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Medicare plan

BULK PROFITS

Anna Pha

For anyone looking for solutions to the Medicare crisis, the Albanese government's *Strengthening Medicare Taskforce Report* raises more questions than it answers. It is full of fine-sounding, generalised proposals that fail to address key causes of the present crisis including the privatisation of health care.

"Strengthen funding to support more affordable care, ensuring Australians on low incomes can access primary care at no or low cost," the report says. Strengthening funding is not the same as increasing funding. Why restrict "no or low cost" access to people on low incomes?

Quality health care should be universally accessible with no fee – this was the central principle of Medicare and why it was so popular when it was introduced by the Hawke Labor government in 1984.

"Since the pandemic began, more people are presenting at emergency departments or delaying care, practices are finding it harder to recruit GPs and other health workers, and bulkbilling rates are falling," the report says. Tellingly, this is the only mention of bulkbilling!

The report proposes that "coordinated multidisciplinary teams of health care professionals work to their full scope of practice to provide quality person-centred continuity of care, including prevention and early intervention; and primary care is incentivised to improve population health, work with other parts of the health and care systems, under appropriate clinical governance, to reduce fragmentation and duplication and deliver better health outcomes."

A fine sounding objective but the detail is lacking.

"Fast-track work to improve the supply and distribution of GPs, rural generalists, nurses, nurse practitioners and midwives, pharmacists, allied health, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers and other primary care professionals."

Does this mean the training of more GPs and an increase in the income of GPs? A multidisciplinary team could be of great benefit, as long as health professionals play a role within the scope of their training.

"Develop new funding models that are locally relevant for sustainable rural and remote practice in collaboration with people, providers and communities. Ensure new funding models do not disadvantage people who live in communities with little or no access to regular GP care, and whose care is led by other healthcare providers." What are these funding models?

Photo: Anna Pha

"Support general practice in management of complex chronic disease through blended funding models integrated with fee-for-service, with funding for longer consultations and incentives that better promote quality bundles of care for people who need it most."

There is no suggestion that GPs be salaried – "blended models of funding" presumably refers to other members of the multidisciplinary team such as nurses being salaried, but this is not spelt out.

Doctors have been calling for more than a decade for an increase to the Medicare rebate while the costs of running a general practice rise and bulkbilling rates fall, forcing more people to pay out-of-pocket for primary care.

That doctors' pay is unaddressed in the report is a reflection of the fact that GPs are a main target of the government in its Medicare plans. It intends to excise GP practices from the Medicare system, so that provision of primary care is found in "blended models" only. "Integrated with fee for service" is code for user pays.

Adequate funding for longer consultations is urgently needed, but why just for people "who need it most"? Why not for anyone who needs it? What are these incentives and bundles of care?

Here the door opens for private health insurers to move in.

The review repeatedly refers to people managing their own health and recommends a greater role for use of centralised digital data. In parts it could be interpreted as a revamp of My Health Record. Adoption of technology, including e-prescribing and telehealth is recommended. Telehealth has its uses but should supplement, not replace face-to-face consultations where a doctor can see the patient and check such things as blood pressure.

PHARMACISTS

"Fast-track work to improve the supply and distribution of GPs, rural generalists, nurses, nurse practitioners and midwives, pharmacists, allied health, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers and other primary care professionals." Another fine sounding statement. But how?

Pharmacists, through their powerful lobby group the Pharmacy Guild, are pushing to be able to write prescriptions. Would this create a second health care stream for people on low incomes or with no access to GPs in rural and regional Australia? Pharmacists would have a conflict of interest. They are for-profit businesses, and every additional script adds to the bottom line.

The GP is at the heart of primary health care, referring patients and prescribing medications. They know their patients' medical history and in cases where patients have a number of chronic conditions, which is increasingly the case, the role of the GP becomes even more important. Pharmacists do not have the necessary medical training.

FEE FOR SERVICE

Under Medicare GPs and specialists are paid a fee for each consultation or procedure, either through a government rebate (when bulkbilling) or by the patient who can then claim the Medicare rebate and be left out of pocket (the gap). This system is inefficient and costly. Decades of frozen or below CPI increases in the rebate have reached a point where many GPs have had to abandon bulkbilling.

This gap has been on the rise to the point where patients might be $50, $70, $90, or more out of pocket – unaffordable for many, especially families and those on low and middle incomes.

The failure of GP incomes to keep up with inflation over decades has deterred medical students from seeking a career as a GP, compounding the existing shortage of general practitioners.

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Aid for people, not profit

Like a horrendous auction, the death toll from the massive earthquake in Türkiye (Turkey) and Syria continues to rise, every time we check the news feed. At time of writing, we know that 37,000 people have died. Estimates of how much the damage will cost Türkiye alone range to up to AU$72 billion. These figures are elastic, and it's hard to find any figures for Syria, from where the news is mainly about sanctions, but they give an idea of the level of need. There could be more than a million homeless people in Syria.

Australia committed "an initial" $10 million in aid to Turkiye, with an additional $3 million to Syria via UNICEF. This has since been increased by $8 million.

That's a drop in the ocean compared to the level of need and human misery involved. Of course, nobody is expecting Australia to do all the relief work – it is only one country among many. However, some comparisons are in order.

As part of its ceaseless drive to not be wedged by the Coalition, the Australian Labor Party has committed to giving $17.7 billion back to high income earners in legislated tax cuts next year.

That's a lot more than $10 million and it's about four times as much as the government spends on all its foreign aid. Also hefty is the cost of the nuclear-powered submarines the government has signed up to receive at some point in the future; $171 billion has been credibly cited.

The World Health Organisation has called for more aid for Syria, pointing out that years of sanctions have left the country in a weakened state when it comes to humanitarian disasters like this. The US has announced a temporary lifting of its unilateral sanctions after China urged Washington to put aside its "geopolitical obsession" and do so.

Naturally Australia didn't do any similar urging, despite the supposedly robust relationship with the United States. Bourgeois governments from both sides of politics know not to question the actions of Australia's big friend. Sanctions, which have visited hardship on the lives of ordinary people from Cuba to Iraq, will be generously lifted, then applied again when the US decides that it's expedient.

Okay, so the Albanese government is subservient to the United States, but at least it's being generous with aid, right? Wrong. Under the previous Coalition government Australian foreign aid fell to its lowest in 39 years. Under the Labor government increases have been (a) nowhere near as generous as we are to potential submarine suppliers and people on more than $200,000 per year, and (b) firmly focused on what the ALP says is the national interest – all of which mirrors the Coalition's position. Australia increased aid to Pacific countries by $900 million to make Australia "more influential in the world," according to Foreign Minister Penny Wong.

What's more, Australian aid, like Western aid in general, tends to boomerang back to the country giving the aid, in the form of large amounts of aid going to contractors, and to companies based in the US and Australia: Reconstruction, whether after a natural disaster or war, is a profit bonanza. In an example of revolving-door government, former foreign affairs minister Julie Bishop, is on the board of Palladium – one of the companies that formed Palladium is GRM, the third largest private sector partner for AusAID, which administers Australia's foreign aid.

The Communist Party of Australia calls for increased aid to the earthquake victims, aid which has as its focus support on the ground for the victims, and not as an opportunistic means to further enrich the private sector, hand-in glove with imperialism's destructive agenda.

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NATIONWIDE CAMPAIGN AGAINST AUKUS

Friday 24th February 2023

Australian Anti-AUKUS Coalition (AAAC)

www.antiaukuscoalition.org

We say:

NO to nuclear submarines

NO to east coast sub base

NO to AUKUS

NO to preparations for war

YES to demilitarising Australia's foreign policy

YES to climate change mitigation

Yes to less $$$ for defence, more $$$ for human need

YES to Australia signing and ratifying the Treaty for Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons

Call on a Federal Minister on Friday 24th February

TAKE ACTION! JOIN US!

CALL ON A MINISTER **FRIDAY 24 FEBRUARY**!

Senator Penny Wong, Minister for Foreign Affairs
Electorate Office, 19 gouger St. Adelaide SA
Join NoNuclearSubs SA at 12.30pm
Richard Marles, Minister for Defence
Electorate Office, 100 Brougham St. Geelong
Join IPAN Geelong & SW Regional Victoria at 4pm
Anthony Albanese, Prime Minister
Electorate Office, 334A Marrickville Rd, Marrickville NSW
Join Marrickville Peace Group, SAAC, WAWAN 12pm to 1pm
Pat Conroy, Minister for Defence Industry
Electorate Office, Suite 1A, 571 Pacific H'way, Belmont NSW
Join Hunter Peace Group at 10am
Jim Chalmers, Treasurer
Unit 2A Logan Central Plaza, 38-74 Wembley Rd, Logan, QLD
Join Just Peace at 11am

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US Health Care

A failure at every level

Graham Holton

In Michigan, a man falling off his bicycle had obvious injuries and I offered to drive him to a public hospital for treatment. He refused, saying he could not, as he had not worked for some time. Not having "enough credit" meant he could not be admitted. In Los Angeles, I met a woman who was charged US$15,000 to have her baby, with no complications in the delivery. She could not pay. There is a multitude of such stories.

Unlike television shows that portray great health care provision, the US healthcare system has deep-seated problems, because it is based on profit maximisation. When doctors go into poor areas to work for free, it is because the poor cannot get into hospitals, or cannot get the medication they need. The United States has the worst health care system in the developed world.

It is not just that the majority of hospitals in the USA are privately owned, it is also because health care and medications are so expensive. The charge to call out an ambulance is US$2,500. Over 25 per cent of well-insured US citizens struggle to pay their medical bills. Of these, 63 per cent had depleted their savings and 42 per cent had to get an additional job to pay their bills. Medication is far more expensive in the USA than in Canada or Australia.

A vial of insulin costs US$32 in Canada, while in the US the same drug costs US$300. In Australia Novorapid costs $34.20 for 5 injection pens. It is on the PBS (Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme) list and the federal government subsidises the medication. Surgical procedures at US hospitals can cost over US$80,000. The patient is forced to get a second job or get another mortgage on the family home. The US system is the most expensive healthcare system in the world.

The USA is the only country in the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development of developed countries) without a system of universal healthcare. A major contributing factor to their present mortality rate is that a large proportion of the population are unable to afford health insurance.

