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STAGE SET FOR INDIGENOUS VOICE TO PARLIAMENT

Franc Stregone

Last month, at the Garma Festival in Arnhem Land, prime minister Anthony Albanese released the draft wording that would be inserted into the constitution that would enshrine an Indigenous "Voice" to parliament.

He also released a draft question to be put to people at the referendum for the change.

The new provision in the constitution reads as follows:

"There shall be a body, to be called the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice

"The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice may make representations to parliament and the Executive government on matters relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

"The Parliament shall, subject to this Constitution, have power to make laws with respect to the composition, functions, powers and procedures of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice."

The draft question asks: "Do you support an alteration to the Constitution that establishes an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice?"

Speaking on the referendum, Albanese stated that:

"I believe the country is ready for this reform [...]. I believe there is room in Australian hearts for the [Uluru] Statement from the Heart. [...] It is not a matter of special treatment, or preferential power. It's about consulting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on the decisions that affect you. This is simple courtesy, it is common decency."

According to Albanese, this Voice would not be a "third chamber," but instead be "a body with the perspective and the power and the platform to tell the government and the parliament the truth about what is working and what is not."

However, by putting this Voice in the Constitution, Albanese has stated that it "means a willingness to listen won't depend on who is in government or who is prime minister."

The referendum is expected to take place sometime in 2023.

GOOD BUT NOT ENOUGH

While many have welcomed the news with open arms, many Indigenous people highlighted the need for a treaty. Indigenous affairs spokeswoman Lidia Thorpe — a Gunnai Gunditjmara and Djab Wurrung woman — has responded by saying:

"We don't have to wait until next year to have our rights legislated. Labor can support the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, which is being debated in parliament [...]. The Greens also want to see the government make meaningful progress towards Treaty, the potentially more difficult but ultimately more transformative part of the Uluru statement [...]."

However, Thorpe has stated the Greens will negotiate "in good faith" but has certain demands such as a truth-telling commission – "an independent body that investigates and reveals past wrongdoing to resolve ongoing and historical conflict and heal from it."

Others were more pessimistic about a "Voice."

Independent member of the NT Legislative Assembly Yingiya Mark Guyula – a Yolŋu elder – has called the Voice "hopeless," stating:

"It's not good enough, that's not what we want. People here don't want Voice, we want Voice included into Treaty, and we want truth-telling into Treaty. [...] Through a Treaty we want to say, no we don't want that policy, we don't want your policy, you listen to us [...]."

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By putting this Voice in the constitution, Albanese has stated that it "means a willingness to listen won't depend on who is in government or who is prime minister."

Aboriginal Dreamtime Team. Photo: NAPARAZZI – commons.wikimedia.org (CC BY-SA 2.0)

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REVIEW: *Our Members Be Unlimited*

Guardian

Issue 2020 22nd August, 2022

SCOTTY'S GOTTA GO

With the Morrison government over, you'd think we'd have heard the end of it – but you'd be wrong!

It turns out that former prime minister Scott Morrison appointed himself as the joint minister for health, finance, resources, home affairs, and the treasury without all ministers (and the Australian public) being notified.

Speaking on the revelations, prime minister Anthony Albanese stated that:

> **"Australians knew during the election campaign that I was running a shadow ministry. What they didn't know was that Scott Morrison was running a shadow government. [...] The people of Australia were kept in the dark as to what the ministerial arrangements were,it's completely unacceptable [...]. This is very contrary to our Westminster system. It was cynical and it was just weird that this has occurred."**

Then-health minister Greg Hunt agreed to the joint position as a safeguard in a circumstance where he was unable to perform due to COVID-19. However, it has been reported that then-finance minister Matthias Cormann was not told Mr Morrison self-appointed himself to share that portfolio. Nationals MP and then-resources minister Keith Pitt told the ABC that he "certainly made inquiries" about the appointment but accepted the position.

Albanese has ordered an investigation into Morrison's actions.

Opposition leader Peter Dutton has attempted to remove himself from the situation while, at the same time, not fanning the flame by stating: "Obviously the then-prime minister had his reasons, his logic for it, but it was not a decision I was party to or was aware of. It was a decision-making process that he's made [...]."

Former Coalition prime minister Malcolm Turnbull told ABC's *7.30* program that this was "one of the most appalling things I have ever heard [...]," further stating that "This is sinister stuff [...]. [...] Scott was meant to be leading a centre-right conservative government. This is not conservative. This is throwing aside all of the traditions of Westminster parliamentary democracy."

With politicians from both sides of the aisle either distancing or outright denouncing this behaviour, what has the man of the hour himself had to say about the recent news?

Morrison told 2GB that, "I was facing press conferences every single day [...]. [...] People were expecting me to be taking responsibility for all that."

While the public expected Morrison to take responsibility for the decisions of his cabinet and be informed of what each portfolio was doing, no one expected the prime minister to literally take the responsibility out of the hands of his ministers. Additionally, what is being criticised here is not so much that the prime minister took on these portfolios but the manner in which he did it – secretively, away from public scrutiny or the scrutiny of his own party. However, we should not be surprised that Morrison – who threw in captain's picks at the 2022 federal election – undermined his colleagues when he was prime minister. After making the noble sacrifice of choosing to take on all the responsibilities of all those portfolios, sounds like the bloke deserves a well earned break, another trip to Hawaii perhaps? It's not like he told anyone about that either.

STAGE SET FOR INDIGENOUS VOICE TO PARLIAMENT

Continued from page 1

WHERE DOES THE CPA STAND?

The CPA acknowledges both an Indigenous Voice to parliament and Treaty as key tasks of Indigenous struggle. The CPA believes that material gains will result from these processes and develop better outcomes for First Nations people.

However, the CPA holds that Australia – as a state that only serves the interest of the ruling class – limits Indigenous struggle within its capitalist framework which is predicated on exploitation of the working class and, as a result, holds everything subordinate to profits for the ruling class. Therefore, true liberation for First Nations people is necessarily intertwined with the struggle of the working class for a truly equitable society not based on exploitation but is instead people-orientated.

At the 14th CPA Congress, the CPA outlined in its political resolution how it believed a socialist "Australia" would deliver a just society:

"Land rights as a recognition of prior Indigenous ownership of the entire Australian continent will be realised. This is the fundamental issue of rights for Indigenous people. There will be legislation to return land to its traditional owners based on traditional ownership, cultural association, long occupancy, connections or need. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders' land title will include full rights to minerals and other natural resources as well as to all sacred sites, heritage areas and areas of traditional significance."

In other words, the CPA believes that a relationship between First Nations people and non-Indigenous people can only begin with an "Australia" that is truly acknowledges its colonial and capitalist nature which has robbed and murdered Indigenous people for centuries. Such an acknowledgement requires a commitment to work alongside First Nations people which transfers real rights and power back into their hands.

Before such a future can be realised it is important that we start acting and help First Nations communities. We need to move beyond just listening as First Nations communities have expressed time and time again their struggles: police brutality, undrinkable water, continued land theft, removal of children, among others. Participating in these campaigns and struggling alongside First Nations people we can move the conversation on equality forward and fight for more radical changes. ✪

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It argues that humanity is at a crossroads. The insatiable drive for profits by capitalism is leading to irreversible and catastrophic climate change. Capitalist governments – and the giant corporations they work for – are refusing to act on the warnings of the great majority of the world's leading scientists.

A popular movement for change is growing around the world. It aims to dismantle the destructive policies that have led us to this uniquely perilous moment of human history, and to move toward a world system that gives priority to human rights and needs.

The stakes in the bitter class war that is taking shape are immense and arise from the nature of capitalism. Capitalism is an unsustainable system.

The pamphlet insists that we must confront the reality that what we do now will forever alter the course of humanity and all life on Earth. Now more than ever we must fight for a better system. Our lives are more important than their profits.

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GENUINE SOVEREIGNTY: WHAT AUSTRALIA CAN LEARN FROM SOUTH AFRICA

Roland Boer

It is a sad fact that many countries around the world do not see Australia as a sovereign country, especially in terms of international relations. After a little over 100 years since federation, this is a poor state of affairs. To clarify: "sovereign" means the new definition that emerged in countries that had achieved liberation from imperialist and colonial oppression. To be sovereign therefore means mutual non-interference: it means not interfering in the internal affairs of other countries, and not permitting any other country to interfere in your own country. As we well know, Australia has constantly experienced external interference, first with the fading British Empire, and – since the Second World War – by the US. And Australia spends a good deal of time trying to interfere in the internal affairs of Pacific countries, as well as Indonesia.

What can Australia learn from South Africa? Two recent statements are worth quoting at some length. The first comes from Dr Naledi Pandor, the minister of international relations and cooperation. During a recent – and very underwhelming – visit by the US's Anthony Blinken to South Africa, Pandor observed: "With some of our partners in Europe and elsewhere, there has been a sense of patronising bullying [...] You can't say 'because Africa is doing this, you will be punished by the United States' [...] It is important for all of us to accept our ability to hold different opinions. We are, after all, sovereign nations that are regarded as equal in terms of the UN Charter. We may differ in terms of economic power and economic ability to influence development in different parts of the world, but what will make the world work is if we respect each other. One thing I particularly dislike is to be told 'either you choose this or else.' I definitely will not be bullied in that way, nor would I expect any other African country worth its salt to agree to be treated in this way."

The second quotation comes from the South African defence minister, Thandi Modise, She has a background in the anti-Apartheid struggle and in 1980 was imprisoned for ten years by the former apartheid regime. Modise was one of 700 delegates from seventy countries at a major forum held near Moscow in August, 2022. In response to a question by a Russian journalist, Modise observed: "The reason Africa respects Russia is that Russia was never a coloniser of Africa [...]. We also respect Russia for a second reason: where it has contributed, where it has given loans, it has not enslaved Africans. So we think that in terms of development, Russia has the potential to invest, to become a partner, to grow the economies that will lead to less poverty, less dependence [...] [In reply to a question on BRICS:] Through South Africa, BRICS was enabled to expand to the rest of the continent. You will also remember that every time BRICS is hosted in South Africa, the other states are invited to participate. Therefore, we are already enabling China, Brazil, and India to get access to the countries which you sometimes may not have been able to come into. But as I say, it is about growing people. It is about growing respect. It is about growing positive relations throughout the world. That's what we want; more than just making money."

