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NATIONALISE AGED CARE

Anna Pha

The ageing population is portrayed as a burden on the budget and taxpayers because the priorities of the Labor government are pedigree neoliberal: user pays and privatisation are its objectives. Those who no longer pay tax or have their labour exploited are of no use to the capitalist system. It's why the former Coalition government of John Howard privatised aged care so as to churn profits for the private sector.

The Albanese government set up an Aged Care Taskforce to make recommendations on how to introduce so-called 'sustainable funding' with a view to users of the system paying more for their care.

The Taskforce come up with a set of recommendations to cut costs, but also to further fund the privatisation of the sector in true neoliberal fashion. The aged will be required to pay a much larger proportion of the costs of aged care. The government released the report on 13 March, the same day that the work value case findings were handed down for aged care workers.

The Taskforce was chaired by Aged Care Minister Anika Wells. The deputy chair was Nigel Ray who has served terms as an executive director of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund as well as having had a career at Treasury. Other members of the Taskforce included Rosemary Huxtable, a former Secretary of the Department of Finance under the Coalition and Liberal NSW former state Premier Michael Baird.

The report provides principles for funding accompanied by clichés such as equitable, flexible, person-centred, transparency, and accountability – all largely contradicted by the recommendations.

The report expresses concerns about an ageing population and their cost to taxpayers. "Over the next 40 years, the number of people over 80 years of age is expected to triple to more than 3.5 million." The "taxation burden for funding aged care services grows for a segment of the population that is becoming proportionally smaller."

Photo: Australian Ageing Agenda australianageingagenda.com.au

AGEING POPULATION

"Government spending on aged care as a proportion of Gross Domestic Product is projected to grow from 1.1 per cent in 2021-22 to 2.5 per cent in 2062- 63."

Should this be considered a burden on the taxpayer? Hardly, when the government is spending more than 2 per cent of GDP on war preparations, has just legislated billions in tax cuts for the rich, and dishes out billions on fossil fuel subsidies.

The report proposes a "significant role" under a fee-for-service model for Support at Home that makes participants pay a co-contribution for services.

The report talks in terms of raising "awareness of existing financial products that enable older people to utilise their wealth in retirement and provide confidence they can afford future aged care costs." It also eyes superannuation balances: "Balances for people aged 85 are projected to be significant for high wealth people."

RESIDENTIAL CARE

The report divides residential aged care into two categories: "direct care", and "indirect care" for "daily living services" such as food, cleaning, laundry, and rental of a room. It says caring services should be fully funded by government, and there should be a supplement on indirect care for those on lower incomes such as pensioners.

At present Refundable Accommodation Deposits are paid by residents when they enter a facility. These can range from $100,000 to $1 million. They are refundable when a resident leaves, but without interest. This capital, which is held by the provider, can be used to build new facilities or take over existing ones, and hence expand their operations. These deposits equate to interest-free loans.

The Taskforce recommends that deposits be replaced by rental charges for accommodation. From the perspective of new entrants to facilities, not requiring a large deposit upfront is a positive step forward.

However, it opens up avenues for the finance sector to move in with loans adding to costs as interest must be paid on them. These costs will be passed on to residents.

It will be possible to negotiate better or more daily living services for a higher fee – maintaining the two-tier system. So much for "equitable" care!

There is an emphasis on users of the system using their accumulated wealth to pay for care. Despite calls from some quarters, including the finance sector, the report does not recommend including the family home.

There is **NOT** a shortage of money to fund these reforms.

Continued on page 2

some people are extracting large profits ... and crying poor at the same time

6

International Women's Day 2024

12

Palestine: Australia joins western cruelty

Due to Easter the next *Guardian* will be 8 April

Guardian

Issue 2092 25 March 2024

One man dead

"One man dead, another fighting for life." That's all the headlines said on Wednesday 13 March 2024. By the time you read this, the media will have moved on to other topics. The family of Kurt Hourigan, the man who died, will take a lot longer to move on.

Hourigan died in a Ballarat gold mine accident while 'air legging,' basically two miners drilling on unsupported ground, a practice that the Australian Workers Union says should not be used for this kind of work. The union has raised concerns about safety before. Now they're asking why, 169 deaths after the laws were introduced in 2020, nobody has been prosecuted under Victoria's industrial manslaughter laws. That's a fair question. A law that never operates is a dead letter law, and might as well not exist.

Kurt Hourigan is not alone. Seven miners died last year, and two have died so far in 2024. 195 workers died in Australia in 2022. That's 195 too many. Every year on April 28, we mark International Workers Memorial Day to commemorate these deaths. We commemorate the lives lost and we vow to take action to save lives still in danger at work. Everybody deserves to come home from work alive.

Naturally Victory Minerals, the company that employed Hourigan says that the safety of workers is its "first priority." They have only recently reintroduced air legging, despite most modern operations banning it for safety reasons. An investigation is underway and the workplace manslaughter laws might be used. Australia has a patchwork of workplace manslaughter laws. Disgracefully, Tasmania and NSW have none, although NSW has started work on one.

It would be good if governments took workers lives so seriously that they had workplace manslaughter laws, and used them. It would be even better if a safety culture meant that there were no workplace deaths in the first place.

The fundamental reason why people die and are maimed at work is capitalism. Workers are seen as a means to an end, like machinery or buildings. Of course there are jobs where the employers and workers get along, but that's just a bump on the road for capitalism. Workers like Kurt Hourigan are an expense, an obstacle to profit. The safety and health of workers isn't what Victory Minerals or any large company is about. What companies are about is simple – a good return on investment. That's why so many workers don't come home alive every year. It's the reason why so many come home injured.

It doesn't have to be like this. Capitalism *feels* inevitable, because we're in the middle of it, but there is an alternative. The alternative is socialism We could all have jobs where workers, their safety and their welfare are what the job is about.

Unions work to keep members safe and well. We support them and we support industrial manslaughter laws that make a difference. More than that, the Communist Party of Australia is working for a society where the worker is what the job is about, and *everybody* comes home from work healthy. For that, we'll have to change a lot more than the laws.

Most Coalition voters back 'right to disconnect'

Two-thirds of Coalition voters back newly legislated protections for employees' right to disconnect from emails and calls outside of work, new research from the Australia Institute shows.

It comes as the federal opposition pushes amendments to the *Fair Work Amendment Bill 2024* to scrap the right. The Coalition has vowed to overturn the legislation if it wins government.

The Australia Institute's Centre for Future Work surveyed 1,017 Australians about the right to disconnect in late January, before the bill passed parliament.

- Three-quarters (76 per cent) supported the federal government legislating a right to disconnect, while 11 per cent were opposed.
- Support for legislating a right to disconnect was high across the political spectrum.
  - Greens (90 per cent) and Labor voters (83 per cent) were the most supportive. This was followed by two-thirds of Coalition voters (66 per cent). Just 18 per cent of Coalition voters opposed it.
  - Three in four 'independent/other' voters (77 per cent) and 61 per cent of One Nation voters supported legislating a right to disconnect.

"The opposition appears determined to remain out of touch with its own voters by pledging to roll back the very policies they support," said Dr Fiona Macdonald, Policy Director, Industrial and Social at the Centre for Future Work.

"The Coalition joined the business lobby in claiming the right to disconnect would cause the sky to fall in. They were wrong. Instead, this survey finds most Australians across the political spectrum back the legislation to stop work encroaching into their personal and family time.

"We know that unpaid overtime is endemic. Our research shows employers are stealing more than 280 hours a year from their workers. This average employee loses $11,055 a year to unpaid overtime.

"The implementation of the right to disconnect is a commonsense step towards rectifying this exploitative imbalance."

The Australia Institute | Centre for Future Work ✪

Nationalise aged care

Continued from page 1

CO-PAYMENTS

At present there is a Basic Daily Fee of 85 per cent of the single age pension, currently $61 a day. The other payment is the hotelling supplement, currently $11 per day, which government pays to providers for all residents, regardless of their means. A means-tested fee makes up 6 per cent of care contributions in residential care.

Providers claim they are losing an average of $4 a day per resident so the recommendation is for an increase in resident co-contributions to ensure sustainability, but "with a strong means tested safety net" for those who cannot pay a higher rate, such as full-rate pensioners with no other income or assets." This would be in the form of a supplement.

This would perpetuate the current two-tier system where the wealthy are able to purchase luxury accommodation and superior care.

It looks like a step toward the British system where aged care residents must pay for everything until they have less than AU$45,000 left, including the family home.

PROFITEERING

Since the reforms introduced by the Howard government in 1997, the aged care system has been progressively privatised and deregulated with devastating consequences for those who use the system.

There is virtually no accountability as to how funding is used or whether it is syphoned off to other areas. Both private for-profit outfits such as BUPA and 'non-profit' church-run facilities are not required to provide such information.

The 2021 Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety report estimated one in three residents in aged care facilities had experienced substandard care. Almost half of all residents in aged care facilities had concerns about the number of staff, the quality of care, and the use of agency (outsourced) staff. (See *Guardian* #2021 and #2022)

"When you turn over an age care system to a market-orientated approach what you get is profit extraction out of the system and away from front line care," Principal Analyst at the Centre for International Corporate Tax Accountability and Research, Jason Ward, said recently.

Ward said some investors extract 20 per cent returns each year on their investment in age care, a phenomenal rate of return for an industry that is highly dependent upon public funding.

There is big money to be made out of aged care. There is massive profit-extraction through real estate. The developers are making a killing. Profits disappear offshore through complex corporate structures. Even in the non-profit sector, there is no transparency as to where government funding is directed. There have been examples of money being syphoned off to churches and other causes. All of this while these same centres claim to make losses year in and year out.

Ward admits the system needs more money, but argues that we need to fix this problem first; "I think we need to fix the holes in the bucket before pouring more water into it as it were, because some people are extracting large profits out the sector and crying poor at the same time."

The question of plugging the holes in the bucket is not seriously addressed by the Taskforce.

The government has implemented the Royal Commission's recommendations for a registered nurse to be on duty 24/7 and a minimum 200 minutes a day of care time.

In Victoria, 10 per cent of beds are state run. In these facilities the quality of care is far superior, and when COVID hit, they did not experience the mass outbreaks and deaths that the privately-run operators did.