Healthcare is provided by insurance companies, healthcare providers, hospitals, and independent providers. According to "Fast Facts on US Hospitals" by the American Hospital Association, healthcare facilities are mainly owned and operated by the private sector. Of the community hospitals 58 percent are non-profit, 21 percent are government-owned and 21 percent are for-profit. The Hill-Burton Act, passed in 1946, provides federal funding for hospitals in exchange for treating poor patients.

According to the Grattan Institute's The Conversation (19th November, 2020) an armed services veteran has access to a comprehensive, centrally coordinated, government-run health service. Those over 65 are covered by Medicare, which is a federally funded insurance-based system. For those on a low income, Medicaid is available. As it is partially federally funded and state-run, eligibility is means tested. For someone employed, their employment package may include health insurance coverage and they can choose their own insurer.

The US Postal Service (USPS) and businesses with a high union presence have good health packages. In the prison system 40 per cent of those incarcerated have chronic health conditions. According to Sojourner Ahébée on *PBS Radio* (9th April, 2021) there is a need for quality health care in correctional facilities across the country.

The United States spends more on health care services than does any other nation, more than twice as much per person as the other OECD countries. As noted, healthcare coverage is provided through a combination of private health insurance and public health coverage, such as Medicare and Medicaid.

In 2021 the US government spent US$3.69 trillion, US$10,738 per capita, which is 17.9 per cent of its GDP (Gross Domestic Product). This is twice the per capita cost of the Australian health system. Healthcare expenditures are financed by a complex mixture of public payers (federal, state, and local governments), as well as private insurance, and individual payment.

The US primarily relies on employers to voluntarily provide health insurance coverage to their employees and dependents. Unions negotiating contracts barter for a health care plan. Government programs are confined to the elderly, the disabled, and some of the poor. In 2017, over twenty-eight million people (more than the population of Australia), 8.8 per cent of the US population were without health insurance coverage.

Photo: Images Money / TaxRebate.org.uk – flickr.com (CC BY 2.0)

The report *Mirror, Mirror 2021 – Reflecting Poorly: Health Care in the US* shows that getting quality, essential health care in the US depends on income. Half of lower-income US adults reported that they could not afford much needed health care, compared to 27 per cent of higher-income adults.

Adults reported that their insurance denied payment of a claim or paid less than expected. The US performs poorly in maternal mortality, infant mortality, life expectancy at age 60, and deaths that were potentially preventable, if they had timely access to effective health care. The US rate of preventable mortality is 177 deaths per 100,000 population, which is double that of Switzerland, with 83 deaths per 100,000.

According to the Commonwealth Fund, an independent research organisation on health care issues, the best health care systems in the Developed World are in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Australia.

The US is a glaring example of the inherent contradiction of the for-profit system. Based on the drive for profit, it is a failure in both human and material terms.

There is a lack of insurance coverage, especially in those states that did not expand Medicaid, and more especially if you are an undocumented worker; a maze of insurance plans that cover different treatments and procedures; and, primary care, fragmented, inefficient, and under-resourced.

The report "Maternal Mortality in the United States: A Primer" (16th December 2020) found that the US had 660 maternal deaths in 2018, a maternal mortality rate of 17.4 per 100,000 pregnancies. The maternal death ratio for Black women is 37.1 per 100,000 pregnancies, which is 2.5 times that for white women at 14.7, and three times that for Hispanic women at 11.8 per 100,000 pregnancies.

In 2019, the under-five infantile mortality rate was 6.5 deaths per 1,000 live births, placing the USA at 33 of 37 OECD countries. The worst infant mortality was amongst Black families with 10.6 deaths per 1,000 births. A Black mother with a college education is at a 60 per cent greater risk for a maternal death than a white or Hispanic woman, with less than a high school education. The US mortality rate is therefore dependent on race and ethnicity as well as income.

The US healthcare system falls far behind that of the former Soviet Union, where people mattered more than profits. I have spoken to people who had been to Soviet hospitals where they were well treated as a human being, something missing from a system created by US capitalism.

Today, Americans travel to Cuba to have operations because it is affordable and of such high quality. "Medical tourism" is allowed by the US Treasury Department on a case-by-case basis. While the pharmaceutical and healthcare corporations make massive profits, Americans struggle daily with their health and medication bills. It is a path to disaster that Australia needs to reject.

Further Information:

"Why American Healthcare is the Worst in the Developed World." https://youtu.be/wO1loKN0AkY ✪

GLOBAL CLIMATE STRIKE

12pm Friday 3rd March

Sydney Town Hall

Invite your friends

On March 3, students, workers, teachers, parents and grandparents will take to the streets of Sydney as a part of the Global ClimateStrike! The climate crisis has not disappeared with the defeat of Scott Morrison's government. 2022 was a year of climate breakdown. Climate extremes are happening at an increased pace across Australia – the disastrous floods in the Kimberley are just the latest example.

The Albanese Government's current 43 per cent target is inadequate and relies on an emissions trading scheme that allows polluters to buy their way out of reducing emissions. Alarmingly, the government is also supporting a series of major new fossil fuel projects like the Scarborough gas project in WA, the Middle Arm gas hub in the NT and the Santos Narrabri Pilliga Gas Project in NSW.

100 RED YEARS

An online exhibition of the history of the Communist Party of Australia's 100 years

Visit:

www.100redyears.org

"an informative and fascinating look at the comrades' work over the last 100 years. Designed to inspire and educate."

Make wage theft a crime

Last year Monash University launched an extraordinary bid to avoid repaying millions of dollars in wages allegedly owed to sessional and casual staff.

The University applied to the Fair Work Commission to retrospectively change its enterprise agreement covering Monash staff.

Monash's application was made less than four weeks after the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) launched wage theft proceedings in the Federal Court.

The NTEU alleges the university systemically underpaid sessional teaching staff by requiring them to deliver scheduled student consultation as unpaid "associated work" tied to the rate they receive for delivering tutorials.

The NTEU also notes that the university's push is an attempt to prevent paying millions of dollars in back pay owed across multiple university faculties and schools.

"It seems Monash University will go to any lengths to avoid paying workers potentially millions owed in allegedly stolen wages," NTEU National President Alison Barnes said.

"Instead of bending over backwards to shirk responsibility, Monash should own up and pay up.

"We'll vigorously fight Monash's attempt to wriggle out of its obligations to pay staff, which are clearly outlined in the enterprise agreement the university now wants to change after being called out by the union."

There are fears it could encourage other employers to employ similar tactics.

"This case has economy-wide implications," NTEU Monash Branch President Ben Eltham said.

"If employers can respond to underpayment claims by retrospectively varying their Agreements, this could have a chilling effect on underpayment claims brought by employees across the economy."

The university's extraordinary Fair Work application came days after almost 100 affected Monash employees and students staged a protest at Monash's Clayton campus.

In 2021, in a separate case, Monash University admitted to underpaying its casual academic staff $8.6 million over a six-year period. Speaking generally, Barnes said wage theft was a rampant sector-wide problem.

"Wage theft is a cancer that must be cut out of higher education," she said. "Universities have paid back millions in unpaid wages thanks to the efforts of brave NTEU members who have stood up.

"This is exactly why wage theft needs to be made a crime and more secure jobs delivered to cut down on exploitation."

BACKGROUND

In an extraordinary step, the university is disputing the interpretation of the Enterprise Agreement, specifically whether it has failed to properly pay the wages owed to casual academics across multiple faculties.

The dispute followed NTEU's legal letter which alerted Monash to this wage theft. The NTEU then lodged Federal Court proceedings against the University.

The union alleges that Monash systematically directed casual academics to be available for student consultation during a weekly, scheduled consultation hour, outside of the delivery of tutorials, and has not paid them for this work.

Monash had been on notice that the union would file in the Court since last July. Rather than paying staff for that hour, academics were told it was "associated work" for the purpose of that tutorial rate.

The University's position is that despite NTEU's claims, it does not believe casual tutors should be paid separately for this work.

"If your boss at the cafe told you to come in and work a scheduled shift, you'd expect to be paid," Eltham said. "Teaching at a major university should be no different."

"Monash University is directing academics to teach scheduled classes, on campus and face to face with students, but telling tutors they don't deserve payment for those classes.

"Monash University claims it delivers education of the 'highest international quality,' but you can't deliver high-quality education if you won't pay your teachers."

"Rampant wage theft is a sector-wide issue underpinning universities business models," NTEU National President Dr Alison Barnes said.

"The scale of the problem is completely outrageous and shows exactly why we need the federal government to make wage theft a crime.

"Wage theft is directly linked to the scourge of insecure work, with casual and fixed-term staff disproportionately affected.

"That's why we need a definition of casual employment suitable for higher education and proper funding for more permanent roles."

Monash University has issued a dispute, rejecting the NTEU's allegations and claiming it did not underpay casual staff.

The union's statement of claim, lodged in the Federal Court, alleges serious contraventions of the Fair Work Act using the example of two casual academics employed at Monash between 2015 and 2022.

The allegations are separate to Monash University's admission it underpaid $8.6 million to casual academics in September 2021.

Monash University recorded a consolidated pre-tax operating surplus of $416 million in 2021.

Monash University Parkville Pharmacy. Photo: Canley – Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4.0)

Mass protest to defend UK workers' right to strike

Up to half a million British teachers, civil servants, and train drivers walked out over pay in the largest coordinated strike action for a decade on 1st February, with global unions including the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF) joining the struggle to defend workplace pay and conditions as well as defending the rights of all workers to strike and engage in industrial action to defend their collective interests.

The ITF will back union legal action against the UK government's proposed anti-strike legislation, the organisation announced last week.

International transport unions have added their voice to growing condemnation of the UK government's ruthless attack on workers' right to strike and called on all parties to reject the draconian anti-union legislation.

"The UK government has launched a full-scale attack on working people and trade unions," said ITF President Paddy Crumlin. "It's attempting to force the Minimum Service Level bill through Parliament. Its blind ambition is to give ministers sweeping new powers to restrict the right to strike.

"Instead of engaging with workers who sustain vital public services and negotiating in good faith to solve the legitimate disputes which have led to recent strike action, [Prime Minister] Rishi Sunak and his anti-union henchman Business Secretary Grant Shapps are intent on attacking workers fighting for a fair pay rise during the worst cost of living crisis in decades."