This is not to say Australia should simply copy South Africa on every issue. Instead, genuine sovereignty entails acting internationally in a way that is beneficial for workers and common people in Australia. Perhaps the foreign ministry in Canberra should spend some time in South Africa so as to learn how to act as a sovereign and responsible country. ✪

Photo: South African Tourism – flickr.com (CC BY 2.0)

To be sovereign therefore means mutual non-interference: it means not interfering in the internal affairs of other countries, and not permitting any other country to interfere in your own country.

PAY RISE TO RECOGNISE UNDERVALUED AGED CARE WORKFORCE

Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation Statement

The Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) says the Federal government's Submission supporting a pay rise for aged care nurses and care workers will finally recognise the chronic undervaluation of employees and set the platform for better recruiting and retaining workers in the sector and, ultimately, better care for older Australians.

The ANMF and the Health Services Union (HSU) have already made landmark applications to the Fair Work Commission's aged care work-value case, for a twenty-five per cent across-the-board increase in award wages for the country's lowly-paid aged care workers.

ANMF Federal Secretary Annie Butler said the Submission by the Federal government is a long-awaited recognition that the work of aged care nurses and carers continues to be undervalued and that an increase in award wages is strongly justified.

"We appreciate the government's support for our ongoing ANMF campaign to improve the wages of aged care workers, whose work has never really been properly valued," Butler said today.

"We welcome the government's agreement that current award rates do not adequately reflect the value of aged care workers, particularly in light of their extraordinary efforts over the last thirty months of the COVID-pandemic, which has already claimed the lives of more than 3,000 elderly Australians.

"The nature of the work required across the aged care sector has developed considerably over the years and become significantly more complex, requiring greater skill and responsibility under increasingly difficult conditions, with a diminishing workforce.

"That's why we believe the government's support for a wage increase for nurses and workers will create the opportunity for well-paid jobs and provide a platform for nurses and care workers to be recruited and retained in the under-resourced aged care sector."

Ms Butler said the Submission demonstrated the Albanese Government's ongoing commitment to fixing aged care after the introduction of new Legislation which will ensure that a registered nurse (RN) is on-site in every nursing home 24/7 and that nursing home residents will receive a minimum amount of safe, quality care every day from a suitably valued workforce. ✪

"Business as usual won't work"

ACTU PUSHES FOR RADICAL REFORMS AHEAD OF JOBS SUMMIT

A worker is smashing the capitalist system.
Faithfully adapted by mAlkAv from the Vladimir Mayakovsky's original.

B Curphey

The federal government is holding a Jobs and Skills Summit in early September this year to address the "shared economic challenges" faced by Australians. The Summit will be held over two days from 1-2 September and will focus on issues such as:

- keeping unemployment low, boosting productivity and incomes
- delivering secure, well-paid jobs and strong, sustainable wages growth
- expanding employment opportunities for all Australians including the most disadvantaged
- addressing skills shortages and getting our skills mix right over the long term
- improving migration settings to support higher productivity and wages
- maximising jobs and opportunities from renewable energy, tackling climate change, the digital economy, the care economy and a Future Made in Australia
- and ensuring women have equal opportunities and equal pay.

While attendance at the Summit is limited, members of the public will be invited to make submissions to government ahead of the next federal budget (more information at treasury.gov.au/employment-whitepaper/jobs-summit).

The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) has commissioned a report calling for six key reforms to ensure a decent future for Australian workers. These include reforms to the industrial relations system, targeted tax measures, and calling on the government to "[u]se active fiscal policy to help achieve and maintain full employment, decent jobs, and stable prices."

The ACTU report emphasises that "business as usual won't work." But apparently big business didn't get the memo. The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry has rejected the ACTU's proposal for reformed fiscal policy, insisting instead that the government should focus on boosting employment levels, encouraging skilled migration and upskilling the workforce. Reserve Bank policy, they say, should not be considered at the Summit.

Meanwhile, the Liberal opposition is refusing to attend the Summit, labelling it a "stunt." Good riddance. But they haven't refrained from giving their two cents. Siding with the Australian Industry Group, Shadow Treasurer Angus Taylor warned that the ACTU's proposal was too reliant on monetary policy, stating:

"[t]his is a plan for higher taxes, higher inflation and heavy-handed government and it would be a wrecking ball through the economy."

Taylor's statement makes it painfully clear that the 'economy' is just a convenient euphemism for the wealth of the ruling class. No regard is had for the impact of high inflation, the pandemic or the looming recession on workers.

The capitalists want free market economics and business as usual, because higher taxes and labour regulation would hurt their bottom line. Companies are making record profits while workers suffer the cost of living crisis. And when the impending recession hits, it is workers who will suffer. Not business.

Without getting into the nitty gritty of monetary policy, the system as it stands is what got us into this mess. It cannot be relied on to get us out. We need what the ACTU called, "a fairer inflation-reduction policy that protects workers' incomes, prevents price gouging, and tackles the underlying sources of inflation, especially in energy and housing, and reduces the cost of key public services such as early childhood education and care."

Flooding the labour market will not solve these problems. It will only create more, as the demand for decent and secure work skyrockets and workers compete for crumbs. We've seen it before, and if the ruling class gets its way, we'll very shortly see it again. ✪

Dingo bytes

Banks and insurance companies raked in billions according to financial year end of interim results, with CEO pay increasing by tens of millions of dollars. This coincides with big banks advocating against increasing wages and suppressing their own workers' wages or sacking them. Profits of the four banking and insurance companies who have reported their full year results this year (CBA, Macquarie, Suncorp and IAG) are up twenty-eight per cent to $15.6 billion despite revenue increasing only eight per cent to $80.3 billion. CEO pay for these entities is up thirty-six per cent to $37.8 million and shareholder returns in the form of dividends and buybacks are up fifty-seven per cent. Individual company results highlight this wider profit trend: The Commonwealth Bank's profits are up nine per cent to $9.7 billion, and their CEO Matt Comyn's pay went up thirty-five per cent to $6.97 million, while he argues that higher wage growth could lead to a wage price spiral; Macquarie bank's CEO Shemara Wikramanayake's pay went up by forty-nine per cent to $23.7 million. Suncorp's CEO Steve Johnson's pay rose seventeen per cent to $4.9 million posting a profit of $341 million. IAG are increasing premiums – with profits of $347 million. Big banks have made these profits while the real wages of financial sector workers have gone backwards to 2015 levels. While raking in billion-dollar profits, the expected RBA cash rate increase to 2.6 per cent will likely be passed on entirely to borrowers but not depositors by the banks. Currently workers' wages have the lowest share of GDP in recorded Australian history, while company profits are at their highest share.

The cost to GPs of delivering care to patients has outstripped the Medicare GP rebate payment that not charging patients gap fee is no longer feasible, says the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners. The previous Coalition government – in line its anti-Medicare line – froze the doctor rebate from 2013 to 2019. A recent poll of 500 GPs found that twenty-two per cent had recently began charging a gap fee. "Medicare was introduced as a universal health system, with high bulk billing rates for many years," said Leanne Wells of health services group Consumer Health Forum. "We now have a system where universalism is at risk and patients paying more in out-of-pocket costs for a basic GP visit than the rebate. This is going to lead to more people not getting the care they need."

PARASITE OF THE WEEK: The NSW workers' comp agency iCare has knocked back claims for compensation by the family of an Uber Eats delivery rider killed in a road collision on a Sydney street in 2020. The Transport Workers' Union is challenging the decision, the union's national secretary Michael Kaine, noting, "If these riders were killed in any other workplace, there'd be no question as to whether the loved ones they've left behind should be financially supported."

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RTBU'S "ROLLING" ACTIONS HIGHLIGHT BROKEN BARGAINING SYSTEM

B Curphey

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Workers at Sydney Trains and NSW Trains are taking industrial action throughout August over the Government's refusal to negotiate in good faith. Health and safety, job security, privatisation and domestic violence leave are all on the Rail Tram and Bus Union's (RTBU) agenda, but the safety of Sydney's new metro trains is a primary concern. Strictly speaking, the action is not a strike. Instead, workers have put bans on working with trains made overseas, overtime, working with contractors or doing non-essential electrical and maintenance work.

Rail workers in NSW began taking industrial action last year, after negotiations with management stalled. Sydney Trains proposed cuts to redundancy entitlements, full-time jobs and consultation on work health and safety issues. So far, they have refused to come to the table to negotiate with workers over these proposals. And workers are steadfastly refusing to sacrifice their safety and conditions.

In an effort to turn public opinion against train workers, the NSW government has cut services on a number of lines across the state – both metro and regional. An estimated 70 per cent of train services in metro Sydney are affected. In addition, despite the ticket gates being thrown open, commuters are still being issued with infringement notices for not paying their fare.

The Chief Executive of Sydney Trains stated that fare enforcement was necessary and that:

> "[t]he data we receive when commuters tap on and tap off is used to plan and adjust services to meet commuter demand and assists us to communicate real time capacity information."

This facade of concern for commuters has been a consistent feature of the companies' response to the actions. It is a blatant attempt at strike-breaking and should not be heeded. The Opal system is designed to generate profit and commuters are a captive market: commuter satisfaction is not the company's primary concern.

But RTBU NSW Secretary Alex Classeens says workers will not be intimidated into ceasing their action:

> "Workers won't be bullied into allowing unsafe trains to run on our railways, nor will we be bullied into submission by a government more focused on ideological games than in delivery of the public transport system we all deserve."

At the heart of this issue is a broken system wherein employers can use the expiry or termination of a workplace's enterprise agreement (EA) to attack wages and conditions, and refuse to negotiate in good faith. On twitter earlier this month, @RTBUnion had this to say:

> "The RTBU has been a loud critic of the way employers have been able to use the terminations of EAs as a bargaining tactic to drive down wages & conditions. Great to see his tactic heading for the bin where it belongs."

This in response to criticism of this practice by the new Labor government. Workplace Relations Minister Tony Burke has stated that Labor will commit to legislating to close this loophole. It remains to be seen how effective this legislation will be.

The issue of using EAs to rip off workers is not confined to the transport industry: it is endemic to industrial relations in Australia. The NTEU is fighting the same battle on many fronts as university EAs come up for negotiation. Earlier this month, RMIT staff were threatened with proceedings in the Fair Work Commission if they refused to work for free on the university's open day in protest of the University's failure to negotiate.

