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Medicare: PEOPLE FIRST

Health care is a basic human right. The original concept behind Medicare was a national health insurance scheme that offered universal access to free medical services through a system of bulk billing whereby patients were not required to pay an upfront fee for service. Access to public hospitals was also free and access universal.

The potential of Medicare and the public hospital system has not been realised. Instead there has been deterioration in many areas. Public hospitals are short of staff, resources and beds. There are shortages of GPs and specialists, as well as huge distortions in the geographic distribution of services, with oversupply in some areas, and none in others.

The public hospital system has been run down, starved of the necessary funds and resources, resulting in long waiting lists and enormous pressures on staff. Governments cry poor as billions of dollars are siphoned off to subsidise private hospitals through the private health insurance. Without the more than $8 billion a year in federal government subsidies that the private hospital system receives, it would collapse overnight.

A combination of long waiting lists, scare tactics and tax incentives have seen an increase in the take up of private health insurance. This has resulted in the emergence of a two-tiered health system, with queue jumping by private patients in public hospitals and immediate access guaranteed in private hospitals.

The refusal by successive governments to increase the pay of GPs through Medicare has seen bulk billing diminish to vanishing point: It is now common for patients to be left with a co-payment of $50 or more.

Nursing homes are chronically understaffed, and many of the staff under-qualified. GP shortages and a lack of doctors prepared to bulk bill place additional pressures on public hospitals. Some rural and remote areas are without GPs. The lack of provision of suitable Indigenous health services is nothing short of criminal.

For mental health, primary health care services are either unaffordable or lacking. The community care programs that were supposed to support people with mental health conditions when de-institutionalisation took place are totally inadequate.

Photo: Anna Pha

HEALTH CARE REFORM

Reforms are needed. The question is in which direction: public or private, free or fee-for service, people first or profits first? The health care debate between the two major parties is about how to privatise the system, dressed up in terms of choice and competition, who is bulk-billed, what additional services are provided.

But the crisis facing the public health system does *not* arise out of the public nature of the system. It is the promotion of and diversion from public funds to the private, for-profit sector that has resulted in the present untenable situation.

This process has been a conscious one on the part of successive governments of both major parties, all intent on privatising health care. In this scenario Medicare is broken up and handed over to private health insurance funds to manage. Public hospitals will be funded by fees for services from the health insurance funds, not directly by government. They will be competing on a health market, with increased pressure to churn through patients as quickly and cheaply as possible, regardless of consequences to their care.

Private health funds will offer, as they do now, a range of plans for hospital cover in the private system. This cover will be extended to buy places in public hospitals and access to medical services, an area that the private sector has been lobbying to cover for years. Those who can afford it will be able to buy health and hospital plans that offer a more complete range of services, that cover the gap between the standard refund and what a private provider charges. There will be no lid on what private practitioners charge.

This will create possibly three instead of two tiers of health care – the safety net, those who can afford full cover and jump waiting lists and possibly a third group of people who fail to qualify for the safety net but do not have the means for extended private cover.

Welcome to a US-style managed health care system in which health funds will be telling you what medical procedures you can have and in which hospital! So much for the private system's much vaunted "choice".

Costs will skyrocket while the transnational corporations taking over the health system will be rolling in profits.

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Guardian

Issue 2137 17 March 2025

China is not our enemy

New US Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth has been depressing a lot of mainstream commentators with his comments about Europe and Ukraine, but one mainstream paper saw a "silver lining." It was that Hegseth holds the line when it comes to being aggressive towards China. Hegseth is just as interested in "containing' China as the Defence Secretaries who came before him. Some things never change.

China has been thoroughly demonised by Australian media for so long now that demonising has become a reflex action for our major news producers. Conducting naval drills in international waters without breaking any laws or treaties becomes "significant escalation", and a "test of strength", not to mention "brazen." Conducting a huge annual exercise in parliamentary democracy becomes "a rubber stamp parliament" (it's a good thing you can read about what actually happens at the Two Sessions on page 9 of this paper). China can't cough, sneeze or do anything else without that action being seen through the lens of demonisation.

Let's be blunt. China is not our enemy. It has one solitary military base outside its borders, while the USA has about 800. China is a major trading partner that has fueled Australian prosperity for some time. It's a very big country with a lot on its' plate at home. China is explicit about not wanting to be the new dominant super power. It respects the right of other countries to choose their own way forward.