Dingo bytes

The Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) says the release of the new National Cultural Policy, *Revive*, is a major show of faith in the arts sector by the Albanese government after years of wilful neglect by its Coalition predecessors. The union says the *Revive* policy has been the result of widespread consultation with industry stakeholders that began soon after last year's federal election. Most of the recommendations made in the MEAA's submission to the policy review have been adopted, including giving a greater artistic and cultural voice to First Nations peoples; enhanced funding for the renamed Australia Council and for regional arts and culture; the establishment of Music Australia with $69 million of funding; an agency to enforce conditions and safety standards in the arts and entertainment industries; mandated minimum remuneration for musicians and performers contracted by the government; and a commitment to require streaming services to produce Australian content. MEAA Chief Executive Erin Madeley said the government had listened to stakeholders and shown it was prepared to act to reinvest in the sector and lift the wages of arts workers.

"*Revive* provides a solid framework for the arts going forward, and it recognises the central role that the arts and arts workers play in our national story and as a major part of the economy. The policy also places a welcome emphasis on participation in artistic and creative activities at a community level so that all Australians, whatever their background or their age, wherever they live, can benefit from cultural activity." MEAA Federal President Simon Collins noted that one policy does not erase the neglect of the sector over a long period. And the success of this policy will depend on how it is implemented, including how arts funding is allocated in the future. "But this is an important milestone in delivering confidence to arts workers that they are valued and respected by the government and the community and MEAA is keen to play a constructive role in delivering on the promise of this policy."

PARASITE OF THE WEEK: Svitzer Towage's ongoing attack on maritime workers' pay and conditions continues. Svitzer towage's enterprise bargaining agreement with the Maritime Union of Australia expired on 31st December 2019. In January 2022 Svitzer Australia applied to the Fair Work Commission to have the existing enterprise agreement terminated, which would push crew onto the minimum Award conditions, slash wages by 47 per cent, reduce safety standards, including minimum crewing numbers, and casualise secure jobs. Svitzer planned to lockout their entire Australian tug workforce from 18th November 2022 but that was ultimately dismissed by Fair Work Commission. The FWC, however, prevented further Protected Industrial Action by the unions for six months thus denying the union any industrial leverage to seek a resolution. Svitzer Australia workers have not had a pay rise in four years.

Housing Justice Rally

CPA members at the rally for Housing Justice rally in Sydney Town Hall on 11th February. Photo: CPA

About 300 activists gathered in Sydney Town Hall on 11 February determined to make housing justice a major issue in the upcoming State election.

The protesters are infuriated by the NSW Government's program of selling off public housing. While $4 billion worth of housing assets have been sold, no funds have been injected into the sector and public housing has been left to rot through lack of maintenance.

Protesters were calling for housing justice for the thousands of women who suffer homelessness, justice for the housing tenants evicted by brutal government policies, and justice for communities disrupted by the government's vandalism.

CPA members attended the rally and distributed a leaflet calling for a peace budget with "homes not submarines".

The rally, organised by community group Action for Public Housing, was addressed by public housing tenants who are about to evicted from their homes of over 30 years.

Howard Byrnes from the CFMMEU described the support the union movement is prepared to give to the housing justice movement.

Rose Jackson, ALP NSW Shadow Minister for Housing and Homelessness, spoke movingly about people in need of housing but did not explain what an ALP Government would do differently.

Jenny Leong, Greens spokesperson on housing, gave a rousing speech in which she promised to recreate the NSW Government works department instead of contracting out maintenance of public housing to the private sector.

Rachel Evans, Socialist Alliance candidate for Heffron, included LGBTQIA+ community and Aboriginal housing needs when she spoke in support of demands to defend and extend public housing, to end homelessness and for a rent freeze.

The rally then marched to the Archibald Fountain in Hyde Park. ✪

ALP housing policy is a sham!

Denis Doherty

In May 2022, the new Labor government promised an injection of $10 billion into the housing sector. In late February 2023, not a single house has been built by the Federal government.

Legislation is just appearing in Parliament to get the system under way, but no house will be built till 2024!

The $10 billion was to build 30,000 affordable and social housing dwellings over the next ten years. Estimates of the need for housing are in the order of 437,000, according to the NSW University's City Futures Centre.

Media comments use words like "modest" but the tragic reality is that ALP housing policy is a sham.

Governments fund services, using our taxes. If there is a problem, resources should be set aside to solve it. However, with housing, State and Federal governments apply neoliberal principles and housing must pay for itself.

Federal Labor's plans to develop a housing futures fund that might generate $10 billion has been attacked by the Greens.

"This isn't a $10 billion investment in housing, it's a $10 billion gamble on the stock market," says Greens spokesman Max Chandler-Mather.

"You wouldn't subject health and education funding to the success or failure of the stock market, so why do that to housing?"

On 13th February the ALP legislation was introduced in Parliament and immediately ran into difficulties as both the Coalition and the Greens objected to the fund.

The Greens are proposing amendments that would see $5 billion per year going into quality public homes, not $500 million as the ALP plans.

"A $5 billion investment every year could fund hundreds of thousands of good quality public homes over the next decade, clearing the wait lists and ensuring we actually tackle the scale of the housing crisis," Chandler-Mather added.

The ALP rarely mentions public housing. Social housing refers to housing provided by private sector organisations. Affordable housing is 20 per cent below market rent – but this is still unaffordable for many workers.

State and Federal governments persist with schemes that are little more than gifts to developers or real estate agents. These include first home grants, lower deposit schemes, reducing stamp duty and so on.

In addition, State governments are selling off or converting public housing stock to private ownership in the face of crisis where homes are desperately needed by hundreds of thousands of our citizens.

The housing crisis is real and deep. The Productivity Commission has revealed that all states have a deficit ratio of social housing dwellings to need. South Australia, ACT, and the NT are the worst performing.

This is more distressing as the backlog in Aboriginal housing in the Northern Territory came to a head recently over the troubles in Alice Springs.

Even the Property Council of Australia admits that 81 per cent of Australians think housing is unaffordable.

The housing crisis affects the working class disproportionally and governments at all levels must abandon neoliberal policies and make immediate and substantial investments in public housing.

The crisis will only start to be solved when we have fully government subsidised housing (public housing) where taxpayer money is invested in housing and the money is paid back slowly via rents, so housing is a replenishing activity of governments.

The CPA is campaigning for public housing. The CPA will fight for "accessible, good quality, affordable, well-maintained and safe public housing" and "an increase in government funding for public housing".

Defend and Extend Public Housing! ✪

PEACE NOTES

Hannah Middleton

Just 80 years after the end of World War II, German tanks are again threatening Russia.

At an event commemorating the 80th anniversary of the Battle of Stalingrad, Russian President Vladimir Putin said: "The Battle of Stalingrad rightfully entered history as a fundamental turning point in the Great Patriotic War."

Now Nazi ideology "again creates direct security threats" to Russia.

German Leopard tanks, bearing the same black crosses as their Nazi Panther predecessors, are now being sent to fight in Ukraine.

"There is again a plan to fight Russia on Ukrainian land using Hitler's successors," Putin said.

The Battle of Stalingrad ended in February 1943 with the surrender of the Nazi army. Almost half a million Soviet soldiers died in the battle.

Arguing in favour of sending tanks to Kiev, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said openly that EU countries are fighting a war against Russia.

German Defence Minister Christine Lambrecht, who was reluctant to send tanks to Ukraine, was forced to resign.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said the West keeps admitting they have been planning the conflict for years.

Former German Chancellor Angela Merkel has admitted that the 2014 Minsk Agreement was actually a ploy to "give Ukraine valuable time" for a military build-up. Former French President Francois Hollande has confirmed this, while Ukraine's leader at that time, Pyotr Poroshenko, openly admitted it as well.

Russia's operation in Ukraine was a "forced and last-resort response to preparations for aggression by the US and its satellites," former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev has said.

Mike Scrafton, a senior Australian Defence executive and chief of staff and adviser to a former minister for defence, says the supply of main battle tanks (MBTs) will commit the NATO allies to the war in a way that makes their involvement irreversible and could be effectively the first major step toward a war with Russia.

How decisive for the course of the war the provision of tanks will be depends on a number of factors; the number of vehicles, the skill with which the Ukrainians employ them (they are being trained in Poland), the establishment of supply lines to bring fuel and other materiel to the battlefront, the speed with which MBTs and their support could be delivered and on the rates of attrition and willingness and ability of nations to replace destroyed MBTs.

Kharkiv is 900 kilometres from Poland and Kherson 800 kilometres. Providing fuel and maintenance and the transport and refuelling tankers required to maintain these fossil-fuel guzzling war machines in high intensity operations will be a challenge.

Scrafton points out that after committing a limited number of tanks it will be almost impossible to resist Ukrainian demands for more if the first tranches are insufficient to achieve victory. It seems politically inconceivable that contributing states could resist Ukrainian demands for just a few more and then a few more.

And if tanks don't bring victory, what follows? Advanced fighters and bombers? Aircraft carriers in the Black Sea? Ballistic missiles?

Scrafton concludes that the tanks are a poor strategic and geopolitical step. They will not bring the negotiations necessary to end this conflict any closer.

“Hands off the world”

Vijay Prashad

On 2nd February 2023, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr of the Philippines met with US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin at Malacañang Palace in Manila, where they agreed to expand the US military presence in the country.

In a joint statement, the two governments agreed to “announce their plans to accelerate the full implementation of the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA)” and “designate four new Agreed Locations in strategic areas of the country.” The EDCA, which was agreed upon in 2014, allows the US to use land in the Philippines for its military activities. It was formulated almost a quarter of a century after US troops vacated their bases in the Philippines – including a massive base at Subic Bay – during the collapse of the USSR.

At that time, the US operated on the assumption that it had triumphed and no longer required the vast structure of military bases it had built up during the Cold War. From the 1990s, the US assembled a new kind of global footprint by integrating the militaries of allied countries as subordinate forces to US military control and building smaller bases to create a much greater reach for its technologically superior airpower.

In recent years, the US has been faced with the reality that that its apparent singular power is being challenged economically by several countries, such as China. To contest these challenges, the US began to rebuild its military force structure through its allies and more of these smaller, but no less lethal, base structures.

It is likely that three of the four new bases in the Philippines will be on Luzon Island, at the north of the archipelago, which would place the US military within striking distance of Taiwan.