The NSW train action is expected to continue for weeks as part of a "rolling action" to force the NSW government to negotiate in good faith and protect their conditions. Nine actions are planned throughout August, targeting different aspects of the work that RTBU members do. Not all of the actions will affect the ability of train services to run.

The CPA stands in solidarity with train workers in NSW and with all workers whose employers are using the broken enterprise bargaining system to strip away their hard-won wages and conditions. ✪

WORKERS WALK-OFF AT PFIZER FOR A FAIR DEAL

United Workers' Union Statement

Workers at Pfizer's pharmaceutical manufacturing plant in Bentley, Perth will down tools for 24 hours in protest of the company's substandard offer.

United Workers Union (UWU) members have begun industrial action following the USA-based company's refusal to consider a wage increase in line with the cost-of-living.

Pfizer has offered a twelve per cent increase over three years, while members are pursuing an 18 percent increase over the same period, pointing to the US$25 billion profit the pharmaceutical company reported last financial year.

The pharmaceutical giant also plans to shutter the Bentley plant in 2024, which would leave the more than 100 advanced manufacturing workers in limbo as a new buyer of the plant has not been secured.

Despite Pfizer's planned exit from the market, the company was refusing to guarantee redundancies paid on average hours worked, which could potentially leave all workers worse off.

United Workers Union Allied Coordinator Louise Dillon said it was unconscionable that huge multi-nationals like Pfizer were keen on short-changing the workers who had helped generate their profits.

"Pfizer's revenues have doubled in two years, largely on the back of the world's taxpayers who forked out to have the COVID-19 vaccine distributed in their respective countries."

"Australians contributed hundreds of millions of dollars to Pfizer's profit margins but the company is insistent on squeezing every single dollar, even if it means screwing workers out of a fair pay deal.

"It really is unbelievable that on one hand Pfizer tell us they couldn't possibly consider a $1.60 pay rise while shovelling out billions to wealthy shareholders across the planet. Greed, it's a pretty insidious disease for which there seems to be no cure."

UWU members from the plant reserve the right to take indefinite action in the event Pfizer refuses to return to the bargaining table with a fair offer. ✪

Find out more about the

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MASS SHOOTINGS IN TH
THE ROLE OF TH

Graham Holton

On 24th May 2022 an eighteen-year-old gunman, equipped with an AR-15 style semiautomatic rifle, murdered nineteen students and two teachers at a primary school in Uvalde, Texas. It was the deadliest school shooting in the United States since the Sandy Hook Primary School in Newtown, Connecticut, on 14th December 2012, with twenty children and six adults murdered. Within two weeks Uvalde was followed by another thirteen mass shootings in the USA. During the 4th July Independence Day Parade in Highland Park, Illinois, six people were murdered and more than thirty others injured in a mass shooting. This was just a week after President Joe Biden signed a bipartisan gun reform bill into law, on 25th June. On a single day, 17th July, there were another eight more mass shootings, murdering seven and injuring twenty-nine. It was just another day in the USA. Gun safety advocates, including President Joe Biden and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, called for new restrictions following the mass shootings, taking on the powerful gun lobby and the gun manufacturers.

The Gun Violence Archive (GVA) and the Congressional Research Service define a mass shooting as an incident in which four or more people are shot and killed, excluding the shooter. By July this year, there have been more than 314 mass shootings, with the death of more than 22,000 people, making it one of the worst years since 2014, when the GVA started collecting reports. In 2021, the GVA recorded 692 mass shootings and reported that 45,010 people had died from gun violence.

According to the Giffords Law Center, guns are now the main cause of death for children under the age of eighteen. The mass shootings of children attracted worldwide attention after the Columbine High School, Colorado massacre on 20th April 1999, in which twelve students and one teacher were murdered. In Michael Moore's 2002 documentary, *Bowling for Columbine*, he argues that the US government emphasises fear and uses it to promote capitalism over human lives. He focused attention on the NRA (National Rifle Association), the nation's biggest gun lobby and a major donor to Congress members, especially Republicans. The NRA and its supporters have no interest in saving lives nor in social justice. In response to the film, mass pro-gun marches demonstrated across the country.

Under the influence of the gun lobby, the media has changed the language being used, referring to the victims as "killed" rather than "murdered." A killing is an all-encompassing loss of someone who died, either accidentally or intentionally. That is, the victim of a mass shooting is unplanned, it is just someone who happened to be there. A murder is more specific. It is an intentional killing of someone due to a malicious act. In the case of a mass shooting, it is someone holding a gun, with the specific purpose of killing people.

Despite the horrific massacre at Uvalde, the NRA went ahead with its annual convention at the George R Brown Convention Center in Houston, a five-hour drive from the little town. The NRA executive director, Wayne LaPierre, said gun owners "love our nation, love our children and grandchildren. That's why we will always cherish and protect our fundamental right to defend ourselves and our communities." In 2021 LaPierre admitted to hiding on a wealthy friend's yacht, in fear of his life, after the mass outpouring of grief after the Sandy Hook School shootings. He obviously did not trust his guns to protect him.

In support of the NRA, retired law enforcement officer Rick Gammon, said that any efforts to take firearms from Americans are doomed to failure. R Thurman Barnes, the assistant director of Rutgers University's New Jersey Gun Violence Research Center, and faculty at the Rutgers School of Public Health, said that since we have more guns than people "you're going to have more gun violence." Senator Ted Cruz, a Texas Republican, said that communities needed guns: "Taking away guns will not make them safer." Former US President Donald Trump told a gun convention: "The existence of evil in our world is not a reason to disarm law-abiding citizens".

Yet according to the statistics, guns have not and never will make the US safer for its citizens. So why do US citizens believe the obvious lie that guns make the country safer? The NRA is the major supporter of lax gun laws and actively promotes the ownership of guns, by lobbying the government and through the media.

In an attempt to diminish the power of the NRA, New York Attorney General, Letitia James, sued the NRA for its stand on gun ownership, aiming to bankrupt and dissolve the organisation. Her office claimed that current and former executives, including LaPierre, used NRA funds for their own personal gain, leading to the group losing more than US$64 million in three years. In January 2021 the NRA filed for bankruptcy and planned to move its operations from New York to Texas. The NRA organisation in January 2021 had US$50 million in assets, and spent US$620,000 on lobbying in the first quarter. In March 2021, a federal judge dismissed the NRA's bid to seek bankruptcy protection, allowing James' litigation to continue. In response, the NRA spent a further US$2 million on lobbying Congress and the Biden administration on gun reform bills. The NRA is defended by Brewer, Attorneys & Counselors, which was paid US$23 million in 2020. Despite this filing, the NRA is still very influential with significant cash reserves to lobby and campaign.

The NRA was founded in 1871 by Colonel William C. Church and General George Wingate to "promote and encourage rifle shooting on a scientific basis." It was also political, forming the Legislative Affairs Division in 1934, following attacks on the Second Amendment of the Constitution. The NRA mailed out legislative facts and analyses to its members, allowing them to take their own actions. The NRA Police Firearms Instructor certification program began in 1960, certifying police and security firearms instructors.

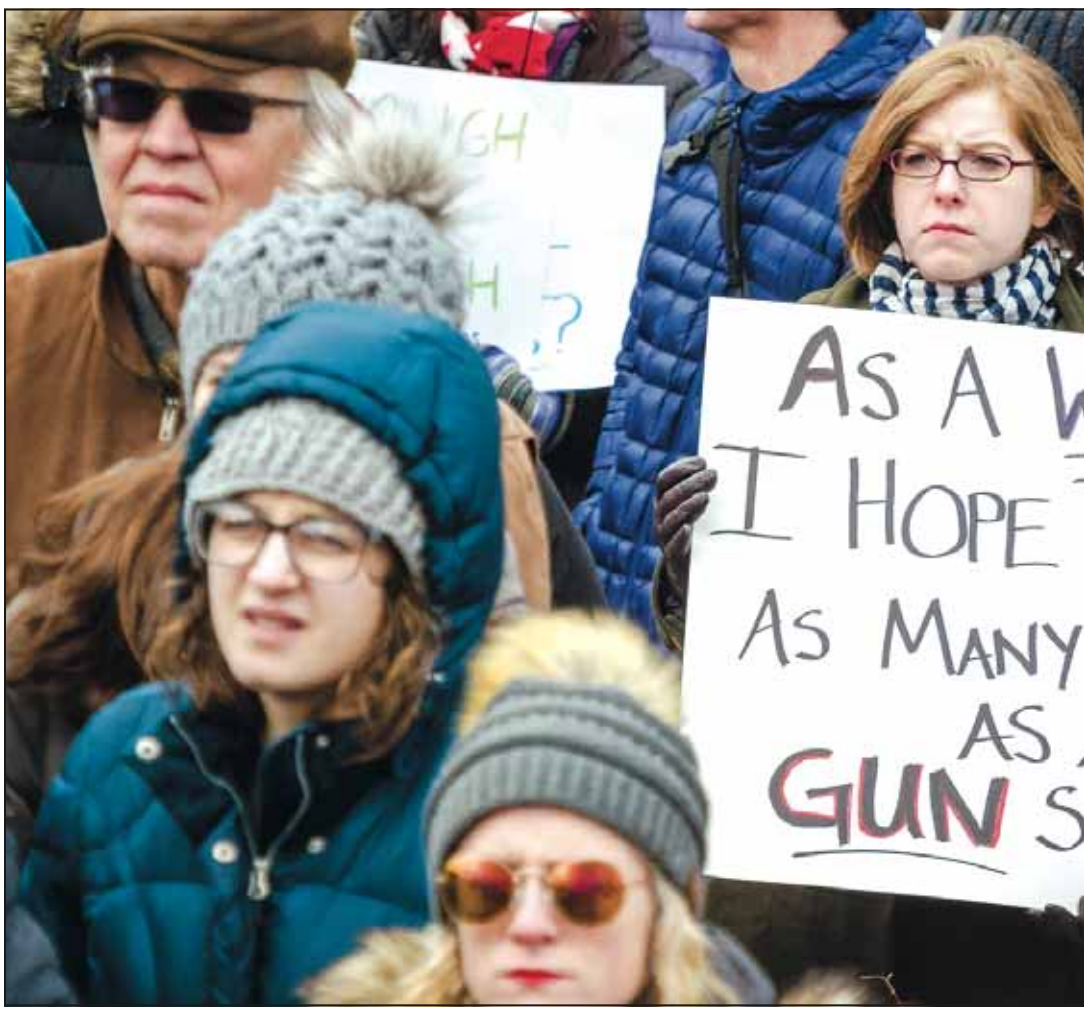

Photo: depthandtime – flickr.com (CC BY-NC 2.0)

The 1960s saw the rise of the Black Panthers, which had grown out of the Civil Rights Movement and the appalling way that police officers treated Black people in the USA. Huey P Newton, Bobby Seale and other Panthers patrolled Oakland, California. When the police harassed African Americans the Black Panthers would stop, get out with their semiautomatic rifles and recite the proper laws for those being harassed. When the police challenged the Panthers for carrying guns in public, they cited the laws protecting all individuals for gun ownership and that if any effort was made to disarm them, the Panthers would defend themselves and the community. The NRA retaliated with the message that Whites had to arm themselves for protection. In 1975, it formed the Institute for Legislative Action (ILA). Gun ownership in the US has more to do with racism than just self-protection.

