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Photo: Anna Pha

BUILD THE FIGHTBACK

Anna Pha

Decades of privatisations, job cuts and wage suppression and more recently the cuts masked by measures taken during the COVID-19 pandemic, have taken a huge toll on workers. 2022 has seen a growing fightback. Millions of workers are fighting back in a way not seen for many decades. Industrial action is occurring in numerous sectors of the workforce across Australia and globally as workers and their unions take back what has been taken from them and improve their working conditions and living standards.

Let's build the fightback momentum into 2023!

Almost four decades of neoliberal policies were accompanied by successive anti-union laws removing hard won trade union rights and introducing massive penalties. These laws left unions with few rights and relatively little legal power while strengthening the hand of the bosses. Job safety has been in decline. Casualisation has risen along with an increase in the use of labour hire and the emergence and spread of the "gig economy," settings millions of workers backwards.

Many unions have made great gains for their members through industrial action or the threat of such action, despite the difficulties they face in doing so. Others, such as construction unions have been hit by whopping penalties, amounting to millions of dollars but have still made gains.

COST-OF-LIVING CRISIS

The present cost-of-living crisis with rising prices and ongoing suppression of wages has reached a point where workers have no choice but to take action.

A poll of 3000 people by the ACTU found that fifty-six per cent of Australians have cut back on essential items and twenty-four per cent have skipped meals due to the current cost-of-living crisis. Just over twenty per cent had sold assets to keep up with rising costs and fourteen per cent had been forced to move to, or look for more affordable housing.

Nurses, teachers, aged care, construction, maritime, rail, retail and mine workers, academics, firefighters, police, and public servants are amongst the hundreds of thousands of workers who took or threatened industrial action in 2022. Some have made significant gains, others smaller wage rises and improvements in entitlements.

The anger is palpable amongst workers in nursing, aged care, and other majority-female low-paid workforces whose wages have been frozen or suppressed and working conditions become intolerable with long hours and lack of resources. Like teachers, academics and other public sector workers' wages have gone way backwards in real terms.

They are not only suffering burn-out from labour shortages resulting in part from the present huge surge in COVID-19 cases, but also long-term cuts and deliberate understaffing. The lifting of the requirement to wear masks indoors has spawned a new wave of the pandemic and consequent increases in staff absences in the workforce.

At the same time employers are increasing their use of the lockout provisions in the *Fair Work Act*. One of the most recent examples was the threat by the multinational company Svitzer to lockout tugboat workers in seventeen ports. The Fair Work Commission decided to prevent the lockout which would have caused chaos with supply chains in the lead-up to Christmas.

For many of the million or more visa workers in Australia, with the threat of deportation hanging over their heads if they protest, their exploitation is more extreme. But with union backing some have been successful in gaining legal entitlements.

PRO BIZ

Employers, as always, oppose wage increases and resist any restoration or improvement in working conditions. The Reserve Bank of Australia (RBA), not so long ago was calling for wage rises. Now, with price inflation heading towards eight per cent it is opposed to wage rises, with RBA Governor Philip Low trotting out the usual capitalist myth that wage rises cause inflation.

They don't. What caused the present hike in price rises? The RBA's slashing of interest rates sent house prices and rent through the roof; its printing of money fuelled inflation; as did the rorting of the market by gas, electricity and oil companies. On top of that there are shortages of fresh produce arising from the floods that hit farmers hard saw prices rise. Record profits played a major role, with employers jacking up prices.

As for real wages, they were at record lows and not surprisingly profits hit record highs. They did not cause inflation, but inflation is a means of reducing the purchasing power of wages (real wages) used by capitalists instead of cuts to wage rates.

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Make your shopping progressive

This is the final *Guardian* for 2022, the first in 2023 is 23rd January.

Guardian
Issue 2036 12th December, 2022

FAREWELL, READERS

Dear Readers,

This issue of *The Guardian – The Workers' Weekly* is the final issue I will oversee as editor as I move on to pursue other endeavours. It has been a tremendous honour and privilege to serve as editor of this newspaper for three years.

I feel particularly blessed by how many more voices were offered to write for the "The Guardian," where we received multiple contributions from comrades across nearly every state. Those volunteers made it possible for each issue to be realised and I am forever indebted to them for making my job that much easier.

I am proud of the artwork – both original and reproduced – that we were able to place in our newspaper for comrades to use at protests or to hang on their bedroom walls. This was an element otherwise not seen previously in our Party press but I believe contributed to the agitational nature of our work.

I was also incredibly happy with my contributions to the new Party website which brought our Party newspaper into the 21st Century.

I am thankful to those who committed the time and energy in selling or handing out "The Guardian" at events or in the streets, ensuring our messaging was being widely spread, making the effort all of us who produce our Party newspaper worthwhile.

And, of course, I am thankful to all of those who have purchased subscriptions to our newspaper. Without your support the work we do would be impossible.

Perhaps my favourite moment in editing "The Guardian" was overseeing the celebration of the centenary of the CPA by reproducing excerpts from previous issues of *The Tribune*, *SPA*, and *The Socialist* and *The Guardian – The Workers' Weekly* which highlighted the century-long dedication to the task we are undertaking to this day. Looking through the archives provided me with the perspective of how important and storied this job has been and the tireless work that has been placed into it.

While I will be moving on, our task does not stop. "The Guardian" is a newspaper for the working class. It provides a Marxist analysis on what is happening at home and broad in a manner that is accessible to all, and the Communist Party of Australia will continue on in this task. I am confident that our newspaper will continue producing high-quality content like it did before me because the members of this Party are dedicated to this task.

Thank you again to all those who supported me, I will always remember my time here fondly.

With Peace, Love, and Solidarity,

– Franc Stregone

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NEW YEAR'S GREETING FROM THE PRESIDENT

It feels like only a few months have passed since I wrote a season's greeting for 2022.

It was the year our 14th Congress, delayed by COVID, finally went ahead under the banner of "Building the Party for a Socialist Future." The Congress elected its new CC and delivered a new Political Resolution which will guide Party work until the next congress.

The year has passed by quickly leaving behind both positive and negative experiences for workers and their families. Party members have been on the ground with workers in their struggle for better wages and conditions.

The government let COVID rip through the community abandoning hundreds of thousands of people. Part of that strategy was to stop reporting daily cases giving the appearance that the worse had gone and now there was a new normal. As I write media reports talk about more than 100,000 new cases in a week nationally, about an average of 14,000+ cases per day.

The new government that emerged from the federal election held in May represented a blow to the two-party system. Teals, Greens, and independents are an interesting cross bench. Several pieces of legislation have passed through both houses of parliament but the government has been forced to negotiate with those holding the balance of power.

The most recent IR Laws relied on ACT senator David Pocock who voted with the government. Finally, we see the promise to abolish the Australia Building and Construction Commission (ABCC) delivered with this Bill which also introduced some other reforms but has not the right to strike. A new round of IR is still needed to abolish the FairWork Act, give the right to strike and end the right of employers to lockouts. Workers and their unions must continue this struggle.

2022 also saw significant labour struggles with workers rising up together to fight for their interests. Some gains have been made but the state has been exposed for which class they represent. Some unions, such as the nurse's union in WA, have been threatened with deregistration or fined in acts of intimidation by government. As we go into 2023 more and more workers in their unions are realising only united action of workers can defeat the employer class and their repressive apparatuses.

Over the year our party continues to experience significant growth across the country. This in part has been the result of more activity and presence in the struggle. I recall the famous quote by Engels that "an ounce of action worth a tonne of theory" it is imperative that in 2023 all party members actively participate in the people's struggles. Peace, housing, workers' rights, and the environment are just some of the priorities of work in the next period as decided by the 14th Congress.

In the new year the CPA will strengthen its work among women to ensure the building the Party for a socialist future.

The *Guardian* editor and the collective have done a great job keeping the workers' weekly coming out during the last 3 years of the pandemic. I thank the editor for his work and wish him success in the new endeavours.