For the past 15 years, the US has pushed its allies – including those organised in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) – to strengthen their military power while increasing its techno-military power and reach by establishing smaller bases across the world and producing new aircraft and ships with greater territorial reach. This military force was then used in a series of provocative actions against those it perceived as threats to its hegemony, with two key countries, China and Russia, facing the sharp edge of the US spear

At the two ends of Eurasia, the US began to provoke Russia through Ukraine, and provoke China through Taiwan. The provocations over Ukraine have now resulted in a war that has been ongoing for a year, while the new US bases in the Philippines are part of an escalation against China, using Taiwan as a battleground.

Skyline of Taipei, Taiwan. Photo: Heeheemalu – Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4.0)

FLASHPOINT

In recent years, Taiwan has become a flashpoint for tensions between the United States and China. The seriousness of the situation was recently underscored on 21st December, when US and Chinese military aircraft came within three metres of each other over the South China Sea.

At the root of this simmering conflict are the countries’ diverging perspectives over Taiwan’s sovereignty. The Chinese position, known as the “One China” principle, is firm: although the mainland and Taiwan have different political systems, they are part of the same country, with sovereignty residing in Beijing. Meanwhile, the US position on Taiwan is far less clear. Despite formally adopting the One China policy, the US maintains extensive “unofficial” relations and military ties with Taiwan. In fact, under the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979, US law requires Washington to provide arms “of a defensive character” to the island.

The US justifies its ongoing ties with Taiwan by claiming that they are necessary to uphold the island’s “democracy” and “freedom.”

A FOOTHOLD FOR INFLUENCE

To understand the contemporary geopolitical significance of Taiwan, it is necessary to examine Cold War history. Prior to the Chinese Revolution of 1949, China was in the midst of a civil war between the communists and the nationalists, or Kuomintang (KMT) – the latter of which received billions of dollars in military and economic support from Washington. The revolution resulted in the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) on the mainland, while the defeated KMT forces fled to the island of Taiwan, which had returned to Chinese sovereignty four years earlier, in 1945, following 50 years of Japanese colonial rule. From Taipei, the KMT declared that they were the rightful government-in-exile of all of China under the name of the Republic of China (ROC) – originally founded in 1912 – thereby rejecting the legitimacy of the PRC.

The US military soon followed, establishing the United States Taiwan Defence Command in 1955, deploying nuclear weapons to the island, and occupying it with thousands of US troops until 1979. Far from protecting “democracy” or “freedom” in Taiwan, the US instead backed the KMT as it established a dictatorship, including a 38-year-long consecutive period of martial law from 1949–1987.

During this time, known as the “White Terror”, Taiwanese authorities estimate that 140,000 to 200,000 people were imprisoned or tortured, and 3,000 to 4,000 were executed by the KMT. Washington accepted this brutal repression because Taiwan represented a useful foothold – located just 160 kilometres off the south-eastern coast of the Chinese mainland – that it used to pressure and isolate Beijing from the international community.

From 1949–1971, the US successfully manoeuvred to exclude the PRC from the United Nations by arguing that the ROC administration in Taiwan was the sole legitimate government of the entirety of China. It is important to note that, during this time, neither Taipei nor Washington contended that the island was separate from China, a narrative that is advanced today to allege Taiwan’s “independence.”

However, these efforts were eventually defeated in 1971, when the UN General Assembly voted to oust the ROC and recognise the PRC as the only legitimate representative of China. Later that decade, in 1979, the US finally normalised relations with the PRC, adopted the One China policy, and ended its formal diplomatic relations with the ROC in Taiwan.

US INTERFERENCE MUST END

Today, the international community has overwhelmingly adopted the One China policy, with only 13 of 193 UN member states recognising the ROC in Taiwan. However, due to the continued provocations of the US in alliance with separatist forces in Taiwan, the island remains a source of international tension and conflict.

The US maintains close military ties with Taiwan through arms sales, military training, advisors, and personnel on the island, as well as repeatedly sailing warships through the narrow Taiwan Strait that separates the island from the mainland. In 2022, Washington pledged US$10 billion in military aid to Taiwan. Meanwhile, US congressional delegations regularly travel to Taipei, legitimising notions of separatism, such as a controversial visit by former US Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi in August 2022.

Would the US or any other Western country accept a situation where China provided military aid, stationed troops, and offered diplomatic support to separatist forces in part of its internationally recognised territory? The answer, of course, is no.

In November, at the G20 summit in Indonesia, Chinese President Xi Jinping and US President Joe Biden held their first in-person meeting since Biden was elected president. At the meeting, Xi strongly reiterated China’s stance on Taiwan, telling Biden that: “the Taiwan question is at the very core of China’s core interests, the bedrock of the political foundation of China-US relations, and the first red line that must not be crossed.”

Although Biden responded by stating that the US adheres to the One China policy and that he is “not looking for conflict”, just a few months prior, he affirmed in a televised interview that US troops would militarily intervene to “defend Taiwan,” if necessary.

It is clear from the US’s track record that Washington is intent on provoking China and disregarding its “red line.” In Eastern Europe, a similarly reckless approach, namely the continued expansion of NATO towards Russia’s border, led to the outbreak of war in Ukraine. As progressive forces in Taiwan have declared, “to maintain peace in the Taiwan Strait and avoid the scourge of war, it is necessary to stop US interference.”

On 31st January, Pope Francis conducted a mass in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) with a million people in attendance, where he declared that “Political exploitation gave way to an ‘economic colonialism’ that was equally enslaving.” Africa, the Pope said, “is not a mine to be stripped or a terrain to be plundered. Hands off Africa!” Later that same week, the US and the Philippines – in complete disregard of the Pope’s declaration – agreed to build new military bases, completing the encirclement of US-allied bases around China and intensifying US aggression towards the country.

The Pope’s cry could very well be “Hands off the world.” This of course means no new Cold War, no more provocations.

The Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research

As progressive forces in Taiwan have declared, “to maintain peace in the Taiwan Strait and avoid the scourge of war, it is necessary to stop US interference.”

Twitter vs Mastodon vs What's going on with Social Media?

Ethan Williams – Hunter Branch

For anyone who isn't sure, what even is Twitter?

Twitter is commonly known as a social media network, a modern way to communicate and socialise with the broader world. Twitter began life as a micro-blogging platform, allowing users to post messages (tweets) with a very small character limit, and receive replies and "likes" from the entire twitter community. Unlike Facebook, which encourages friends and close contacts to "connect" with each other, Twitter makes it possible and actively encourages you to "follow" strangers, so long as the algorithm believes you will engage with their tweets.

SO WHAT'S THE FUSS ABOUT?

Elon Musk has recently purchased Twitter, taking it out of sharemarket ownership and into his own personal hands. Musk is a largely polarising figure, to the point of being seen as a meme (that is, an image or text copied and spread rapidly by internet users); most people will have strong opinions of him one way or another.

IS MUSK AS BAD AS PEOPLE THINK?

Elon Musk was born to his father Errol Musk and mother Maye in apartheid South Africa. The Musk family grew up with an investment stake in emerald mines in Zambia, profiting perhaps inadvertently from the system of Apartheid Errol had professedly campaigned against.

Musk himself has been involved in a long string of public controversies including allegedly exposing himself to a flight attendant, offering to buy her a horse, and then settling the case for a quarter of a million dollars. Musk has been known to attack workers, including forcing them back into the office during the COVID epidemic (at both Tesla and Twitter) as well as sacking thousands of Twitter employees shortly after acquiring the company. As an ostensible champion of green energy and electric vehicles through his Tesla company, Musk has managed to profit greatly from fossil fuel vehicle sales via the U.S' carbon credits trading scheme, raking in over $5b (USD) between 2017 and 2022 from fossil fuel auto manufacturers required to purchase the credits Tesla generates. Recently, Musk demonstrated his U.S. chauvinism credentials when he tweeted "We will coup who we want" in response to a user commenting on the 2019 Bolivian coup which the user suggested would have granted Musk cheap access to Bolivia's lithium reserves critical for manufacturing Tesla's batteries.

WHAT ARE THE ALTERNATIVES TO TWITTER?

Alternatives to Twitter include conservative-aligned platforms such as Truth social, Gettr, Gab or Parler, as well as more liberal-aligned outlets such as Mastodon or Tumblr. Each has its own pros and cons, evidence of a more compelling alternative can be found in the audiences of each rather than the features of the platforms themselves.

WHY ARE PEOPLE LEAVING TWITTER FOR MASTODON?

From a political point of view, Musk has signalled himself to be aligned with the US Republican party by unbanning Donald Trump from Twitter, mocking the idea of pronouns and publicly denigrating Dr Fauci for vaccine mandates rolled out in the US Many Democrat-aligned celebrities and notables have publicly voiced their displeasure about Musk owning Twitter, claiming that his ownership will herald a resurgence of right-wing voices on Twitter and even a repeat of the January 6th capitol riots.

Twitter has also suffered more technical issues since Musk has taken over, including a large outage for all Australian/New Zealand users, multi-factor authentication being made unavailable for a short period of time and threads not loading for some users. A more contentious change to Twitter made by Musk was to allow users who paid a premium for Twitter to receive a "verified" badge on their handle. This badge was previously reserved for notable individuals, journalists, and celebrities as well as official corporate accounts to help prevent impersonation attempts on the site. With the badge now available to anyone with $8, a clever Twitter user swiftly impersonated the insulin manufacturer Eli Lilly and tweeted "We are excited to announce insulin is free now.", prompting a sharp decline in not just Eli Lilly stocks but those of other insulin manufacturers, as the fact that people were tricked into believing in the benevolence of a large pharmaceutical company.

I'VE HEARD MASTODON IS REALLY HARD TO USE. IS THAT TRUE?

Many users coming from a centralised platform such as Twitter have reported difficulties in adjusting to the use of Mastodon. As Mastodon intends to have separate servers for different topics/geolocations etc, this requires a user to connect with different servers in order to find content, rather than a conventional network like Twitter where all content is available and searchable in one place. The idea of a "federated" network, as Mastodon creators call it, is not usually a familiar concept to those outside of the technology industry. If, however, you fancy yourself tech-savvy enough you will have no problems adjusting.

IF I WANT TO KEEP HEARING SOCIALIST VOICES, DO I HAVE TO STAY ON TWITTER?