The first step in tackling funding should be nationalisation of residential and home care which would cut costs overnight and guarantee higher standards of care.

There is a shortage of facilities and carers. Hopefully, the pay decision will boost carer numbers. Governments need to urgently build more centres to meet growing demand.

The ageing population is not the problem, it is privatisation and deregulation. There is NOT a shortage of money. The present crisis is government-induced, and the solution lies in political will and putting human need ahead of corporate greed. ✪

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Open letter to Foreign Minister Penny Wong

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Senator the Hon. Penny Wong Minister for Foreign Affairs
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Re: Urgent call to Act against genocide. Demand an enduring ceasefire and the recognition of an independent Palestinian state.

Dear Minister Wong,
As Israel prepares a genocidal ground invasion on Rafah, we are deeply concerned at the ongoing violation of the human rights of citizens in Gaza and the West Bank, and breaches of International Humanitarian Law (IHL).

Israel's stated intent is to continue to defy international law and persist with its atrocities in Gaza, its displacement of Palestinians from their homeland and its further occupation and colonisation of the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) found on 26 January 2024 that South Africa presented a plausible case that Israel had intent to commit genocide against Palestinians in Gaza. This ruling obligates all parties to the Genocide Convention, including Australia, to prevent and punish the crime of genocide. Australia must act collectively with governments across the globe to urgently and decisively pressure Israel to end its violence and commit to a political resolution.

The ongoing shelling and blockade of the Gaza Strip by the Israel Defence Force (IDF) destruction of critical infrastructure such as hospitals, schools, housing, water and electricity; and prevention of food and medical supplies from entering, threaten the survival of 2.3 million civilians, half of whom are children. Ongoing conflict is causing a massive escalation in civilian deaths. The humanitarian catastrophe is worsening every day in Gaza – the United Nations has described Gaza as a "graveyard for thousands of children." One child is being killed every 10 minutes.

We are writing to urge you to call for an immediate permanent ceasefire in Gaza in line with growing international consensus and an end to the siege on humanitarian aid that is preventing children and their families from accessing food, water, and lifesaving medical supplies.

Australia must observe its obligations under International Humanitarian Law and International Human Rights Law, and call for a safe pathway for the permanent entry for humanitarian aid into Gaza to meet humanitarian needs including medical, food, and clean water supplies.

We note that after six weeks Australia finally reinstated the suspended aid to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). The decision to suspend was wrong and we note the decision was based on still unproven accusations of the involvement by a small number of staff members in the October 7 attack on Israel, an attack that UNRWA condemned. We note also that the funding was not reinstated until several countries led the way, and eventually Australia fell in line. This has not alleviated the shame many Australians feel from how the Albanese government has acted.

Further, many Australian companies supply weapons components for arms and military hardware used by Israel against Palestinians. According to international law, it is illegal to knowingly allow weapons to go to a country or entity perpetrating war crimes.

We call upon the Albanese Government to exert all possible influence with partners towards seven life-saving outcomes:

- Protection of civilians
- Renewed efforts towards a long-term diplomatic solution
- Officially express Australia's support for the ICJ's rulings
- Call for an immediate unconditional, permanent ceasefire and unfettered, ongoing and sustainable humanitarian aid to be provided to Gaza
- End any military support for, or contracts with Israel, including: ending Australian supplies of military equipment to Israel, e.g. provision of parts for Israel's F-35 Joint Strike fighter plane; a halt any intelligence going to the Israeli government from the Joint Defence Facility at Pine Gap; expel Elbit Systems, an Israeli weapons and military equipment firm providing drones and white phosphorous to the Israeli armed forces, from Australia
- Implement cultural, sporting and economic sanctions on Israel until there is an end to the brutal Israeli apartheid system in the West Bank, Gaza and in Israel
- To join 139 other countries to unliterary, recognise Palestine as an independent sovereign state

Australia must not be complicit in genocide being committed by Israel in Gaza and the West Bank. Protection of civilians and alleviation of the humanitarian crisis can only be guaranteed through peace. The Australian Government must use its voice and exert its influence to seek a ceasefire – an end to the rapidly escalating conflict – as a matter of urgency.

We urge you also to listen to the people who for almost six months have been demanding an enduring ceasefire and the unilateral recognition of an independent Palestinian state.

Australia could make a difference!
Yours sincerely,

Vinnie Molina
President
Communist Party of Australia

20th March 2024

WA: Rail, Bus, and Tram Unions (RBTU) stop work for a better pay deal

Richard Titelius
Delegate CPSU/CSA

On 14 March members, delegates and officials of the RBTU stopped work and held a meeting outside the Perth Train Station in Western Australia. They were joined by other members of the Public Sector Alliance including the United Workers Union, Health Services Union, Community and Public Sector Union/Civil Service Association and State School Teachers Union to formally reject the offer of a three-year deal identical to that offered to teachers – 4.75 per cent in the first year and 3 per cent for each of the following two years.

The State Secretary of the RBTU Western Australia, Joshua Dekuyer addressed the rally to say the union had been waiting for nine months for an offer from the government on their claim for 12 per cent over two years and only received it the night before the rally after the rally was threatened. The government also asked them to call the rally off.

They refused, and this lead to the 200 plus unionists assembling outside the Perth Train Station. Dekuyer said that members had put up with seven years of austerity-level wages which had significantly reduced the real income levels of his members. The members have endorsed a campaign of industrial action of not checking train tickets and not issuing fines for not having a valid ticket starting on Friday 22 March, and continuing the last Friday of every month, with an escalation of that action until a worthwhile offer is received.

Other state public sector unions can expect to receive the same offer, signifying that it will only be united and resolute industrial action which will prompt the government to improve their offer to the RBTU and other public sector unions.

The Communist Party of Australia supports the campaign of industrial action by the RBTU to secure a better wages outcome from the government to lift the incomes of RBTU members who have seen cost of living pressures erode their real wage levels over the last seven years. ✪

Workers Union helps secure $30,000 in unpaid wages

An Australian Workers' Union member has received $30,000 in unpaid wages from his employer, Secure Energy, after the AWU intervened in a dispute involving underpayment and issues around his termination.

AWU delegate Barry Reape had raised issues with his employer over a period of two months, pointing out that he was working 12-hour days but was only being paid for 10.5 hours. Secure Energy provided no explanation for this underpayment, and the issue went unresolved.

Following this, in December 2023, Secure Energy informed Barry that his role would be terminated. However, the company also informed him that the termination would be effective from 9 December, effectively "backdating" the end of his job and leaving him short of 10 days' pay.

At this point the AWU became involved, and Secure Energy agreed to investigate. After follow-up from the AWU, Secure Energy agreed to pay the worker for the 10 days owing, as well as back-paying him the wages he was owed.

This resulted in back pay totalling just under $30,000.

Barry says issues like these are why it's important for workers to join their union.

"I would 100 per cent encourage any worker who isn't in the union to join," he says.

"I spent two months trying to deal directly with my employer and made very little progress. But when the AWU got involved the problem was resolved quickly. These sorts of issues are only one of the many reasons why workers should join their union."

The AWU's Victorian branch secretary, Ronnie Hayden, said the case shows the importance of members knowing their rights on the job and speaking up when something goes wrong.

"Workers deserve to receive every cent they are owed by their employer," he said.

"Whenever there are issues with employers underpaying staff, the AWU will always back its members to ensure they receive their full entitlements. This includes money owing when their employment ends.

"We can only help when we know there's an issue though, so if something isn't right or if you or a colleague have any concerns, speak up. Our delegates and representatives are always ready to help, and the AWU and our legal partners will do everything we can to make sure members get what they deserve."

As well as supporting workers when things go wrong on the job, the AWU negotiates better pay, conditions and job security for its members, and backs them in the courts, in parliament, and in the media.

AWU members get a better deal, earning an average of $350 more per week than non-union workers. ✪

RAFFWU Coles members NO to 'inadequate' offer

The Retail and Fast Food Workers Union (RAFFWU) represents over 600 workers in Coles who have appointed the union to specifically represent them as their bargaining representative. Despite RAFFWU having more such appointments than any other bargaining representative, Coles is pressing on with putting an offer to its workers that the union has described as "inadequate."

The union is pushing for:

- a guarantee of a safe workplace, something Coles wants to delete from employment conditions
- minimum staffing levels
- comprehensive heat and cold arrangements for worker safety. Workers have been offered 'cooling neck ties', icy poles, and water at times when the level of heat was demonstrably unsafe
- a living wage of $29 per hour base rate
- Superannuation to be paid to all workers
- The abolition of junior rates, supported wage rates, trainee rates and any other poverty rates at Coles
- Proper penalty rates for weekends, evenings and public holidays
- Improved job security and conversion rights for casual Coles workers.

An important demand is that Coles replace the digital gift card bribe with actual money in the form of a living wage. Coles has been offering casual and part-time workers digital gift cards instead of decent wages. As the union points out, Coles knows that workers can get groceries cheaper at other outlets.

RAFFWU is encouraging workers to vote NO to the Coles deal, arguing that every NO vote in retail has seen a better offer made by management.

RAFFWU.org.au ✪

Who is the target of the AUKUS alliance? The answer is explicit in all the writing on the subject and what all the leaders of AUKUS have said: it is China. In other words, this is a containment of China policy with the South China Sea and the Taiwanese Strait as the key contested oceanic regions. (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.)

Positioning US naval ships including its nuclear submarines armed with nuclear weapons makes Australia a front-line state in the current US plans for the containment of China. Additionally, it creates pressure on most Southeast Asian countries who would like to stay out of such a US versus China contest being carried out in the South China Sea.

But China is not only the biggest importer of Australian goods, but also its biggest supplier. In other words, if Australia is worried about the safety of its trade through the South China Sea from Chinese attacks, *the bulk of this trade is with China*. So why would China be mad enough to attack its own trade with Australia? For the US it makes eminent sense to get a whole continent, Australia, to host its forces much closer to China than 8,000-9,000 miles away in the US. Though it already has bases in Hawaii and Guam in the Pacific Ocean, Australia and Japan provide two anchor points, one to the north and one to the south in the eastern Pacific Ocean region.