According to a report by OpenSecrets, gun rights groups spent US$15.8 million in 2021 on lobbying compared to US$2.9 million in 2020, setting a new record. In the first quarter of 2022, gun rights groups spent US$2 million compared to US$609,000 by the gun control groups. With such a direct influence on how people consider gun violence, it raises the question, if the NRA has been culpable of soliciting acts of violence? If so, then should the NRA be held responsible for mass shootings? Under US Code § 373 (a) Solicitation to commit a crime of violence:

"Whoever, with intent that another person engage in conduct constituting a felony that has as an element the use, attempted use, or threatened use of physical force against property or against the person of another in violation of the laws of the United States."

Few Australians realise how powerful and politically active the gun lobby is in our country. After the Port Arthur massacre on 28th April 1996, when thirty-five people died and eighteen injured, Australia enacted tougher new gun laws under John Howard. This included a general ban on the use of semiautomatic rifles, shotguns and pump-action shotguns. This massacre was not an isolated incident for in the 1980s there had been nine mass shootings, with forty-five dead. Since the new laws were enforced, there has only been one mass shooting in Australia. Ever since 1996 Australians have been supportive of tougher laws. In polling published last year, Essential Research found that only seven per cent of Australians thought our gun laws were too strict, compared to sixty-two per cent who felt they were "about right," and a further quarter who believed that the legislation is still too weak.

A report by The Australia Institute warns that Australia's gun lobby is "of similar size and funding" to America's NRA. The Australian gun lobby is far more subtle and no

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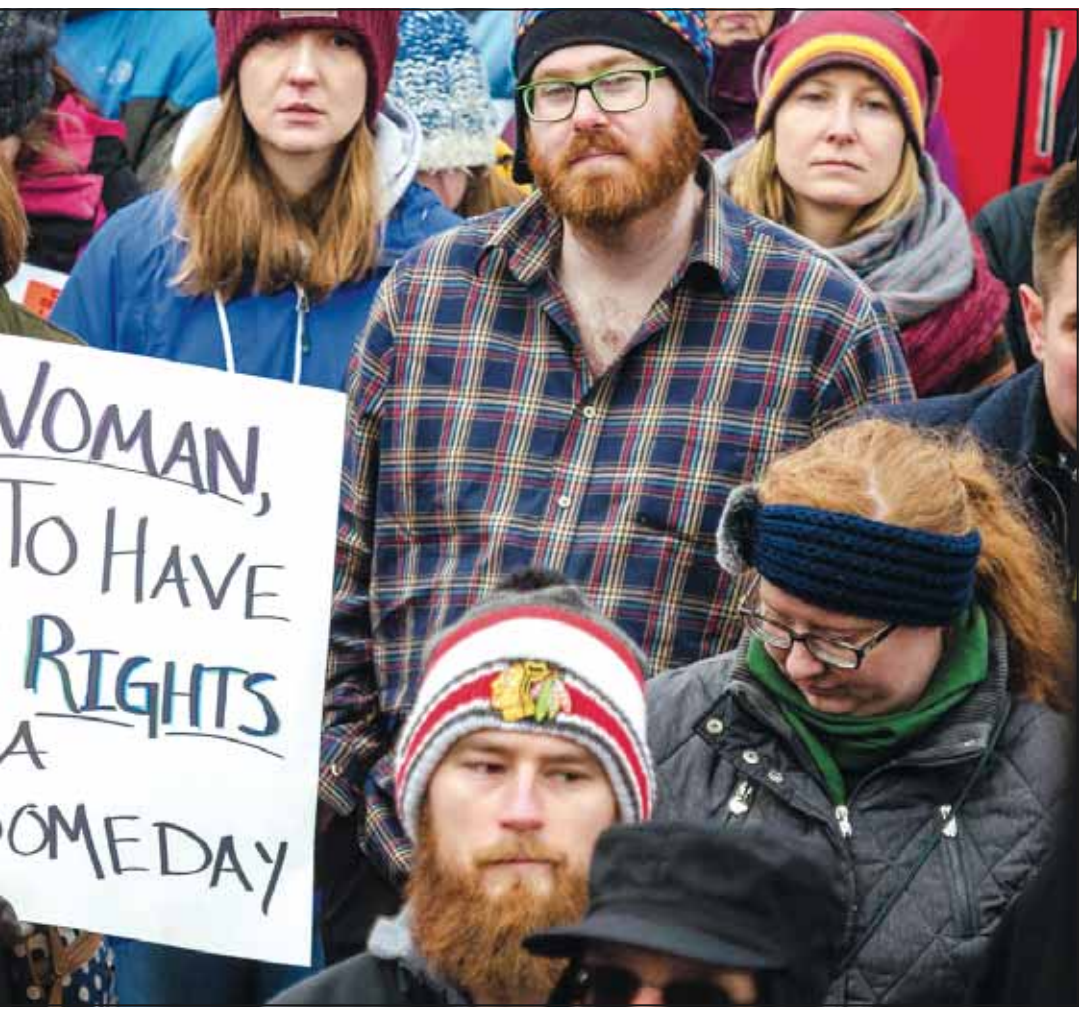
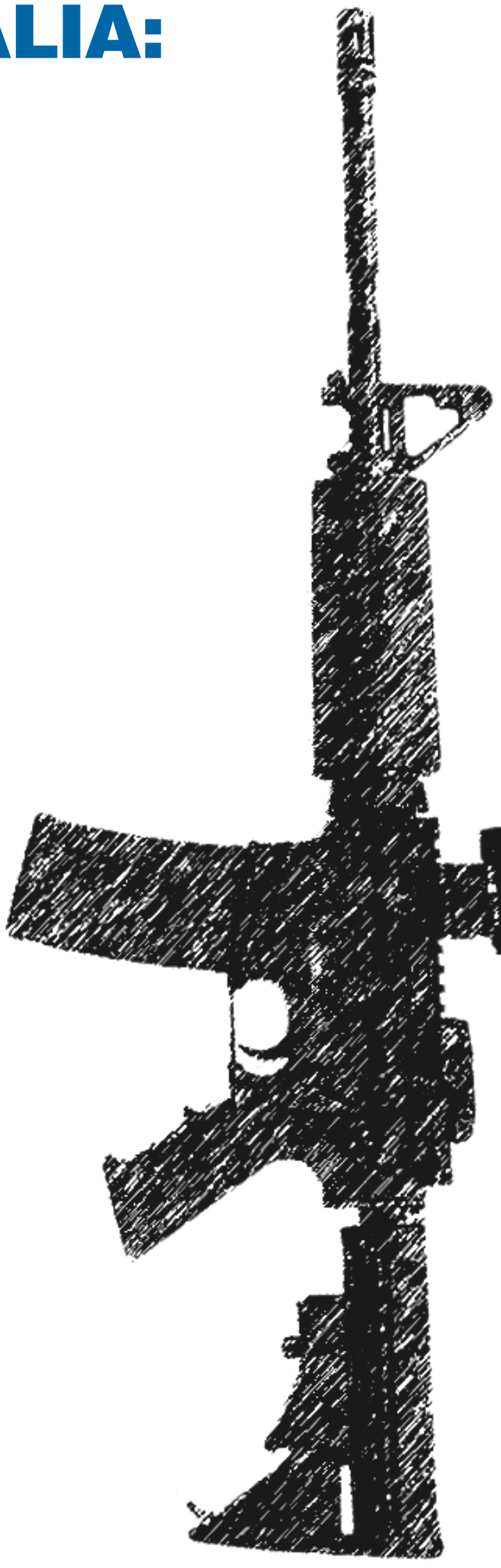
IE USA AND AUSTRALIA: IE NRA AND SIFA





less willing to pour money into political campaigns. "The Australian gun lobby," says the report, "runs political campaigns and lobbies politicians and journalists, but it attracts little attention in Australia because it keeps its operations low key."

The report highlights the activities of the Shooting Industry Foundation of Australia (SIFA), the peak body for Australia's five largest firearms suppliers. SIFA spends "roughly the same amount of money" per person on political campaigning as the NRA. SIFA spends an annual average of $30,120 per million Australians, compared to the NRA's $28,106 per million Americans.

SIFA ran major ad campaigns ahead of the 2017 Queensland state election and the Victorian election in 2018. The Australia Institute identified that since 2011 the gun lobby donated US$1.7 million to Australian political parties. The main beneficiaries were Katter's Australian Party, with over $800,000, and the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party, with almost $700,000. One Nation received less than $10,000. The major political parties also received gun lobby largesse. The Liberal Party, Liberal Democrats, Nationals and Labor and each received tens of thousands of dollars in donations annually.

While the Labor Party, Liberal Party and the Greens reject donations from tobacco companies, they do accept donations from firearms suppliers and dealers, which arguably, may also have a deadly impact on the population. The major donors include NIOA – which represents more than fifty suppliers including Federal and CCI ammunition, Ruger, Anschutz, Leupold, Bushnell, Colt, and Glock – plus the Sporting Shooters Association of Australia and the Federation of Hunting Clubs.