No. If you are interested in hearing socialist voices, then reach out to your local Communist Party branch or other socialist organisations. If you are a university student, you could also try reaching out to socialist student organisations. Look for socialist reading groups and other socialist-aligned social groups (something your local socialist political parties may be able to help you find). Get involved in your community! The most effective, dissident voices will not be given a platform on Twitter, Mastodon or any other capitalist controlled social media outlet. The revolution will not be televised.

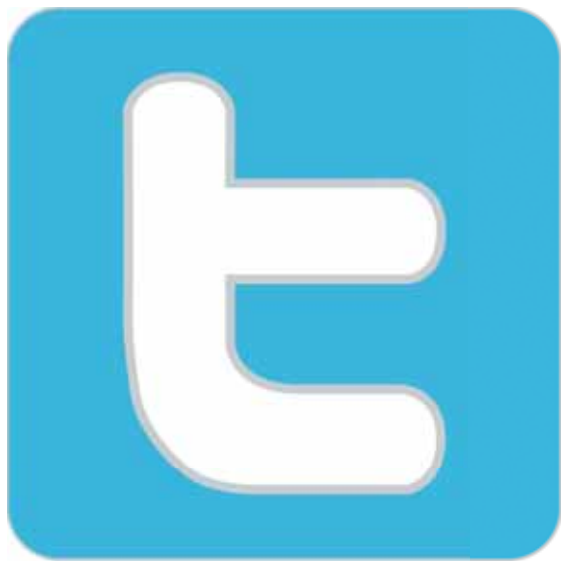
CAN I REGISTER MY DISAPPROVAL OF MUSK WITHOUT MISSING OUT ON ALL THE GOOD STUFF I GET OUT OF TWITTER?

Of course! Elon Musk has professed his dedication to free speech absolutism. Don't post publicly available information such as @ElonJet (that uses social media to track real-time airplane usage of Musk) and you may be fine, though suspension of some left-wing twitter account continues today!

The content moderation on Twitter has significantly declined in quality, likely due to a shortage of staff, and many accounts previously banned have now been restored. If you are concerned about censorship, Twitter will not likely cause you any problems unless you have a large audience.

IS TWITTER REALLY HARDER TO USE NOW?

No. Twitter has not changed in any significant capacity and will likely stay that way. Musk has fired a lot of employees including significantly knowledgeable architects of the current system. It will take months, if not years to get any significant changes through the platform without a huge risk of failure. ✪



Twitter: Tom Britt – flickr.com (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)
Mastodon: freesvg.org

Medicare plan

BULK PROFITS

Continued from page 1

The privatisation and commercialisation of medical centres has resulted in extremely short, inadequate bulk-billed consultations or longer consultations with fees that many patients are unable to afford. It is no coincidence that GPs are overwhelmingly located in wealthier suburbs.

Fee for service can also create an incentive for overservicing. Increasingly medical centres are for-profit businesses.

Medicare is underfunded and $750 million over three years in additional funding promised by the government will only scratch the surface, hardly making up for the billions of dollars in cuts by the Coalition. More importantly, the underlying problems of a broad system of care with a range of interconnected services are not addressed.

COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH REQUIRED

One of the weaknesses of the review is that its terms of reference were limited to primary health care and Medicare is much more than primary health care. It also applies to public hospitals, radiology, pathology, and specialists. Strengthening primary health care would of course have flow-on benefits in other areas.

It is difficult to find a specialist who bulk bills. Radiology, pathology, and other services are increasingly abandoning bulkbilling and becoming unaffordable, profit-churning machines.

Public hospitals are choked with thousands of patients who are ready for discharge but have nowhere to go. Some have been there for months or even years. This is because of the crises in aged care and the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). These systems are in crisis due to under-funding and being increasingly privatised.

Another aspect of the health care crisis is ambulance ramping at public hospitals as they wait for available beds to discharge their patients and get back on the road.

The shortage of bulkbilling doctors compounds the problem as people turn to public hospitals for conditions that are not emergencies.

The report fails to outline how shortages of health care workers including GPs would be addressed. Nurses have been leaving their profession in droves: they are overworked and underpaid. GPs who rely on bulkbilling find it difficult to sustain their businesses (and they are businesses) at the same time as providing quality care.

At present Medicare is being privatised by stealth with the undermining of bulkbilling and the health system Americanised with an increasing number of people denied access to the care they need. This report fails to address this situation.

Whether Medicare is really strengthened and its core principle of universal access to quality care is restored is a question of government priorities:

- $254 billion in tax cuts for the rich;
- $170 billion on nuclear-powered submarines;
- Billions more on other war preparations;
- $7 billion plus on private health insurance rebate;
- Further privatisation of Medicare.

OR

- Wage rises for nurses, aged care and NDIS workers;
- Salaried GPs;
- Universal access to quality health care with no fee;
- Nationalisation of health care;
- Planned training and provision of health care workers.

See Page 3 for what the US health system looks like. ✪

The future of international relations

David Cavendish

Photo: Henry Mühlpfordt – Wikimedia Commons (GNU Free Documentation License)

In recent weeks, the United States announced that it was shipping 31 Abrams battle tanks worth $400 million to Ukraine. That came only several weeks after Washington agreed to supply US$1 billion in arms sales to Qatar, a country in the Persian Gulf and the site of the recent World Cup soccer matches.

There's really nothing unusual about either of these transactions. They're but the latest episodes in a long-time policy that goes back to the 1940s and President Harry Truman's sale of weapons to Greece and Turkey, whose military governments were fighting left-wing insurgents in their countries.

An aspect of the anti-communist "Truman Doctrine," weapons sales to US-friendly authoritarian regimes was a keystone in the developing Cold War against the Soviet Union.

It also marked an early development in what has been called the "permanent war economy." A major component of the permanent war economy, which is still in existence, is what President Dwight Eisenhower named the "military-industrial complex."

This intertwined war machine – which merges weapons makers, the armed forces bureaucracy, and the foreign policy establishment – continues to influence all aspects of how the US approaches international affairs.

By the late 1940s and early '50s, the US government had put into practice a policy of "containment," that is, a strategy based on reliance on overwhelming military superiority to block the expanding influence of the USSR and the other socialist states of Eastern Europe.

To that end, the United States was instrumental in the founding of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), as well as several other military alliances. It also set about rapidly expanding what over time ballooned to a network of 750 military bases in more than 80 countries around the world.

Over the last 75 years, the US government has maintained the largest military budget in the world, with total outlays estimated since 1947 to be well in excess of $25 trillion. One can only imagine how that money could've been put to social use.

And to go along with all these factors, the United States has fought numerous wars (Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan being the largest), funded proxy wars in all parts of the globe (Africa, Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Europe), and created a "cult of the military," in which any criticism of the role of the armed forces in our society is considered unpatriotic.

Even today, decades after the disappearance of the Soviet Union and a year-and-a-half after the US withdrawal from 20 years of fighting in Afghanistan, Washington continues its time-worn policies. Now Russia – and especially China – are the new adversaries.

Not only has NATO expanded eastward toward Russia, but the United States has created new military and economic alliances with Australia, India, Japan, and Great Britain to counter what it sees as a growing threat from China to US "interests."

William Astore, a retired Air Force lieutenant colonel, recently wrote in *Tom Dispatch* about the power of the military-industrial complex (MIC).

"There's an obvious lesson to be drawn from its [MIC] striking endurance, never-ending enlargement, and distinct engorgement in our moment (even after all those lost wars it fought): The system will not reform itself. It will always demand and take more – more money, more authority, more power. It will never be geared for peace. By its nature, it's authoritarian and distinctly less than honourable ...."

Well, you can't have a Cold War if one side refuses to join in. China, on the other hand, is forging a foreign policy distinctly different from that of our country. Its military budget is about a quarter the size of that of the United States. It has one military base outside its borders, in Djibouti. It belongs to no military alliances.

China is pursuing a foreign policy that its government says is devoted to "exploring a new path for the development of international organisations." President Xi Jinping recently explained that this policy is based on five main concepts:

1.) *Political trust*. Guided by the vision of forging enduring friendship and peace;

2.) *Win-win cooperation*. "We accommodate each other's interests, stay true to the principle of consultation and cooperation for shared benefits, enhance synergy between our respective development strategies, and keep to the path of win-win cooperation toward common prosperity;"

3.) *Equality between nations*. "We are committed to the principle of equality among all countries regardless of their size...;"

4.) *Openness and inclusiveness*. "We stand for harmonious coexistence and mutual learning between different countries, nations, and cultures; dialogue between civilizations; and seeking common ground while shelving differences; and

5.) *Equity and justice*. "We are committed to the purposes and principles of the UN Charter; we tackle major international and regional issues on the basis of their merits and oppose the pursuit of one's own agenda at the expense of other countries' legitimate rights and interests."

To carry out these goals, Xi has proposed two main policy pursuits: the Global Development Initiative (GDI) and the Global Security Initiative (GSI). In the area of development, the Chinese government is working with governments of other countries "with the aim of making the Global Development Initiative a workable platform for people-centred development." China says its seeking to "maximise the effects of its cooperation networks in such areas as cutting-edge technology, agriculture, digital education, energy, culture, and climate actions."

In the Global Security Initiative (GSI), the Chinese Global Television Network (CGTN) reported in May 2022 that at April's Boao Forum for Asia, Xi proposed the GSI, which takes "security as the guiding principle, mutual respect as the fundamental requirement, indivisible security as the important principle, and building a security community as the long-term goal."

It says all of this is focused on fostering a new type of international security that "replaces confrontation, alliance, and a zero-sum approach with dialogue, partnership, and win-win results."

In this effort, China welcomes the participation of all nations, none more than the United States.

China's foreign policy, according to the Chinese states, is based on a "shared future for mankind." It envisions "an open, inclusive, clean and beautiful world that enjoys lasting peace, universal security, and common prosperity," in the words of Xi.

The contrast, therefore, between the fundamental goals of US foreign policy and those of the People's Republic of China cannot be clearer. It is up to the people of the world, including US citizens, as to which road we will all travel.

People's World

Disney workers vote down dollar-an-hour wage hike

Mark Gruenberg

ORLANDO—By a 96 to 4 per cent margin, workers from six unions who toil at Disney resorts in Central Florida voted down the firm's dollar-an-hour wage hike for each year of a proposed five-year contract.