If China's so friendly and non-hostile, why is it being treated as the enemy, you might wonder. If people say something a lot, it's natural to think there might be something in it. In the case of China, it's not hard to see what's behind the demonisation. China threatens the USA's status as the world's top superpower. It does not do this with military threats, but by being a large important independent country which will not be told what to do. China responds to threats, which is fair enough, but is overwhelmingly focussed on lifting prosperity and quality of life at home.

China's independence also threatens people who depend on the US more or less running the world. Organisations like the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), funded by Australian and US military industries, and our government, ASPI is a 'think tank' that spends its time demanding more military spending and more aggression towards a peaceful country which is our major trading partner.

Speaking of military issues, Australia is a very secure country. We don't really have enemies, and we get on pretty well with our neighbours, but we're being made to feel insecure. In response to Trump, both our major parties are promising to increase 'defence' spending. Trump's under-secretary for policy has urged Australia to spend 3 per cent of our gross domestic product on the military to "counter China." Since China is not a threat, we'd be far better off spending more of our GDP on keeping Australians from homelessness, or building up our own country.

This is one single editorial, speaking out against a tsunami of China demonisation in other news outlets, but we think it's important to be clear. China is not an enemy or any kind of military risk to Australia. We need to be told that a lot. The People's Republic of China is many things; an inspiration, a source of interest, a trading partner. It is not a threat. Australia needs to turn away from imaginary demons and get on with issues that matter to working people.

ETU wins access to workers

FK

The Electrical Trades Union has won in court and now has access to workers on the EnergyConnect project in south-west NSW. A Spanish contractor, Elecnor, had denied access to workers on many occasions. The Federal Court ruled that Elecnor had breached right of entry laws, and that the reasons it gave for denying what should be a basic right of unions to talk with workers were "specious if not disingenuous".

ETU national secretary Michael Wright called the decision "a warning" to all employers, financiers and contractors involved in the energy transition.

"The message is that Australia's energy transition will fail unless it is built on reliable, well-paid union jobs that put workers' safety, communities and families first," he said.

"Any company that thinks it can cut corners on safety, cut wages through labour hire and cut unionised labour out of energy transition should read it very carefully and reconsider their position."

Allen Hicks, the NSW secretary of the union, said it was disgraceful that access had been blocked in the first place, saying that the company had finally "been forced to see sense."

The *Guardian* was saddened to hear of the passing of Maria Hilario, a staunch member of the Communist Party of Australia, and a good friend of Cuba. Maria coordinated a monthly demonstration outside the US Consulate in Sydney, calling for an end to the USA's cruel and inhumane blockade of Cuba. Maria was also a strong supporter of the Palestinian cause.

Medicare: PEOPLE FIRST

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THE PUBLIC ALTERNATIVE

The alternative is a fully-fledged public health system, with the government paying doctors and funding public hospitals and other health services provided free on a universal basis. Such a system, with the elimination of the profit motive and layers of administration, is the only one capable of delivering quality health care to everyone and would cost less than is being spent now.

If these issues were addressed and preventative and community health care improved, then many of the conditions that lead to hospitalisation could be avoided.

The debate is on. It needs to be redirected to the key issue of public or private, for people or for profits. The opportunities are there to join in – talk-back radio, newspapers, on the PM's blog, at union meetings, in community organisations, social media, or even at the bus stop.

The Communist Party of Australia is calling for major reforms to the health and community care services in Australia. These should be based around the following principles:

- universal access – regardless of income or locality
- free services at the point of delivery
- services to be of the highest quality
- services funded through central taxation revenue
- services provided by the public sector
- planned system of training, staffing and provision of services

Funding and planning are critical. The economic crisis does not preclude finding the necessary funds to build a public health system on the above principles. The present under-funding is ideologically based and a matter of lack of political will.

The private health insurance rebate should be abolished. This would free up more than $8 billion to provide a quality health care program.

Funding to public hospitals must be increased as a matter of urgency. As an initial step, while rebuilding the public hospital system, private hospitals would be directly subsidised for private patients at $300 a night per patient. This would be phased out over several years.

The question of how doctors are paid needs reviewing, with a focus on components for salary and other costs to replace the present focus on payment per patient consultation. Funding per visit through Medicare rebates has led to rapid churning of patients in some practices, and made it more difficult for doctors to give the time needed and for the elderly and chronically ill, in particular, to receive the attention they need.