I take this opportunity also to wish all CPA members and *Guardian* readers a peaceful season's holiday and all the very best in the new year 2023. ✪

Invasion Day, 2022, Perth. Photo: CPA

DEALING WITH A DISABILITY AND THE NDIS PROCESS

Bev Hall

Rally calling for a fairer National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). Photo: Matt Hrkac www.matthrkac.com.au – flickr.com (CC BY 2.0)

Our grandson was placed with us when he was a baby. He was a victim of crime and is now living with an acquired brain injury and mild cerebral palsy. Initially for the first year or so he was with us he received several times a week, assistance from Novita an occupational therapist, a speech therapist, and a physiotherapist. It was really a wonderful service and as he grew up until eighteen years of age was able to access services as needed. After this he came under Disability SA which eventually phased out when NDIS came into being and clients moved into this new Australia wide service.

When it first was set up it was very confusing, in SA alone suddenly there were 80 pages of providers. This in itself was overwhelming. The first local group we tried on advice from a friend, who also has a disabled child, later proved unsatisfactory. After only a few services we found out that a considerable amount was taken out and that any activities arranged we had to provide the transport. It was NDIS who eventually let us know that our grandson's money was being used and he could run out before the end of the year it was allocated. When we confronted the group about the amounts they accused us of complaining to NDIS.

Consequently, soon after, the Disability and Aged Care Exhibition was held in Adelaide and we visited it to see what services we could access for our grandson. The NDIS had a stall there so we visited them first and informed them that we were confused and how do we select from so many providers. The advice they gave us, we followed up and have ended up finding a reliable and supportive service to cover the various needs of our grandson. We found this group over the years have not only provided us with assistance and how to weave through the complexities of NDIS, but have gone further in seeking out other services for our grandson's various needs including pursuing his educational wishes and competitive sporting desires.

The situation in SA, is that Ferris Care, a private company, was brought in to process initially Disability SA participants and to assist in the establishment of NDIS access for people with a disability in the state. NDIS recipients then when approved, can elect to manage their plan in one of the three different processes:

1. Self-manage – means that the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) pays the participant so they can pay the provider.
2. Plan-managed – NDIA provides funding to pay a Plan Manager who pays providers for the participant.
3. NDIA managed – NDIA pays the providers on behalf of the participant.

Providers have to be NDIS registered and meet government quality and safety standards. Participants who elect to self manage or be managed by a Plan Manager can use NDIS registered providers and non-registered providers, while NDIA managed can only use NDIS registered providers to deliver services.

In being considered for supports and services it must be related to the participant's disability. It cannot be for day-to-day living costs not related to the disability. It should represent value for money and be effective and work for participant. It needs to be taken into account along with other services provided by family, government, and community networks.

Where participants are vulnerable is that some service providers can charge more knowing it's government funded. Participants who decide on being Plan Managed brings in another middle stream who are setting up a private business from the funds allocated in order to manage these funds and so the funds go towards offices and staff for this purpose. NDIA managed means the participant deals directly with the government funding body and not another middle level which has private business interests. In this category along with some service providers it has been a windfall financially. The additional difficulties come with hours needing to be spent by either the participant or their family to fill out the numerous service agreements, with the various types of funding supports. For some people this is a daunting experience and requires a considerable level of ability intellectually.

For our grandson who has elected to be NDIA funded directly, he still has to deal with at least 4 different bodies including one dealing with supported employment. All of who require agreements and some funds charge more than similar non NDIS services elsewhere.

In the education system there are many supports for intellectually disabled, but for more higher functioning disabled any funding is globalised by the school and such students are usually overlooked or not supported at all. In discussions with other families who had children with disabilities it appears that very little if any support is given and often schools only allow these children to attend part time. The schools claim they haven't the funding, while using allocated funding to support other students, so disrupting the potential of some with learning problems related to their disability. Schools conveniently brand such students as having intellectual problems, so denying the more higher functioning student any opportunity to achieve their potential.

Our grandson despite all these difficulties particularly in education system has become generally a well balanced adult and interested to continually learn overcoming the various effects of his disability. ✪

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WINE ISN'T THE ONLY THING THAT'S RED IN THE HUNTER REGION

CPA Hunter Branch

After nearly a year of preparation and political activity, local workers have re-established what was formerly known as the Newcastle branch of the CPA. Instead of calling it the Newcastle Branch, the new members elected the more inclusive name of Hunter Branch to recognise and include workers of the Greater Hunter Region. Areas including, but not limited to Newcastle, Lake Macquarie, Maitland, Cessnock, Port Macquarie, and parts of the central coast.

Anyone who is familiar with Newcastle knows it as the "Steel City" because of its former largest employer BHP steelworks, until its closure in 1999. Newcastle traditionally has been an industrial, manufacturing, and mining city with a strong tradition of militant workers willing to fight for their rights. With the new Hunter Branch, the broader scope and geographical area which includes more regional areas like Maitland and Cessnock encompasses other industries such as agriculture and tourism.

One of the key focuses of the branch so far has been supporting teacher, nurse, and early childhood learning worker's strikes as well as activities to inform the populace that the CPA is back in the Hunter. In 2023 the focus will be on the peace budget, education, and formation for members and growing the size of the branch, while continuing to support worker and union activity.

The new branch will provide opportunities for the rising left-wing shift in the political leanings of the people of the Hunter, especially the youth. Communism and socialism are not the dirty words they once were, and the Hunter Branch aims to reclaim these words and bring them to the people. The political avenues for leftists do not need to be constrained to inadequate Labor or Greens parties, nor do they need to be constrained to student groups.

The CPA has a rich history in the Hunter Region, and it is up to the new branch to remind Novocastrians and the people of the surrounding areas of that history.

Newcastle and the wider Hunter is a workers region, and presents ample opportunity for expansion and activity. The Hunter Region has also been an area of massive exploitation by business and the state and local governments, which also provides many opportunities for the cause.

Newcastle in particular has changed from an industrial, mining and manufacturing city, to a miniature version of Sydney with a mostly services-based economy due to the outsourcing and closure of many of its blue collar industries. The nature of the kind of work has changed but the need for workers to continue their militancy has not. Steel workers are replaced by retail workers yet their struggle is the same.

The newly formed Hunter branch aims to support every worker in the region regardless of the industry. ✪

Photo: CPA

The new branch will provide opportunities for the rising left-wing shift in the political leanings of the people of the Hunter, especially the youth.

Dingo bytes

More than a thousand refugees and their supporters rallied outside Parliament House in Canberra on 29th November to demand permanent visas for refugees. Priya Nadesalingam, from the Biloela family granted a permanent visa by the Labor government, told the rally, "I believe the 'fast track' system was unfair. The people who interviewed us had no idea about what has happened in Sri Lanka for Tamils. The policies were made specifically to fail us. It has been ten years and people can't keep repeating this process. We want to build our future. So I'm asking everyone that this has to come to an end. We need to grant permanent residence to everyone, so we can live our lives peacefully." More than 31,000 refugees and people seeking asylum have been surviving for up to nine years and more, on temporary protection or bridging visas. Others are eking out an existence in the community on expired visas. Labor came to office promising to grant permanent visas to all refugees on temporary Temporary Protection visa (TPV) or Safe Haven Enterprise visa (SHEV), and to scrap the fast-track assessment system that has seen around 10,000 refugee applications rejected. Saajeda, an Afghan refugee, co-chairing the rally, asked, "Why must we keep begging the Australian government to give us safety and permanent protection? It is very clear that refugees from Afghanistan, and other places like Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Iran cannot return to live safely." Labor has also turned a deaf ear to refugees brought to Australia from Nauru and Papua New Guinea, ignoring the torture inflicted on them offshore and the fact that many now have jobs and families in Australia. Zahra, one of the speakers at the rally said, "The refugees sent to Nauru and Manus have been punished for a decade for seeking Australia's protection. Offshore refugees have been denied protection just because of the date we arrived. Some people who arrived after 19th July 2013 weren't sent offshore and will soon get permanent visas. Labor's policy towards us is like a cruel lottery."