For twenty years SIFA resisted the introduction of a National Firearms Management System, despite government promises made in 1996 and 2017. The Federal Police plead for a proper national firearms database, which successive Australian governments had failed to implement. It had been first recommended after the Queen Street and Hoddle Street mass shootings in Victoria, which led to the establishment of the National Committee on Violence in 1987.

Since each Australian jurisdiction maintained its own register of firearms, it created inconsistent data holdings and gun classifications. In response, the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission (ACIC) hosts the National Firearm Identification Database (NFID) and several other firearm related systems, which support the management of firearms across Australia. The NFID allows uniform firearm registry data collection to be uploaded to the Australian Firearm Information Network for use by law enforcement across the country. Even so, the gun lobby remains powerful, continuing to influence political parties and the public across Australia for the benefit of gun manufacturers.

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TRANSFORM (OURSELVES): THE FIRST STEP TOWARDS CUBA'S DIGITAL AGENDA 2030

Susana Antón

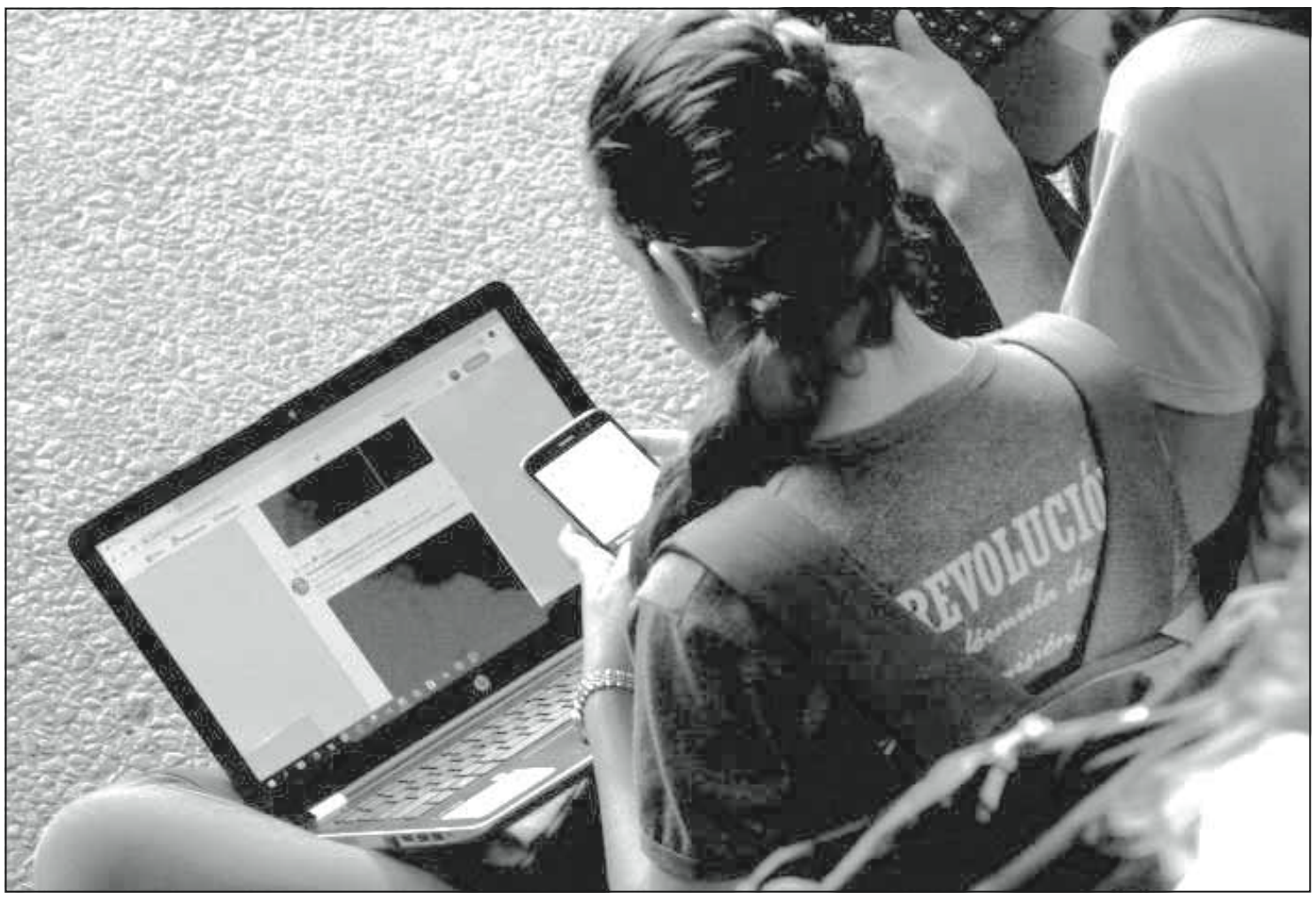


Photo: Ricardo López Hevia

In Cuba, the term digital transformation – in a context associated with the software industry and the intelligent, critical and responsible use of technologies – is becoming more and more frequent. But is it the same as the informatisation of society, or are they antagonistic concepts?

In an exclusive interview with *Granma* newspaper, Mayra Arevich, Minister of Communications (MINCOM in Spanish), commented that digital transformation is not a new process, but a continuity of informatisation.

It is, she said, "a higher stage that, using the pillars of science and innovation, will lead us to the Cuban Digital Agenda 2030, the roadmap that will allow us to project a vision of the country and make great leaps in the use of information and communications technologies (ICT)".

Now, based on what has been achieved in terms of telecommunications infrastructure, emphasis is placed on the processes that take place in the face of citizens and that contribute to a better quality of life, with the participation of all factors in the economic, political and social order of the country.

She emphasised that, as part of this strategy, preliminary ideas have been outlined in order to lead the digital transformation. Among the guiding principles are to stimulate the production of original content and computer applications and services, innovative thinking, scientific research and the creation of technology-based entities with state participation, among others.

The consolidation of this policy makes a more harmonious step towards the Digital Agenda which, due to its broad scope and in correspondence with the strategic sectors of the National Economic and Social Development Plan until 2030, has been structured in strategic axes, she said.

In this regard, she said, driving projects have been defined that will enable the necessary and available resources to be concentrated on them; to work on a full cycle; to attract talented human capital, ensuring the multiplication of results, and to identify key players and international alliances and regional integration.

For example, several steps have already been taken in Cuba with regard to the computerisation of some healthcare and medical processes. The project for digital health will promote the transformation of health institutions and the achievement of an integrated service, focused on the needs of the patient and the community, she explained.

All these projects will enable faster progress to be made in the fundamental issues of the economy and society, she added.

However, digital transformation requires a profound cultural change, which starts with the very vision of how and why we use ICTs, and what to do to integrate their uses in each of the sectors of society, in such a way that this results in higher quality and safety of services, she warned. This is one of the main challenges ahead of us, she reiterated.

The ICT infrastructure is the support to ensure the digital transformation of Cuban society. Its development is vital to boost economic activity, and also to facilitate e-government and e-commerce, access to knowledge and increase benefits for the welfare of society, said the Minister.

In recent years, the dynamics in the development of computerisation has been high. This process, which in other countries took 20 years to promote, in Cuba was developed from 2015 to 2022 in difficult economic conditions, but it was a government priority, she added.

That is why in this path the deployment of infrastructure was vital to ensure the development of the rest of the programs and, in this regard, she highlighted the work done by the agency in the monitoring of some projects that continued their development even during the pandemic.

NETWORK TRAFFIC ALMOST QUADRUPLED DURING COVID-19

With COVID-19, traffic on the network increased almost fourfold, a behaviour characterised by a movement to different parts of the cities due to the displacement of work by teleworking and home study. In this context, the Cuban Telecommunications Company made a projection to guarantee Internet access according to the demands of the economy and the population, the Minister added.

In the years of the pandemic – 2020 and 2021 – most of the 4G radio bases were installed in Cuba, a process that allowed the spread of this technology to all municipal and provincial capitals. It continues to be deployed as the preferred network, although progress continues to be made in 3G technology to guarantee voice service.

The development of the country's infrastructure has also made it possible to consolidate other programs such as the Nauta Hogar service, to which 6.82 per cent of households have access, a figure she described as "discreet," while work is being done to expand access to more families.

On the other hand, she added that the use of WiFi zones in the country remains, although the traffic has decreased compared to previous years, but with a similar behaviour; therefore, in order to achieve a greater impact on the population, they are relocated to places with the highest demand.

From the beginning of the computerisation program, the importance of connectivity in institutions was also taken into account, with priority given to high impact sectors such as the Ministry of Education.

The demand for services requested by the new economic actors is also guaranteed.

PROJECTIONS FOR THE SECOND HALF OF THE YEAR

Incorporate new radio bases with 4G technology to ensure user growth.

Expand the mobile telephony service in the 700 MHz band, which will allow expanding 4G coverage, mainly in rural areas.

Increase infrastructure and capacities of data centres to respond to the development and implementation of new services, the computerisation process of agencies, entities and new forms of non-State management.

Digitalisation of national contents.

Improvement of electronic transactions that support electronic commerce.

IN FIGURES

- 7.5 million people have access to Internet service in some way.
- 7.2 million mobile telephony customers.
- 6 million mobile telephony customers access the Internet.
- 264,803 households with Nauta Hogar
- 49.27 per cent of the population has 4G coverage
- 657 surfing lounges
- 1,670 public WiFi spaces

Granma

Emphasis is placed on the processes that take place in the face of citizens and that contribute to a better quality of life, with the participation of all factors in the economic, political and social order of the country.

CANADA: WHO BENEFITS FROM RISING INTEREST RATES?

Adrien Welsh

On July 12, the Bank of Canada announced the biggest key interest rate hike in twenty-four years, an increase of 100 basis points to 2.50 per cent. According to economists, this is a necessary response to higher than expected inflation. And it is. General interest rates must be raised to reduce borrowing and spending, lowering demand to allow a re-equilibrium of the market.

All this works wonderfully in a theoretical scheme, one where all economic actors are equal. However, for this to be the case, everyone must consume what they produce – so we would be living under socialism, which, needless to say, is far from being the case.

But in a parallel history to this vision of the economy, inflation is not a result of increased wages and consumption by workers, but of the race for capitalist profits.