Dental health should become an integral part of Medicare.

Aged care should be taken out of the hands of the private sector and philanthropists.

Measures are needed to overcome the shortages of qualified nurses, GPs, medical specialists, aged care, and other health professionals. This needs planning in conjunction with universities and other training institutions. It cannot be left to 'the market' any longer. Substantial increases in funding are required for preventative health care and community care services, for Indigenous health programs, for aged care, mental health, and rural and remote areas.

These goals can only be achieved through planning and coordination by the public sector. The development and provision of services needs community involvement.

‘Shameful’ – Victoria changes bail laws again

The Victorian government is set to implement alterations to bail laws less than a year after they were changed in the wake of a concerted campaign by police and conservative media .

It is understood the new changes will target serious offending, including home invasion and carjacking, as well as machetes, after concerns were raised following several alleged violent home invasions which were allegedly carried out by youths on bail.

They will treat children like adults in serious cases, in what the government has called the toughest in the country. Remanding youth offenders in custody will no longer be a last resort. Rather, community safety will now become the “overarching principle” when deciding if children and adults can get bail.

The cabinet resolved to finalise changes to the bail laws, which experts have long argued will exacerbate the number of First Nations people spending more time behind bars on remand.

“Our tough bail laws will jolt the system – putting community safety above all, creating the toughest bail laws ever, and ensuring bail rules are respected,” Premier Jacinta Allan said.

It will become a separate crime to commit an indictable offence while on bail, scrapped last year in a raft of changes, and for people who commit serious and violent crimes on bail repeatedly, a new test would be created where a judge or magistrate must be satisfied to a high degree of probability they won’t reoffend.

Similar laws in NSW have seen a significant increase in the number of people denied bail and have been condemned by Indigenous organisations and legal groups.

Bail changes were implemented less than 12 months ago after almost five years of campaigning by Veronica Nelson’s family.

The Gunditjmara, Dja Dja Wurrung, Wiradjuri, and Yorta Yorta woman died in custody in 2020 in a “vomit ridden” prison cell from a rare gastrointestinal condition – known as Wilkie’s syndrome – along with malnutrition and opiate withdrawal.

An inquest into her death heard Coroner Simon McGregor describe the then-bail laws as an “unmitigated disaster.” He said they discriminated against Aboriginal people, were incompatible with Victoria’s Human Rights Charter, and should be changed urgently.

They had also led to a dramatic increase in the number of Indigenous people and women being held on remand.

Despite this, Premier Allan last week said the current bail laws were failing Victorians, describing several highly publicised alleged criminal acts as “completely unacceptable.”

“I understand that the current laws, the current settings, are not working,” she told reporters outside of Parliament.

“It’s why the laws need to be changed and they will.”

The *Herald Sun* has led a campaign to have the bail laws strengthened, even going as far as to call for readers to sign a petition.

However, not all agree.

One lawyer, speaking on condition of anonymity, told *National Indigenous Times* the campaign to change the laws failed to consider the relatively small number of children and young people being caught up in crime, rather than an overarching group.

They said the conservative media campaign had led to a moral panic, arguing the bail laws were about to be flipped on its head without having even been tested.

Another barrister simply said: “How shameful.”

Writing on social media, former president of Liberty Victoria, Michael Stanton, said: “The duplicity of this government fronting Yoorrook and now desperately introducing these draconian bail reforms is just breathtaking.

“Including removing the principle of detention being a last resort for children? This will result in deaths in custody. It’s a disgrace.”

In reply, Ali Besiroglu, the head of legal services at the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service (VALS) said: “300 kids, that’s it. Overhaul the entirety of the bail system for 300 children (with 25 kids being responsible for a quarter of those offences). Unbelievable!”

Besiroglu had also responded to the *Herald Sun*’s campaign to change the laws, writing: “Unbiased journalism out the window.”

Last year multiple Ministers, as well as the Premier, faced the truth-telling commission, expressing deep regret at the way First Nations people had been treated and listened to in the state.

Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People in Victoria, Meena Singh, told ABC Radio she does not believe the laws need to be tightened.

“I don’t think it’s good policy to change laws based on one highly promoted incident,” Singh said.

“[Young people] get caught up in these bail laws because they don’t take into account the specific vulnerabilities of children and young children.