As the Albanese government's privatisation plan gets into top gear with its "investigation" into Medicare's shortcomings, a glimpse of the government's vision for health care popped up last week. InstantScripts allows customers to obtain prescriptions for more than 300 medicines online by filling out questionnaires that are reviewed by doctors and, if approved, "can be sent in minutes." You don't actually see a doctor, which points the way for the government to make real savings. The company had 450,000 "transactions" last financial and is currently the target of a $200 million takeover. In addition, the regulator, the Medical Board of Australia, is auditing InstantScripts because of undisclosed "issues." Free-market-medicine in action.

PARASITE OF THE WEEK: Telstra has announced it will no longer require employees who are targets of sexual harassment to sign non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) that gag them from speaking out. Such is the corporate view of the world that rape, too, may be commercial-in-confidence. Sex Discrimination Commissioner Kate Jenkins has noted NDAs silence victims and protect serial predators.

Find out more about the

Communist Party of Australia

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COMMODIFICATION OF HEALTH CARE

Anna Pha

Since its introduction in 1984, Australia's national health insurance scheme, Medicare, has been under constant attack from the privateers. Medicare is an anathema to their profit-driven philosophy of user pays. Private health insurance funds have long sought to get their hands on Medicare.

The Medicare Schedule of rebates encourages short, fast through-put consultations as doctors' rebates have been frozen or failed to keep up with rising costs for decades.

Bulkbilling has been undermined by stealth as more and more GPs charge fees leaving patients out of pocket by $30, $40, $50, or much more in many instances. It is almost impossible to get into remaining bulkbilling practices in some suburbs and regional and rural Australia.

General practice is the bricks and mortar of the health system, where preventative care, education and early detection can result in better outcomes for patients, avoid hospitalisations while making huge savings for the public purse.

A COMMODITY

Health care has increasingly been turned into a commodity – provided for profit – with ability to pay a major determinant in access and outcomes for patients.

A new, highly profitable industry of online prescription services has emerged where companies such as InstantScripts (see Dingo Bytes) and Prime Medic offer prescriptions online from registered doctors.

Scripts are available by completing an online questionnaire and not speaking face-to-face with a doctor, with bulkbilling an option. Telehealth consultations are also offered.

Prime Medic, for example, offers online prescriptions; medical certificates; specialist, pathology, and radiology referrals.

Its website boasts 50,000 plus "weekly visitors" and ninety-two plus doctors. When contacted by the *Guardian*, Prime Medic clarified that the 50,000 plus referred to the number of people who used the service in a week. It did not mean they just visited the website.

Simple arithmetic suggests that each doctor is providing scripts, referrals and other services for around 500 customers per week or 100 a day over a five-day week! No wonder the company and doctors can afford to bulkbill. So much for knowing patients or continuity of care!

Proposals for pharmacists to be able to issue scripts keep surfacing, with claims about relieving the pressure on GPs to free them up for patients with chronic conditions.

What we see emerging is a second-class health stream for people on lower incomes and with chronic health conditions. Research has established that those in the lower socio-economic brackets are more likely to have multiple chronic diseases than wealthier Australians.

REVIEW OF MEDICARE

In July, the Labor government established the Strengthening Medicare Taskforce which is due to report by the end of the year. Its stated focus is on "improving primary health care in Australia," with particular reference to improving patient access to general practice; GP-led multidisciplinary team care; making primary care more affordable for patients; improving prevention and management of ongoing and chronic conditions; and reducing pressure on hospitals.

At the same time the government is seeking to contain spending on healthcare.

Last week the Grattan Institute think-tank published recommendations for a "new Medicare." To understand where the Grattan Institute is coming from it is worth looking at some of its financial supporters. They include Medibank Private, several banks, a law firm, BHP, an investment fund, Wesfarmers, and various philanthropic foundations. Its board members include directors from NAB, BHP, HSBC, and CSL.

The report points to some of the problems relating to Medicare – lack of accessibility to GPs and specialists for poorer Australians; GPs "struggling to meet increasingly complex demand in the system does not support them."

It says that "... general practice needs to be a team sport, with many clinicians working under the leadership of the GP to provide more and better care ... To accelerate change, 1000 more clinicians, such as nurses and physiotherapists, should be employed in general practices serving the communities with the biggest gaps in care." Team-based care is highly desirable.

But it then proposes a model where GPs can combine appointment fees with a flexible budget for each patient that is based on their level of need. GPs would be able to opt in to such a system. The allocation of a specific budget for each patient would lay the foundations for the entry of private health insurance (PHI) funds – the privatisation of Medicare.

Medicare would allocate a specific amount to a PHI fund for each patient. The concept is similar to the privatised NDIS model where each participant is ostensibly assessed according to needs, a dollar allocation made for services which are contracted out to the private or not-for-profit sector. In the case of healthcare, it would be for PHI funds.

Photo: Anna Pha

Once the PHI sector got its grubby hands on Medicare the outcome would be disastrous both cost-wise and in meeting the needs of patients. It would add an additional layer of profits and fail to restore universal bulkbilling.

It is worth noting that the Grattan Institute does not push for universal bulkbilling but makes constant references to patient fees throughout its report.

The Communist Party of Australia believes that universal access to medical care is fundamental to building a healthy society. It calls for a nationalised health system under local control, with high quality and "free" at point of delivery care, according to need rather than the ability to pay.

In particular, it supports team-based care focused on early intervention and providing care in the community and in the home. Improvement of the public system in outer suburban, rural and remote areas is needed, with measures put in place to ensure the health system caters first and foremost for working families and the sick and the elderly in these communities. ✪

VARROA MITE NUMBERS PLATEAU IN NORTHERN NSW

N Woodruff

Outbreaks of invasive bee-killing parasite Varroa mites have plateaued since the initial discovery at the Port of Newcastle in June this year.

Until recently, Varroa mite was present in every beekeeping region of the world except Australia. The parasite attaches itself to bees and can kill entire hives. A similar outbreak of the parasite in New Zealand in 2000 has devastated bee populations and caused hundreds of millions of dollars of damage to beekeeping operations and the agricultural industries that depend on bees for pollination. Fruit and nut crops are particularly dependent on pollination, and impacts on these crops could cause significant shortages and price increases.

Initially, it was feared a similar situation could happen in Australia, and so quarantine measures were put in place, banning the transport of bees and beekeeping equipment, and burning infected hives. Beekeepers, both hobbyist and commercial, have been urged to inspect their hives for Varroa mite, as early detection is critical in controlling the spread. Registered beekeepers in NSW are eligible for compensation if their infected hives have to be burned.

Currently, all known infections are around Newcastle and the Hunter Valley region of New South Wales, ranging from Coffs Harbour down to Gosford. No new infections have been reported since the start of November, and all infected beehives can be traced to another hive, giving beekeepers confidence that eradication of the Varroa mite could be possible.

Eradication of Varroa mite has happened before. Detections of varroa mite on Asian honeybees in Townsville in 2016 caused a similar eradication program, and was declared successful in 2021.

If you suspect a varroa mite infestation, contact the Exotic Plant Pest Hotline to report your detection on 1800 084 881 (9 AM to 5 PM, Monday to Friday). ✪

Western Honey Bee with attached Varroa Mites.
Photo: AbsoluteFolly – flickr.com (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

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ENVIRONMENT

Green Strategy: Path to Fundamental Transformation

By **Marc Brodine**
International Publishers NY 2018
Paperback – 293 pages **$40**

Green Strategy links environmental issues to other struggles and applies lessons from past struggles. It explores the interwoven environmental problems caused by the imbalance between humanity and the natural world on which humanity depends. The roots of our environmental crises are identified as lying in capitalism. Brodine puts forward a number of positive proposals for building the necessary coalitions and alliances with other movements. A very interesting and useful contribution towards the understanding of the complexity of climate change and its all-encompassing impact on every aspect of life.