It makes sense only if we understand that Australia now sees itself as a cog in the US wheel for this region. And it is a vision of US naval power projection in the region that today Australia shares. The vision is that settler colonial and ex-colonial powers – the G7-AUKUS – should be the ones making the rules of the current international order. And behind the talk of international order is the mailed fist of the US, NATO, and AUKUS. This is what Australia's nuclear submarine deal really means.

Vale Tom Salisbury

Dearest Comrade Sylvia
Our deepest condolences for the loss of Comrade Tom.

May his memory burn brightly in all of us, particularly his children and grandchildren.

Our thoughts are with you, with love.

Comrades from Beloyannis Branch.

In honour of Tom's wishes, instead of flowers, a donation of $100 has been made from the Beloyannis branch to the Party.

The Beloyannis Branch is a Communist Party Branch of Greek comrades, named after Nikos Beloyannis, executed by a pro-fascist Greek government in 1952. ✪

Serious revelations at South Australian West Papua meeting

Photo: Ethical Photography – flickr.com (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

The recent Australia West Papua Association of South Australia (AWP SA) annual general meeting heard about the infamous 1969 "act of free choice" which ultimately condemned West Papua to Indonesia's brutal control.

Under freedom of information, copies of telegrams sent to the Australian government from Indonesia were released. These contained a request to delay West Papuan emissaries who needed to travel through the Australian controlled section of New Guinea in order travel to New York to report to the United Nations on the voting procedures arranged by the Indonesian authorities. Obligingly, Australia under the Gorton government detained the Papuans long enough to cause them to miss the important UN session that determined the fate of the former Dutch territory. Had the Papuans been able to reveal the undemocratic, in fact intimidatory, nature of the voting procedure, their future may well have been marked with a much greater degree of freedom.

Under the "act of no choice," as the "Act of Free Choice" is also known, 1025 voters in total representing thousands in the territory, about an estimated 800,000, voted in small groups, in eight separate regions across the territory. Voters were surrounded by well-armed soldiers, and forced to vote, usually publicly by a show of hands. Thus a unanimous result favouring Indonesia was achieved.

Today Indonesia promotes a benign image of trying to help West Papuans, but this involves obvious intimidation, for example, soldiers are frequently present in school classrooms and the Indonesian military dominates Papuan daily life, except for those who flee to the mountainous regions where greater freedom is found but community services are non-existent.

PERSISTENT COLLUSION

Australian collusion knows no bounds, and there is a long shameful history of military cooperation. Furthermore, in perpetuating the deception over the Balibo Five, Australian journalists who were killed in Timor L'Este, Australia colluded with the United States in the deception that the journalists were killed in cross-fire during the invasion when, in fact, they were murdered well beforehand so that they could not report on the atrocities that were likely to happen. Tribute was paid to Shirley Shackleton, especially for her life-long efforts in exposing the deception.

It was suggested that, internationally, a key role could be played by the Melanesian Congress, through lead nations such as Vanuatu in advocacy for a Papuan nation. In any case, the collusion of the United States and Australia needs to be exposed, and even sanctions applied, because our nation's complicity in deception along with Indonesia.

WEST PAPUA INITIATIVE

AWPA has played a vital part in supporting West Papuan students by raising $40,000 to assist them when the Indonesian government suddenly withdrew funding for students around the world. Exposure is greatly feared, especially of such practices as ethnic cleansing, as visits from United Nations rapporteurs are delayed and journalists are restricted from entry into West Papua.

Further alarming revelations came from Dr Jim Elmslie, an authority on West Papuan Politics, who heads the West Papua Project based at the University of Wollongong. The project has undertaken a special program known as West Community Resilience Initiative (WPCRI).

This initiative is focused on the provision of training in the collection of verifiable information on the conflict between West Papua and Indonesia and the recording of the personal stories, especially of the IDPs (Internationally Displaced Persons). The information gathered will help get desperately needed assistance from national and international religious and humanitarian agencies.

INDONESIAN CONTROL

World attention has turned to the increasing violence and militarisation in West Papua as the Indonesian government under former President Joko Widodo continued the "developmental" push to build the Papuan Highway through the highlands. Clearly, with such a dubious human rights record, no future improvements in surveillance practices can be expected from the newly elected Indonesian President, 72-year-old Prabowo Subianto, whose record includes being a commander of the notorious Kopassus section of the Indonesian military in Timor Leste and conducting repisals against OPM (Organisasi Papua Merdeka, or Free Papua Movement) in West Papua. Papua Merdeka, Free Papua Movement). On one occasion in attacking a supposedly OPM-sympathetic village he deceptively used a military helicopter disguised as a Red Cross aircraft to launch a brutal attack on innocent people.

Papua has now been divided into five new provinces as part of a strategy calculated to increase external migration into West Papua in order to diminish indigenous influence, along with a deliberate strengthening of security forces through new military bases in every province.

Many West Papuan people have been both internally and internationally displaced. Initiatives in community assistance and capacity building from benevolent organisations are virtually banned, and numerous visit requests by the United Nations Human Rights Commission have been consistently delayed by the Indonesian government.

In attempts to flee a life-threatening situation, refugees making the difficult crossing into Papua-New Guinea naturally put pressure on local communities there as well as the central government and so these Papuan refugees face further distress.

AWPA SA SUPPORT FOR WEST PAPUAN INDEPENDENCE

Obviously, through strong active community campaigning, the West Papua Association is playing a vital role in assisting West Papuans to achieve their goal of independent nationhood and exposing the continuing attempts to stall the justice and independence that West Papuan people rightly deserve.

Australia West Papua Association, South Australia. ✪

GREEN NOTES

'Underwater bushfire'

Anna Pha

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority has confirmed a mass coral bleaching is taking place – the fifth in eight years. The World Heritage-listed Great Barrier Reef is the largest coral system in the world spanning 2300 kilometres and made up of about 3000 individual reefs. "Coral bleaching is caused by excessive ocean heat, which is being fuelled by the continued burning of fossil fuels – coal, oil and gas," Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) CEO Kelly O'Shanassy said. For the past 12 months, ocean temperatures have been at record high levels causing thermal stress on the Reef.

Climate Council Research Director, Dr Simon Bradshaw, warned: "Another mass bleaching event will have major consequences to the health of our Reef, and the thousands of Queenslanders whose livelihoods rely upon it. What's happening on the Reef right now could be described as an underwater bushfire. These abrupt changes underway signal even greater dangers, and the possibility of crossing points of no return in our climate system.

"Every new coal and gas project hurts the Reef and surrounding coastal communities, but governments keep approving these dangerous polluting projects," Bradshaw said. It usually takes around ten years to recover from a mass bleaching and the reef has not had a chance to recover between recent episodes of bleaching.

Recent analysis by the Climate Council (CC), *Underwater Bushfire: Vibrant Great Barrier Reef fading to a shadow of its former glory*, shows how pollution from the burning of coal, oil, and gas projects is heating our oceans and cooking the Reef. "It's now likely we are crossing a tipping point for tropical coral reefs worldwide, including this irreplaceable ecosystem," the analysis says. "This has significant consequences for our wellbeing, coastal communities that rely on reefs for their livelihood and potential knock-on effects for biodiversity and climate that we are only beginning to understand.

"At least five fossil fuel projects have been approved under our outdated national environment law since the last mass bleaching event on the Great Barrier Reef," the CC said. The reef is changing with warming oceans and coral bleaching. The impact on the species that rely on the reef is still to play out.

Just how the Coalition and now Labor governments have staved off the Reef being placed on the World Heritage endangered list is incomprehensible. Environment Minister Tanya Plibersek said it was due to the significant investment and effort the Albanese government has made in protecting the reef for future generations. The federal government is spending $3.7 billion on the reef over seven years – just one third of the $11.1 billion that it provides in subsidies and tax breaks for the fossil fuel sector in one year! "Absurdly, our governments don't even consider the climate damage new coal and gas mines will have on places like the Great Barrier Reef," ACF CEO Kelly O'Shanassy, said.

The Reef supports complex ecosystems and is vital for biodiversity and Australia's economic prosperity. Dr Ove Hoegh-Guldberg, Professor of Marine Studies at the University of Queensland and one of the world's leading authorities on coral, told the ABC 7.30 program: "The impact of climate pollution is driving our beloved Reef to the brink, and unless we act faster many other natural and human systems will tumble. The implications of these changes are unimaginable."

Hoegh-Guldberg said corals that have been around for 200 years are dying. This should set off alarm bells. "It is time for us to urge all governments to take emergency action at a scale which matches that of the growing threats to life on Earth."

International Women's Day 2024

IWD Perth.

IWD walk for peace – Perth

This year on 8 March around 300 women in Perth walked through Perth CBD for the first IWD Peace Walk. This is the first International Women's Day march to take place in Perth since 2010 when a march was organised to mark the 100-year anniversary of the proposal from Clara Zetkin, the leader of the Women's Office for the Social Democratic Party in Germany who tabled the idea of an International Women's Day at the second International Conference of Working Women in Copenhagen; the proposal received unanimous support from over one hundred women representing 17 countries.

This year in Perth a collective of women came together to organise a Peace walk to demand an end to violence in all its forms, from our homes to the global community.

The walk, MCed by Elly (CPA) and Janet (SA) was marked by songs and silence with a number of stops along the way to hear from powerful speakers and poets from Palestine, Afghanistan and Sudan, as well as human rights activists and unionists.

The Peace Walk started with a smoking ceremony and acknowledgement of country followed by interventions from prominent Aboriginal activist Megan Krakour and a spontaneous contribution from a young Aboriginal woman from the crowd who received much support when she shared her experience of the justice system and how she is rebuilding her confidence.

The walk acknowledged the violent onslaught taking place in Gaza with Palestinian women leading with the main banner.

Ending at the Perth Cultural centre on the other side of the CBD, the crowd was addressed by Filipino activist, Joy, who introduced the One Billion Rising campaign. The Filipino women from Gabriella then led marchers in the 'break the chains' dance which is performed around the world between Valentines Day and IWD as part of the anti-imperialist One Billion Rising movement against all forms of violence including state violence.

Historically women have proven they can be a force for change. Walking in solidarity we called for change; Treaty and Truth-Telling to begin the process of healing the scars of our colonial past, an end to arms shipments to Israel, an enduring ceasefire, and an end to the occupation, a more generous refugee policy to support those fleeing war and violence. The walk challenged colonialism, war and governance in the pursuit of profit over people. We walked for money for child care, health and disability care, public housing, education and training – not nuclear-powered submarines and militarisation. Recognising our collective voice is powerful.

