments in much of the global South, where increasingly national sovereignty is being defined in terms of state power, rather than the well-being of the people – typically do? To start with, they mark out terrain that they would like to work over for their industries; they identify populations that live on that terrain, and then work out schemes for getting them to comply with their industrial and market logic. Where compliance is not to be had, they resort to coercion, using their own private armies or looking to states and governments to support their will to plunder.

In India, for example, the entire central Indian region, and parts of the eastern plains and plateau, home to some of the country's richest mineral and forest wealth, are at present being held captive by global and local industries. Of the latter, many have recently begun to expand their interests across the world, particularly in the countries of the former Soviet Far East and parts of Africa, and may therefore be considered "global" in their own right.

In order to get at the mines, companies have resorted to terrorising, shifting and destroying entire populations, which in the Indian instance comprise a large number of Indigenous communities. Known as adivasis, these people of the forest and fastness are being literally thrown out of their homes and fields. Attempts to protest are immediately countered with force, arrests, murders, both judicial and non-judicial.

In such a context, women bear the brunt of the tensions, and also because in many terrains they are in the forefront of the struggle. Women who thus have put their lives on the line have had to reckon with police interrogations, custodial violence and vile sexual assault by both the minions of the state as well as the hired goons of capital.

There are other issues at stake as well: the loss of livelihoods, when lands are taken over, has meant that families migrate in search of work. Where men migrate initially, women, children and the elderly stay behind, and in such cases, the burden of survival is borne almost entirely by women. Whether having to protect their fragile peasant economies, or enter into strategic negotiations with the brokers of capital and industry, women are forced to walk the knife-edge in an everyday sense.

Sometimes women migrate too, with their families, or even on their own – and are forced to be part of a labour pool that is employed for uncertain periods of time and often for very depressed wages, with almost no safety at workplaces and certainly no laws in place against sexual harassment or assault. Migrating single women stand to be trafficked, or sometimes voluntarily enter the sex trade, and in either case cannot expect to have any guarantees against assault: only when there is a possibility of organised action have women sex workers experienced a measure of autonomy.

Yet this is not all. Women resist, and have made it clear that the hills, the rivers and the coast are theirs and meant for them and their unborn generations. This maternalism which goes beyond the familial has helped draw hundreds of women into the struggle – for instance in southern India's Tamil Nadu state, which has for over 550 days witnessed a struggle against

a Russian and French-supported nuclear plant, women have time and again drawn attention to their roles as guardians of life, and argued vociferously against energy options that strengthen the hands of the rich and take away from the poor, that help the cities to live and grow while disenfranchising all those who have to part with their share of resources that the city's affluent populations may live.

A gendered critique

In such a context, what is the everyday life of a working-class, disenfranchised woman in the global South? How may we understand the violence that she endures, negotiates and confronts? While the larger picture is bleak and extremely worrying, the fact remains that in a number of contexts, women affected by the effects of the new market economies are not mere victims. In the Indian context, for instance, the presence of new manufacturing industries in the vicinity of small towns or rural populations that lie on the fringes of metropolitan centres such as Chennai or Delhi has meant that girls from working-class and lower-middle-class families have new work options: rather than settle for underpaid domestic labour, modest vending of goods, or service labour that is uncertain and often exploitative, young women have chosen factory labour.

This is not a new development: it has been noticed that women by and large have preferred the grind of a garment sweatshop to labouring on the fields, where they are the victims of not only capricious work conditions, the weather and limited number of workdays, but also of social control and humiliation. In India, where most of the labouring people come from the so-called subordinated castes, this latter can be a fairly traumatic, though everyday, experience. Factory labour, while exploitative, relentless and cruel in the manner it attaches workers to the grind of the assembly line, is yet better-paying in a relative sense, and while there is the ever-present threat of sexual harassment and coercion, chances are that social humiliation is less easy to enforce.

For women, then, the market, such as it is, allows a pyrrhic reprieve from an older and more resilient violence, of the caste system. However, this cannot be assumed and has to be precisely established: and much depends on where the factory is, the nature of the labour pool, especially its varied nature, and whether recruitment has been through local agents or directly through company-appointed personnel. Besides, even where women's lives have marginally improved, they still have to negotiate and fight for their dignity and survival.

The point is that the feminisation of certain kinds of labour is not accidental, and while it may pay provisional and temporary dividends, it cannot in the long run make for female labour mobility in the workplace or help women develop skills that will help them negotiate their terms in the workplace. There is a further twist to all of this: for instance, many factories in Tamil Nadu recruit women with the explicit promise that their wages will help them earn their dowry! This has led to all sorts of unfair labour practices and besides has helped sustain the pernicious practice of dowry, paid at the time of marriage to the groom's family, and through it a cycle of domestic humiliation and violence.

In another sense too, the growth of the market has put additional pressure on women from peasant or working-class communities. The structural adjustment regimes imposed on many countries in the South by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and its cohorts have resulted in the state withdrawing from its welfarist role. In countries like India, where the state's welfarism has translated into subsidies for agriculture through soft loans and the whole paraphernalia of the so-called "green revolution", the sudden withdrawal of the state from this role and the concomitant problems that peasants are left with have led to the tragic phenomenon of farmers' suicides.

While this has been identified and studied as a grievous social problem and elicited responses from policy makers, the nether side of this



problem, of what a commentator has called the problems experienced by "those who did not die", that is, the widows and daughters of the deceased, has been relatively ignored.

Silent violence

The struggle for survival, the issue of loans, personal safety, sexual vulnerability and the burden of honour that peasant families carry with them to the grave – all these have made for a very unhappy rural female populace in parts of India, who are unable to leave, but equally unable to continue to be peasants as their foremothers had been. This is a silent sort of violence and one that is barely acknowledged.

Then there is the problem of dispossession and all the ills that attend it, from forced migrations to being trafficked. Related to the unwieldy and unchecked growth of economies that service the export trade or fill the pockets of the national rich and powerful, trafficking is a complex phenomenon and includes women being coerced into sex work.