POLITICAL ECONOMY

Super Profits and Crises: Modern US Capitalism

By Victor Perlo
International Publishers NY
Paperback – 546 pages **$30**

This is a great book for beginners and those with a greater knowledge in understanding Marxist political economy. It not only presents the theory but also its application today, something which many theoretical texts do not do. It covers such topics as exploitation of labour and value, real wages and productivity, the rate of profit, corruption and decay of capitalism, monopoly, state monopoly capitalism, racism, the militarisation of the economy, US imperialism, economic crisis and the business cycle, the structural crisis of world capitalism, socialism versus capitalism, and much more in simple everyday language.

WOMEN

The Emancipation of Women

International Publishers NY
Paperback 136 pages **$25**

This publication contains selected writings by Lenin on a wide variety of topics related to the problems of women in society. The origins and persistence of discriminatory and oppressive practices and modes of thought, the family, the important role of women in social movements and the need to combat prejudicial hangovers from the past are discussed. Lenin "... saw full social equality of women as a principle that no communist could dispute," Clara Zetkin writes in "My Recollections of Lenin," which is also included in this volume. Of particular significance for today is the thought Lenin gave to the need for women to have special demands and organisations of their own, within the movement for socialism and the true emancipation of women by way of victorious class struggle.

REVOLUTION

ABC – What is Revolution?

Progress Publishers 1986
Paperback, 191 pages **$15**

This easy-to-read volume explains Marxist-Leninist theory on the economic basis of social revolution, the revolutionary situation, types of social revolutions, diversity of ways of transitioning to socialism, and much more.

ABC – what is the state?

Progress Publishers 1986
Paperback 156 pages **$15**

Another easy-to-read publication that examines Marxist-Leninist theory on the origin of the state, the bourgeois (capitalist) state, the socialist state, and the state in developing countries.

State and Revolution

By Vladimir Lenin
International Publishers NY
Paperback – 103 pages **$15**

The concept of the state is fundamental to understanding capitalist society and the revolutionary process. This important booklet clarifies what Engels and Marx said about the conditions in which the state exists and its role in class society. Lenin counters the distortions that are propagated by capitalist writers and explains the well-known term "withering away of the state."

Birth of The Communist Manifesto

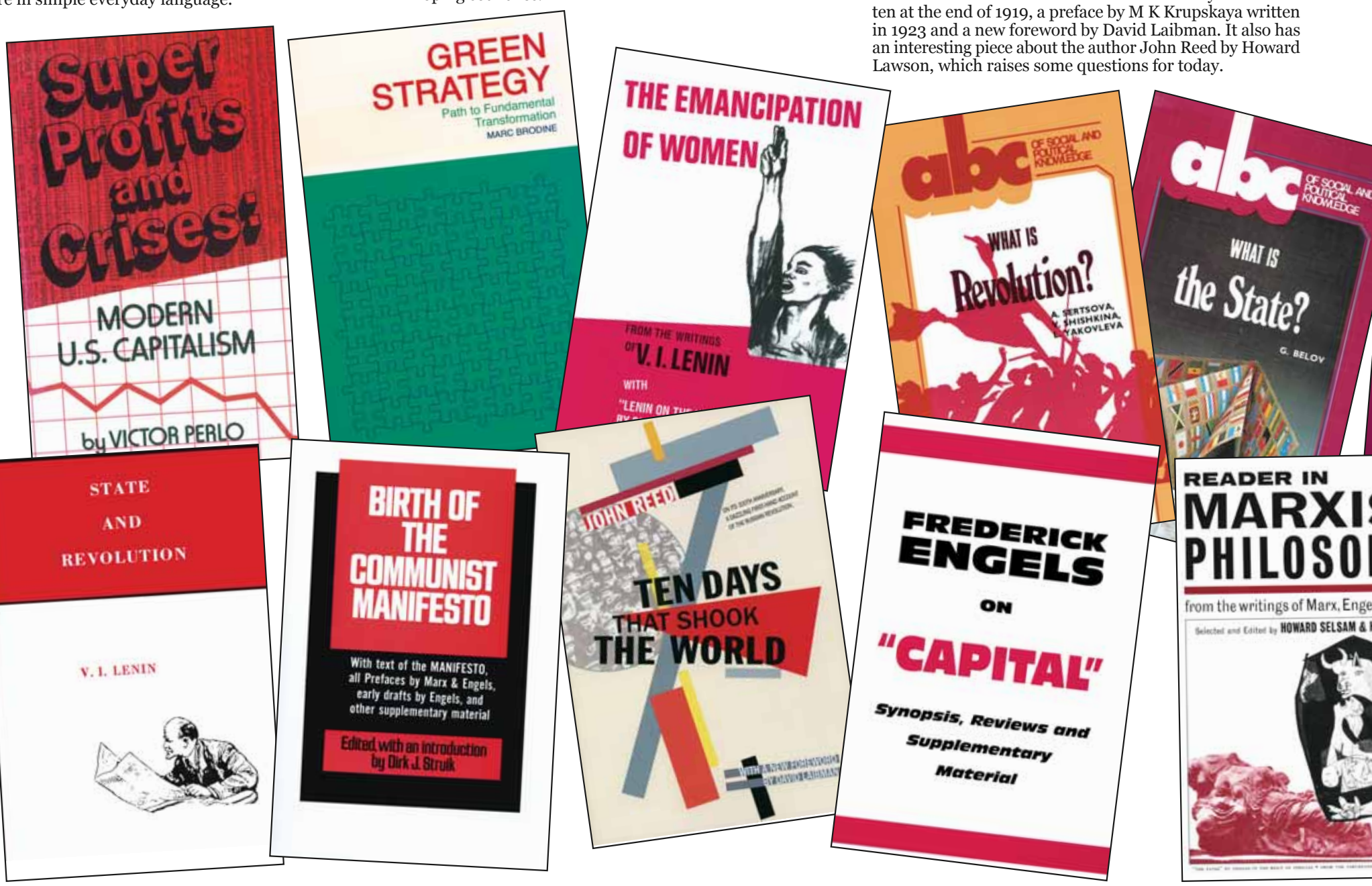
By Karl Marx & Frederick Engels
Edited with an introduction by Dirk J Struik
International Publishers, USA, 1971 (1993)
Paperback – 224 pages **$25**

This publication contains the full text of the *Communist Manifesto* by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels with early drafts by Engels and other supplementary material. It has a very useful introduction by Professor Struik that assists with understanding the *Manifesto* and the context in which it was conceived and written. A must read for anyone wishing to understand Marxism and still very relevant today.

Ten Days that Shook the World

By John Reed
International Publishers
Paperback 430 pages **$45**

In this iconic work, John Reed provides a first-hand riveting description of the extraordinary events that occurred in the lead-up to and during the Revolution that resulted in the Bolsheviks seizing power. The book was first published in March 1919, and this edition was published for the centenary of the Revolution. It includes an introduction by Lenin written at the end of 1919, a preface by M K Krupskaya written in 1923 and a new foreword by David Laibman. It also has an interesting piece about the author John Reed by Howard Lawson, which raises some questions for today.



PING PROGRESSIVE

nething for yourself to read? Then look no further than ins, DVDs, and other merchandise. First some books:

Frederick Engels on Capital

By Frederick Engels
International Publishers
Paperback 108 pages **$14**

Das Capital is one of the most iconic works by the great revolutionary Karl Marx and fundamental to understanding capitalism and Marxist political economy. It revealed and substantiated the source of surplus value and exploitation of workers, the true source of private profits. This publication provides a clear outline of the essentials covered in the three volumes of *Das Capital*. Engels writing is clear and easily accessible.

PHILOSOPHY

Reader in Marxist Philosophy – from the writings of Marx, Engels and Lenin

Edited by H Selsam & H Martel
International Publishers, New York, 1963
Paperback – 384 pages **$20**

A selection of edited writings from Marx, Engels and Lenin with introductions and notes by Howard Selsam and Harry Martel. It covers materialism versus idealism; dialectics and the dialectical method; theory of knowledge and philosophy of science; the materialist interpretation of history; religion; and ethics. It draws on many well-known writings of Marx, Engels and Lenin, is well referenced and has a bibliographical index with useful that assist with understanding.