The inflation we are experiencing (7.7 per cent annualised) is the result of the monopolies' control over basic necessities, including housing. COVID or not, war in Ukraine or not, in the end, large distribution companies are experiencing fantastic profits. This is proof that they are benefitting from the upheavals in the world economy, not suffering. Worse still, very often, they are the ones who set the prices.

In the United States, inflation of more than nine per cent leads to an increase in overall consumption in financial terms. Here, monthly spending per credit card holder increased by 17.5 per cent in Canada and by 18.4 per cent in Quebec. This is part of a context where the issuance of credit cards has grown by thirty-one per cent, in the space of one year. The average credit limit granted is the highest in seven years. Between thirty-five and forty per cent of credit card holders are unable to pay their balance in full.

For workers, raising the policy rate will have a devastating effect. In addition to the increase in the key rate, they will struggle with the increase in the minimum payment of credit cards, which will jump annually by half a percentage point. During the pandemic years, the average debt per household has risen from 170 per cent to 180 per cent; last June, 20 per cent of Canadians admitted that they can no longer pay their mortgage.

As for small farmers, the price of inputs has exploded by fifty per cent since autumn 2021, while large distribution groups grab the bulk of profits in the agri-food sector. Small businesses, increasingly subjugated to the large monopolies for whom they act as subcontractors, will see their access to credit compromised and will find themselves on the straw. The higher student loan debts contracted to financial institutions will compromise access to education for a large part of the youth.

The banks claim that the only way to curb inflation is to impoverish the working class, even if this means embarking on a recession. At least that's the message the Central Bank is sending by raising its key interest rate. However, the measures taken will have no impact on price increases: it is even expected that inflation will continue until 2024!

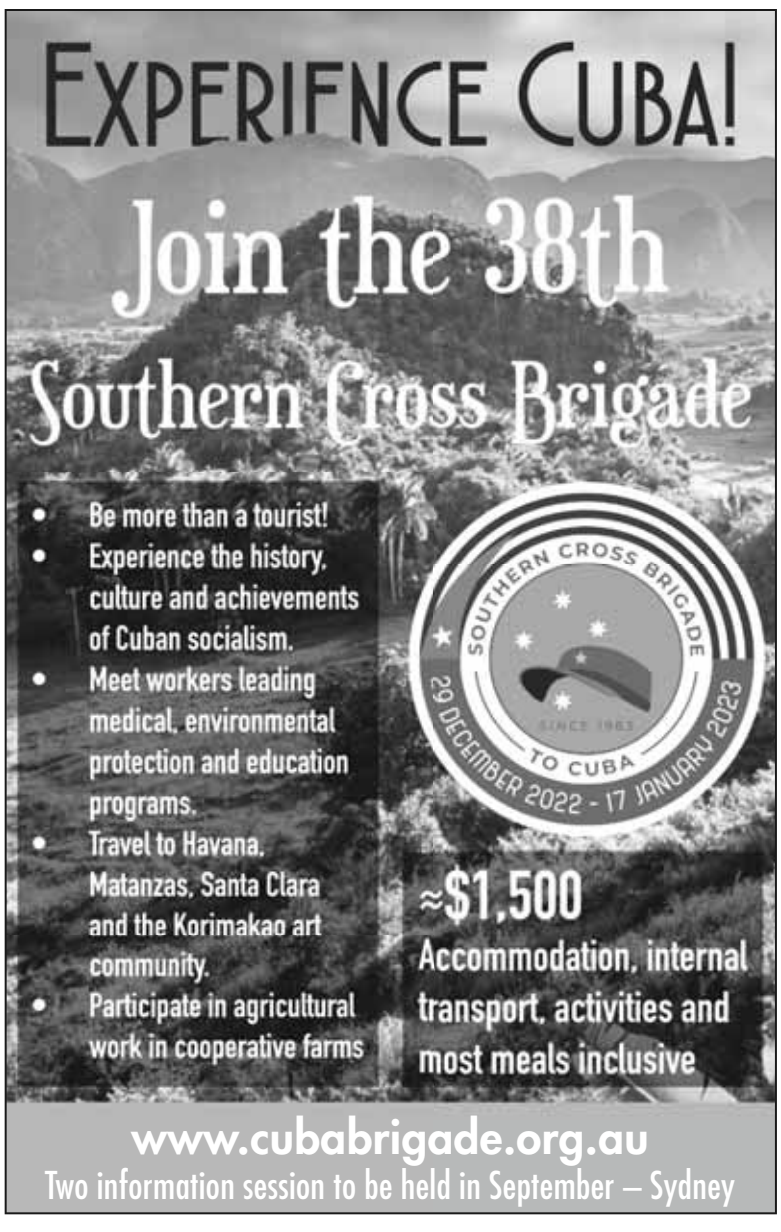
Solutions do exist, however, but these require attacking the power of finance capital, in particular by controlling the prices of basic necessities, and putting key sectors of the economy (natural resources, the means of distribution, exchange and communication) under public and democratic control. Similarly, reindustrialisation and the withdrawal of free trade agreements are required for workers, small farmers and even small entrepreneurs and savers.

On the other hand, raising wages and enriching the working class in general is the best way to counter inflation. In this regard, the trade union movement is a key player in the struggle for a substantial wage increase that goes beyond simple catching up, especially in large industries and public services, where labour action makes it possible to raise the minimum wage. At the same time, this struggle, which is located at the heart of the capital-labor confrontation, must be accompanied by the creation of unionised and well-paid jobs – the labor shortage we are experiencing is orchestrated by capital, which seeks to outsource and bypass the unions in order to inoculate a "flexibilisation" of the workforce.

Contrary to what is claimed, higher wages are not the source of the rise in prices: the purchasing power of employees is much lower than that of capitalists, despite their smaller numbers (the richest twenty per cent of Canada monopolise nearly seventy per cent of the country's wealth).

In the end, the only ones to benefit from an increase in the key interest rate are the banks, large corporations and war merchants. A higher interest rate allows for a better return on the stock market, which is an even more inflated economy compared to its real value. One could even add that the fluctuations in the Bank of Canada's interest rates are intimately linked to the interests of US-EU-NATO imperialism, which imposes itself economically only through the force of arms. It is no coincidence that the Euro has practically fallen below the dollar lately. Indeed, with such a financialised, and therefore unproductive, economy, the only way to stay afloat is to ensure hegemonic control of the world by "our" monopolies, so that they can continue to speculate at will, thus strengthening military alliances and beating the drums of war.

People's Voice ✪



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REVIEW: OUR *MEMBERS BE UNLIMITED* – SAM WALLMAN

Anna Pha

If the trade union movement is to have a future, then it is in today's youth. There is not a great deal of material written in a form that is attractive to, or easily accessible for working class youth. The comic form, its lively presentation and the language of this work offer such an introduction to trade unions and class struggle.

Author Sam Wallman is a comics-journalist, cartoonist, and labour activist based in Narrm/Melbourne. He has worked as an organiser for the National Union of Workers, and prior to that was a delegate on the shop floor. His work has been widely used by trade unions and a range of other organisations around the world. It has also been published by the *Guardian* (UK), the *New York Times*, the ABC, and SBS. He has also received a number of awards for his long-form comics-journalism.

The title of the book is the first rule of the first working-class political organisation in Britain and underlies the importance of organising all workers and building the trade union movement. The illustrations reflect the text in a lively manner. " [...] it was their work that both constructed the wheels of society and also made those wheels turn." The accompanying illustration shows workers constructing and pushing wheels uphill.

The first chapter is a brief historical overview of the trade union movement, setting and place some basic facts about capitalism. "There is nothing modern about cooperation. And resistance to exploitation is as old as exploitation itself." Unionism and opposition to the powers that be was illegal under the Combination Acts. In response to the persecution, secret societies and other organisations were built on mutual trust. They formed to demand pay rises, reduced working hours, and safe work places.

Wallman describes his personal experiences of working as a picker in an Amazon warehouse where the boss tells workers their job is to move quickly – "always moving at Amazon pace," as they scan orders into trolleys. They start their shift with warm up exercises because the work is so physical and movements so repetitive.

"When I work where does my body end & the equipment begin? Is the cart I push an extension of my body?" It's rush, rush, rush, walking upwards of thirty kilometres a day under a hot tin roof wearing steel cap boots.

Wallman is carrying a scanner gun with a countdown timer telling him how long he has left to scan the next item. "Sometimes it gives me 5 seconds for an item aisles away." Management sends messages such as: "your rate is down – pls try harder" or "everyone needs to stay on 3 hrs longer." Toilets, located at one end of the warehouse near the managers' area, can take five or more minutes to walk there while the time continues to tick down.

The workers joke about Amazon selling nappies. After reading about Amazon workers in the US Wallman straps a "reusable urine bag" to the inside of his leg! The language is colourful: "getting used to pissing while walking is tricky."

The message of alienation, persecution and exploitation is carried graphically in words and illustrations. Workers are and feel expendable. They start talking to each other. "We've got each other. And the union?" There are acts of solidarity.

The next chapter uses examples from mythology, the animal kingdom, and trade unions as examples of the power of unity and solidarity compared with the powerlessness of the individual. "So too do workers voluntarily contribute a sliver of their income and energy towards collectivising, & establishing a formal organisation that can accomplish more than any one person could ever hope or imagine."

The concept of unity is then developed with more history including the Tolpuddle Martyrs, the industrial revolution, the Suffragist movement, and growth of unions and strike actions. At the same time Wallman provides examples of union-busting tactics of capitalists and the heavy penalties faced by workers and unions for industrial action. The book also notes the legacy of the communist-led green bans movement where union-led, blue-collar workers stepped outside industrial activism.

The struggle of women is not overlooked. The description of women in Iceland in the 1970s who withdrew their paid and unpaid labour is powerful and brought a smile to my lips. The slogan was: "When women stop, everything stops." And it did. The women were able to highlight how care is undervalued by capitalism.

The book has so many interesting facts and historical examples that make important points about capitalism and communists without ramming them down people's throats. These include the appalling working conditions and loss of life of garment workers in Bangladesh and their strike actions.

"Simply stopping work is probably the most powerful single action we can take. It is possible that bosses & governments know this better than workers do."