Labour trafficking is equally a problem: hundreds of women are lured to seek work as service providers, as ayahs, domestic workers and care workers in either West or South-East Asia. Denied rights, straddling several wobbly legal realms, both of the countries they belong to and of the countries where they go to work, these women workers are particularly vulnerable. Instances of domestic workers being sexually harassed, accused of adultery or of being irresponsible and therefore cruelly punished have been well documented in the countries of the South.

In addition to all these structural issues to do with the economy, which entail extremely destructive consequences for women in spite of their determined effort to negotiate with it, there is the pervasive phenomenon of low-intensity conflict. Conflict comes about for any number of reasons: when dispossessed, the poor fight back.



However, this war is never merely a people's war against a state: it causes "collateral" damage of the worst kind, since the state uses the excuse of militancy to wilfully deny rights to ordinary citizens who suffer from its economic policies and to enforce its own neo-liberal agenda. This has meant, as has happened in Chiapas in Mexico and in the plateaus and plains of central India, that entire populations are harmed, turned out of historical homes and packed into internal refugee camps. Sexual violence against women is routinely used in such instances, and marauding state-supported vigilantes in the name of fighting armed militants wreak havoc on communities, especially women and children.

Another reason for conflict is the manner in which states across the global South have managed to link their own ruling-class interests, military power and the spread of capital to stymie democratic dissent as well as settle older conflicts. This set of developments has fed into and exacerbated the violence of the civil war, once again with disastrous consequences for women: forced to live in camps, having lost their all, their loved ones, sexually victimised, without prospects, the lot of Tamil women in Sri Lanka is completely unenviable.

A similar situation obtains in Kashmir and the Indian north-east, where decades of ethnic protests by populations that have resented being integrated into the Indian Union are now made worse by the neo-liberal path to development that the Indian state appears determined to take forward at any cost. Here too, we find that women suffer in exceptional ways: being at the mercy of the armed forces, and having to deal with their children caught in the crossfire of battles between the forces and ethnic militia, and the everyday problems of survival.

We know too the issues at stake for women in other conflict zones, from the Sudan to

Palestine, from Mali to Syria, and none of these situations appear easy to resolve: the fate of the oil economies in the 21st century, and the manner in which this fate is linked to the fate of democracy are matters that cry out for understanding. Meanwhile, the lives of ordinary people in these regions continue along difficult paths, and women, in all those nations of the Islamic Crescent, stretching from the African Magreb to the Arabian Sea, have had to bear the brunt of two sorts of violence: of civil war, of American and Israeli imperialism on the one hand, and the cultural backlash in their own contexts, where so-called "crimes of honour" continue to haunt their intimate lives.

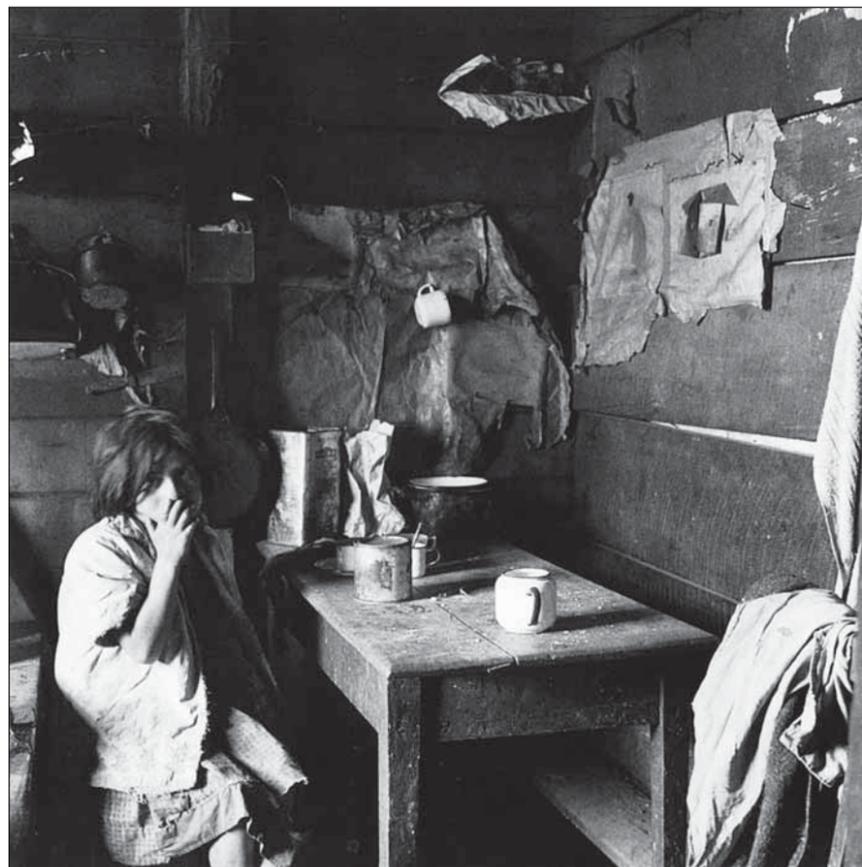
Conclusion

However, as this article has endeavoured to argue, the picture, however bleak, is leavened by the fact that women caught in the ugly dynamism of events that are not of their own making are not hapless victims, and do make important and often rational choices. It is just that these choices appear far too limited and circumscribed to change their conditions of existence, in terms of labour conditions, wages, freedom in matters of love and marriage, dignity in the family, equality in the larger culture.

On the other hand, every act of dissent, protest and every attempt at confronting and negotiating what appear at first to be intractable realities has to be acknowledged for what it is, and while we may now and then realise the strength of a Malala or rue the fate of Rizana, the fact remains that women like them are legion – braving everyday odds that are actually insurmountable, and leading lives that sadly and cruelly are all too easily damaged and hurt. As against the impunity of states and the merciless logic of the market, we need must balance compassion and justice, understanding and action.

Third World Resurgence ✪

THE GREAT STONE TABLE



We arrive at the great stone table
the children of Lota, Quepe,
Quitratue and Metrenco,
Yumbel, Yungay and Osorno.

We sit by the table,
the cold table of the world
and no one has brought us anything.
Everything was consumed,
they had eaten all of it.