The Disney theme parks clustered in and around Orlando employ 45,000 workers, two-thirds of whom make $15 an hour under a 2018 contract that expired in October. And before that pact, many – especially cooks, and housekeepers – made $10.

The Service Trades Council Unions, the joint negotiating team for the six unions, had recommended the workers reject the pact. STCU President Matt Hollis said the hike does not keep up with Central Florida's inflation, which he calculated was eight per cent last year. Hollis is also president of one of the six unions, Transportation Communications Union-IAM Local 1098.

"A 'no' vote will show that Disney workers do not accept a $1 raise and want to keep pushing for higher raises for everyone," STCU said in a statement before the results were announced on 3rd February.

The workers and their unions demanded a minimum of $18 an hour. Workers interviewed by various news organisations said the current $15 rate doesn't leave them enough money to pay their bills. A study published by the two Unite Here locals added 62 per cent of workers it surveyed had less than $100 each in the bank.

Besides TCU-IAM Local 1908, Teamsters Local 385, Unite Here Locals 362 and 737, the Theatrical and Stage Employees, and the United Food and Commercial Workers represent the employees at Disney World, Epcot, Animal Kingdom, Magic Kingdom, and Hollywood Studios.

Individual workers told news organisations that the skimpy raise doesn't capture the reality of trying to live on Disney's pay. They also reminded readers and listeners that Disney paid out "golden parachutes" worth millions to top executives it fired last year after "disappointing" overall results. The theme parks made money, which helped overcome other sections of the Disney empire that didn't.

The former CEO took home a $20 million golden parachute and another, the PR chief, got a severance bonus that worked out to more than $100,000 per day for three months' work.

"We are not asking to drive Bentleys and go on vacations every other week," Sean Hopper, who is paid $16.50 an hour working full-time at Hollywood Studios, one of the theme parks, told Unite Here Local 362. "We just want to be able to live."

"I'd probably be living in my car if I wasn't sharing an apartment with his sister," Jonathan Pulliam told CNN. "I know several who are living in cars because they can't afford to pay rent."

Pulliam, a cast member at one of the parks, makes $15.85 an hour. "It's a tourist area," he said of Orlando. "Everything's expensive."

People's World

Ecuador

Progressive forces ascendant

Lee Brown

Latin America's left has secured victory after victory in recent years, winning the presidencies in nearly every country, landing important blows against neoliberalism and offering a beacon of hope to progressives the world over.

Ecuador is the latest country to see a stunning victory for the left. The left-wing Citizens Revolution party, led by former president Rafael Correa, won the mayoralties in the country's major cities and the governorships in nine provinces, accounting for two-thirds of the population.

What marks this victory out is not only the strong results but the fact they were won against the backdrop of sustained political persecution and legal repression that has targeted the left and sought to decapitate it over the past six years.

This strategy, known as "lawfare," is most associated with the jailing of Brazilian leader Lula da Silva on trumped-up charges when he was the favourite to win the 2018 presidential election.

After a huge struggle, Lula is now not only free but has returned to the presidency after his electoral victory last late year.

Though less well known, Ecuador is the country where lawfare has perhaps been the most thoroughgoing.

Leading politicians who ran the country so successfully for a decade up to 2017 – reducing poverty and inequality, achieving strong growth and advancing social inclusion – have been at the sharp end of this persecution from the judiciary, electoral authorities and other state bodies.

Correa has been granted political asylum in Belgium after a farcical legal case against him sentenced him to years in prison without any evidence.

His former vice-president was thrown into prison where he remains. Paola Pabon, a governor in an area that includes Ecuador's capital city, was jailed for inciting "rebellion" after supporting protests against austerity.

While other senior figures including Ricardo Patino, in many ways the second most important figure in Correa's cabinet, sought sanctuary in Mexico to avoid a similar fate.

Even the very party that Correa led, Alianza Pais, was taken from the left by the electoral authorities. Correa's allies were even prevented at times from registering a new party.

The calculation from the Ecuadorian elites was simple. The left would win in a free and fair election contest and so the playing field had to be made as uneven as possible with elections overseen by biased referees.

The wider objective of this lawfare was to remove every trace of the impressive social progress delivered by Correa's decade as president which was a central part of the so-called "pink tide" of Latin American governments that included Lula, Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales among others.

Lawfare has in many ways been successful in Ecuador. The right wing narrowly won the 2021 presidential election after political persecution meant allies of Correa had to run a talented but relatively unknown young candidate as president and had to run under the banner of a little-known party.

But lawfare is also a reflection of the weakness of the right-wing elites. When the right comes to power using this strategy, it is a sign that it cannot win in free elections because it doesn't have the policies to address the deep problems that continue to blight Latin America.

They only offer the same failed neoliberal recipes that Latin Americans have rejected time after time for the past 25 years.

The current Ecuadorian government led by President Guillermo Lasso, a banker and one of the country's richest men, is a case in point. He has been a total failure since winning in 2021.

Ecuador has gone from Latin America's second-safest country to one of its most dangerous, with the murder rate up almost five-fold since Correa left office in 2017. It is now at the highest level recorded in the country.

The IMF has returned to the fore in determining Ecuador's economic policies, including deeply unpopular privatisation and cuts. As a result of these policies, Lasso faced an 11-day popular uprising led by indigenous and other social movements last year.

Ecuadorians are also emigrating again in huge numbers in an echo of what happened at the turn of the century when Lasso was the economy minister and oversaw an economic crisis so deep that up to one million Ecuadorians left their country.

Even before the local elections Lasso's level of support was already below 20 per cent and the latest results have delivered him a further blow.

This was made worse still when all eight of his proposed constitutional changes were rejected in a national referendum held on the same day as the elections.

Lasso had hoped the referendum would allow him to regain the political initiative (with some of the proposals also part of an anti-democratic power grab).

The exact opposite has happened with his defeat. Key Lasso ministers and presidential advisers have already resigned.

But it is not just President Lasso facing difficulties – the wider right is also on the back foot with the Social Christian Party losing control to Correa's Citizens Revolution party in Ecuador's biggest city of Guayaquil.

This is the first time the Social Christian Party has failed to win there in three decades.

The left is now in the ascendant. Correa's Citizens Revolution party is the biggest in parliament, runs the biggest cities and governs in the most-populated provinces.

It is also the political current most aligned to the new progressive wave sweeping Latin America following victories in Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Argentina, Mexico, Honduras and elsewhere in recent years.

Ecuador's left is now demanding that the presidential elections are brought forward from 2025 as the constitution permits.

Of course, the situation remains dangerous for progressives. Correa still cannot return to Ecuador without the threat of being unfairly arrested and thrown in jail. While a mayoral candidate from Correa's party, Omar Menendez, was shot dead by gunmen just hours before the recent polls opened.

With options running out, the right may turn even more sharply in an anti-democratic direction or, exploiting concerns over rising violence, pursue even more repressive policies.

But just as lawfare was defeated in Brazil and the left returned to power, we can take great hope that a similar process is under way in Ecuador. We need to ensure those fighting at the sharp end get our solidarity.

Morning Star ✪

Rafael Correa. Photo: Medios Públicos EP – flickr.com (CC BY-SA 2.0)

Global Briefs

PERU: Hip hop, rock reggae, and punk songs are accompanying the continuing protests of thousands of Peruvians. Displaying unprecedented creativity, Peruvian youth have composed songs that reflect the discontent of those who raise their voices against the political and economic elites, structural racism, state terrorism. "The democracy is no longer democracy, Dina, murderer, the people hate you," is the most popular song during the massive marches demanding the resignation of Dina Boluarte, who assumed power on 7th December, 2022 after Congress dismissed President Pedro Castillo.

SYRIA: An estimated 5.3 million people in Syria may have been left homeless by the earthquake that struck both Turkey and Syria, said the UN Refugee Agency representative. "This is a large number and comes to a population already suffering mass displacement," he added. "For Syria, this is a crisis within a crisis. We've had economic shocks, COVID, and are now in the depths of winter, with blizzards raging in the affected areas." International assistance is limited by the western sanctions imposed on Syria in 2011.

SUDAN: Sudan's authorities concluded a review of an agreement with Russia to build a naval base on the Red Sea. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov visited Sudan recently and was warmly welcomed there. The agreement allows Russia to set up a naval base with up to 300 Russian troops, and to keep simultaneously up to four navy ships there. In its turn Russia will provide weapons and military equipment to Sudan. The agreement is to last for 25 years, with automatic extensions for 10-year periods if neither side objects. The deal is yet to be ratified and is awaiting the formation of a civilian government and a legislative body to ratify it before it takes effect.

BRAZIL: Brazil's ex-president Dilma Rouseff will head BRICS New Development Bank until the end of Brazil's presidency of the organisation in 2025. BRICS is Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. Rouseff will replace Brazilian diplomat Marcos Troyjo, who was appointed by the country's previous leader Jair Bolsonaro.

NORTH KOREA: Between 300 and 500 North Korean specialists will be coming to the Donbass region to help with the rebuilding of civilian structures destroyed by the Ukrainian military.

You are invited to

THE FRANKLYN REPORT LAUNCH

Wednesday 22 February 5 - 7pm

Treasury Room, Sydney Town Hall

Franklyn Street is an excellent public housing complex in the inner west suburb of Glebe with over 100 tenants who love their homes and gardens.

The NSW Government plans to demolish the homes and gardens and construct towers to house 70 per cent private and only 30 per cent public dwellings.

The Franklyn Report, produced by Hands off Glebe with the support of The Glebe Society, presents the case to renovate all the units and to keep all the land and homes in public ownership.

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supported by

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Dr Elizabeth Farrelly Writer, columnist, architecture critic, former City of Sydney Councillor

Rose Jackson MLC Shadow Minister for Housing and Homelessness, feminist, unionist, community activist

refreshments provided

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For live streaming of the launch, go to the Hands off Glebe Facebook page

Streaming Review

Cunking the class system

Floyd Kermode

Cunk On Earth. Photo: Jonathan Browning via Netflix

The UK dangerous for Australians for a few reasons. One reason is that the country that is still legally our colonial overlord is about to help make our military and foreign policies even more dependent on the United States, via the horrendously expensive AUKUS submarines deal, a deal so wasteful that if we ditched it, we could introduce free dental care, free post-secondary education and still have enough left over to give every capital city in Australia a replica of the Sydney Opera House.