ETHICS

Marxist Ethics: A Short Exposition

By Willis H Truitt International Publishers
Paperback ,119 pages **$25**

There is a widespread misconception that Marxism is limited to material facts, mostly economic in nature, and does not and cannot delve into the realm of values and value judgements. Yet, as the author of *Marxist Ethics: A Short Exposition* points out, Marx condemned the injustices of capitalism in moral language. The volume covers ethical concerns that were deemed important by the young Marx; the question of determinism in Marx's writings; justice and workers' interests; integration of needs and rights of the individual with that of whole society; the intersection of the arts and morality; and much more.

FLAGS

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THREE MONTH
CAPITALISM & RACISM II

Graham Holton

Abandoned House, Detroit. Photo: sharghzadeh – flickr.com (CC BY-NC 2.0)

I lived for three months in Detroit, Wayne County, Michigan. The house on Tyler Street was not far from Eight Mile Road. One side of which was White and middle class. The other side was African American and poor. There was not a single Black driver in the White area. It was as if self-imposed "segregation" had fallen upon the city. The house, which cost US$1,000, was in the African American area. The houses nearby had bars on the windows, others were long abandoned. Buildings had collapsed and were now empty lots with tall trees. Grey squirrels ran across the roads. Cables hung from electricity poles to get free power and pipes were tapped to get water. The poor were living life as best they could.

There were no stores in the Black area. On Eight Mile Road there was a Party Store, which sold alcohol and canned food, but nothing fresh, the counter protected with bulletproof glass. There was a store for women to have their nails done. Next door sold expensive hubcaps. Otherwise, the locals had to go into the White area for shopping. Most people did not have cars, they rode bicycles. A few churches survived, Catholic and Baptist. There was a shooting at a nearby school. Kids waiting for a bus were shot in a drive-by. It had become part of daily life in a tough city.

The few Whites I met had been in jail, were old, or were alcoholics. Even with their poor background their racism towards African Americans is evident in the way they spoke and treated Black people. I was at the counter talking to the young Black woman serving and she asked where I came from. I said Australia. She replied, "Wow, they are nice people over there." After hearing this response several times from African Americans, I asked what it meant. "White people usually just shout at us and abuse us. But you are different." It was a nice, but sad, compliment. I can honestly say that all the African Americans I met in Detroit treated me well. The image portrayed in Hollywood films, of African Americans being drug addicts and pimps, is false. I called up a plumber to fix the sewerage. He was two metres tall and all muscle and came to the door visibly shaking. The plumber looked around terrified. "This is a Black area!" The neighbours were friendly, but he never bothered to find that out. When I walked the streets at night, I was told by White locals that I was crazy. No one ever bothered me.

I drove or walked along every main street and many backstreets of Detroit. A nunnery was boarded up for sale. Dilapidated mansions had for sale signs, "Highest Cash Offer." Houses were selling for US$1 each. People had abandoned their homes, handing the keys to the local police station for the banks to take over the mortgage. As it cost US$2,500 to clear a site, the banks sold off at auction streets of once beautiful Art Deco buildings. Many had collapsed roofs and mould on the walls.

The original name of Detroit, (French meaning "strait"), was Fort Ponchartrain du Detroit, founded by French settlers in 1701. By 1920 it was the fourth largest city in the USA, after New York City, Chicago, and Philadelphia. At its industrial peak the Detroit River was the busiest commercial hub in the world, its freight throughput was four times that of London. By the 1950s Detroit was a symbol of US car manufacturing (Motown), dominating car production around the world. It was an icon of American capitalism with its large industrial middle class and good wages.

The workers were proud union members. At its peak in the 1970s, the United Auto Workers (UAW) had a membership of 1.5 million, which could shut down the city with a strike. Many Black workers felt alienated by the union's majority white leadership. After a wildcat strike in 1968, they formed the League of Revolutionary Black Workers (LRBW), guided by Black liberation and Marxism-Leninism principles. In 1971 it merged with the Communist League and in 1974 it became the Communist Labor Party and worked with the CPUSA.

Today, downtown Detroit has a population of 640,000, down from 1.85 million in 1950, having lost sixty-five per cent of its inhabitants. Detroit's wealth and population decline began with the Race Riots of 1967, when much of the White population began moving out. The violent confrontation with the city's police in predominantly African American neighbourhoods began on 23rd July 1967 and lasted five days, resulting in forty-three dead: 33 African Americans and 10 Whites. Since then, the city has razed to the ground more than 200,000 houses, as unfit for human habitation, leaving great spaces that have gone back to wilderness.

After the GFC (Global Financial Crisis) in 2008, General Motors and other car manufacturers went bankrupt and had to be bailed out by the Federal government. The Subprime market had collapsed. Banks and finance companies had tranched their mortgages assuming that by so doing they could weather any financial storm. When the GFC hit banks had no idea of how many subprimes they held, nor how much they were worth. The term "subprime" comes from loans given to African Americans in Detroit, as being below prime real estate, being unreliable loans. The American dream of house ownership was shattered and the Crash spread around the world. One economist calculated that the amount of money lost by US banks in 2008 was equivalent to all profits from all US banks since the end of the Civil War in 1865. It was the biggest collapse of US capitalism since the 1929 Crash, which created the Great Depression.

The residents of the White city never enter the Black city, which today remains in economic decline, suffering from deindustrialisation and urban decay. The White population moved to places like Grosse Pointe, where the film *Gran Torino* (2009), starring Clint Eastwood, was shot. There are photographs of Eastwood with the proprietors in the hardware and barbers. Black residents moved to Harper Woods and Eastpointe. According to the 2020 Census, the Black population in Harper Woods increased fifty-eight per cent since 2010 and Eastpointe by eighty-nine per cent.

Since the 1970s Detroit has been the king of the "Rust Belt." Its factories, stores and houses have been abandoned, with poor African American families moving in. *The Detroit News* reported (27th September 2021) that the metropolitan area, with 4.3 million inhabitants, is the most dangerous city in the USA, having a violent crime rate in 2020 of 2,248 per 100,000 residents. The 14,370 violent crimes reported, included assault, robbery, rape and criminal homicide. Murders rose 19.3 per cent from 2019. Not surprisingly, thirty-eight per cent of the residents live below the poverty line.

The city's decay has produced such an iconic image of social dystopia that Hollywood films use it for their films. In *Robocop* (1987), directed by Paul Verhoeven, Detroit is shown as a corporate success with towering glass and concrete monuments to American capitalism, while the dystopian suburbs are

Many Black workers felt alienated by the union's majority white leadership. After a wildcat strike in 1968, they formed the League of Revolutionary Black Workers (LRBW), guided by Black liberation and Marxism-Leninism principles.

IS IN DETROIT: N A "SEGREGATED" CITY

filled with decaying hovels, filled with the poor, where crime goes unchecked. The law enforcement system had been privatised by Omni Consumer Products. The movie begins in an abandoned steel mill where Alex Murphy is shot up and later turned into Robocop, half man, half machine. The residents so relate to the fictional crime fighter, who laid down his life to protect the people, that they crowdfunded a 2-metre-high statue of Robocop, weighing 2.5 tonnes, to be erected in the city.

I was walking along Pelkey Street, with its big brick pre-World War II houses, when an old man told me that this is where one of the Supremes lived here before the neighbourhood collapsed. Today this area is a mere shell of its former African American wealth and glory. "You should check out the Museum. That is where they recorded." I drove downtown to see the Motown Museum. From outside there was not much to see, but in the basement was where the studio was and it was an amazing experience. In this small recording studio, Diana Ross and the Supremes, the Four Tops, the Jackson 5 (Michael Jackson), Marvin Gaye and the Marvelettes recorded their hit songs. An X marked the spot where blind Stevie Wonder would stand at the mike. The budget was so small that that they cut a hole in the ceiling to create echo effects.