One plate alone remains, waiting
on the immense hard table
of the world and the void.
Still a child waits
who is the truth of every dream,
who is the hope of our earth.

Translated by Dennis Maloney

From *Windows that Open Inward, Images of Chile*
Poems by Pablo Neruda
Photographs by Milton Rogovin

Syria escalation poses growing risk of regional war

Bill Van Auken

In the wake of the European Union's vote last month to lift a ban on directly arming Western-backed "rebels," there is a mounting danger of wider war. Growing military tensions in the region are likewise threatening to turn a Syrian peace conference, ostensibly backed by both Washington and Moscow, into a dead letter. Dubbed "Geneva II", the conference is tentatively set to convene in mid-June.

The Russian government condemned the EU for "throwing fuel on the fire" of Syria's sectarian civil war and announced that it is going ahead with the delivery of S-300 air defence systems to Syria.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov told a press conference in Moscow that the deployment of the advanced air defence batteries would serve as a "stabilising factor" in the Syrian crisis by dissuading Western powers from launching direct military intervention.

The mobile, surface-to-air missile systems have been compared to the US Patriot and are capable of bringing down rockets as well as planes.

"We consider that such steps will restrain some hotheads from the possibility of giving this conflict, or from considering a scenario that would give this conflict, an international character with the participation of external forces," he said.

While the deployment of the missiles would complicate any imposition of a "no-fly zone," the action that began the US-NATO war for regime change in Libya, it is also directed against Israel, which has repeatedly carried out air strikes against Syria in the course of the two-year-old crisis. The latest of three known air strikes took place earlier this month and provoked an angry denunciation from Moscow, which is Syria's long-standing ally and biggest arms supplier.

The Israeli government condemned the decision to deliver the Russian missile systems to Syria, claiming that the anti-aircraft batteries were not defence weapons,

as Moscow has claimed, but rather "offensive" because their range made them capable of bringing down planes flying in Israeli airspace. Israeli officials also claimed that the weapons could fall into the hands of Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shiite mass political movement and militia, which has resisted Israeli incursions into Lebanon.

Tel Aviv's principal concern is that the missile systems could rob the Israeli military of its ability to carry out military aggression against Syria as well as Lebanon with impunity.

Israel's Defence Minister Moshe Yaalon threatened that the country's military "will know what to do" if the missile systems reach Syria, an implicit threat of renewed air strikes that could draw Russia more directly into the conflict.

Meanwhile, the White House acknowledged that it had been informed in advance of a provocative stunt staged by Senator John McCain, the Arizona Republican and former opponent of Barack Obama in the 2008 presidential race, who made a brief foray just inside Syria's border with Turkey to meet with the so-called rebels.

The area that McCain visited is largely under the control of Islamist militias, including the Al Nusra Front, which has formally aligned itself with Al-Qaeda. His host, the former Syrian general and defector Salem Idris, is the leader of the Supreme Military Council of the Free Syrian Army. While it is by no means clear that Idris exerts any real control over the various militias and gangs that have taken up arms against the government, the ex-general used McCain's visit to press Washington for more arms and direct military intervention.

"We need American help to have change on the ground; we are now in a very critical situation," Idris told the *Daily Beast*, which first reported McCain's two-hour trip to Syria. "What we want from the US government is to take the decision to support the Syrian revolution with weapons and ammunition, anti-tank missiles and anti-aircraft weapons," the ex-general continued. "Of course



"Free Syrian Army" fighters taking cover as they prepare to join an attack on a Syrian Army base in Damascus.

we want a no-fly zone and we ask for strategic strikes against Hezbollah both inside Lebanon and inside Syria."

The "rebels" demand for US imperialist intervention in both Syria and Lebanon apparently dovetails with preparations being made by the Pentagon and the Obama administration. The White House has asked the US Joint Chiefs of Staff to draft plans for the imposition of a no-fly zone to be enforced by Washington and its key NATO allies, the former Middle East colonial powers, Britain and France.

The *Daily Beast* quoted two unnamed administration officials as saying that the request came "shortly before Secretary of State John Kerry toured the Middle East to try and finalise plans for an early June conference between the Syrian regime and rebel leaders in Geneva."

"The White House is still in contemplation mode but the planning is moving forward and it's more advanced than it's ever been," one of the administration officials said.

The online publication reported that the White House had requested that US agencies consider a shift in policy toward directly arming the anti-Assad militias and recognising the "rebels" as Syria's legitimate

government. It also noted that upcoming "Eager Lion" military exercises bringing 15,000 US and NATO troops, along with those of other US-aligned countries, to Jordan would provide the means of pre-positioning US military hardware for a Syrian intervention.

These preparations give the lie to the pretence that Secretary of State John Kerry is working with his Russian counterpart, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, to ensure a successful peace conference next month in Geneva.

While the Syrian regime has indicated its willingness to attend a meeting aimed at reaching a political settlement of the two-year-old war, there is no indication that the "rebels" are prepared to do likewise, nor for that matter that they have any coherent leadership capable of negotiating such an agreement.

The Syrian National Coalition, the rebel front backed by Washington, has spent the last five days holding a fractious conference in Istanbul. Attempts by the Western powers to lend the body a more acceptable veneer by incorporating a handful of secular opponents of the Assad regime have been repeatedly rejected by the opposition's Muslim Brotherhood-dominated leadership.

While the Obama administration and its allies are prepared to recognise the coalition as the "legitimate representative" of the Syrian people and even the country's provisional government, it has become increasingly obvious that it has no significant popular support.

As the Abu Dhabi daily the *National* noted recently, the coalition's secretary general, Saudi Arabian-based businessman Mustafa Al Sabbagh, was given his post after appearing at the group's founding in Doha last November with 16 people he claimed were representatives of regional councils from across Syria.

"In fact many of them were his employees in Saudi Arabia, or his relatives," the paper reported.

The crisis of the so-called rebels and the reversals the Islamist militias have suffered recently in combat with the Syrian army have only served to escalate the US and Western European preparations for direct intervention. Washington and its allies are determined to pursue their war for regime change as part of a broader strategy for redrawing the map of the entire region to serve their own predatory interests.