Another way the UK is dangerous is that if you spend too much time-consuming British culture, Australia can begin to look like a classless meritocracy by comparison. Look, they've got a House of Lords, how silly! Look, they can't go five minutes without talking about class (unlike nice Australians who can't go five minutes without being classist about bogans, real estate, or, in Melbourne, asking "what school did you go to?").

Look, they have a silly Royal family (ie the Royal family that's on our coins).

All this British-watching is dangerous because – as readers of *The Workers' Weekly Guardian* probably don't need to be told – Australia is *not* a classless egalitarian meritocracy. We have classes, and those classes have different interests (also, anyone who thinks this place is a meritocracy really wasn't paying attention for at least the last three Prime Ministers).

The steady tide of British stuff that Australians consume really should come with a warning: "THIS DOES NOT MAKE YOUR COUNTRY A CLASS-FREE UTOPIA" in big letters like the warnings about tongue cancer on cigarette packets.

So, it's with a certain familiarity that we turn to *Cunk On Earth*, from the very talented mind of Charlie Brooker. Cunk sounds like a rude word, but the show feels like yet another BBC documentary, with lavish footage of old monuments, lots of vaguely classical uplifting music with trumpets – but wait! The presenter is an idiot with an Essex girl accent (how common!) who gets all sorts of things wrong! That's the gag really. Apologies if this revelation has spoiled the joke for you, but in fairness it's pretty obvious in the first five minutes.

Philomena Cunk is a fictional documentary-presenter who has what is not a smart-person's accent – that is, she does if you're used to BBC docos (and dramas and comedies for that matter). She asks stupid questions, like "Can you tell me about the Soviet Onion?," and interrupts the brainy authentic academics she's interviewing to tell stories about mates of hers who've done stupid things on drugs.

She also parodies the genre of Expensive Classy British Documentaries by asking the bewildered-looking academics if they could either just cut down something as complex as the Renaissance to a one sentence soundbite, or say something obviously wrong to make the program go down better with the Cunk-like masses.

Before you resolve to go elsewhere for your laughs, I hasten to add that *Cunk on Earth* is not as bad as I've made it sound just now. A lot of it is laugh-out-loud funny. The malapropisms, crudities and nonsense are often pretty cleverly written, so if you've ever enjoyed a Classy British Documentary, and/or have a funny bone, you'll probably enjoy it. If you do like the idea of making fun of classy British docos, you'll really like it but (you knew there was a "but" coming, didn't you?) it's not as good as it used to be.

Anyone who hasn't met Philomena Cunk, do yourself a favour and go check out *Cunk on Shakespeare*, *Cunk on Britain*, *Moments of Wonder*, and all the other Cunkery that is out there on Youtube for free. Starting your Cunking with *Cunk on Earth* is a bit like starting with a band's fourth album, if the band in question has gone from "cult genius" to "getting blander but they know what moves units."

That's a tad harsh, because as I said, *Cunk on Earth* is still very funny indeed, if you don't mind a bit of classism in your comedy (if you *do* mind classism in comedy you probably never ever watch British comedies anyway, and have tuned out of the review five paragraphs ago).

My point is that the early stuff is really funny, while the current stuff, discovered by Netflix and very popular, is showing the strain a little. Interrupting the interviews with anecdotes about "my mate Paul" gets a bit old by the second episode, and the gags about "the producers asked for this bit" only go so far. Mind you, I never got tired of being surprised by references to Techtronic's 1989 smash hit *Pump Up the Jam*.

Something else that may swing the deal for you is that *Cunk on Earth* is written by Charlie Brooker. Well, Brooker and eight others, which is no shame because Brooker is vastly more famous, busy and important now than he was when he first came up with the Philomena Cunk character for a very funny show called *Screenwipe*. If you've never heard of Brooker, he's the author of two book-loads of columns about British TV shows, columns which were hilarious even for someone like me who was never going to see the shows discussed. He's also the creator of *Black Mirror*, a kind of modern British *Twilight Zone*.

Check out *Cunk On Earth* if you like a brainy laugh and have ever seen a British doco. Hunt up the early Cunkery on Youtube if you want more of the same. Read *The Hell of It All* or *Screenburn* if you want good writing that will make you laugh out loud about TV that you'll never actually see.

Just don't ever assume that Australia is a classless wonderland.

Cunk On Earth is now screening on Netflix. Philomena Cunk's other outings can be found on Youtube. ✪

Britain

Strength in the union

Heart Unions week 2023 is an opportunity to highlight how trade unions have "risen to the immense challenges" of the COVID-19 pandemic and the worst cost-of-living crisis in a generation, the Trade Union Congress (TUC) stressed last week.

The annual event, which highlights the positive contribution that unions make in workplaces and across wider society, comes amid the largest strike wave to sweep Britain since the 1980s as workers challenge a decade of Tory austerity.

In a statement, the union body said: "After working through a global pandemic, union members have been forced to navigate their way through a cost-of-living crisis this year.

"The union movement has risen to meet this immense challenge, campaigning for fair pay, demanding action to protect jobs and supporting members through thick and thin."

Retail union Usdaw highlighted the success of its push for a protection of shopworkers Bill in Scotland as well as campaigns to support disabled workers and fight racism, and anti-LGBTQI+ discrimination.

General secretary Paddy Lillis said: "Usdaw is the campaigning union, improving workers' lives and delivering for our members.

"Our reps and activists do a fantastic job organising for fairness at work, promoting equality by tackling discrimination and getting a better deal for our members.

"The vast majority are key workers who keep the country fed and healthy, but they are too often underpaid, poorly treated and do not receive the respect they deserve – there must be a new deal for workers.

"All that is best achieved by joining the union."

HOSTILE ATTITUDE

The Tory government's "hostile attitude" towards nurses provoked national strikes across the National Health Service (NHS), according to Labour deputy leader Angela Rayner.

The intervention came after the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) said that it is considering extending walkouts to accident and emergency and cancer wards as Downing Street continues its refusal to reopen negotiations on 2022-23's below-inflation wage award.

"The RCN and nurses have never taken industrial action ever before so I think that context is really important," Rayner noted.

"And RCN leader [Pat Cullen] has made it clear that the government have just absolutely point blank refused to negotiate with them.

"I think that we're in this situation because the government are acting in a hostile way towards these workers that kept us going through the pandemic.

"They really urgently need to get around the table. No nurse wants to take industrial action and cause disruption to the care that they provide.

"But of course, we've seen record numbers of vacancies in nursing care and their jobs are therefore becoming increasingly difficult.

"So, without this intervention, without the government getting around the table, these issues are ongoing, regardless of the strike, because we can't carry on as things are."

Labour's national leadership has been widely criticised for failing to commit to inflation-matching public-sector pay rises if it wins the next general election, likely in spring or autumn next year.

Tory ministers claim the move would be "unaffordable."

Morning Star ✪

Amnesty International's submission to UN committee highlights Xinjiang

Jerry Grey

Amnesty International just made a submission to the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and some of it surprised me.

I live in China, I've travelled extensively, including many kilometres in Xinjiang. First in 2014 when I cycled from Macau to the Kazakhstan border and again in 2019, I flew to Urumqi and cycled home to Guangdong. In doing so, I passed through several Xinjiang cities, many towns and countless villages, met with Uyghurs, ate in their restaurants and watched as they went to their mosques. I saw enhanced security, there are a lot of police officers, but I saw no oppression and certainly no abuses or crimes against humanity.

It's easy to say: just because I didn't see it doesn't mean it isn't happening and I accept that, but what I did encounter was friendly, welcoming people who weren't afraid to invite us into their homes, who gave us gifts of fruit or bottled water and wouldn't take payment for their kindness.

When you see people like this, you realise that they aren't oppressed, they live their normal lives. On the occasions I asked about the enhanced security, the only answer I received was, we feel safer than before; I can accept that people in the cities may have been programmed to say this but surely, the shopkeeper in the village, the farmer in the fields and the waiter in the restaurant can't all keep to the same script without at least one of them giving some indication that they aren't telling the truth.

I should add here that I've been trained in interview techniques, I've learnt how to tell when someone is lying and, for sure, some people can tell a lie and get past a trained, even a skilled observer, but definitely not all of them.

Call me a denialist, I'm certain many will, but the fact is, inside Xinjiang, there is no evidence and no visible indicators that any form of oppression is going on, nor that Uyghur people are being singled out for harsh treatment, or that Muslims are in any way oppressed. It just isn't visible anywhere in Xinjiang, other Muslim populated regions I've cycled through such as Gansu, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, or anywhere else in China for that matter.

Over the last three years, I've experienced lockdown, quarantine and a range of restrictions due to COVID-19. Every single person I've spoken to in China, who is Chinese, supported these restrictions but had some complaints about personal inconveniences. Even the Edelman Trust Barometer which stood at 91 for China last year and fell to 89 this year is an indicator that Chinese people believe the restrictions were appropriate. The fact that, at the time of writing, globally, almost 7 million people have died of COVID, tells Chinese people that their government were right to prevent that happening in China.

So, I'm surprised that this Amnesty report dedicated more of its pages to these two things. It criticises China for several issues, including "LGBTI discrimination" of which there seems to be absolutely none. Somehow, Amnesty feels a lack of legislation supporting this topic, equals discrimination against it.

The report also criticises working conditions, and sexual harassment which, it admits, China has legislated strongly to prevent but surprisingly, the report cites only one, well-documented case, which it states, created a wave of online discussion and then, in complete contradiction, says has been censored from the internet.

The report doesn't make allegations: it makes statements, without any admissible evidence, that China *is* carrying out crimes against humanity using "former detainees, satellite imagery and data" as sources.

It says many groups *have been* oppressed or imprisoned for practicing religion. It also says that "recent regulations" *have* further tightened the government's grip on religious practices and ethnic minority groups and then goes on to cite only the laws related to de-extremism in Xinjiang adopted six years ago, on 29th March, 2017 and translated by Yale University's China Law Translate. Take a few moments to read the English version of these and it's hard to find anything in these laws to disagree with, or which aren't imposed in other countries where religious extremism has been a problem.

The report has 42 footnotes and 28 of them, in circular references, link the reader to previous Amnesty International reports. Of the others several are Chinese media cited to demonstrate human rights abuses exist but which confirm action is being taken such as in a *Global Times* report where 17 people were punished by China for human trafficking. Proving that China is indeed working hard to stamp out these crimes. But then, if the perpetrators were sentenced to death for such heinous crimes, there would be an outcry from Amnesty for that.