These singers were household names in Australia in the 1960s, when it still had a White Australia Policy, with furniture stamped, "By White Labour." While their music played on the radio, they did not show their photographs, as it would have revealed that they were African American. Motown (Motor Town) is an African American-owned label which played an important role in integrating local soul music blended with White popular music, achieving an amazing success internationally. The label was worth US$61 million, with seventy-nine records in the top ten of the *Billboard Hot 100*. Following the 1967 Riots and the loss of the songwriting and production team of Holland, Dozier and Holland over pay disputes, Motown moved to Los Angeles, California. The Motown Museum closed in July 2021 because the elevator needed repairs. It is presently undergoing an expansion after receiving US$55 million in donations, to make it a world-class entertainment and education centre to bring in tourist dollars.

I have been a fan of the Mexican artist, Diego Rivera, for years, so I drove to the Institute of Arts Museum to see his masterpiece. He went to Detroit in 1933 to do a mural celebrating the American car industry. What he painted was a Marxist view of American capitalism. The *Detroit Industry* murals are a symbol of modernity and the power of labour and capitalism. Commissioned by Edsel Ford, president of the Ford Motor Company, Rivera completed a 27-panel masterpiece. It was at the height of the Great Depression and Rivera prominently represented the working classes and indigenous cultures of Mexico, showing the constructive/destructive and organic/mechanistic side of the automobile industry. When the murals were unveiled, critics attacked the images of the working class being featured so prominently, instead of the Capitalists. Outraged, the Detroit City Council even considered whitewashing over the murals. Standing before them, in the courtyard of the Institute of Arts Museum, I could easily see why they are one of the most important modernist works of the twentieth century. In 2014 they were given the National Historic Landmark Status.

In 2022, *TIME* magazine named Detroit "One of the World's Greatest Places" to visit. "Detroit is truly the textbook definition of a great American city," said Wayne County Executive, Warren Evans. A new US$126 million investment into the Michigan Central Innovation District, around the iconic Michigan Central Train Station, will be a hub for innovation and entrepreneurship. In 2017, *The New York Times* named Detroit, "The Most Exciting City in America?" Two years before, Detroit became the first American UNSECO listed city, calling it a "City of Design." This investment has gone into the White area of Detroit. The poor African American areas remain destitute and forgotten. ✪

First Black family moving into the Sojourner Truth neighbourhood, Detroit, Michigan, 1942. Photo by Arthur S Siegel – (Britt Fuller) flickr.com Public domain.

Further Reading:
Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin. *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying: A Study in Urban Revolution*. Chicago, Il.: Haymarket Books. (1998) 2012.
Linda Bank Downs. 1999. *Diego Rivera: The Detroit Industry Murals*. New York. W. W. Norton Company.

Diego Rivera went to Detroit in 1933 to do a mural celebrating the American car industry. What he painted was a Marxist view of American capitalism. *The Detroit Industry* murals are a symbol of modernity and the power of labour and capitalism.

COMRADE JIANG ZEMIN: A RETROSPECTIVE

Roland Boer

On the last day of November, 2022, Comrade Jiang Zemin died in Shanghai. He was 96 years old, and at the time of writing the whole of China is in mourning. All websites have been in black and white for a week, many non-essential activities and meetings have been postponed, and a funeral committee is overseeing all activities. On 6th December, I listened to the memorial meeting in the Great Hall of the People. Standing before Jiang Zemin's coffin, Xi Jinping spoke of his contribution to the CPC and China's socialist development. Except for the frail, all stood while listening.

Jiang Zemin was General Secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) from 1989 to 2002. When reading through the many Chinese sources published over the recent days, one is struck by the following: first, Jiang Zemin and the CPC steered China through some major crises; second, at the same time they guided the country to some very comprehensive achievements; and third, there is a remarkable continuity from Jiang Zemin's time as CPC General Secretary until today. Before dealing with these points, I will provide a sketch of Jiang Zemin's life. It goes without saying that the reader should avoid the ill-informed, ignorant, and at times malicious pieces from the usual suspects among the Western media.

JIANG ZEMIN'S LIFE

Jiang Zemin was born on 17th August, 1926. Think for a moment of what times they were. The CPC had been established only five years earlier, and Mao Zedong and the other young communists were barely out of their 20s. China was at a very low ebb, was riven with civil war, and life expectancy was only 33 (now, life expectancy in China is higher than the USA). By the time Jiang was in middle (primary) school, his home town of Yangzhou, Jiangsu Province, was overrun by Japanese imperialist forces seeking to conquer and colonise China.

During the later 1930s and early 1940s, Jiang was involved in anti-imperialist activities while studying electrical engineering in Nanjing. After the defeat of the Japanese invaders in 1945, he was able to move to Shanghai to continue his studies. By 1946, he had developed a Communist world outlook and joined the CPC. Until liberation in 1949, he carried out underground Party work behind Kuomintang lines. By day, he was a factory engineer, and at night he was a Communist agitator and educator. As Shanghai was about to be liberated in 1949, Jiang organised the workers into factory protection units so as to preserve the factory for its role in the New China.

After liberation, Jiang worked in a range of factories, from food processing to soap manufacture, before finding his role as a leader in technological development and electrical engineering. He joined and then led a number of delegations to other socialist countries to learn about their technological and industrial developments. By 1982, at the CPC's Twelfth National Congress, he was elected to the CPC Central Committee. In 1985, Jiang was appointed mayor of Shanghai. Here, he began the process of turning the port-city into what it is today: a world-leading economic and technological centre, and one of the busiest ports in the world.

CRISES

Jiang Zemin was elected into the role of General Secretary of the CPC at a moment of deep crisis. In the spring and summer of 1989, the world's first "colour counter-revolution" was attempted in China at the instigation of hostile external forces. Internationally, the world socialist movement was facing its most significant setback: the Communist Party of the Soviet Union had lost its way, opportunists had risen in the ranks (Gorbachev and others), and Party unity had dissipated. In socialist countries of eastern Europe, a series of counter-revolutions were taking place, and by 1991 the Soviet Union itself was no more. Not a few thought China would go the same way. It was not to be.

At the Fourth Plenary Session of the CPC's Thirteenth Central Committee, Jiang Zemin was elected as General Secretary. This was very much a crisis meeting, at the height of the turmoil. Deng Xiaoping was in his 90s, and China needed a steady hand to keep China on the socialist road. Jiang Zemin was precisely that steady hand.

By the time of the CPC's Fourteenth National Congress (October 1992), stable transitions in leadership had been established. Not only was Jiang Zemin elected to the Central Committee and the Politburo, but he was also elected as General Secretary again. Importantly, at the National People's Congress held in March 1993, Jiang Zemin was nominated and elected as chairman (in English "president") of the PRC, as well as of the Central Military Commission. With re-election in 1997, he would hold these positions until 2012, when he offered to retire. It is to Jiang Zemin's credit that he established a stable process of transition that is continued today.

The 1990s were a time of learning from the mistakes of the Soviet Union and eastern European socialist countries. Many were the in-depth studies and debates as to what was needed in China, especially since world socialism was at a low ebb. Jiang Zemin summarised what was needed in two points: resolutely adhere to socialism; and follow a path of socialist reform and development that is attuned to the concrete realities of China.

ACHIEVEMENTS

For China's development, Jiang Zemin and the CPC faced a formidable task: implementing the reform and opening-up begun by Deng Xiaoping. In many respects, they were on a road that no one had followed before. A major feature of this path is the "socialist market economy," with common ownership as the mainstay and other forms of ownership alongside. Many were the misunderstandings at the time within China and internationally, and not a few thought that China was embarking on the "capitalist road" and the path of "bourgeois liberalisation." Nothing could be further from the truth.

Like Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin was resolute in ensuring that China kept to the socialist road, upheld the dictatorship of the proletariat, the leadership of the Communist Party, and Marxism-Leninism along with Mao Zedong Thought. These are, of course, the "Four Cardinal Principles." I cannot go into the details here as to how the socialist market economy came to work within China's socialist system, except to point out that it is one component of that system. China never gave up on the planned economy, but – after a few bumps – has managed to develop far more effective planning precisely through the interaction with the socialist market economy.