One Billion Rising can be found at onebillionrising.org ✪

IWD march and event – Melbourne

In Melbourne, as well as the traditional IWD march, comrades attended the Greek Democritus Workers League IWD event. Greek songs were performed, and passionately sung along to, and a speakers recounted stories of the struggles of the first generation of Greek women in this country, with stories of women giving birth on their way to work, not understanding the English used in the hospital, as well as the solidarity of organising community events together. ✪

CPA, South Australia Branch, IWD education session

Notes from a session facilitated by Comrade Bev Hall.

Women hold up half the sky: This year's theme for International women's day is 'Count Her In.' In 2021, it was 110 years of International Women's day. A day proposed by Clara Zetkin at the second International Conference of Socialist Women in Copenhagen in honour of the garment workers in New York who were demonstrating for better wages and conditions. Clara Zetkin was a member of the Communist Party in Germany from 1920 to 1933. She was a close confidante to Lenin and assisted with his writings on women. This brought about the first decree of the Socialist Government in USSR, the code on Marriage and Family in October 1918. This was the most progressive in the world giving women the right to freely divorce without consent, to have abortion without the consent of a father and conduct a personal life without the tutelage of the church or family. The Soviet Union was the second place in the world to give women the right to vote.

International Women's Day from 1920 became a day of Peace and Solidarity with women of all countries suffering injustice, oppression, misery and effects of war at the time. Women have a history of struggling for their rights and equality and the desires for a happy future for their children.

Lenin's thoughts from *Conversations with Clara Zetkin* pointed out, "Our ideological conceptions give rise to principles of organisation …. A woman communist is a member of the Party just as a man communist, with equal rights and duties." However, "we must not close our eyes to the fact that the Party must have bodies, working groups, commissions, committees, bureaus" and collectives "to arouse the masses of women workers" and women's groups in general. This involves "systematic work" and involvement at the grass roots level which is not feminism but "practical revolutionary expediency." "Unless millions of women are with us we cannot exercise the proletarian dictatorship." Lenin felt the working class would not become spontaneously political just by fighting the economic battles over wages and working hours.

Marx saw unpaid women's work as an integral part of capitalism. He saw the nuclear family as an imbalanced structure that teaches its members to accept imbalances of power in wider society. He believed that family was not women's natural sphere but rather the source of women's oppression. Marx and Engels interacted with female activists involved in struggles from the time of the Paris Commune. Women influenced the development of Marxism just as Marxism influenced the dedicated socialist women. The degree of emancipation of women is the national measure of general emancipation.

Lenin spoke of the importance of relieving women from housework so they could participate more fully in society and an effort to pay workers for household chores began – equal pay for equal work. He also pointed out that no revolution is possible without the participation of women. He encouraged men to support women's participation in politics. Lenin believed it was a most important duty to enlighten proletarian women on sexual problems, forms of marriage past, present and future and to take note of working women's needs. He saw the "disease of Modernity" as promoting bourgeois conceptions of morality, and the need to awaken the social life and activity of women.

Marxism is a philosophy which is 'anti-sexist, anti-racist, and against all forms of oppression and exploitation. It aims for not only economic restructuring but the development of a class-less mode of production and a new humanity in all its forms. These changes dialectically "must come simultaneously from changing relations of production, changes in material conditions of families and the development of values and ideologies related to freedom and equality." ("Women and Revolution: Marx and the Dialectic," (Lilia Monzo) *Knowledge Cultures*)

Monzo says we need "a mass movement of working class women under communist leadership … the development and management of such a movement is an important part of the entire Party activity." Even in communist and socialist parties and the trade unions men can see women as a side issue. There is a need to recognise, encourage and support women into leadership roles. There is a need to listen with real interest not to think "well we have listened now move onto the real issues."

Monzo adds that rooting out the "master idea" is vital, concluding that "through this … women will come to understand what the proletarian dictatorship means for them with complete equality with men in law and practice in the family [and] in the state" of the capitalist class.

We need to study history to know what to build on, not reinvent the wheel. Marxism is a philosophy. Communism is a system of government based on the above principles. Women cannot be left behind but should be respected, and equal. ✪

‘The war will end’

Remembering Mahmoud Darwish, Palestine’s poetic voice

Mahmoud Darwish’s poems are ever relevant to the conditions of Palestinians, particularly now in Gaza.

Indlieb Farazi Saber

Photo:ني‌رادب, Mahmoud Darwish Museum – Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4.0)

> The beauty of Gaza is that our voices do not reach it.
> Nothing distracts it; nothing takes its fist from the enemy’s face.
>
> Gaza is devoted to rejection …
> Hunger and rejection, thirst and rejection, displacement and rejection, torture and rejection, siege and rejection, death and rejection…”
>
> Extracts from *Silence for Gaza*, Mahmoud Darwish (1973)

These are the words of celebrated Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, penned 50 years ago and perhaps more poignant now than ever as Gaza is devastated by more than five months of an Israeli onslaught that has killed more than 31,000 people and destroyed vast swaths of its infrastructure.

Born on 13 March 1941, Darwish is feted as Palestine’s national poet for his words expressing the longing of Palestinians deprived of their homeland, which was taken by Zionist militias to make way for present-day Israel.

His poetry gave voice to the pain of Palestinians living as refugees and those under Israeli occupation for nearly a century. His words are relevant today as the hopes of a free Palestine struggle against increasing Israeli control of the occupied West Bank and Gaza.

Darwish died in 2008 after open-heart surgery leaving behind more than 30 collections of lyrical Arabic poetry.

Translated into 39 languages, Darwish’s laments of loss, longing, and exile spoke to people struggling against occupation around the world.

THE POWER OF POETRY

For Palestinians, words are often the only weapon available to fight back, finding the power to shape perception.

Atef Alshaer, a senior lecturer in Arabic language and culture at London’s University of Westminster, says Palestinian poetry “moves people to action, protest, commemorate, to remember, and bear witness”.

“In the absence of a fair response to Palestinian political outcries, poetry has helped to give shape and voice to what they have lost.”

Darwish did just that, becoming the voice of the Palestinian people.

> On this Earth, there is what makes life worthwhile:
>
> On this earth is the Lady of Earth, the mother of all beginnings, the mother of all endings.
>
> Her name was Palestine.
>
> Her name became Palestine.
> My Lady, because you are my Lady, I deserve life.

WHO WAS MAHMOUD DARWISH?

The second of eight children, Darwish was born to a modest farming family in the village of Barweh, Akka (Acre) – an Arab city destroyed by Zionist militias in 1948, its remains absorbed into Israel.

At the age of six, Darwish saw his village razed to the ground along with hundreds of others during the Nakba of 1948 during the founding of Israel.

His family joined 750,000 other Palestinians forced into exile, fleeing violent attacks by Zionist militias and the newly formed Israeli military, in search of a safe home elsewhere.

Settlement camps in neighbouring Lebanon took in 110,000 Palestinian refugees, including the Darwish family.

A year later, Darwish and his family returned to their village home only to find it burned to the ground.

They moved to Deir al-Asad, a Palestinian village about 15 km away, where they tried to rebuild their lives as internally displaced people (IDPs), unable to return to their home.

Thousands of Palestinians who remained in Israel after 1948 were dubbed “present-absent aliens” – physically present, but returning to their properties because they were absent when Israel took those over, since they had fled fearing violence.

Among the exiled was also renowned Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani.

They would join the wave of revolutionary Palestinian writers like Samih al-Qasim, Fadwa Tuqan and Tawfiq Zayyad who would go on to unpack themes of exile, identity, and resistance. Darwish would later say, “Every beautiful poem is an act of resistance.”

BECOMING PALESTINE’S NATIONAL POET

A 14-year-old Darwish read out a poem he had written in class, at his school in Kafr Yasif (11 km from Akka). The poem described a Palestinian boy complaining to a Jewish boy:

> You can play in the sun as you please, and have your toys, but I can’t.
>
> You have a house, and I have none.
>
> You have celebrations, but I have none.
>
> Why can’t we play together?

Israel’s military officials decided to answer the question the poem posed – by threatening Darwish that if he continued with such poetry, his father could lose his job at the local quarry.

Undeterred, Darwish kept writing his poems, with his early works – soon after he completed high school – appearing in left-wing newspapers.

His poetry spread, going on to be “sung by fieldworkers and schoolchildren,” wrote Munir Akash and Carolyn Forche in the introduction to the English translation of his works: *Unfortunately, it was Paradise*.

His writings were read by Palestinian children. His poems were sampled in songs, painted on the walls of buildings in refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, the occupied West Bank and beyond – camps that were built to be temporary.

In March 2000, Yossi Sarid, Israel’s education minister, suggested including Darwish’s poems in the Israeli high school curriculum but Israel’s Prime Minister Ehud Barak overruled him.

Darwish responded: “The Israelis do not want to teach students that there is a love story between an Arab poet and this land … I just wish they’d read me to enjoy my poetry, not as a representative of the enemy.”

The Palestinian poet was part of the cultural mainstream for Mustafa Abu Sneineh growing up in Jerusalem.

“His voice is there in the head of every young Palestinian poet,” Abu Sneineh, a poet and writer himself now living in London, told *Al Jazeera*.

“I know this because I had to work hard to get it out of my head and learn to protect my voice.”

Abu Sneineh believes the 50 years of Darwish’s writings documenting the history of Palestine from 1948 onwards were what made him the national poet.

“At every point in Palestine’s modern history, Darwish was there … narrating the Palestinian experience in exile, in refugee camps, and under Israeli occupation.

“He captured all that with a personal touch, with stories of love and friendship.”

WRITING TO RESIST

Darwish’s status as a “present-absent alien” meant he could not travel without the correct permit. Doing so would lead to his imprisonment, which happened at least five times between 1961 and 1967.

His poem Identity Card – part of his poetry collection Leaves of the Olive Tree in 1964 – led to his house arrest, while Palestinians turned it into an anthem for protest.

> Write down
>
> I am an Arab
>
> And my identity card number is fifty thousand
>
> And I have eight children
>
> And the ninth arrives in a summer.
>
> Does this bother you?