“If we’re bailing children to the exact same scenario and the exact same issues that they were dealing with before they offended, we’re not going to see different outcomes.”

National Indigenous Times revealed that former Police Commissioner Shane Patton believed the old bail laws contributed to Ms Nelson being incarcerated, where she ultimately passed away.

Nonetheless, it was reported he campaigned to have them strengthened again.

When the bail laws were finally changed last year, after years of advocacy from the Nelson family, VALS chief executive Nerita Waight said they would reduce the number of Indigenous people on remand.

“These laws bring us one step closer to ensuring that what happened to Veronica never happens again,” she said.

Data showed fewer Aboriginal people were being remanded since the laws changed, which VALS said was evidence of their effectiveness.

National Indigenous Times

(edited for space)

Photo: Matt Hrkac – flickr.com (CC BY 2.0)

Right to disconnect under threat

Peter Farmer

How much of your time does your employer pay for? Four hours a day? Six? Eight? There are all sorts of work arrangements, but it’s very unlikely that you answered ‘24.’ Unless, perhaps, you’re Peter Dutton.

The government has agreed to make a “right to disconnect” part of its industrial relations bill. Like a lot of ALP measures, it’s long overdue and doesn’t go far enough. Employers face no penalties for contacting workers after work hours, and as usual, it would be left to workers and their unions to enforce the law. As with a lot of progressive ALP measures, they apparently had to be dragged into it by the Greens.

Still, a win is a win. The aim of the laws is apparently to give workers the right to ignore unreasonable out-of-hours calls/emails/text messages. Note the word ‘unreasonable.’ The legislation won’t stop bosses from stipulating that workers have to be available for some communications after formal work hours. That kind of thing can be negotiated, with extra pay or time off in lieu to compensate workers for being available for work messages after they clock off.

All good right? Not if you’re Peter Dutton. He’s promised to repeal the “right to disconnect” if the Coalition can form government after the coming election.

The Coalition has put up a few different reasons for their defence of round-the-clock availability, none very convincing. Dutton says it’s bad because the Greens were involved. Opposition public service spokesperson Jane Hume has claimed the right-to-disconnect would add “complexity and confusion.” Life’s so much simpler when a worker has no control over their own time.

Dutton has also said that right-to-disconnect could damage relations between workers and bosses.

Unions have called Dutton’s idea for what it is – a promise of unpaid overtime. The ACTU has warned that repealing the law – aside from taking away peoples’ right to their own time – could add more than 100 minutes of overtime to an average workers week.

Photo: Bob B Brown – flickr.com (CC BY 2.0)

Report reveals grim reality for Australia's migrant meat workers

A new RMIT University report gives voice to the experiences of Pacific Island workers in Australia's meat industry who say they feel trapped and exploited.

The report – *Meat the reality: unpacking the exploitation of PALM scheme workers in Australia's meat industry* – calls for further improvements to address worker exploitation in the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme, beyond changes made in 2024.

The Australian government scheme provides foreign workers temporary visas to work in meatworks and other industries with labour shortages.

As well as providing a detailed legal critique and recommendations for reform, the report reveals personal experiences of five PALM scheme workers who each took photographs to represent their daily lives. The researchers used these photographs as prompts for in-depth discussions with the participants.

Professor Shelley Marshall from RMIT's Business and Human Rights Centre (BHRIGHT) said the photographs and interviews revolved around themes of darkness, injustice and feelings of being trapped.

"The participants in our study were sent to isolated rural towns, far from familiar faces, and placed in shared housing with strangers," she said.

"The photos hauntingly depict how they rarely see daylight due to physically demanding shifts, which are often extended with overtime, leading to an oppressive sense that their lives are consumed entirely by work."

"At work, these workers are often burdened with lifting heavier meat – a demand fueled by racial stereotypes about their strength – yet earn less than colleagues on other visa schemes. Outside work, they are stripped of the full tenancy rights enjoyed by most Australians and are forced to endure high rents that are automatically deducted from their wages," Marshall said.

RMIT study co-author Ema Moolchand said these challenges were compounded by a visa condition requiring the employer's permission for a worker to quit and seek work elsewhere.