Contemporary issues such as the decline in formally organised collective activism and rise in precarious forms of employment are covered and attributed to the success of bosses' tactics.

In defining trade unions, Wallman raises the question of "unions transitioning to elected governmental councils, or soviets, & achieving true hegemony and dominance." Where union leaderships are corrupt or forgotten how to fight, "we would have to be as ready to fight the union leadership as the bosses."

The concept of workplace democracy and workers' control is raised. The book returns to Amazon and the issue of automation and the threat it poses to workers, depending on how it is used. Workers program the robots. "We produce everything."

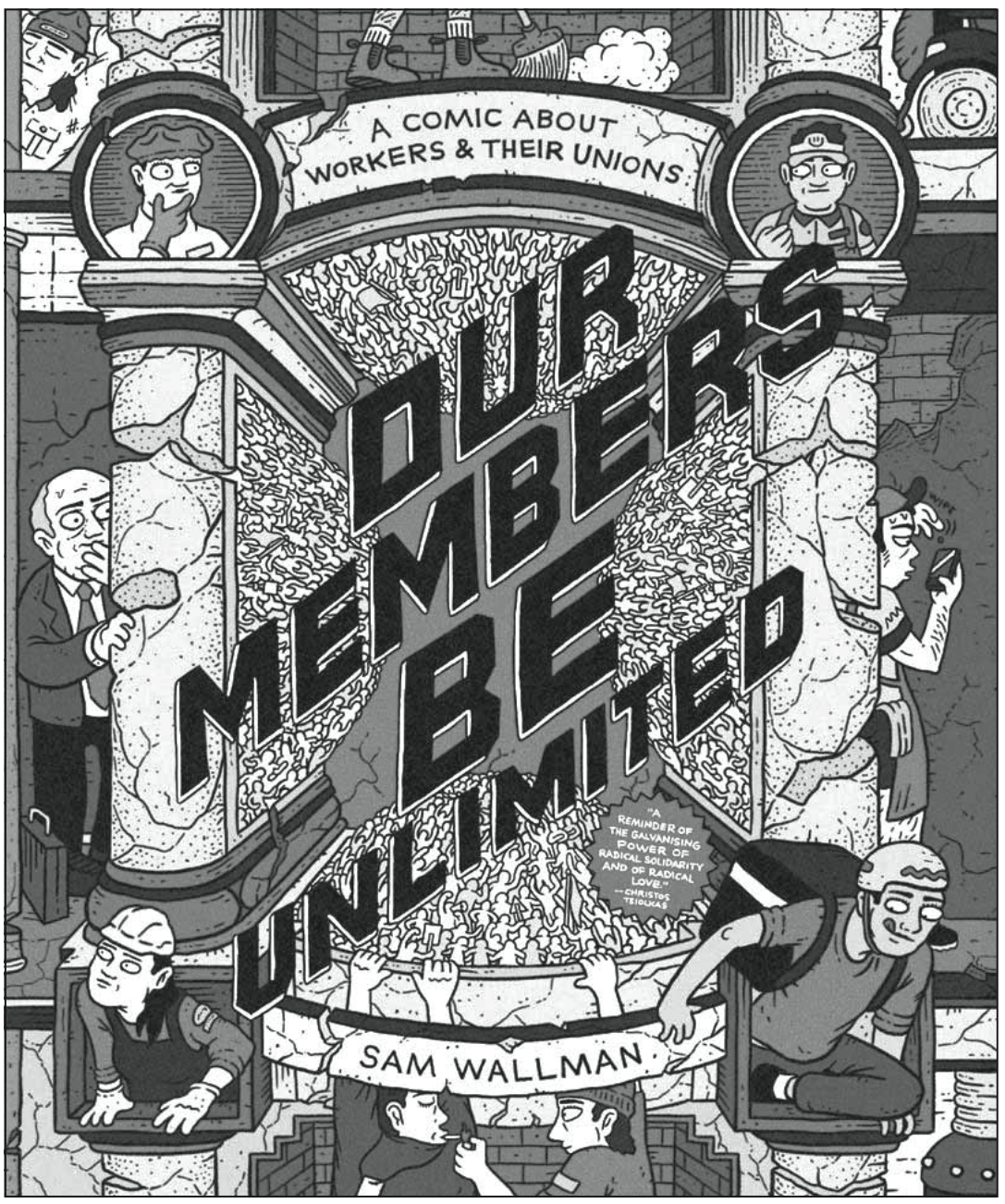
The book is written in the first person with the various cartoon characters including Wallman talking to the reader in snappy, everyday language. It ends with an entertaining appendix of more than fifty labour definitions.

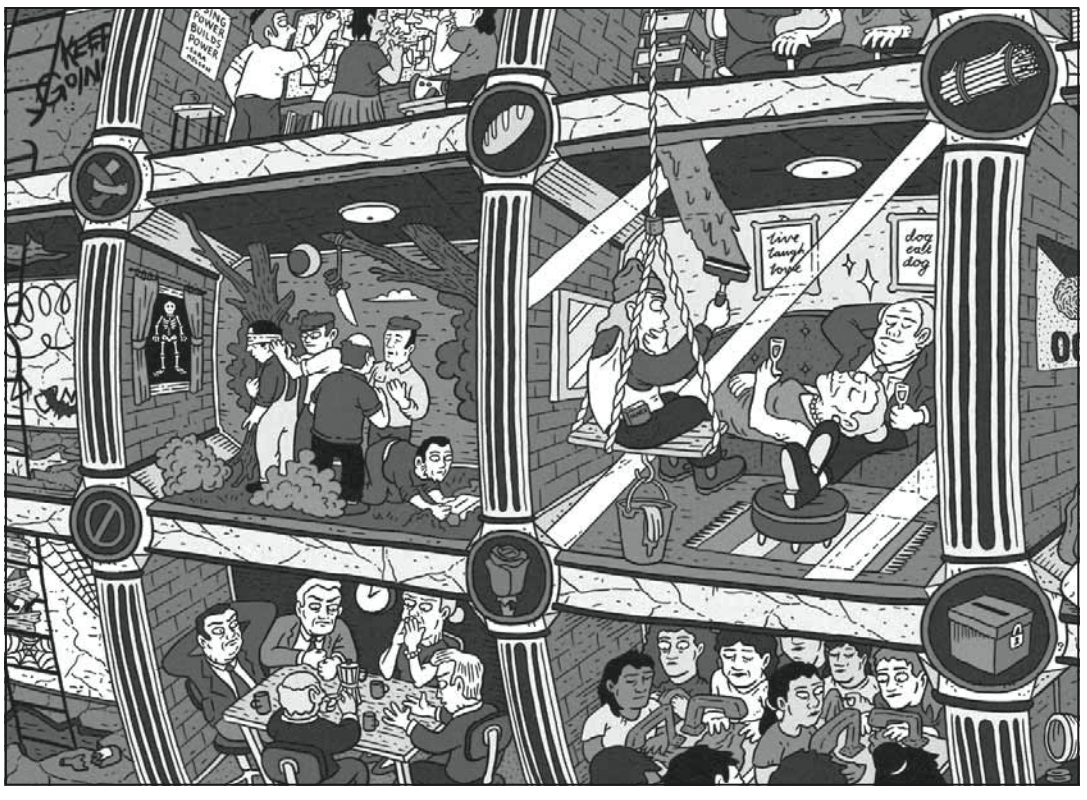
Terms such as scab, grub, snitch, picket line, secondary boycotts, rank and file, trot-bot, closed shop hammer & sickle, internationalism, and general strike are amongst those covered. The definitions and illustrations that carry them make important points at the same time as being humorous and poignant. They are an education in themselves.

To conclude with a personal confession; I am not a fan of comics, but this book was so entertaining that I sat and read it from cover to cover in one sitting. I found it interesting, stimulating and educational and can strongly recommend it to the young and not so young as both an introduction to trade unionism and as a primer for those with trade union experience such as myself.

Thank you Sam for a great text and your incredible illustrations.

Our Members Be Unlimited
By Sam Wallman
Published by Scribe 253 pages ✪





"Simply stopping work is probably the most powerful single action we can take."

CAMPAIGNERS AND UNIONS DEMAND NATIONALISATION OF ENERGY FIRMS

Matt Trinder

UK: People must be put before profit, Labour's left demanded today, after Sir Keir Starmer again rejected calls for public ownership of key utilities despite soaring energy prices.

The Labour leader dismissed such a move, overwhelmingly endorsed by party members at last year's Labour conference, as he unveiled a plan to stop gas and electricity bills rising this winter.

Labour's £29 billion proposal, partly paid for by expanding a windfall tax on the British profits of oil and gas companies, would address the "national emergency" by funding a freeze in the energy price cap at its current level of £1,971 for six months from October, he said.

The intervention, which comes after market analysts warned that regulator Ofgem could soon allow energy firms to charge the average household more than £5,000 a year to keep the lights on amid sky-rocketing wholesale costs, was welcomed by former party chairman Ian Lavery.

But the Wansbeck MP told the *Morning Star*: "If it will cost us billions to get through the next few months, surely we should take the opportunity to bring this utility into public ownership.

"You can't control what you don't own.

"Enough is enough: it's time to put people ahead of profit."

Sir Keir insisted his focus on scrapping further increases to the energy price cap, now set to be updated every three months, would limit runaway inflation, seeing it peak at about nine per cent rather than the crippling 13.3 per cent forecast by the Bank of England.

He said his plan would be funded by closing a loophole in the levy on the profits of energy companies announced by former chancellor and prime ministerial hopeful Rishi Sunak in May and backdating the scheme's start to January, which, together with rising global prices, would bring in £8bn, he claimed.

Some £14bn would come from dropping the government's £400-per-household energy rebate and abandoning pledges to cut green levies or VAT on domestic fuel bills made by Tory leadership hopefuls Liz Truss and Sunak respectively.

Sir Keir, who stressed he is also committed to a national housing insulation programme and boosting the country's renewable energy capacity, said: "We've had 12 years of Tory government that has failed to prepare and refused to invest, leaving bills higher and our country less secure.

"This is a national emergency: it needs strong leadership and urgent action."

Unison general secretary Christina McAnea welcomed Sir Keir's proposals as in "stark contrast to the government's inertia."

Downing Street has ruled out any new announcements on further help for struggling families until after a new prime minister is in place next month.