Information Clearing House

Venezuela to pay pensions to full-time mothers

Kristina Chew Carez

I can't think of any woman who's a mother who wouldn't respond in the affirmative to the question "is motherhood a full-time job?" There are certainly women who are able to be full-time mothers, but many, (myself included) must work. Many of us (myself also included) like working and, for all the demands of juggling a career and caring for children, we are glad to do it. But it is true, one does appreciate knowing that one's efforts to do not one but two jobs are acknowledged.

Venezuela, a country that has been making the news for a shortage of toilet paper, is providing mothers with a benefit quite unheard of (certainly in the US).

Under the country's new labour law, full-time mothers will be able to collect a pension.

The Chavistas' new labour law gives "recognition to non-salaried work traditionally done by women," Thomas Ponniah of the David Rockefeller Centre for Latin America Studies and the Department of African and African-American Studies at Harvard University writes in *ONTD Political*. Ponniah's explanation of the rationale behind a decision that American women can only dream of (if that) has to do with the efforts of the Chavistas to continue "struggle against inequality" and to work towards economic redistribution.

Gender inequality is certainly one form of ongoing inequality in society. As Ponniah writes,

redistributing resources is not sufficient to break down inequality because it ignores the "crucial role that identity and diversity play in society." That is, who we are plays a huge part in where we are on the social hierarchy. Simply providing those who have historically been economically disenfranchised is not enough to create a truly equal society or, at least, one seeking to be as equal as possible.

Indeed, writes Ponniah, Venezuela's 1999 Constitution is "explicitly anti-sexist" as it guarantees "women's right to work, to health services, to social security and pensions." Even more, by supporting the notion that women who are mothers should receive pensions, it in effect recognises the "monetary value of housework."

How this policy will play out in Venezuelan society remains to be seen. If it is known that a woman who is a full-time mother will receive a pension, might husbands and families use this law as reason to discourage or even prevent women from working?

Still, I find the paying of pensions to full-time mothers intriguing. Placing a specific monetary value on motherhood challenges the notion that "being a mother is priceless; it's the sort of thing that one could never put a price tag on." While I am glad to know that being a mother is esteemed so valuable, it is often conservative thinkers espousing "traditional family values" and that it is better for women to stay at home in the house who offer such views.

Currently the US ranks in the same category as Liberia and Papua New Guinea in how little it provides in the way of maternity leave. Venezuela has the world's third-longest maternity leave, providing mothers with six weeks of pre-natal leave and 20 post-natal. Fathers may receive two weeks of paternal leave. Parents who adopt a child under three years of age can receive the same benefits.

What can I say? When is the US going to wake up and smell the coffee some mothers (myself) drink too much of as we go about our full-time work as mothers, teachers, lawyers and so much more? Read more: care2.com/causes/venezuela *People's World*

Who was behind the Woolwich killing?

Chris Marsden

The killing of soldier Lee Rigby in Woolwich, London has lifted a corner of the carefully constructed veil of lies, intrigue and criminality surrounding British foreign policy. Immediately after Rigby's brutal murder, a chorus of political and media figures insisted that this was not the occasion for questioning the motives of his killers, Michael Adebolajo and Michael Adebowale.

Labour MP David Lammy described "the suggestion that the murder was a direct consequence of British foreign policy" as "superficially compelling," including criticism of "my vote in favour of the invasion of Iraq."

The UK *Guardian's* Jonathan Freedland attacked "liberal and left" figures for identifying a connection between events in London and the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria for having "some sneaking sympathy, not for the act itself, but for the cause it seeks to highlight."

Preventing discussion of the circumstances leading to the horrific crime of Adebolajo and Adebowale serves only to conceal the still-greater crimes perpetrated by Britain's ruling elite.

Within a matter of days, it was clear that both alleged killers had been known to MI5 for years, for a decade in Adebolajo's case. He was affiliated to the banned Islamist group Al-Mahajiroun. In November 2010, he was detained in Kenya while trying to travel to Somalia, allegedly to join the Islamist group Al-Shabaab.

On May 23, Abu Nusaybah, an associate of Adebolajo, was arrested immediately after an interview with *BBC Newsnight* in which he alleged that Adebolajo was tortured in Kenya and harassed by MI5, which asked him to become an informer.

Since then, evidence has emerged that Britain was in fact the architect of Adebolajo's arrest and actively protected him subsequently. According to the *Daily Mail*, it was an SAS unit, working with MI5, which snatched Adebolajo in Kenya as he prepared to cross the border into Somalia. A source said, "The SAS took the lead



It was clear that both alleged killers had been known to MI5 for years.

role. The reason they were involved was because this man was deemed important."

A Scotland Yard counter-terrorism officer based in Africa was "close by" as he was taken into custody in Kenya. Adebolajo was later sent back to Britain with "a Scotland Yard detective, travelling undercover," on board.

According to Adebolajo's legal representative in Kenya, he made a second attempt last year to travel to Somalia with five others and was detained by Kenyan authorities. The UK reportedly told Kenyan police he was "a clean man" and he was sent back once more to the UK.

Sources in Africa told the *Mail* that Adebolajo was seen in Kenya for a third time last November, in the company of a radical cleric Sheikh Hassan Makbul. On both occasions, he used a false passport.

Once again, the security services have been found to have established intimate connections with jihadist elements in order to further British imperialism's foreign policy in the Middle East and Africa.

A key factor in Adebolajo's being allowed free rein was his role in relation to Syria – and that of a broader layer of Islamists. A caller to the BBC's London 94.9 radio station,

Abdullah, identified Adebolajo as campaigning recently outside a community centre in Plumstead, London for youth to go and fight in Syria. Abdullah explained, "We may not have to go there because their soldiers are here," before adding, "Success is closer than you think."

In April, Foreign Secretary William Hague acknowledged reports that more than 100 Britons were among the 600-plus Europeans that have gone to fight in Syria with groups linked to Al-Qaeda, such as the Al Nusra Front. In a letter to MPs he said that such individuals were a danger, because they "will seek to carry out attacks against Western interests in the region or in Western states now or in the future."