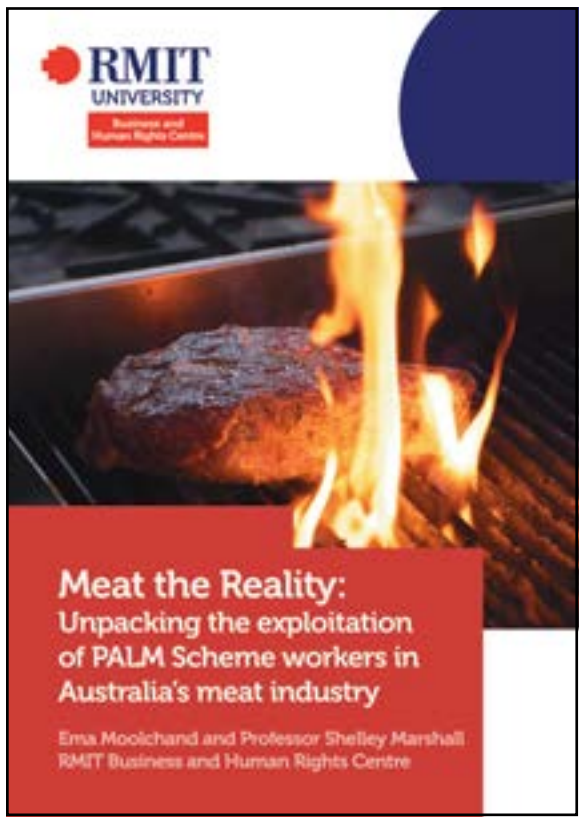
"Dependence on employers – even if they are clearly bad bosses – remains a key source of feelings of being trapped and unable to do anything about poor conditions, especially when workers face racial stereotypes or restricted freedom that further limit their ability to act," Moolchand said.

The researchers are calling for more to be done to improve conditions for PALM workers, with those in the study saying they'd seen little improvement following changes made by the government in 2024.

The report found while an attaché from each country had been appointed to support and represent workers, those surveyed had not met them and did not know who they were. Participants also alleged illegal deductions were widespread.

"As the first empirical study since important changes to the PALM scheme, this report highlights the need for a completely new approach to the scheme that genuinely prioritises worker voices and ensures fair, safe and dignified working conditions," Moolchand said.

Launching the report, Australian Council of Trade Unions President Michele O'Neil said the findings align with the experience of unions that represent PALM workers, showing these challenges to be systemic problems rather than isolated incidents.



"This report adds a human voice to what we already know are significant and ongoing issues with a scheme that ties PALM workers to their employer; the lack of mobility for workers to change employers poses a clear modern slavery risk."

"Among the changes we are calling for, mobility for these workers is paramount, as it would mean they can move to another approved employer if they need to leave a bad boss, unsafe conditions or harassment," O'Neil said.

"This would mean employers could no longer treat PALM workers as bonded labourers."

O'Neil also said a better scheme would ban employers who do the wrong thing.

Marshall said the photovoice methodology used to share stories of the five participants in the study did not claim to be a representative survey sample for all PALM scheme workers.

"This methodology is one that's useful to help us understand the experiences of people who live in a very different situation from our own in detail. It is more a deep dive than a representative sample, that aids more comprehensive legal analysis," Marshall said.

"It's important when discussing the well-documented issues with this scheme that voices and experiences of those living it are part of that debate."

The study was led by Ema Moolchand as part of her PhD, co-supervised by Dr Matt Withers at the Australian National University and Professor Shelley Marshall at RMIT.

RMIT University (The full report can be found at rmit.edu.au)

Dependence on employers remains a key source of feeling trapped

Dingo bytes

Palestine's population is again on the verge of starvation following a week-long Israeli blockade which prevented the entry of aid shipments to Gaza. Hamas spokesman Abdel-Latif al-Qanou said Israel is pursuing "a policy of starvation and collective punishment" in Gaza by keeping land crossings closed and preventing the entry of crucial aid.

The siege is a "flagrant violation of international and humanitarian laws, and a war crime that the world must stop and hold its perpetrators accountable," he said. "We renew our call to the international community, all human rights and humanitarian institutions and all free people of the world to force the Zionist occupation to open the crossings, bring in relief and medical aid – and end the suffering of our people."

Nurses and midwives in private health group Healthscope are standing together and fighting for fair pay and safe staffing reforms, including enforceable nurse/midwife-to-patient ratios. Not only are nurses and midwives in NSW paid less than in other states and territories – nurses and midwives at Healthscope hospitals are paid up to 16 per cent less than their colleagues in Healthscope hospitals in Queensland for the same work.