We can see the result today. It was Jiang Zemin at the core of the CPC who set China on its extraordinary trajectory of development. This is known as socialist modernisation, which is quite distinct from capitalist modernisation. This comprehensive modernisation has taken place over decades rather than centuries, includes 1.4 billion people, and has been managed in an overall stable way. When contradictions – some quite serious – have arisen, there has been a notable ability to resolve the contradiction and move forward. By now, the modernisation of more people than in all developed countries combined is having a profound influence around the world – especially in other developing countries.

Of the many international achievements, the most significant is the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). As former mayor of Shanghai, this was one of Jiang Zemin's major international policy initiatives, and after much planning in the 1990s the SCO was established in June of 2001. Having grown into what it is today, with many Middle Eastern, Central Asian, and African countries seeking to join, the SCO is instrumental in the qualitative changes taking place in the world today.

Jiang Zemin official photo.
Photo: Government of People's Republic of China – Public domain.

CONTINUITIES

The risk in focusing on Jiang Zemin is that it may seem like the work of one human being who influenced history. Instead, we should always remember that the CPC has a collective leadership with the General Secretary at the core. Further, Jiang Zemin's contribution is in significant continuity with those who went before him – Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping – and those who were to follow – Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping.

Let us take the example of economic development. Jiang Zemin is often seen as one with a single focus: economic development as the foundation of the country's strength, unity, and ability to repel imperialist interventions. As one trained in the sciences and technology, he did emphasise economic development, especially since China was still a relatively poor and weak country when he was elected General Secretary. But this is also a one-sided picture: Jiang stressed again and again the need for all-round development, in terms of economic, political, and cultural development, or what is also expressed as the need for development in both material and "spiritual" aspects (here "spiritual" means culture in a much fuller sense). This comprehensive concern we find even more today with Xi Jinping.

Politically, Jiang Zemin emphasised the need to develop and strengthen China's socialist democracy and rule of law. He rolled up his sleeves to begin the long task of improving and consolidating electoral, consultative, and grassroots democracy, as well the mechanisms for democratic supervision, management, and socialist human rights and freedoms. He oversaw significant revisions to the minority nationalities preferential policies, ensuring greater autonomy as the key to the country's unity. Picking up Deng Xiaoping's emphasis on the need to find a way to establish a distinctly socialist rule of law, Jiang oversaw both significant debates in the 1990s concerning this question and the beginning of a process that is now coming to fruition with Xi Jinping and the practice of "ruling the country according to the rule of law." Perhaps the best example is the rule-of-law solution to the "Hong Kong Storm" of 2019-2020.

Many are the other continuities, such as modernising the People's Liberation Army so that it can adequately protect a socialist country, a comprehensive social security system, ensuring that China is treated internationally as an equal, the need for constant innovation, and emphasising the policy of establishing a moderately prosperous (*xiaokang*) society by 2021. In Jiang's time, these policies were in their beginning stages, but we have seen them carried out in the decades that were to follow.

To be added here is the long process of reunifying the whole country, as the last step of the revolutionary struggle. Indeed, it was Jiang Zemin who was present at the return of Hong Kong in 1997 and Macao in 1999. He was not to see a resolution of the Taiwan question, but he did manage the significant "1992 Consensus" between China and the USA. Importantly, Jiang stressed peaceful reunification, and that if force was needed as a last resort it would not be directed at the Chinese compatriots of the island but at foreign forces trying to interfere with China. ✪

RUSSIA REJECTS WEST'S OIL PRICE CAP, MULLS SUPPLY SUSPENSION

Moscow has voiced opposition against a price cap on Russian oil and said European countries championing the price cap could face a suspension of oil supplies, local media reported over the weekend.

The Kremlin's uncompromising stance came on the heels of a Friday announcement by the Group of Seven (G7) nations and Australia to join the EU in setting a $60 a barrel cap on Russian seaborne crude oil.

The price ceiling is indicative of Europe's plans to manoeuvre the non-market practice into propaganda to show its political correctness, experts said, arguing against the West's hype around the cap supposedly serving as a stabiliser to global energy supplies with discounted Russian oil.

A bruising scenario in the wake of the price cap could be a possible hike in oil prices that eventually boomerangs on the EU and adds to the bloc's economic sufferings, they noted.

OIL WRESTLING

Russia has barely given any ground on the price gap, although the orchestrated move is blatantly targeting Russia's finances.

On 4th December, the G7 and Australia as current members of the Price Cap Coalition agreed on the price limit in line with a unanimous decision by EU member states, according to the announcement. The price cap is scheduled to enter into force on Monday or very soon thereafter.

Russia will definitely give resolute countermeasures at the diplomatic level as Russia does not want to lose the pricing power of energy exports, and pricing power is one of the core contents of economic sovereignty, Zhang Hong, an associate research fellow at the Institute of Russian, Eastern European & Central Asian Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), told the *Global Times*.

"We are assessing the situation. Certain preparations for such a cap were made. We won't accept the price cap and we will inform you how the work will be organised once the assessment is over," Russia news agency TASS reported on Saturday, citing Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov.

Russian Permanent Representative to International Organisations in Vienna Mikhail Ulyanov wrote on Telegram that "Moscow has already made it clear that it will not supply oil to those countries who support an anti-market price cap."

"Starting from this year, Europe will live without Russian oil," he claimed, according to TASS.

Interestingly, a photo reportedly published by Russian Security Council Deputy Chairman Dmitry Medvedev is circulating on social media on Telegram channels, sarcastically warning Europe of the price cap's chilly implications, media reports said.

The meme is taken from Stanley Kubrik's landmark horror movie *The Shining* featuring the frozen protagonist, and is accompanied by an ironic sentence that suggests the decision on the Russia oil price cap has finally been made.

Capping crude oil prices is part of the sanctions aimed at cutting Russia's energy revenues in order to make Russia's economy and its current military operations unsustainable, experts said.

The impact of the price limit on direct oil trade between Russia and the EU is almost negligible. This is because the direct trade between the two sides has almost been suspended, and the West mainly aimed at affecting Russia's oil exports and price negotiations with third parties, Zhang said.

Reckoning the move as an attempt to showcase the West's political correctness, the expert stressed that if the price further drops to the $30 previously requested by some countries in the region, then Russia may cut production, which will lead to a rise in global crude oil prices.

BRUISING REPERCUSSIONS

Even under the current price limit, what the deal might ultimately end up is believed to be far from, if not entirely contrary to, its desired role as a stabiliser to global energy markets already feeling the pinch of sanctions on Russian oil, observers said.

"The price cap will encourage the flow of discounted Russian oil onto global markets and is designed to help protect consumers and businesses from global supply disruptions," US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said in a statement released following the price cap announcement.

Oil and gas processing enterprise Yakutia Russia. Photo: Chursaev13 – flickr.com (CC BY 4.0)

The fundamental purpose of the price cap is to limit Russia's ability to export oil and thus its access to energy export revenues. However, there is a premise that Russia can only rely on European energy markets, Cui Heng, an assistant research fellow from the Center for Russian Studies of East China Normal University, told the *Global Times*.

Europe is likely to suffer far more than Russia as the latter can search for alternative markets outside Europe, the expert noted, adding that this would add to Europe's already high inflation.

Europe is already divided over energy, and several countries have sought exemptions from bans on importing Russia's oil. All in all, the price cap is undoubtedly a lose-lose situation for both Russia and Europe, and the de-Europeanisation of Russia's energy exports is also a certainty, Cui remarked.

Russia, albeit under pressure of the deal's fallout on its economy, is unlikely to give in to the mandated discounted price in the foreseeable future, Lin Boqiang, director of the China Center for Energy Economics Research at Xiamen University, told the *Global Times*.

Factoring into the lack of pipeline infrastructure to channel crude oil, Russia might find it difficult to identify purchasers out of the price limit's jurisdictions yet sufficiently accessible to Russian crude oil, Lin continued, noting that Europe is facing a similar dilemma.