The purpose of Hague's admission was in fact to argue the case for lifting the European Union's arms embargo on Syria in order to close down the "uncontested space" presently filled by fundamentalists with supposedly "moderate" forces armed by the Western powers.

Hague of course knows that arms sent by Britain, the European Union, the United States and its Middle East allies – such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar – are fuelling a sectarian insurgency dominated by Islamist

groups they have cultivated for years. His pose was only to ensure that the war for regime change in Syria was stepped up, with the region's oil reserves as the strategic prize.

On May 28, six days after Rigby was hacked to death, the EU arms embargo was lifted as a result of a campaign led by the UK and France. The decision guarantees that innumerable atrocities no different to that carried out in Woolwich will continue to be inflicted in Syria and neighbouring Lebanon and Iraq, by jihadists acting as terror squads on behalf of London, Washington and Paris.

At home, political forces whose crimes have fuelled the anger exploited by Islamist groups – and which have been proved once more to have covertly worked with them – are using Woolwich to argue for still greater repressive powers.

Prime Minister David Cameron has launched an "anti-terror task force" to propose "practical measures" to tackle political extremism that includes the Metropolitan police commissioner, Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe, and Andrew Parker, the director general of MI5.

The government is already mooted the reintroduction of legislation requiring telecom companies to record

the time, duration, originator and recipient of all emails, phone calls, messages on social media, webmail and Internet voice calls made in the UK.

The murder of Lee Rigby is only one of many, many tragic manifestations of how decades of wars and other colonialist adventures have served to poison social and political life in Britain and internationally, pursuant to the predatory aims of the financial oligarchy.

To secure control of vital resources such as oil, gas and minerals, large parts of the world have been despoiled, impoverished and subject to brutal intervention. Meanwhile, working people in Britain, Europe and America are forced to pay the trillions of dollars these wars cost through savage cuts aimed at enriching the criminal element that now dominates society.

No one should be intimidated or confused by the "patriotic" lies and crocodile tears emanating from the ruling class and its media. In the most fundamental sense it is they who are responsible for what happened at Woolwich. And it is they who should be politically held to account by the broad masses of working people.

globalresearch.ca ☪

Let's give Guantánamo Bay back to Cuba

David Cavendish

When President Obama gave his speech on national security issues on May 23 at the National Defence University in Washington, DC one of the topics he focused on was closing the Guantánamo Bay detention centre. The interruption of the speech by Medea Benjamin, a co-founder of CODEPINK, brought greater public attention to the issue.

The president recounted a number of problems he faces in order to do so, such as the need for Congressional approval to move the detainees before he could shutter the facility. "As president, I have tried to close Gitmo. I transferred 67 detainees to other countries before Congress imposed restrictions to effectively prevent us from either transferring

detainees to other countries or imprisoning them here in the United States. These restrictions make no sense. After all, under President Bush, some 530 detainees were transferred from Gitmo with Congress' support. When I ran for president the first time, John McCain supported closing Gitmo. This was a bipartisan issue."

The president went on to make a vague promise to remove the remaining detainees and close the prison.

Guantánamo will only be closed if there continues to be a broad-based movement that consistently pressures the government to close the prison. This effort is being augmented by the struggle – most notably through their hunger strike – by the detainees to seek justice.

When the detention centre is closed it will be a most important step in the worldwide effort to achieve universal human rights. But this closure should be only a first step in a long-term strategy.

What must be done is for the United States to return Guantánamo Bay, with all of its military facilities dismantled, to Cuba, the country from which US imperialists stole it in 1898.

There is no reason for the U.S. to maintain control over territory that belongs to another sovereign nation. Our presence in Guantánamo Bay harks back to the days of "gunboat diplomacy" and running roughshod over the darker-skinned peoples of Latin America, Asia, and Africa.

After the end of the Spanish-American War in 1898 Cuba attained independence from Spain

and nominal control over its affairs.

Congress passed the Platt Amendment in 1901 which affirmed the "right" to interfere in Cuba's affairs. One of the pillars of the Amendment was the maintenance of the US Naval Station at Guantánamo Bay. Today it remains the oldest US military installation in a foreign country.

In 1934 the United States and Cuba signed a Treaty of Relations which granted the US government a "perpetual" lease over the area. Over time, officials have claimed that the base ensured the security of the Caribbean basin, served as a calling station for ships, and protected the sea lanes to and from the Panama Canal.

With the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959 the new government has repeatedly demanded

that the United States return Guantánamo Bay, which all presidents since Dwight Eisenhower have refused to do.

Some 54 years have passed since Fidel Castro led the Cuban people to victory. The best way to move beyond the aims of the Cold Warriors is for the United States to make a complete revision of its policies toward Cuba.

This can be done in three major steps: 1) Re-establish full diplomatic relations; 2) the US government end the economic blockade and all travel restrictions; and 3) the United States return Guantánamo Bay to its rightful owners.

It was wrong to steal Guantánamo Bay in 1898; it is wrong today. It is time to give Guantánamo Bay back to Cuba. [PeoplesWorld](http://PeoplesWorld.com) ☪

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



email: tpearson@cpa.org.au

Strong opposition promised to Liberal's ABC privatisation move

Victorian Liberals are urging Tony Abbott to privatise the ABC. Has the Liberal Party learnt nothing from the time the Howard government sought to undermine the ABC? If they move to downgrade the ABC, they are both foolish and blind – blind to the importance of a national public broadcaster to this country, and blind to the strong and overwhelming community support for the ABC.

Friends of the ABC can promise a campaign of huge community opposition if the Liberal Party proceeds to attack the ABC.

The ABC provides an essential service to the nation and to its citizens, with content that is uncompromised by political and commercial influence.

Australians depend on the ABC for independent information, education and ideas. The public broadcaster provides quality entertainment and is important to the maintenance of our local culture.

Importantly, it is accessible to all in the community without cost.

The failure of the business model that supports commercial media has highlighted the importance of ensuring that public broadcasting flourishes.