By 1970, Darwish left Israel for the USSR, then moved to Cairo in 1971 to work for *Al Ahram* newspaper and then to Beirut where he joined the Palestine Liberation Organization’s (PLO) executive committee in 1973.

A year later, he wrote PLO leader Yasser Arafat’s speech to the United Nations General Assembly, which included the now famous line: “Today I have come bearing an olive branch and a freedom fighter’s gun. Do not let the olive branch fall from my hand.”

ARE HIS WORDS STILL RELEVANT TODAY?

Darwish’s poetry is being rediscovered by a new generation, as the hashtag #mahmouddarwishpoetry has gained nearly 18 million views on TikTok and social media is awash with his poems.

“His eloquence and originality are unparalleled and ever relevant to the conditions of Palestinians, particularly now in Gaza, where Palestinians suffer the consequences of an Israeli genocide supported by the US against them,” says Alshaer.

“People find representations in his poetry for their innermost feelings amidst the carnage and sadness engulfing them.”

As Darwish wrote:

> The war will end
>
> The leaders will shake hands
>
> The old woman will keep waiting for her martyred son
>
> That girl will wait for her beloved husband
>
> And those children will wait for their heroic father
>
> I don’t know who sold our homeland
>
> But I saw who paid the price.

Al Jazeera

Book Review by Richard Mullen

The Trinity of Fundamentals

by Wisan Rafeedie

> "I live according to the rules 'visit no one, do not receive anyone' – to which I once added 'and do not open the peephole on the door for an old woman from Al-Bireh' – and 'measures, precautions, requirements, and rules.' Between this and that, I resist and I cook, I sleep, I dream, I sing, and I contemplate, I jump from one safe house to the other. I escape from bad coincidences by virtue of a prayer my mother made nine years ago: 'Go, my son, may God be pleased with you.' I get bored and talk to the walls on occasions, I work and feel tired, I laugh and I curse. Before and after all that, my tasks dominate my thinking – my resistance is my life. The self that pushes me toward bad things has fought me and I defeated it, so it fell silent."

Kan'an, the protagonist of *The Trinity of Fundamentals*, says this in 1991, as Eastern Europe enters the last phase of the crisis of socialism, the First Intifada enters its second half, and the Gulf sees the aftermath of "Desert Storm." In the preceding nine years, he saw the Palestinian resistance from a very specific point: one of a professional revolutionary in hiding. Kan'an, a fictionalised version of the author Wisan Rafeedie himself, is a member of the PFLP, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. When the party informs him that he is to begin his life in hiding in 1982, adventurous excitement and enthusiasm mixes with his Marxist-Leninist analysis, and he abandons the illusion of normal life under occupation many led – family, university, love. The two pillars of his existence from that point are life and the revolution: we get to see, through internal monologue (or rather dialogue) Kan'an dealing with contradictions and revolutionary analysis taking precedent over some individualist tendencies ("a struggle between reason and nerves," the author notes). Nevertheless, there remains the constant tension with the missing third pillar, the one to complete the titular Trinity of Fundamentals: love.

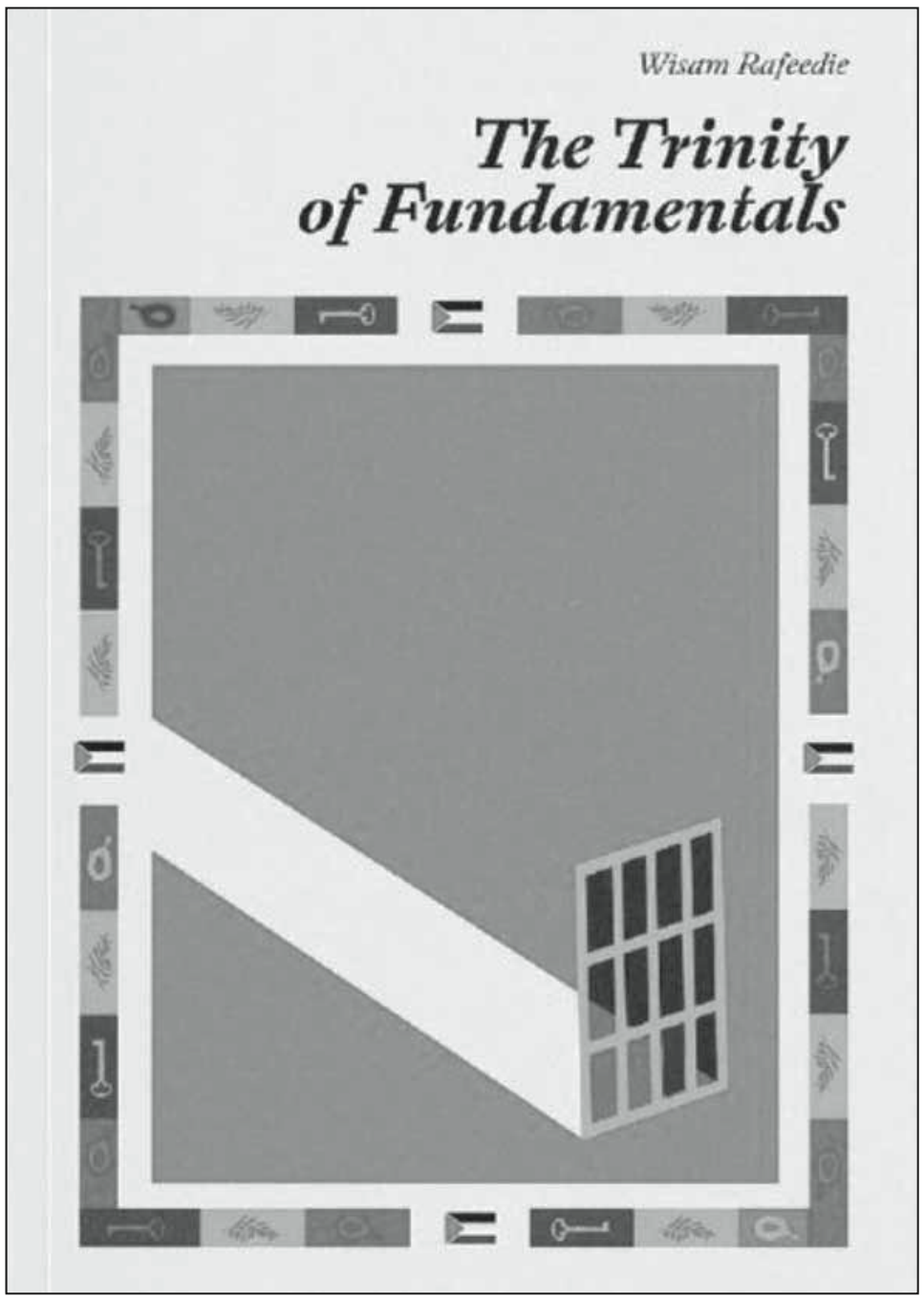
The story of Kan'an opens with a knock on the door. The Occupation is pounding on the door, seeking his hiding place. The image evokes the opening of Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* (1966), but also that of Phil Ochs' "Knock on the door": the occupying force is always one ominous knock on the door away from the resistance. The story takes us back to the beginning of Kan'an's involvement with the Party, and it keeps oscillating between the present moment of the safe house under siege, and Kan'an's personal history. This history is told with the benefit of hindsight, with constant reflection on material conditions, organising principles, and the historical moment. The author does not shy away from the tone he wrote his Party pamphlets and letters in, offering materialist analysis of the situation, retelling relevant aspects from history of Palestine and PFLP, and citing relevant principles of Marxism-Leninism. Typographical choices give us the voice of the narrator, multiple inside voices of the protagonist (in *italics*), and the voice of the Party in bold as in the quotes above.

In the beginning, the voice of the Party is in the instructions Kan'an receives – it is never othered, Kan'an always insists on being a part of that voice, the part of the collective "we." At the end of the book, Kan'an's own words are in bold typeface, as he has become the clandestine printer, the voice of the Party. Coming from a Christian family, Kan'an flirts with a quasi-religious representation of his beliefs, notably with the idea of the Trinity, but also in his loyalty to the party. Through his bearing of the cross, he wouldn't ask, like Christ, "why hast Thou forsaken me?," nor would he deny the Party the way St. Peter denied Christ as his teacher. Arguably, New Testament motifs here are just one bit of the author's love for intertextuality and diverse references. The book is full of references to literature (Hanna Mina, Kanafani and Soviet social realists to name a few), Marxist literature, and music that filled Kan'an's solitude.

Written in and smuggled out of an Israeli prison in 1993, this fictionalised autobiographic account of Wisam Rafeedie's revolutionary activity in the 80s now appears in English translation. The language of the translation is enjoyable, authentic, and emancipatory—it is the English of the resistance and freedom fighters finding their voice, not one of a colonialist, orientalist voyeur.

The Trinity of Fundamentals, written by Wisam Rafeedie, translated by Dr Muhammad Tutunji, was published in 2024 by the Palestinian Youth Movement, and is available from Connolly Books, Temple Bar, Dublin.

Socialist Voice ✪



Interview with Alex Gordon, President of the Rail, Maritime and Transport Union of Britain

The interview was conducted by Denis Rogatyuk, international director of El Ciudadano media platform.

Denis:

So, Alex Gordon, the president of the Rail Maritime and Transport Union of the UK, I would like to start with a bit of summary of what the strikes – going back to when they started, what were the initial demands and how did it really escalate to being one of the biggest waves of industrial action in the UK in recent years?

Alex:

Well, you're right that the last 18 months in Britain has been the highest number of working days lost to strike action for almost 40 years.

There was a public sector workers strike in 2010, 2011, just after austerity, which was a very short but very well-supported strike. But that was really just a very brief phenomenon. The qualitative difference between what is happening in Britain today and anything that has happened since the 1984-85 miners' strike is that this is a prolonged and continued period of resistance led by organised labour, led by organised workers in trade unions, particularly the industrial trade unions, by which I mean the trade unions that organise workers in sectors across transport ports, communications industries, health, education.

But it's also been more widespread than just those big sectors. We've seen lots of strike action in the private sector, in small factories or in parts of the service economy as well. And even the civil servants have been taking prolonged strike action.