Since May 2024, a dedicated team of ten NSWNMA bargaining representatives, comprising nurses and midwives from Healthscope Hospitals have been negotiating a new pay and conditions Agreement (or 'Enterprise Agreement') with Healthscope. This Agreement must appropriately value and recognise the essential work done by nurses and midwives in these hospitals and address the unsafe working conditions they are forced to work under every day.

Key demands, all reasonable, include:

- A 15 per cent increase to pay and allowances from 1 July 2024, with ongoing increases over the life of the Agreement to maintain pay rates above those in the Public Health Sector
- An increase to night shift duty penalty rates from 15 per cent to 30 per cent
- Mandated nurse/midwife-to-patient ratios across all wards and units
- Improved entitlements to annual leave, personal leave, and other leave types

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PARASITE OF THE WEEK: is Mossad. In 2010 Israel stole the identities of Australian citizens to carry out the assassination, by a Mossad death squad, of Hamas commander Mahmoud al-Mabhouh in Dubai. Israel has gotten away with murders like this thousands of times.

The rogue state has a long, bloody history of murder, sabotage and outright terrorism all over Europe, and in Beirut, Tunis, Amman, and Damascus. That is just the cases we know about. All of this is allegedly in "self-defence" against "terrorism" even though the Zionist movement in Palestine invented the sort of modern terrorism for which the Middle East became known.

Mossad, the Israeli intelligence and international murder agency, has a long history of using fake and stolen passports of countries including Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Germany and Australia. It notoriously used fake Canadian passports during the attempted murder of Hamas leader Khaled Meshal in Amman in 1997.

Countries view their passports much like their currencies – their credibility and value must be defended. The lives of their citizens may well depend on it; an Irish, British or German citizen has to be able to travel all over the world without fear that he or she will be suspected of being a Mossad assassin. Some years back, New Zealand broke off diplomatic relations with Israel over the use of its passports by Mossad.

Israel's role as arms supplier to apartheid South Africa played out as Israel was becoming the world's fourth largest arms purveyor, accounting for 10 per cent of all arms exports.

From the 1960s on, there were notable human rights abusers among the weaponry buyers, including the Pinochet and Somoza regimes in Chile and Nicaragua, along with reactionary governments in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

Op-Ed: Panda Mart is capitalism at its worst

William Briggs

The Panda Mart phenomenon has reached Australia. Images of huge crowds of people pushing and shoving at the opening of the vast discount store in suburban Melbourne were less than uplifting. Consumer capitalism at its most dehumanising was on awful display.

The poor, the working class, are once more manipulated into believing that they want and therefore need the dross that this warehouse-style store offers. The nightmare of the Cranbourne shop is to be replicated in Preston in the very near future, and from there, across the country.

The store owner, John Chen, has described this grotesque enterprise as 'Temu in real life.' The bricks and mortar version will soon be stocking 50,000 different low-price, often useless products. The current store is one of more than 100 'superstores' across New Zealand, South America, the USA and Africa. It plans to expand across big city locations in Australia. Panda Mart was founded in South Africa and has flooded the world with the low-price goods manufactured exclusively in China.

Four million Australians have bought products online through Temu in the past year and two million have ordered things from Shein. The 'hands on' experience being offered will not replace these purchases but will add to what is already there.

This has real and hugely negative ramifications. There will inevitably be job losses, flowing from the closure of smaller outfits. Sure, the goods will be cheap, but if you have no job then even the throwaway goods on offer become expensive.

Unemployment might be the price of a quick profit hit for one or even several capitalist outfits. The point remains that if there are less workers, then there is less disposable income to make their wretched economic wheel turn. This can only exacerbate the crisis and do further harm to the working class.

The millions of Australian Temu and Shein customers have added enormously to the land fill crisis. The environmental repercussions are all but impossible to quantify. Add to that the avalanche of Panda Mart waste about to be dumped. The goods will have a very short shelf life. The addition of tonnes of $3.00 soft toys that will so quickly be no longer quite so desirable, the $7.00 plastic sandals that you just had to have because they are such a bargain and the rest of the 50,000 items on the shelves must be replaced, and therefore the old ones will be dumped.

The opening of Panda Mart in Melbourne also showed an appalling and criminal lack of oversight by Australian authorities. It is obvious that nobody checked anything. Thousands of dangerous goods have had to be removed from shelves, but not before thousands were sold.