It also references the horrific, and viral, June 2022 Tangshan assault as an example of what happens in China. Without explaining that, due to its unusual nature, there was massive public outcry on social media. It fails to mention the 24-year sentence for the main offender, between 6 months and 11 years for five other defendants, nor the fact that the Chief of police was relieved of his position and the city had the prestigious title of "civilised city" removed as a result of the incident. Once again, proving China is working hard on the solutions.

There are many aspects to Amnesty's 16-page report but all of them share the same issues, they provide no methodology, no evidence from anyone inside of Xinjiang or even China, other than unsubstantiated Weibo videos in support, and the satellite imagery referred to is not referenced at all. Could this be because it is the already debunked US funded, Australian think tank, ASPI report?

As a submission to a UN Committee, it isn't one to be taken seriously. It rehashes old reports, makes unsubstantiated allegations, uses already discredited examples and provides no balance. There is no evidence that people within China were consulted nor that any effort was made to verify the truth of allegations given to Amnesty by people outside of China, all of whom appear to have left China with a government issued passport by legitimate means.

Jerry Grey is a former British Police officer who was a general manager in a multi-national security company based in Australia for 17 years. He has lived, worked, travelled extensively and studied in China for the past 18 years. He holds a Masters Degree in cross cultural change management. Jerry Grey is a freelance writer living in Southern China's Guangdong province.

Pearls and Irritations ✪

"Dangerous escalation"

Seren Sagir

LONDON—Providing Ukraine with fighter jets is a "dangerous escalation" of the war and must be opposed, anti-war campaigners warned last week as the country's President Volodymyr Zelensky visited Britain.

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has called for an investigation into what jets Britain can give to the Kiev government as Zelensky used his first visit to London since Russia's invasion began to urge Britain and other Western allies to provide "wings for freedom" by supplying his air force with advanced jets.

Sunak earlier announced plans to train Ukrainian air force pilots, paving the way for them to fly NATO country jets rather than the Soviet-era fighters currently used by Ukraine.

Addressing Parliament, Zelensky thanked Britain for its support in the war but demanded more firepower in the form of Western fighter jets. He said he wanted a coalition of nations to supply the planes, concluding his speech by thanking Britain "in advance."

Critics argue training pilots in the range of US, French, and European jets Ukraine requests would be difficult and Kiev's real aim is to further bring its NATO sponsors into engagement against Russia.

Former UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson tweeted footage of Zelensky thanking him for his support last year and urged Sunak to provide Ukrainians with "the extra equipment they need to defeat [Russian President Vladimir] Putin."

At Prime Minister's Questions, Sunak and Labour Party leader Sir Keir Starmer staged a show of unity in support of Britain's backing for Ukraine.

Zelensky also met Sunak behind closed doors at Downing Street and visited King Charles later in the day.

Stop the War Coalition convener Lindsey German said that the Ukrainian president's visit was "geared towards getting fighter planes."

She told the *Morning Star*: "Orchestrated by the disgraced Boris Johnson, this call is designed to put pressure on [US President Joe] Biden and [German Chancellor Olaf] Scholz, who are saying no, just as they did previously over tanks.

"This is a dangerous escalation which must be opposed. We need peace, not war.

"It is shameful that there is total support across Westminster parties, allowing the government off the hook over energy company profits, the National Health Service, and public spending."

Stop the War is organising a national demonstration in London on Saturday, 25th February, to call for de-escalation and peace talks.

A Downing Street spokesman said that no decision had been taken on whether to supply British fighter aircraft, but this is being "actively" considered by British Defence Secretary Ben Wallace.

Morning Star ✪

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Something to say?
Write to the Editor!

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Film Review

Let It Be Morning

Eric A Gordon

Photo: Cohen Media Group

You have to hand it to people like Eran Kolirin. He's the film director who in 2007 gave us *The Band's Visit*, about an Egyptian military band that by some fluke managed to find itself in a sad, godforsaken Jewish-majority Israeli desert town, whose residents unexpectedly were able to find some tentative connections with their guests that defied the reigning narrative of Arab-Jewish antipathy. Against all probability, the film was turned into a hope-filled Broadway musical.

People like this film director include that slim margin of the cosmopolitan, secular, tolerant, educated Israeli élite whose minds have not been totally occupied by conceits of Jewish superiority and their conviction that despite all, Israel is, at least, the only democratic country in its very tough neighbourhood. Those illusions have kept this intelligentsia loyal to Israel as a nation-concept even as the reality on the ground gives daily evidence of what has become, over the 75 years since Israel's establishment, an increasingly apartheid regime.

These intellectuals soldier on, in the universities, in a few internationally recognised NGOs, a smattering in the press, and in the arts. But their influence has gradually receded. As of the most recent national elections, which catapulted Benjamin Netanyahu back into power, there is barely anything left in the Knesset of the strong Labor Party that once governed Israel unchallenged, or of the small left parties that tried to put an honest, though in the final analysis purely cosmetic face on what remained of Israeli democracy.

Now open, convicted fascists head key ministries in the farthest-right government the country has ever had. The Israeli resistance will have to be rebuilt from the ground up, as signs indicate has already started happening.

Maintaining their smug, above-the-fray academic independence from the tawdriness of their society, the elect wring their hands at what Israel has become – and what, to many in the Arab and Palestinian world, it always has been. Israel now has more out-migrants than immigrants. Cities across Europe and North America are bursting with Israeli immigrants who for political or economic reasons no longer envision a future in their once promised land.

All kudos to folks like Eran Kolinin, who are sticking it out in Israel trying – hoping against hope – to make a difference. Interestingly, they actually have some official support. His latest film, *Let It Be Morning* (2021), is Israel's official submission to the Academy Awards, and has swept the Israeli equivalent of the film awards, also accruing much acclaim in Cannes and other film festivals.

It even boasts financial backing from the Israel Film Fund, which no doubt opened many doors for filming any number of controversial scenes. "You see?" official Israel seems to proclaim, "We have complete freedom of expression in Israel and celebrate our multinational identity!" It's a critical element securing the loyalty of American Jews toward the self-nominated Jewish State.

It's exactly that same sense of complacent self-congratulation that dominates the personality of Sami (Alex Bakri), a Palestinian who has left his hometown for the big city (Jerusalem). He works for a tech company as one of the few Palestinians in its employ, and suffers the illusion that he's friends with his co-workers, enjoys their trust, is a valued team member. Married to Mira (Juna Suleiman) with a young son Adam (Maruan Hamdan), he is progressive and sophisticated enough to have taken up with a Jewish mistress, and has all but severed contact with his hometown family and friends.

Sami and family are invited to his brother Aziz's (Samer Bisharat) wedding in the Arabic village where he grew up. It bears underlining that this hometown is not in the so-called Occupied Territories, but within the borders of Israel Proper, so most of the Palestinians of this town hold Israeli citizenship. His parents urge him to come back, and they are building a home for him.

The construction workers are the "daffawis," undocumented West Bank Palestinians who are believed to use the village for getting into Israel where they can work illegally. These men are a source of irritation to the local armed strongmen of the town, who themselves are smug, self-important and violent as the Palestinian enforcers within the informal Israeli state apparatus of the compliant, sell-out town council.

After the wedding, as Sami hurries back to Jerusalem (for an assignation with his girlfriend among other reasons), their car is stopped by Israeli soldiers at a late-night roadblock with no explanation, and over the next few days the village is subjected to a total lockdown. An unnamed "operation" is being undertaken and as further punishment to the residents, a virtual siege begins, with no phone service, and water, sewer lines and, electricity cut off.

Just to remind you, this is a town *within* internationally recognised Israel, not within the disputed territories. It soon becomes clear that the "operation" is a new extension of the grey concrete fortified border wall, but now meant to encircle and strangle one Israeli Palestinian village.

The "daffawis" are duly rounded up by the Palestinian collaborators. This ever more absurdist, Kafkaesque story delineates a neat hierarchy of divide and rule, but with deeper subdivisions and antipathies that make Palestinian solidarity in the face of such a communal assault all but impossible to achieve. Collective helplessness is practically guaranteed as the Israeli forces visit more indignities on the townsfolk. The one thing they can be sure of, as they listen to international news reports and rumours of US moves against Iran, is that the Palestinians will be caught in the middle.

Kolirin makes use of a telling symbol, the white pigeons ("doves," poetically) released at the wedding. But these birds won't even strut out of their cage. They have to be shooed out, and even at that, they hang around the family manse without ever flying away. They remain a constant presence, having settled in feeling quite at home in a prison of their own making.

Even when Mira finally gets one of them airborne, it flutters fecklessly back to the ground, where a hungry cat intends to make her next meal of it. Starting with Adam, the rest of the family fling pebbles at the cat to frighten it off. It's a rich metaphor.

The 101-minute film is based on a 2006 novel by the Arab-Israeli satirist and journalist Sayed Kashua. For years his Jewish readers had regarded him as "our Arab" – he wrote in Hebrew, and his humour pointed up the foibles of the human condition in piquantly charming turns of phrase. Eventually Kashua tired of playing the Israeli court jester, left the country. He now is based at Washington University where – as if to poke his Israeli critics in the nose – he teaches Hebrew!

One of the most ingratiating supporting characters is Abed (Ehab Salami), a classic sad sack – his beloved wife left him, he's in debt to the Palestinian gangsters for his newly tricked out taxicab, and he's a hopeless naïf. Yet the viewer comes to empathise with him over the course of the film, and it seems like the author (and filmmaker) have bigger plans for him than we might have imagined.

The story ends somewhat ambiguously, but we see how a community, with its variously flawed characters, has grown in self-confidence. The film all but shouts out to any sentient viewer that oppression, in its elegant detail and massive impact, calculated to induce a response, and with all tools of legal, legitimate resistance closed off, will only spark reactions that have no other option but to be violent – which instigates a new round of lockups, lockdowns, walls, and, regulations.

Life is to be made so impossible for the Palestinians both inside and outside the recognised state borders, that they will willingly self-deport – or they will be expelled like some cancer from the Israeli body. There are now political parties represented in Netanyahu's government that espouse exactly such policies.

Let *Let It Be Morning* serve as yet another warning, a lovingly crafted, humanly noble alarum, of the Armageddon to come.

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