Without readily available oil transportation conduits, the EU would be challenged to increase oil imports from the US and other sources, he added, estimating that the continent is almost destined to be crippled by a surge in oil prices in the short term.

The global oil price will likely top $100 amid the price limit, TASS reported in a separate report, citing Kirill Melnikov, head of the Russian Energy Development Center.

"The cap level is irrelevant by itself, because Russian companies will not sell oil under it anyway. Accordingly, supplies of Russian oil via European shipping and insurance companies will be interrupted, which may reduce Russia's export by 1-1.5 million barrels per day in December and January. This will likely lead to a price hike above $100 per barrel," he said.

While an expected oil price hike would inevitably add to woes over a worsening inflation landscape across the globe, the EU that's being haunted by record price levels in decades will bear the most brunt, analysts said.

In the words of Lin, instead of envisioning a soothing impact on energy prices, the continent should ready itself for even costlier energy bills and consequently an unbearable drag on its economy amid US' continued cycle of rate hikes.

At the same time, experts also predicted another possibility: the OPEC+ alliance led by Saudi Arabia and Russia might reach a consensus on moderate production cuts to maintain the stability of international oil prices.

Such positivity will directly make the West's price limit agreement to not have the desired effect, it'll just be a diplomatic propaganda, Zhang at CASS remarked.

Global Times ✪

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CONGRESS AND BIDEN OVERRIDE RAIL WORKERS' COLLECTIVE BARGAINING RIGHTS

Mark Gruenberg & John Wojcik

Giving in to pressure from Democratic President Joe Biden and corporate rail bosses, the Senate overwhelmingly imposed a four-year contract on 115,000 unionised freight railroad workers – without the seven paid sick days they sought. The contract, which a Biden board crafted, came in legislation the president signed this morning.

Biden, in a speech this morning at his signing of the bill, tried to deflect from anger expressed by workers and their unions by emphasising that the workers are getting a twenty-four per cent wage increase and that the whole issue of paid sick leave will be considered later, and for everyone, not just the rail workers. But that response, and the failure to insert the sick days into the contract, left workers and union leaders irate.

"Rail companies could do the right thing today and grant workers paid sick leave," AFL-CIO President Liz Shuler said just before the Senate's rejection of paid sick leave.

Photo: Public domain – pxhere.com

THEY REFUSED, PUTTING PROFITS FIRST

"But they've refused, putting profits over people. That's how we got here. Regardless of what happens ... the fight for paid sick leave won't end. Calling workers 'essential' one minute and treating them as dispensable the next is abhorrent.

"We join rail workers – and all America's workers – in securing paid sick leave, fair scheduling, and the dignity and respect they deserve."

That respect and dignity include, though Shuler didn't say so, respect and dignity for collective bargaining agreements – something both Congress and Biden disregarded in wrangling over this rail pact. Railroad Workers United, a rank-and-file organisation representing all rail crafts, called them on it.

Since "a majority of rank-and-file union members have declared" the pact unsatisfactory, President Biden and Congress are overriding the democratically expressed will of railroad workers," it declared. "While the tentative agreement provides significant wage increases, workers stated clearly and repeatedly their fight is not just about money. Railroad workers are *fighting for the right to live – and have a life – outside of work* [their emphasis]."

To short-circuit the collective bargaining rights of the workers, the companies, Congress, and President Biden took advantage of US law which allows Congress to act when national commerce is threatened. Both the companies and the administration held the threat of impending economic doom over the heads of Congress if the original deal without the sick days added by the House was not immediately approved yesterday.

"We are disappointed any time contract negotiations are taken out of the hands of the workers," said Greg Regan, the president of the AFL-CIO's Transportation Trades Council. "This was the plan of the railroads from the beginning. They knew from the very start that the issue of sick days was considered crucial by the rail workers. They never, from the very beginning, listened to what they knew the workers were demanding and needed."

He said, however, that the fight for sick days would continue nevertheless during the length of this contract or at the end of it and that the fight for paid sick leave for all workers was something Biden has promised his administration will wage. Regan said he believed the Biden administration was honest about its promise to wage this fight.

He noted that the contract does include a large wage increase and that "were it not for the Biden administration we would still be nowhere at all with this struggle."

The Brotherhood of Maintenance Employees, this morning, condemned everyone in Congress who voted against the sick days. "None of these lawmakers are worthy of being in Congress," the union said in a statement.

The Smart Transportation Division, one of the three largest unions among the twelve the pact covers, issued a statement saying, "The freight rail industry is structured as a non-competitive oligopoly dominated by seven rail carriers and operates at the behest of Wall Street, prioritising the maximisation of profit for rail executives and shareholders, even if it comes at the expense of endangering the broader public and irreparably damaging the supply chain."

"Unfortunately, threats to the economy have caused this Congress to believe that a strike aversion is the best course for this nation," the statement said. "We implore" politicians, the union said as the Senate was selling out the workers, "to not allow political pursuits or efforts to result in a scenario where we are forced to accept less than what is currently on the table ... Our members want and need sick leave, but even more so, they need relief from the damning effects of operational changes made by the railroads over the last five years."

FIGHT NOT OVER

"This fight is not over," Regan's AFL-CIO Transportation Trades Department (TTD) tweeted just as paid sick leave went down the drain in the Senate.

"The full might of America's transportation labour movement will move this fight forward. Workers are united on this issue. We are millions strong. We will continue to pursue rail worker sick leave through every avenue available to us. And we will win," TTD vowed.

Biden argued lawmakers had to OK the contract now to prevent a forced strike by the workers starting a minute after midnight on the 9th December, when a mandated "cooling-off period" expired. Without it, he warned, echoing corporate claims, much of US commerce would halt, and the US economy would take a big financial hit.

The House previously passed both the main deal and the seven days paid sick leave, which was the key, but not sole, hang-up that forced the administration to intervene in stalled rail talks earlier this year and work out the overall deal.

What neither Biden nor deal backers admitted is that working conditions, and especially onerous work rules with no paid sick leave – not even for doctors' appointments – were the main conflict between the twelve rail unions and their members on one side and the big freight railroads on the other.

The railroads adamantly refused to even discuss paid sick leave, much less negotiate about it. And Biden, pleading the economic impact, pushed Congress, for the first time in decades, into overriding a collective bargaining agreement – one that four of the twelve unions had also rejected.

"Even as the need for worker protections and workplace flexibility have grown, railroad companies provide zero days of paid sick leave to their workers ... If a rail worker comes down with COVID, the flu, or some other illness and calls in sick, that worker will not only receive no pay, but will be penalised and, in some cases, fired. That is absolutely unacceptable," Sen. Bernie Sanders, Ind.-Vt., and eleven other senators said the day before the Senate killed the paid sick leave.

But half of them voted for the final deal anyway. It passed 80-15.

"People in this country are kind of disgusted with the selfishness and corporate greed we are seeing," Sanders told his colleagues, after disclosing that the freight rail firms made a record-breaking $1.2 billion in profits in the first nine months of 2022. "Guaranteeing seven paid sick days to rail workers would only cost the industry $321 million a year – less than two per cent" of that.

"Please do not tell us the rail industry cannot afford to guarantee paid sick days to their workers.

"What the freight rail industry is saying to its workers is this: 'It doesn't matter if you have COVID. It doesn't matter if you are lying in a hospital bed because of a medical emergency. It doesn't matter if your wife has just given birth. It just doesn't matter. If you do not come to work, no matter what the reason, we have the right to punish you; we have the right to fire you.'"

The 52-43 vote for the seven days of paid sick leave was somewhat bipartisan, but it fell short of the sixty votes needed to pass the separate measure and send it to Biden's desk. Republican Sens. Ted Cruz (Texas), Josh Hawley (Mo.), Marco Rubio (Fla.), and Lindsey Graham (SC) broke party lines and voted for the paid sick leave while Democrat Joe Manchin of West Virginia voted against it. Three Democrats and two Republicans were absent.

People's World

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