Toys with button batteries that could be swallowed and burn through the oesophagus in two hours were on sale but not labelled as dangerous. Baby rattles that were unsafe were removed. Cosmetics that failed to meet health standards, products that could choke children, faulty archery sets, bike helmets, glitter balls, calculators, and 'flashing' toys were among thousands of potentially and actually hazardous goods.

Photo: Panda Mart AU FaceBook

By sheer chance there have been no reports of death or serious injury

A spokesperson from Victorian Consumer Affairs declared the goods to be a threat. The store owner acknowledged that 38 different product types had been removed and that he "didn't mean to breaking the law." The law was broken. The manufacturers of the goods broke the law. Those who allowed them entry into Australia without safety checks broke the law.

The fact that the poor and the working class are not offered safeguards as a matter of course is another crime. Attempts to smooth things over by apologies and vague promises to do better are an insult. By sheer chance there have been no reports of death or serious injury. Life and health should not be a game of chance.

The machine that is capitalism grinds on, devouring all. The media show us images of thousands of people trying to get into a superstore to pick up some trinket. The news shows almost mob-like behaviour, and we hear of police having to be called to restore 'order.' The same media does not, will not, point the finger at who created the crisis that permits and promotes such alienation and despair. It does not, will not, describe how dignity is taken away from people by capitalism.

The new shopping 'sensation' will leave ruin in its wake. It will expand across the shopping malls of Australia and the world until it can expand no more. That is how the system works, or how it is no longer working.

Short-term rentals price out essential workers

Immediate action must be taken on short-term holiday rental platforms like Airbnb, amid growing evidence they are worsening the state's housing affordability crisis and pushing essential workers out of their communities.

A comprehensive submission from Unions NSW to the Essential Worker Housing Inquiry has laid bare the severity of the crisis, with the expansion of unhosted short-term rentals drastically reducing the availability of homes for purchase and long-term renting.

A survey of frontline workers in NSW found 78 per cent are in housing stress, spending more than 30 per cent of their income on housing. This is exacerbated by the fact that as of March 2024, 167,955 dwellings across Australia were being used for unhosted short-term rentals.

In Sydney, Airbnb listings are occupied on average for only 71 nights per year, yet they continue to drive up property prices. Of the Airbnbs in Sydney, more than 30 per cent are run by investors with 10 or more listings.

Mark Morey, Secretary of Unions NSW, will present the evidence to an upper house inquiry on Friday: "This is a direct hit to essential workers such as the nurses, teachers, firefighters and police who keep our communities strong and safe. Airbnb and other short-term rental platforms are stripping the market of homes that could be housing these workers, forcing them into longer commutes, financial stress or even homelessness. The NSW Government must take action.

"In March 2024 the state government released a discussion paper on short-term rental accommodation, acknowledging the need for stronger regulation in areas of housing stress. Now it's time for action."

The housing affordability crisis has reached critical levels, with extremely low vacancy rates in Sydney coupled with combined weekly rents rising by almost 60 per cent since 2020, from $519 to $833. This has created a desperate situation for many essential workers.

"Places like Byron Bay are taking matters into their own hands, introducing a 60-day cap on unhosted short-term rentals," Morey said. "The NSW government must follow suit and introduce statewide limits in high-demand areas."

The submission outlines nine key recommendations designed to make housing more affordable for essential workers, including introducing large-scale build-to-rent-to-buy programs, tax on unhosted short-term rentals and a statewide cap on unhosted short-term rental stays.

"The market is failing to provide homes for essential workers because it's been hijacked by investors looking to make quick profits," Morey said. "We need strong regulations to help the people who actually live and work in our communities. The NSW government promised to tackle housing affordability, but it continues to delay the tough decisions. Enough is enough."

Unions NSW

(The Communist Party of Australia supports government investment in public housing)

Unanswered questions about News Corp's AI tool

As they head into negotiations later this year for a new enterprise bargaining agreement, Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) members at News Corp will be seeking commitments about the ethical use of AI in the workplace. This has gained added urgency following the company's announcement this week of a new AI editorial tool, News GPT.

MEAA have written to News Corp urgently seeking more information and consultation about the tool. "We will be insisting that News Corp must obtain the explicit consent of journalists before their work is used for generative AI," said acting MEAA Media Director, Michelle Rae.