With a federal election approaching, the Coalition must now make clear its intentions for the ABC.

Glenys Stradijot
Friends of the ABC

The concept of Unity of Marxists is flourishing in Newcastle

Sunday May 26 saw the coming together of seasoned Marxist-Leninists and young workers fresh from the picket line. Twenty eight people attended, 20 of whom

were younger people. Many of the younger comrades had never participated in a political class before.

Experienced speakers were able to lead interesting discussions on the Australian worker movement, the importance of Marxism-Leninism and the difference between Socialism and social democracy. There was brilliant and solid discussion around a whole range of issues regarding how Communist Parties and Social Democratic parties differ. It was agreed that Social Democratic parties will never change the nature of capitalism.

It was made clear that the only unions that have genuinely achieved for Australian workers have been those led by Communists.

Initiated by the Newcastle CPA Branch and organised by the Newcastle CPA, the Hellenic League Socrates Club and MUSSA Maritime workers, supported also by Newcastle Trades Hall Council, this is the first in a series of Marxist-Leninist classes.

For further information please contact the Newcastle CPA Branch via newcastle@cpa.org.au

Melbourne

Come and participate in Pulong Bayan (Public Meeting)

"Jobs, Security & Welfare: The Plight of Our 457 Kababayans"

1:30pm Saturday 22 June

Multipurpose Rooms 1 & 2 Laverton Community Hub
Corner Crown & Railway Avenue Laverton

Salu-salu (Shared Food and Drinks) follows

Statement, Communist Party of Turkey

During the evening hours [June 2] in Ankara the police attacked the headquarters of the Communist Party of Turkey, where the Cultural Centre "Nazim Hikmet" is also situated.

The police threw tear gas bombs into the building and to the café of the cultural centre. They took in custody the people in the café. Due to the tear gas bombs and the brutal violence of the police many comrades and friends got traumatised.

Our people will not pay for the terror that was created by the AKP government. All law enforcement officials must be brought to account and the government should resign.

Communist Party of Turkey – Central Office

Culture & Life

by Rob Gowland

Mercenaries ride again!



The French Foreign Legion – France and Spain both formed special Foreign Legions of mercenaries drawn from other countries to defend their colonial holdings around the world.

In days of yore, when the great European powers were building (or more commonly seizing) their empires, they regularly used the services of soldiers for hire, mercenaries who saw soldiering as a job so why not do it for a foreign government if it paid better than your own?

Imperialist governments soon realised that the best and most trustworthy mercenaries were foreigners. Being isolated from the community they were less likely to side with it against the government. After a while, some colonial people found that the only career path open to them was to go into the army of a particular colonial power.

Britain used Indian sepoy to spread its power and control over the whole of the sub-continent. The Gurkhas of Nepal are intimately connected still to the British Army. In the struggle for control of North America, both France and Britain used contingents of Native Americans to fight for them, with promises of future long-term co-operation with the winner as an inducement.

In Africa, the French, the Belgians and the British all used native troops to help expand their empires. France and Spain both formed special Foreign Legions of mercenaries drawn from other countries to defend their colonial holdings around the world.

Elsewhere, soldiers from the German state of Hesse became the bodyguard of the Russian Tsar, until the future Catherine the Great overthrew her husband and seized power.

And Scots fleeing English rule became soldiers for France against the Spanish domination of Europe.

Mercenaries played a prominent part in the USA's wars against Mexico and Spain in the late 19th century. And mercenaries were the mainstay of the White Guard forces in the intervention against the new Soviet republic from 1918 until 1922.

In the Spanish Civil War, the Spanish Foreign Legion of mainly Moroccan troops was a mainstay of Franco's fascist forces, paid not only with money but with "free use" for three days of the women of the towns or cities they captured.

Soldiers who fight for money and not for principles tend to be barbaric as well as unreliable. The use of mercenaries fell into disfavour after the end of WW2, the world war against Fascism. But over the decades since, it has slowly regained favour with the big corporations who want to reshape the world to their benefit, without regard for national governments or popular wishes.

Today, with the increasing use of covert proxy armies to destabilise and then overthrow governments that happen to be in the way of oil corporations, mining giants or resource companies, or which simply try to stand up to the bullying tactics of the USA, imperialism has brought about a merger of traditional mercenaries with religious fanatics.

These new-style mercenaries are paid indirectly, through a third party, because the

people of the world (unlike the big corporations and governments they control) still hold mercenaries in opprobrium, and "democratic" governments dare not acknowledge that they use them.

In Afghanistan and Iraq however, the USA uses armies made up of guards and security "consultants" to protect its offices and installations, the oil and other facilities it has seized, and its personnel. These armies are technically "civilians" so they are not really mercenaries. are they? Sure they aren't!

The most blatant use of mercenaries we have seen in recent years has been the fight against the national liberation struggle in Africa, and especially the fight to carve up the spoils once the national liberation forces had been ousted or killed. The whole of the middle part of the continent was subjected to a succession of coups, wars and military turmoil while the region's resources were looted or sold off and the population decimated, turned into refugees and generally impoverished.

In the major capitalist countries a propaganda campaign was carried out to rebrand mercenaries as "adventurers", a term deemed more socially acceptable. Prominent people – or at least relatives of same – thought it OK to become involved in attempts to use mercenaries, such as the abortive effort of Margaret Thatcher's son Mark to take over Equatorial Guinea in 2004.

Apparently satisfied with the effectiveness of mercenaries in other areas, the major

imperial states – the USA, Britain, France and everybody's financial backer Germany – have refined the practice and combined it with their covert activities, stiffening the mercenaries with their empires' special forces operatives. These new forces were seen in operation in the destruction of Libya and are now being used to destabilise Syria.

They are used in conjunction with barely concealed mercenary forces from the oil sheiks of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and other US client states. The only reason this blatant use of paid killers is not loudly condemned by the whole world is that the USA and its allies also control the world's main mass media outlets. According to the news that they distribute the mercenaries are "rebels" or even "freedom fighters", and the elected national governments fighting to defend their countries from these hired thugs and fanatics "oppressing or killing their own people".