It's out of the ordinary from Britain's normal industrial relations scene. And it started really on the back of the recovery from COVID-19 and the beginning of the opening up of the economy after the lockdown. What was immediately apparent was that the largest employers in Britain had a radical policy for reducing wages and using the economic lockdown of COVID to attack long standing working conditions, including trade union collective agreements.

Towards the end of the pandemic [there was] a phenomenon that we called the fire and rehire, very big employers, were giving redundancy notices to their staff, to their workers, and then reemploying them on lower wages, worse working conditions, and claiming that they had to do this because they were so poor after the experience of COVID.

The reality was that British corporate and banking monopolies were provided with taxpayers' money, with state aid, all the way through COVID. Their bank balances grew. There was never a question of them being bankrupt and this is simply an indication of the ferocity and the desperation of the British corporate class and their need to constantly try to increase their profits at the expense of their workers and of consumers.

So that was the first sign that we were going to be going into a period of sharpened class conflicts. The British Conservative government in late 2021 then let it be known that they were going to make sharp cuts to public spending, which they justified by saying that they had to spend money on keeping companies in profit during COVID.

So it was a double whammy. On the one hand, the employers were saying, we're going to cut your wages. On the other hand, the government was saying we're going to cut the social wage. And what this led to in the transport industry in particular was around about £4 billion sterling ($8 billion AU) of direct cuts to transport services.

My union organises all workers across the rail industry. We organised coordinated strike ballots throughout the rail sector, and we won them all. And we called unified Strike action in June 2020 to across Britain.

And this had a catalytic effect on the labour movement generally. And we saw almost immediately what we had expected to see was what normally happens when we go on strike, which is that we are targeted by the right-wing media and the press, by right wing politicians, and we are demonised. What actually happened was that we received massive public support and a series of other unions joined us.

The International (internationalmagz.com) ✪

Belgium: Workers Party starts energetic electoral campaign

Kick-off of the PVDA-PTB electoral campaign. Photo: international.pvda-ptb.be

Belgian party the PVDA-PTB (Partij van de Arbeid van België-Parti du Travail de Belgique, or 'Belgian Workers Party') has had the kick-off for its electoral campaign with a high energy electoral congress. An unprecedented 104,098 people informed the electoral program through the party's 'Great Survey.'

At the congress, the PVDA-PTB vowed to fight for four main priorities: tax justice, purchasing power, a 'social climate' policy, and an end to politicians' privileges.

The party has announced that it is "time to break with policies that harm us. Time to dare to go get the money where it is to invest in society. We will defend these commitments before, during, and after the elections. Together, let's impose change.

The next step for the party is to have over 150 meetings around Belgium as part of a 'PVDA-PTB On Tour' campaign.

The PVDA-PTB is Belgium's only fully national party, representing both Flanders and Wallonia, hence the party name which is in both Dutch and French. It's a Marxist and socialist party.

'Social climate policy' is one of the most important parts of the party program, aiming to fight climate change and social inequality together. ✪

Protests spread in Israel

TEL AVIV: Thousands of peace activists marched and more than a dozen have been arrested in demonstrations against Benjamin Netanyahu's far-right government. Opponents of Netanyahu and his war gathered for protests in at least 30 locations across Israel, including Tel-Aviv, Haifa, Be'er Sheva, Jerusalem, Umm al-Fahem, and more.

Anti-government protesters in Tel Aviv broke through a police barrier and blocked main traffic arteries while chanting about the need for immediate elections to remove the Netanyahu government. Police attacked the demonstrators, using force to disperse them.

The clash followed two separate rallies, each drawing many thousands of participants and held roughly a block apart from each other, near the Israeli army headquarters at Begin Street.

At the end of the anti-government rally, hundreds of protesters smashed the police barrier on Begin Street and continued northward while carrying torches. They blocked that road, blowing whistles and horns and calling for immediate elections before being forcefully scattered by police using water cannons. Six demonstrators were detained by security agents.

About 20,000 demonstrators came to the demonstration in Kaplan Street, including activists from the "Anti-Occupation Bloc," a coalition opposing the Israeli military's occupation of Palestinian territories.

Thousands attended another two rallies in Jerusalem, outside the Prime Minister's Residence, and Haifa. Speakers at both protests criticised the government of Netanyahu for its war policies and its corruption.

Led by Hadash (Democratic Front for Peace and Equality) and Communist Party of Israel activists, several hundred held another protest in Umm al-Fahem city against the Gaza war, demanding an immediate ceasefire. The demonstration is unprecedented because Israeli authorities have cracked down on any show of support for Gaza from Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel.

Umm al-Fahem is the second-largest Arab community in Israel. During the first days of the war in October, police violently broke up a similar demonstration in the city, arresting at least 12 people. One of those arrested was the human rights lawyer Ahmad Khalifa, who was only released in February after 110 days in prison.

In November, the Israeli High Court enforced a ban on protests in the city, even as they allowed predominantly Jewish protests against the war elsewhere in the country. Last Saturday morning, another protest was held by Arab and Jewish women jointly at the Taybeh Junction, led by TANDI (Movement of Democratic Women in Israel) ahead a meeting to celebrate International Women's Day.

People's World ✪

Global Briefs

UKRAINE/RUSSIA: Ukrainian military deployed over 2,500 servicemen, some 35 tanks and around 40 other armoured vehicles to attack multiple locations along the border with Russia. All the attacks were repelled, with the Ukrainian side sustaining heavy personnel and material casualties. The attack was supposed to negatively impact the Russian Presidential elections. It failed and according to the Russian Defence Ministry estimates, "The total losses of the Ukrainian Armed forces amounted to more than 1,500 militants, with some 500 fatalities, in addition 18 tanks and 23 armoured combat vehicles ending up destroyed."

CHINA: China, Russia, and Iran held joint naval drills in the Gulf of Oman. "This exercise will help deepen practical cooperation between the participating countries," the Chinese Ministry of National Defence said in a statement. Beijing dispatched its guided missile destroyer Nanning to take part in the drills. The drills centred on rescue at sea and other non-combat missions. John Kirby, US National Security Council spokesperson claimed the White House was not concerned by the joint training exercises, as it was not the first time that the Russians and the Chinese trained together.

CUBA: Cuban President Miguel-Diaz Canel hosted Arab and Islamic ambassadors in Havana on the occasion of the sacred month of Ramadan. The Cuban president expressed "the best wishes for peace and well-being in the midst of a difficult moment for the Palestinian people suffering from the aggression of Israel." The Palestinian ambassador in Havana stressed that the solidarity shown by the Cuban people, the leadership of the Party, and the Cuban government was unique. "Our people will never forget this," he said.

NIGER: Niger has denounced 'with immediate effect' a defence agreement that allows the US to operate a $100 million drone base in the country. The decision came shortly after a senior US delegation wrapped up a three-day visit there. The high level American delegation which included the chief of US Africa Command, General Michael Langley, behaved in breach of diplomatic protocols – it had not even informed the hosts about the date of their arrival or their agenda. Niger's new government which came to power last July, has taken a number of steps to cut ties with its former military partners. France had to withdraw its troops last December and the US has had to relocate some of their personnel as well. The US currently has about 650 troops there, down from 1,100 in December 2023.

KENYA: Kenya has launched a community health program called Resilient and Empowered African Community Health (REACH). In the first phase of the program 25,000 Community Health workers (CHWs) will be trained on community health and on the use of community health promotion kits and electronic community health information systems to strengthen monitoring and evaluation. In total Kenya has enlisted 107,832 Community Health workers. The population of Kenya is 55.65 million.

FRANCE: Hundreds of victims of child sexual abuse by priests or church representatives have received compensation from France's Catholic Church. 1,351 victims have come forward to claim compensation and seek psychological support so far.

Letters to the Editor
The Guardian
74 Buckingham Street
Surry Hills NSW 2010
email: editor@cpa.org.au

Dear Editor,
When two China-haters write on ASEAN there can't be too many expectations of a reasonable assessment of that organisation's deliberations in Melbourne on 4 to 6 March.

The article (*Sydney Morning Herald* 09/03/2024), written by Peter Hartcher and containing large slabs of text by Rory Medcalf of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), a think tank funded by US arms corporations, lived up to my low expectations. It was a classic piece of arrogance towards our Asian neighbours. The authors turned everything upside down – the corrupt were hailed and the honest accused of dishonesty.

Australian superiority as exhibited by the Foreign Minister as "she rattled the China can" received a hero's reception in the article. ASEAN was unimpressed and refused to join Australia in its habitual China baiting. A clearly disappointed Hartcher whinged that ASEAN "couldn't bring themselves to say a harsh word." These two from their Sinophobic ivory towers decreed that ASEAN is weak and ineffectual.

Medcalf joined in, claiming China was being "brutal" to the Philippines. What was the alleged Chinese brutality? A simple nudge between coastguard vessels brought on the description of China as brutal and bullying.

The Philippines President was lauded to the skies. The article revealed that the Philippines allows the US to access 9 of its military bases but was quick to claim that US support is only diplomatic not military. There was no mention of the military aid the US gives or of Australia's military involvement with the Philippines to prop up its subservience to the US.

There was no mention that Marcos is an enthusiastic supporter of the US making his land a jumping-off point for a war on China. Our authors could apparently not bring themselves to comment on the President's growing reputation, like his father, for human rights abuses and corruption.

Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim of Malaysia received scant attention from our brave adherents of 'all the way with the USA,' perhaps because of his statement, "If they [Australia] have problems with China, they should not impose it upon us. We do not have a problem with China." A man of vast experience and understanding of ASEAN was written out because he would not rattle the China can.

Yours sincerely,
Denis Doherty

China's defence budget and the lies of imperialism

William Briggs

China will increase its defence spending by 7.2 per cent in the coming year. Predictably, 'warnings' came from the West. The cry is that the outlay is greater than the 5 per cent rise in China's GDP. This was offered as yet another 'proof' of China's expansionist and war-like posture. Yes, China is spending more on defence, but its need for a strong defensive capability is real. It threatens no-one but *is* threatened by the most powerful military force the world has ever seen.

Any Western 'outrage' about the rise in defence spending is a confection. Spending has risen each year but China never tries to compete with America's insane military spending. For the last 10 years, the Chinese economy has risen by an average of 7.9 per cent. Its defence spending has increased by a similar amount.