The "zombie government" was slammed by Usdaw union head Paddy Lillis, who argued Sir Keir's plan shows the "clear and positive difference that a Labour government can make."

But Unite leader Sharon Graham said Labour's offer – while an improvement on its previous position – was "piecemeal.

"Selling off our energy sector to the private profiteers has ended in tears," she said.

"Only days ago BP announced that in April to June this year it had made almost £7 billion profits. On the same day it was being openly contemplated that household energy bills in the UK could rise to £3,600 a year.

"These figures prove that the British economy does not work for workers and their families. Britain's real crisis isn't rising prices – it's an epidemic of unfettered profiteering," she charged, pointing out that firms like Scottish Power – owned by Spain's Ibedrola – and France's state-owned EDF were raking in profit from British customers.

The union leader called for a return to public ownership, which is also backed by the TUC.

The move would be supported by most people, according to a We Own It poll published today, though Sir Keir claimed it would be too expensive as it would involve "compensating shareholders."

We Own It director Cat Hobbs told the *Morning Star* that creating a nationalised energy sector is a "complex" process that does not necessarily involve compensating shareholders.

She added: "There's no reason why we have to run our energy system around a handful of shareholders, we could actually run it for people in this country and copy what is best practice and totally normal in other countries, such as France and Norway."

Morning Star

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SHIP WITH CONTRABAND FUEL SEIZED IN IRAN

On Sunday, Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) naval force seized a ship with at least 20,000 litres of smuggled fuel, which was sailing in the Persian Gulf.

The head of the Justice Department of the southern province of Hormozgan, Moytaba Qahremani, told local media that the arrest of the vessel and its subsequent seizure was carried out in coordination with the Judicial Department of the city of Parsian.

The official said that the authorities are investigating the case and remain committed to combating organised oil smuggling in order to protect the interests and security of the Iranian nation.

For some months now, the Iranian Guard Corps and the Iranian Navy have detained, inspected and seized several Iranian or foreign vessels, linked to the illegal business of taking fuel to nations such as Afghanistan, Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), taking advantage of the subsidies that the Persian Government allocated to the price of fuel.

This is the second ship confiscated by the Iranian authorities in less than a week, since the seizure of a ship with a fuel cargo valued at more than 61 billion Iranian Rials (over AUD $2 billion)

In this regard, the Islamic country has determined to combat the transfer of fuel in its territorial waters, and its authorities have stressed that the Persian Gulf will not be a safe place for those who engage in smuggling.

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UNDER MODI, NEOLIBERALISM AND HINDU NATIONALISM COMBINE TO PULL INDIA TOWARD FASCIST FUTURE

Prakash Karat

Until recently, when commemorating the significant anniversaries of independence, we could cite the parliamentary democratic system as one of the major achievements of independent India. The adoption of a republican constitution in 1950 provided the scope for people's participation and a voice in politics which reflected the aspirations of the Indian people in their struggle for national independence.

Despite the narrow basis and the class constraints on the democratic system in a developing capitalist society, it was remarkable how parliamentary democracy could retain its vitality for over six decades. The prospect for democracy was sustained mainly due to the people and the popular struggles and democratic movements.

However, as we observe the 75th year of independence, the prospects for democracy are bleak, and the parliamentary democratic system and all that the constitution provided for as the democratic underpinnings are endangered and under serious assault.

What we are witnessing today is the onset of full-fledged authoritarianism which is undermining all the norms of democracy and the institutions of the state, which maintain a set of checks and balances between the executive, the legislature, and the judiciary.

FULL-FLEDGED AUTHORITARIANISM

Having come back to power with an increased majority in May 2019, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has set itself the goal of establishing a one-party dictatorship. This required an outright onslaught on the opposition.

All other parties in parliament are being sidelined; elected state governments of the opposition are destabilised by bribing of Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) and through the selective use of central government agencies against critics of Modi and the BJP.

The anti-corruption Enforcement Directorate (ED), the Central Bureau of Investigation, and the income tax department have been weaponised against opposition leaders and ministers in the opposition-ruled state governments.

As for the devaluation of parliament and the degrading of parliamentary procedures, they have become particularly virulent in the second term of the Modi government. The parliament sat for less than fifty days in 2021. Apart from a lack of discussion on legislation, there is hardly any scrutiny of legislative bills.

The sixty to seventy per cent of bills referred to the standing committees by the Parliament of India during the previous centre-left United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government dropped to twenty-two per cent in the first term of the Modi government and to just thirteen per cent in the second term.

This is compounded by the denial of the opposition's right to raise issues and press for a vote during the legislative process. The status of the parliament has been downgraded, with various laws being declared "money bills" in order to bypass scrutiny and a vote in the upper house.

The authoritarian drive has also led to the trampling of the democratic rights and civil liberties of citizens which are enshrined in the constitution.

The criminalisation of dissent and suppression of civil liberties are hallmarks of an authoritarian regime. This has reached an unprecedented level through the use of draconian laws like the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) and the sedition clause.

Between 2014 and 2020, in a period of seven years, around 690 cases under UAPA were registered and 10,552 people were arrested under the provisions of the law. These include political activists, civil rights advocates, journalists, and writers. The Bhima Koregaon case, in which sixteen prominent activists and intellectuals have been in jail for three years under the UAPA, is a prime example.

A characteristic feature of an authoritarian regime is when the judiciary ceases to act independently and stops keeping a check on executive excess. More and more, the Supreme Court has begun to behave like an executive court.

If we look back over the past seventy-five years, the biggest attack on democracy occurred with the imposition of "internal emergency" by Indira Gandhi in June 1975. That period of authoritarian rule saw the jailing of opposition leaders, suspension of civil liberties, and press censorship. But this existed for a limited period of twenty months, and the people rejected Gandhi's Congress Party in the parliamentary elections that ensued.

The current ongoing assault on democracy is more serious and comprehensive. It seeks to change the nature of the republic by truncating democracy and undermining secularism and federalism.

Why is this vicious form of authoritarianism which stifles democracy taking hold in the country? This is not some aberration or accidental turning point, nor can it be ascribed to an individual's dictatorial tendencies. We have to understand the conjuncture of forces which have spawned this authoritarianism.

AMBEDKAR'S WARNING

At the time of the adoption of the constitution, Dr BR Ambedkar, who headed the committee that drafted the charter, warned that political democracy cannot succeed without social and economic democracy. He also warned that "Democracy in India is only a top-dressing on an Indian soil, which is essentially undemocratic."

Over the decades, while "electoral democracy" thrived, the striving for economic and social democracy fell by the wayside. The capitalist path of development pursued by the ruling classes heightened class and regional inequalities. The advent of neoliberal policies, three decades ago, has resulted in sharply widening economic inequalities and the consolidation of plutocracy with obscene levels of wealth in their hands.

On the social side, the bourgeoisie which had compromised with landlordism and pre-capitalist relations made only formal attempts to end caste oppression and the iniquitous social order. Therefore, as Ambedkar presciently observed, the contradiction between political democracy and widening social and economic inequality has come to a head.

It is remarkable how this analysis of Ambedkar closely parallels that of the Marxists in India. The Communist Party of India (CPI-M) has, from the outset, held that the failure to undertake a thorough-going democratic transformation of social and agrarian relations would hamper the development of modern bourgeois-democratic society.

The onset of neoliberalism and the rise of Hindutva (Hindu nationalism) spelled the death knell of social and economic justice, which has resulted in curbing democracy and ushering in authoritarianism.

NEOLIBERALISM RESTRICTS DEMOCRACY

Neoliberalism narrows and restricts democracy by placing the market above the people and their rights. Big capital has invaded the political system, and all the bourgeois political parties have become subordinate to big money power. This is corroding the parliamentary system.

We must keep in mind what the CPI(M) program states: "The threat to the parliamentary system and to democracy comes not from the working people and the parties which represent their interests. The threat comes from the exploiting classes. It is they who undermine the parliamentary system both from within and without by making it an instrument to defend their narrow interests."

The rise of the Hindutva forces and the assumption of power by the BJP with a majority in 2014 have brought about a qualitative shift in Indian politics.

State power is being wielded by a party which is imbued with the fascistic ideology of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) [an Indian right-wing, Hindu nationalist, paramilitary volunteer organisation.] They wish to institute a Hindu majoritarian rule which is inimical to democracy, as it denies minorities equal status and rights as citizens.

We have seen both state-sponsored legislation and vigilante actions by Hindutva outfits on the ground which target Muslims and subject them to periodic bouts of violence and persecution by the state machinery.

In fact, in BJP-ruled states such as Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, and Karnataka, minority populations have been virtually relegated to the status of second-class citizens.

HINDUTVA-CORPORATE ALLIANCE

The authoritarian drive is, thus, fueled by the alliance forged between corporate elites and Hindutva forces. Both the necessity to push through neoliberal policies and impose Hindutva values on society requires a high degree of authoritarianism.

What is being undertaken is a reshaping of the institutions of the state, working within the facade of the constitution. The soil for authoritarianism is being cultivated not only in the political sphere but also in the social and cultural arenas.

The ban on cattle slaughter and beef consumption, moral policing, the denunciation of artists and cultural productions as anti-Hindu, the control of educational institutions making them conform to Hindutva values – all these are features of the authoritarian onslaught.

So democracy in India after seventy years of independence is at a crucial turning point.

The existence of the Hindutva authoritarian regime exemplified by the Modi government is a constant and potent threat to democracy and the democratic rights of the people.

The fight to defend democracy and democratic rights has to be waged in the coming days. But the struggle for democracy is linked to the struggle against Hindutva and neoliberalism.

For the working class, the fight for democracy is a vital one, the importance of which Rosa Luxemburg lucidly spelled out: "If democracy has become partially superfluous and partially troublesome to the bourgeoisie, it is necessary and indispensable to the working class. It is necessary, first of all, because it creates the political forms (self-government, electoral rights, etc.) that will serve the proletariat as springboards and fulcrums in its transformation of bourgeois society. Second, however, it is indispensable because only in it, in the struggle for democracy, can the proletariat become conscious of its class interests and its historical tasks."

The left, being the most consistent force against the neoliberal regime and Hindutva nationalism, has a crucial role to play in the mobilisation of wider popular-democratic forces against the authoritarian danger.

People's World

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