Capitalism has certainly created a topsy-turvy world when the employers of mercenaries can stand up and try to take the moral high ground, weeping crocodile tears at the UN on behalf of the Syrian people who are being killed or turned into refugees by mercenaries employed – directly or indirectly – by the same imperial powers that are doing the weeping.

The use of mercenaries demonstrates yet again just how morally bankrupt capitalism is. Although it must be said, do we need any more demonstrations of that unquestionable truth? ☺



Sun 9 June –
Sat 15 June

Everything that's wrong about capitalism – ethically, culturally, morally and most other ways – is encapsulated in the 2012 US documentary by Lauren Greenfield, *The Queen of Versailles* (ABC2 Sunday June 9 at 8.30pm).

Essentially, Ms Greenfield's film is a study of the wife of a US billionaire who made his money flogging grossly over-priced time share packages to folk who dream of living – even if only for a short period each year – the lifestyle of the rich and infamous. He and others like him pander to ordinary people's carefully nurtured longing for the mythical "American Dream".

He is resort developer David Siegel. He and his former beauty queen wife Jackie have eight children and (at the start of the film at any rate) a small army of 19 Filipino maids that accompany the family on shopping trips and in the kitchen, etc.

When the film opens, the family is building the biggest private house in America, all 90,000 square feet of it. It's allegedly modelled on the palace of Versailles, but as re-imagined for a Las Vegas hotel or casino. As the UK *Guardian* said, Siegel is a man of wealth but no taste. For her part, Jackie was originally going to work in IT and has an engineering degree, but she found that her surgically-enhanced bosom opened more doors than an education so she married a

very rich man 30 years her senior and proceeded to live like royalty.

When the sub-prime mortgage bubble burst in the US and the global financial crisis followed, the Siegel's found their luxurious lifestyle severely curtailed (only four Philippino maids now, for example). Don't you just feel for them?

As the UK *Guardian* put it: "Never has grotesque wealth looked so unenviable, or its removal been so entertaining, as in this garishly watchable riches-to-rags documentary: part-car crash reality show, part-dissection of the modern American dream."

The film was released theatrically in the US, and reportedly did good business. Jackie, of course, was only too pleased to show off her gargantuan home (and bosom), her stuffed former pets scattered around the house's hallways, and her family's totally unreal lifestyle.

The *New Yorker* summed up Siegel's activities as "in essence, Siegel was hard-selling subprime mortgages to people who couldn't afford them – much like the banks that, in the course of the film, swoop down to foreclose on his beloved Versailles and his 52-story Las Vegas hotel". The irony is obvious. It's very hard to feel any sympathy for him, however. "Early in the film, when he's still riding high (actually, he's sitting on a throne), he tells Greenfield [the director], 'I got George W Bush elected president.' How? Smirk. 'I'd rather not say it. It may not necessarily have been legal.'"

In the words of David Edelstein in *New York Magazine*, "Siegel is contemptible on all sorts of levels", but *Guardian* readers will recognise that the Siegel family's aspirational, beyond-your-means lifestyle is only an extreme form of the greedy self-satisfying approach to life that capitalism tries to foster in everyone, regardless of income or needs. The 2008 economic downturn hit Siegel's business hard and layoffs at work and at home tested the pampered family for the first time.

Jackie had to accept the fact that her status as a trophy wife did not



The King & Queen of Versailles – The Queen of Versailles (ABC2 Sunday June 9 at 8.30pm).

necessarily guarantee a future for her and her seven children (she actually contemplates the worrisome fact that her children might "have to go to college" after all). Her husband fancied himself as another Hugh Hefner and used to play host to Miss America contestants. But after the crash she finds herself stepping around the dog turds on the floor (the maids used to clean them up before) and endeavouring to carry on.

"After flying on a commercial airline for the first time in decades, she rents a car from Hertz and asks what the name of her driver will be. Like so much of *The Queen of Versailles*, the scene would be unbelievable in a work of fiction on the grounds that no one could be that clueless." (*New York Magazine*).

One reviewer called *The Queen of Versailles* "a long, slow car crash of a film, alternately repellent and compelling". I think it shows the so-called "American Dream" to be really a nightmare – but with money.

There is a very interesting legal issue at the heart of Anthony Horowitz' latest drama series, *Injustice* (ABC1 Saturday at 8.30pm – it started last week, This week's episode is Part 2). Horowitz of course was the creator of Foyle's War. That series was about a copper in wartime, this one is about a defence barrister.

The psychological problem at the heart of the series is given as "how does a defence barrister live with himself if he finds out that his client is guilty?" The program's publicity says it is "a universal question ... at the heart of every country's legal system". But is that true?

I suspect it is only true in the adversarial system of British justice, where one team says the accused is guilty as hell and the other team says he is as innocent as a newborn lamb. Ascertaining the truth can take second place to "winning" the case for your client.

This is not the way justice works

in all other countries and it certainly was not the basis of courtroom procedure in the various countries of the socialist system, when we had one. Trials in socialist countries were usually structured differently, often with multiple judges and always with lay assessors as well as legal experts.

Issues other than "just the facts" were considered relevant, and character references were generally given more weight. Most importantly, the defence lawyer's role was perceived as "getting you client off at all costs" but as bringing to the court's attention any issues or factors that might explain, excuse, justify or mitigate the accused's actions.

It was not deemed advisable for a lawyer to act against his conscience: if his client was guilty he did not try to get him off anyway and thus "earn his fee", but instead he was expected to try to get the best possible result for his client while helping the court to ascertain the actual truth. ★



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Sydney

POLITICS in the pub

June 7

NO MEETING

Long weekend, holiday;

June 14

GENOCIDE IN SRI LANKA: WHY NO RESPONSE FROM AUSTRALIA?