The United States consistently outspends China's military budget by a ratio of 4:1. This year US GDP will grow by about 1.5 per cent and yet its military budget will rise by more than 5 per cent.

A ludicrous claim is repeated that China has had the biggest military buildup of any country since 1945. It became something of a mantra for Defence Minister Richard Marles after the publication of the 2023 *Defence Strategic Review*: "China's military build-up is now the largest and most ambitious of any country since the end of the Second World War." The problem is that it is untrue. The Cold War US-led arms race puts anything China is doing in the shade.

It is not just the USA and its militarisation that is directly threatening China. Japan's contributions in the past couple of years have been spectacular, especially considering its alleged 'peace constitution,' and its 'no war' clause is still intact. While every year is a record year for American military spending, this year has seen Japan's spending rise by 16 per cent!

Japan has recently accelerated the deployment of long-range cruise missiles that can hit targets in China or North Korea. Japan is also manufacturing US Patriot missiles under license from America, as well as arranging with Australia to test long range missiles here.

Australia, for its part, is another country whose military spending continually grows and exceeds its meagre GDP growth.

The militarisation of the region begins with the USA. There is a ceaseless attempt to contain China's growth, reduce its influence, and halt its march to socialism. This has been the central plank of American foreign policy in the region since President Obama first announced his 'pivot to Asia' strategy in 2012. The plan was to limit China's economic growth and to pose a direct threat through a massive deployment of naval and air power to the region.

What has been happening since that time has been a serious arms build-up. Dangerous alliances have been strengthened and new ones formed. We have seen economically unsustainable expenditures projected for AUKUS and there have been serious discussions about shifting NATO into the Asia-Pacific region.

People performs Tai Chi at the People's Square of Urumqi, Tianshan District. Photo: Asian Development Bank (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0 Deed)

In the face of these provocations, China has been compelled to prepare for a genuine defence of territory and sovereign rights. The fact that it has been forced to do so has been misrepresented, deliberately, to 'prove' that the West must deal with an aggressive and expansionist China.

The tragedy is that the propaganda machine is so well oiled. The Lowy Institute conduct annual surveys of public opinion about how Australians regard China. Immediately after Obama launched his anti-China crusade, the percentage of the population that considered China might become a threat remained in the minority. Just ten years later, after a decade of manipulation by government and the media, that figure had risen to 75 per cent.

China's defence spending is just that; spending on defence. The same just can't be said of the USA or of any of the belligerent countries that claim to be seeking a safe South China Sea, or to be upholding a 'rules-based-order,' or to be bastions of freedom.

The US president has just authorised a record $886 billion for the coming year's military spending. In a recent interview Zhang Junshe, a Chinese military analyst, cited a fact that deserves to be repeated. The United States commits 3.5 per cent of its total GDP to the military and urges NATO allies to reach a 2 per cent target. Australia has been happy to spend and to keep spending to reach that same 2 per cent level. China's defence budget remains a little over 1.5 per cent of GDP. It keeps the figure down, not because it can't afford to spend the money, but because its perspective is based on actual defence rather than seeking to threaten or dominate other nations.

Zhang observed that "China will not participate in an arms race with any country, and China takes a path of peaceful development." This is an obvious truth but a truth that is deliberately and dangerously kept from people. China can certainly defend itself and it must be able to do so. This costs money. The expenditure of that money is regrettable. It could be better spent, but when faced with an aggressive superpower, hell-bent on destruction, there is no other option.

China is encircled by US bases and missile sites. The majority of the US navy and air force are close to the Chinese border. The US government spends four times as much on its military than does China. This is portrayed as maintaining free and fair trade and interstate relations, based on the principles of the 'rules-based-order' that has been imposed on the world by the USA since the end of WW2.

The foreign policy of imperialism is a little different to that described by Lou Qinjian, speaking at the recent National People's Congress in Beijing. He encapsulated China's foreign policy, saying that "China ... stands ready to share development opportunities with other countries and foster a new type of international relations featuring mutual respect, fairness and justice, and win-win cooperation, build a community with a shared future for mankind, and make new contributions to the noble cause of peace and development." ✪

Cuba expresses fraternal support for the Haitian People

"Haitian people have the right to find a peaceful, sustainable and lasting solution to the challenges they face, based on the full respect for their free determination, sovereignty and independence".

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Cuba (MINREX) has made a statement in support of the Haitian people.

The statement says: "The Republic of Haiti is facing a serious multidimensional crisis that has worsened social instability, poverty, and structural underdevelopment resulting from centuries of colonial and neocolonial pillaging and foreign interventions."

The Cuban Foreign Ministry also reviewed the fraternal relations that unite the two nations by declaring: "Cuba has offered fraternal and selfless cooperation to Haiti in areas of great impact for its people, such as public health, education, agriculture, sports, energy, water resources, and others that are key to the social and economic stability of the country."

"The Haitian people appreciate and recognise the humanitarian, selfless and altruistic service offered by Cuban cooperation workers amidst the difficult circumstances in which they have always had to carry out their work," the chancellery added.

Cuba denounced attempts to interfere in the resolution of the crisis, "Haiti needs true and sufficient assistance and cooperation for its reconstruction and progress, without foreign interference, because far from being a solution, this has been the cause of its problems."

The Foreign Ministry also reported on the status of the 53 health workers who remain in southern Haiti and referred to the staff of the Cuban embassy in the Haitian capital, stating that they: "are doing well and have adopted all necessary measures to ensure their security and protection."

"Through our embassy in Port-au-Prince and from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, there is also continued communication with the Cubans residing in Haiti or who are in-transit in that country as well as their relatives, and there is a permanent follow up on the situation there," add the note.

The letter ends with the message, "The brother people of Haiti will always be able to count on Cuba's fraternal support."

Telesur ✪

India: Communists protest bigoted citizenship rules

Indian communists have slammed new citizenship rules announced by Narendra Modi's government that exclude Muslims.

The move by the far-right Hindu nationalist leader comes just weeks before the country's general election.

The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) provides a fast track to naturalisation for Hindus, Parsis, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, and Christians who fled to Hindu-majority India from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan before 31 December 2014.

The law excludes Muslims, who are a majority in all three nations.

The law was approved by the Indian parliament in 2019, but Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government held off its implementation after deadly protests broke out in the capital New Delhi and elsewhere.

Scores were killed during days of clashes.

The Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) said in a statement that the law "makes it clear that the BJP wants to use the implementation of the CAA for divisive and polarising purposes."

The CPI-M reiterated "its opposition to the CAA and its implementation and will continue with efforts to get this pernicious law annulled."

Tamil Nadu CPI-M state secretary K Balakrishnan said that the party would not allow the implementation of the CAA in the state.

He said: "The law is draconian and will divide the people on religious and communal lines. A strong protest will be conducted across the state."

Modi's government has defended the 2019 citizenship law as a humanitarian gesture, arguing that the law is meant only to extend citizenship to religious minorities fleeing persecution and would not be used against Indian citizens.

But India's main opposition Congress party said the proposals were "evidently designed to polarise the elections."

Human rights watchdog Amnesty India in a statement called the law "discriminatory" and said it "goes against the constitutional values of equality and international human rights law."

Morning Star ✪

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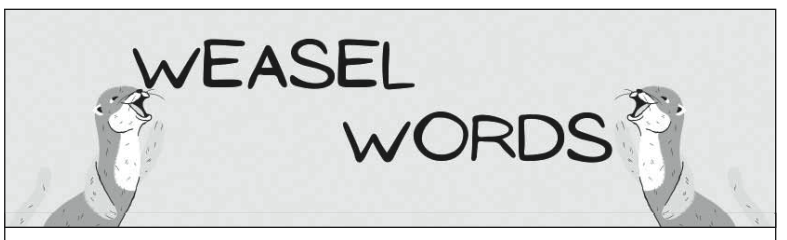


Commitment (strong)

So you've heard about Australia's Home Affairs office cancelling visas while Palestinian people were in mid-flight. Some were stranded in Cairo, and one man is stuck in the airport in Türkiye. Home Affairs was very apologetic and promised to fix the situation as soon as possible.

Just kidding. Home Affairs stalled and said they had a "strong commitment to assisting people who are trying to leave Gaza." Turns out that a strong commitment is something that you have to a project when you've done the opposite.

Resilient

Normally a way of staying that someone is hardy, 'resilient' is also a handy way of telling someone that you're not going to help them, even though you could and probably should, so they're just going to have to suck it up. Hence 'resilient' and 'resilience' are popular words with institutions trying to save themselves money instead of helping. This word was last given an outing by none other than the Australian Labor government in a meeting with Pacific Islands nations, in order to change the topic from what the Albanese government is *not* prepared to do (stop opening new fossil-fuel operations) to what it *is* prepared to do (promise a bit of money and the right to migrate here in return for Australia controlling a sovereign nation's foreign affairs).

Uncompetitive

The Australian Financial Review's Jennifer Hewett has cast a thoughtful eye over the Australian economy and found that our taxation system is not 'competitive.' What she's hinting at is a yarn as old the hills; the idea that if they're taxed, large companies will go out of business or go somewhere else, taking jobs with them. The only solution, if we want to have large companies that don't pay much tax here, is to have lower taxes for corporations. It's a race to the bottom that Hewett wants us to win.

Audacious

(no, not Zorro, just a scheme for ExxonMobil to save money by leaving a lot of its redundant oil rigs where they are)

This word suggests daring, bravery, and flair. See it in a headline, and you'll be wondering if they've made James Bond movies fun again, or if Zorro is in town. No such luck; 'audacious' turns out to mean what headline writers call ExxonMobil wanting to just dump most of their old oil rigs instead of recycling them as they promised when they built the things. So it's 'audacious' to save yourself a ton of money by polluting the environment for everyone else? If anyone has a car they don't need, just leave it on some ExxonMobil executive's front lawn. Audaciously of course.

Vassals

This is one of those transitive nouns, in the same way that countries we like have 'governments,' while naughty countries have 'regimes.' Peter Hartcher, Nine newspapers political editor and warmonger-in-chief thinks that the United States has allies, like Australia, while China* has 'vassals.' He's worked this out while being angry with ASEAN states Cambodia and Laos for not toeing the US line on China*. Australia could only be more vassal-like if it wore tights and a tunic like an extra from a Robin Hood movie, but gets to be called an ally for rolling over when told.