Gordon Weiss, former UN spokesperson on Sri Lanka, author of *The Cage: The Fight for Sri Lanka* and *The Last Days of the Tamil Tigers*;
Sam Pari, Dr, Spokesperson for Australian Tamil Congress;

June 21

REMEMBERING RACHEL CORRIE

Rihab Charida, Daughter of Palestinian Refugees and Film Maker;
Vivienne Porzolt, Spokesperson for Jews Against the Occupation,
Sydney;
Lisa Arnold, Apheda Project Officer, Middle East;

June 28

THE DISGRACEFUL SHORT FALLS IN THE NSW HEALTH SYSTEM

John Kaye, MLC, NSW Greens;
Tad Tieze, Dr, Psychiatrist and campaigner;

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Fighting for equity in education

Yes, there is something fishy about NAPLAN (and My School)

Trevor Cobbold

A social media outcry a month ago forced the withdrawal of a television commercial linking a children's fish-extract supplement to success in the NAPLAN tests. Television advertisements for Nature's Way Kids Smart Omega-3 Fish Oil supplements finished with a reminder to parents that "NAPLAN testing starts May 14". *The Sydney Morning Herald* also reported that a Kids Smart ad placed on a website also included the slogan "Key ingredients for NAPLAN results and a healthy future".

The commercial was met with a howl of protest on Twitter and Facebook. *The Daily Telegraph* reported that education and health experts called the ads "unethical" and "opportunistic" and parents called it a "ploy that advertises to people's fears". The ad was quickly withdrawn.

The incident reveals just how important NAPLAN tests have become in schools. A whole industry is being built around the tests that plays on parent fears and aspirations and the pressure on schools to improve their results.

Schools practice tests for much of the first semester of school, some even start at the end of the year prior to NAPLAN, and parents are encouraged to practice for NAPLAN at home with their children. NAPLAN practice booklets are amongst the biggest selling education texts – you can even buy them in the local supermarket. Demand is so great that some publishers cannot keep up.

Many parents are having their children tutored after school for NAPLAN. Just Google "NAPLAN tutors" and you get 80,000 results. Privately-run NAPLAN workshops, including for Year 3 children, were widespread this year during first term holidays. Some schools and teachers refer children to private tutoring centres.

None of this was happening before My School. Standardised tests have been in place in some states for over 20 years and nationally-based tests have operated since 1999. They were treated as a low stakes exercise in schools that provided an additional source of information to parents and schools.

High stakes

NAPLAN is now "high-stakes". It is high stakes because school NAPLAN results are published on the My School website and are used to publish partial or full league tables of school results in newspapers. School reputations now depend on NAPLAN results. They also put the reputations and careers of principals and teachers on the line.



Money now hinges on NAPLAN results as well. Federal government reward payments have been provided to state/territory governments for improving their NAPLAN results. Federal bonuses are to be paid to schools and teachers for improving NAPLAN results. The Victorian and Queensland governments want to introduce performance pay for teachers based in part on NAPLAN results. All this has led to corruption and rotting of results overseas.

Substantial harm is being done as a result of this "high stakes" role of NAPLAN.

Parents are being conned into paying out hundreds, even thousands, of dollars to get their children tutored for NAPLAN just so schools can say they are above the national average or better than the school down the road. Not only is it a waste of money, but it places considerable stress on young children about the tests and robs them of valuable play-time after school.

Many parents seem intent on following the East Asian "tiger mother" syndrome of hours of homework and tutoring in the pursuit of education success above all else, even the physical and mental health of their children. One only has to look at the epidemic of myopia and high levels of stress amongst children in East Asian countries to see the consequences of intense focus on after-school education.

Many young children in Australia are experiencing high levels of stress as a result of the prominence given to NAPLAN in schools. A University of Melbourne survey found significant numbers of parents raising concerns about the impact of the tests on their children's well-being.

Nearly 70 percent of teachers said that they

had heard from individual parents about stressed children, particularly amongst primary-aged children. Over 40 percent of teachers reported having had concerns raised by parents regarding their child's ability to sleep as a consequence of the tests. Thirty-six percent reported parents had raised problems of students feeling sick before the test, with almost one quarter reporting that multiple families had identified this issue.

It has also been reported that NAPLAN testing is one of the causes of an increase in childhood anxiety observed by community counsellors.

Some schools have made gains in NAPLAN results in some Year levels and learning domains since 2008. However, these gains may be artificial and simply the result of the intense test preparation that now goes on in schools and private tutoring centres.

Breadth and depth

They also appear to be at the expense of breadth and depth in learning. There is evidence that the curriculum is being narrowed to allow more time for test preparation, that there is more teaching to the test, and more drilling and rote learning in the classroom. For example, a survey of teachers by researchers at the University of Melbourne last year reported that 75 percent of teachers say that they now teach to the test because of the focus on the NAPLAN tests and 70 percent say that less time is now spent on other subjects in schools. About 55 percent said that the focus on NAPLAN had narrowed the range of teaching strategies they use.

About 55 percent of primary teachers said they practised tests at least once a week for five

months before the tests, including 10 percent who practised daily for the whole five months. About 35 percent of secondary teachers said they practised tests at least once a week for the five months.

Another survey of teachers in South Australia and Western Australia by researchers at Murdoch University also found that NAPLAN has led to a narrowing of the curriculum, teaching to the test, and a negative classroom environment that lowers student engagement and does not cater for the needs of individual students. In this survey, 77 percent of teachers reported that preparation for the NAPLAN tests are taking time away from other curriculum areas. Fifty percent of teachers said that they felt forced to give dull, repetitive lessons because of NAPLAN.

Although these surveys were limited in scope and the respondents self-selected, they provide more evidence than hitherto available and confirm extensive anecdotal evidence of the impact of reporting school NAPLAN results on My School. They are also consistent with the experience with test-based accountability in England and the United States.

So, there is something "fishy" about NAPLAN and My School. They were promoted as the way to better student results, but the gains may be artificial and at the expense of a balanced education and lifestyle for young children.

Last year, the consumer group Choice awarded its Shonky award to another Nature's Way Kids Smart product – its Natural Medicine range for children. Perhaps this year's Shonky award should go to NAPLAN and My School! Save Our Schools saveourschools.com.au ✘

Parents are being conned into paying out hundreds, even thousands, of dollars to get their children tutored for NAPLAN just so schools can say they are above the national average or better than the school down the road.



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