*who else? It's Peter Hartcher we're talking about here

Extremist

This is one of those rubbery words; we all know what it means roughly, but one person's extremist is another person's activist. The British Tories have had a shot at defining it. Under David Cameron, 'extremist' meant 'opposed to basic British values.' Cameron didn't spell out what those values were.

Now Home Secretary Michael Gove has defined extremism as 'promotion or advancement of an ideology based on violence, hatred or intolerance'. To colonised people around the world, those are British values.

Palestine: Australia joins Western cruelty

A Carruthers

The news that the Australian government decided to cancel visas for Palestinian refugees, effectively leaving them stateless, shows what kind of cruelty the West, including countries like ours, is capable of inflicting on Palestinians. Not only are Western countries in lockstep with Israel's military, Western countries are putting their geostrategic position above humanitarian needs of Palestinians.

VISA CANCELLATION HEARTBREAKING

The situation in Gaza continues to deteriorate, with 31,500, dead and reports that 1 in 3 children under the age of 2 are suffering from severe malnourishment. In the midst of this came the heartbreaking news that the Australian government cancelled Australian visitor visas for Palestinians while they were *en route* from Gaza to Australia.

The General Delegation of Palestine to Australia, Aotearoa (New Zealand) and the Pacific drew attention to the fact that individuals and families had just escaped the Rafah crossing and "unimaginable horrors in Gaza," only to find themselves stranded in transit countries, with nowhere to go. The General Delegation issued a statement urgently calling on Australian authorities to reconsider this decision.

After an outcry from ALP members and the public, some of the cancelled visas were reissued. One man who is now stranded at Istanbul airport remains in limbo. ABC news reports that it's "not known how many visas had been cancelled, or how many have now been reinstated."

This kind of cruelty from Australian government is a pattern (think Robodebt). This government needs to be held to account.

Our government's heartlessness to refugees is nothing new. Our governments like to spruik the so-called "multicultural" policy and the virtue of the home minority idea, yet at the same time laying waste to any hope of peace and multipolarity in the majority world system. They create the conditions for mass migration and refugee crises, supporting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and supporting Israel's genocidal attacks on Palestine, and do nothing to fix those crises, except making feel-good statements about multiculturalism in its Western form. Australian governments have consistently shown zero intent to build an equitable expression of nations and cultures in the global majority. It's a form of geopolitical racism, of collective imperial chauvinism.

If Western countries are truly multicultural, they need to support a multipolar world, and serve world peace and settlement of disputes between cultures and nations in the developing world.

UNRWA DISGRACE

UNRWA funding should never have been cut, but the recent decision to restore it is welcome and necessary. UNRWA needs this funding to provide relief now.

As former Greek Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis has noted that Australia has damaged its "already tainted" reputation by blindly following the United States in pausing UNRWA funding. Varoufakis drew an interesting line through history: from Iraq to Afghanistan to Palestine (and we could add Syria). Varoufakis is right: our own lack of sovereignty, our own weakness and inability to stand up to the United States, has become a danger to the world.

Penny Wong needs to be up front with the Australian people. Australia is financing Israeli weaponry while cutting aid and refusing refugees. It's an old conundrum made obvious at the time of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars: Australia first plays its sub-imperial role in the collective West by sending weapons and troops, fighting wars and introducing all manner of instability across the Middle East, then it refuses refugees from the region, and withdraws aid.

The cycle needs to stop at the source: rather than funding violent imperial wars, an Australian government needs to fund relief, and stand for humanity. We need to get away from US domination and capitalism, the root causes of those wars.

COLLECTIVE WEST MUST STEP AWAY

A poll from *Arab News* has indicated that 80 per cent of Palestinians trusted China and Russia to strike a deal in Palestine-Israel peace talks. In the wake of China's success resolving conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and given Russia's staunch defence of Syrian sovereignty during the devastating Civil War, Palestinian people know who's on their side in the region. Palestinians are confident that Russia and China present a different attitude to international relations, and offer new potential. They know Russia and China are not interested in fanning the flames of conflict, division, and colour revolution as the West does in the Levant and the Middle East.

China and Russia also know very well that wiping Israel off the map is not an option. At present, Israel will not accept "unification under Palestine," and Palestine will certainly not accept "unification under Israel." A two-state solution is the only achievable option, and it requires urgent international support. A stable Palestinian state can only emerge if nationalist and progressive forces within Palestine are given an expanded capacity to govern.

Further, achieving a two-state solution is possible only if the West steps back and moves away from the negotiation process, allowing other voices in. China's position on international relations in recent years has been made very clear: it seeks a shared future for humankind. This is not just a slogan, but a philosophy of international relations that is bearing fruit in reality. Russian negotiations with PLO forces are also promising.

CULTURAL CONSEQUENCES

Not only have at least 31,500 Palestinians been killed, mosques, churches, libraries and children's theatres are also being destroyed (see *Guardian* #2089, 04/03/2024 for more on 'cultural genocide').

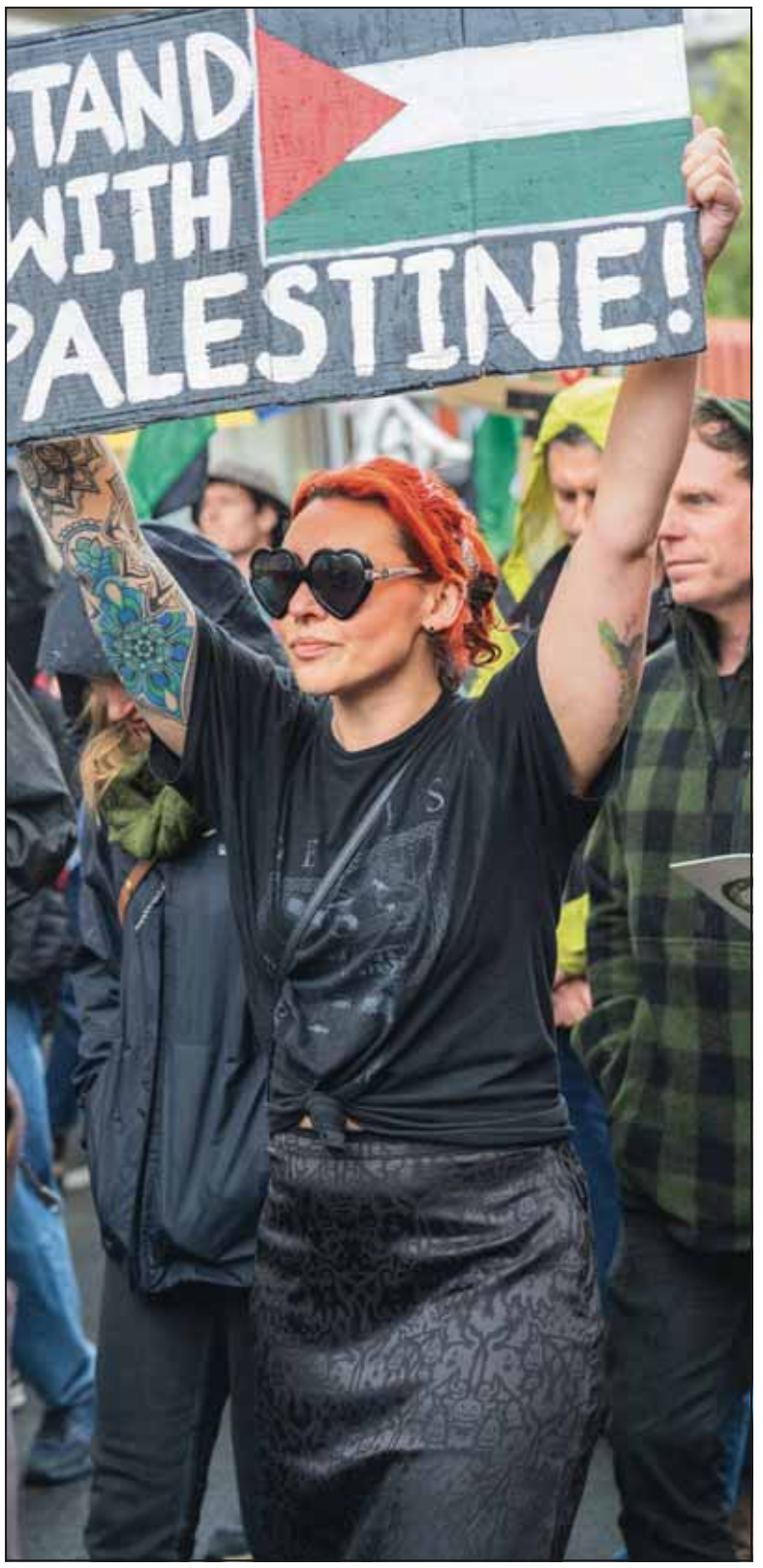
Among the worst elements of this genocide is the destruction of culture. Nur Masalha, in *Palestine: a Four Thousand Year History*, explores Palestine from the standpoint of its intangible ancient heritage – Palestine not just as a modern country, but rather a place and a people with an ancient history that brings together civilisations from across the region into a unique Palestinian identity.

Genocides and wars destroy cultures and histories. No matter what the US-led West may say to the contrary, it opposes a political resolution because it has no interest in protecting the diversity of cultures and civilisations around the world. Palestinian people require a path to self-determination and basic sovereignty, cultural sovereignty, established on the ground of statehood.

WHAT THEN MUST BE DONE?

We need a principled government.

The Australian government needs to stop being a puppet of the US regime and pluck up the courage to stand for Palestine and permanent ceasefire. Australia needs to stop arms sales to Israel.



Rally For Palestine, Dunedin, NZ, November 2023.
Photo: Mark McGuire – (CC BY 3.0 NZ)

Palestine self-determination and regional stability is an absolute necessity, not Western bullying, not Western coercion.

The government could begin by standing up for the Australian people. We deserve a principled and humane government, but that's not what we have. To establish diplomatic ground for a political resolution we need to drive a wedge between Australia and the West and establish an independent foreign policy. We have the ability to stand on the side of historical progress and humanity, to stand with the third world, with developing countries, to take a stand against war, meddling, cultural destruction, and imperialism.

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