"From the information that has been provided, there has been no offer of compensation to staff for allowing their work to be used, and there is a lack of detail about what safeguards will be in place to prevent their work being used beyond the strict scope of the tool. Just as importantly, how will the reading public know when an article has been produced using AI or not? Will there be clear disclaimers alongside a journalist's byline when AI has been used?"

Farmers stand against coal

Queensland Attorney General Deb Frecklington has taken the unprecedented step of cancelling a multi-year review into Queensland's mining objection process, prompting outrage from community groups and stakeholders who were involved.

The mining lease objections review began in June 2023 and final recommendations were due to be published in the coming months.

The review was held to determine ways to improve the way the Land Court handled contested mining leases, including whether there should be more opportunities for community participation throughout the assessment process and also if the processes could be made more efficient. Initial recommendations included allowing for decision makers on mining leases, such as government bureaucrats, to have access to independent expert advice – a recommendation that was opposed by the mining lobby, the Queensland Resources Council.

Another draft recommendation was that decision makers be required to consider the rights of First Nations peoples when determining a mining lease application.

The stakeholders received an email notifying them that the review had been cancelled last week, with Queensland Law Reform Commission chair Fleur Kingham noting the commission's "disappointment" at the Attorney General's decision.

Lock the Gate Alliance National Coordinator Ellen Roberts said, "We're shocked that the LNP government has taken the unprecedented step of cancelling this review at the last moment to prevent the release of its findings.

"[Nationals Premier] Campbell Newman took the very unpopular step in 2014 of taking away the rights of farmers and community members to object to coal mines. The Crisafulli government must reassure the community that the cancelling of this review is not the first step to pulling a new Newman.

"Hundreds of stakeholders including farmers, community groups, and even mining companies put many hours and a lot of energy into participating in this review.

"It's extremely unusual for a high-level review of this kind to be cancelled right before the recommendations were due to be delivered. We can only conclude that the LNP government has intervened because the findings were not popular with the mining industry. The Attorney General now has serious questions to answer about why she intervened to stop this review."

Darling Downs farmer Liza Balmain, who spent hours consulting and writing a submission for the latter part of the review, and whose property is threatened by Arrow Energy's expanding Surat Gas Project said, "I am beyond bitterly disappointed that the LNP government has scrapped this review.

"It's a very sad day for integrity in Queensland when politicians can suddenly cancel an impartial, expert, and really important review. We now have no assurance that vested and better-resourced interests won't have an unfair advantage when it comes to any future review of mining leases.

"Farmers don't get paid for their time, they participate because they care for their community and the broader outcomes. This is a real kick in the teeth to stakeholders and the commission.

"I am disappointed not only because I and other stakeholders put so much time and effort into this process, but also for the dedicated time, energy, research, and resources of the Queensland Law Reform Commission.

"This review process spanned almost two years. For it to suddenly be ditched like this is such a waste of everyone's time and resources.

"The final report and recommendations should have been allowed to be released, especially so close to the finish line.

"I held great hopes for positive outcomes for all stakeholders from this independent review – those hopes are now dashed."

Queensland Attorney General Deb Frecklington.
Photo: Gage Skidmore – wikimedia.org (CC BY-SA 3.0)

Independent committee calls for JobSeeker rate raise – again

For the third year running the federal government's own independent Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee has called for a substantial increase to JobSeeker and related income support payments as its top priority recommendation.

The Committee again found lifting JobSeeker to 90 per cent of the pension (from $56 per day to $74 per day) would substantially fix its adequacy. New research by Mandala shows that, for every dollar spent lifting the payment to 90 per cent of the pension, an extra 24 cents would be returned to society by way of improved health and wellbeing outcomes, in addition to the major benefit delivered to people receiving the payment. Lifting JobSeeker would reduce government health expenditure, improve productivity as well as deliver vast benefits to the lives of people receiving the payment.

This year's report includes new budget standards research by UNSW, showing income support payments fall short of essential costs, and that core costs in a remote community – Fitzroy Crossing – are 14 to 59 per cent higher than the equivalent in capital cities. The Committee recommended the Remote Area Allowance, which has not increased at all in 25 years, be lifted from $18.20 to at least $52.50 a fortnight, and called for further reform to ensure the payment reflects very high remote prices.

This year's report again urges the government to overhaul the employment services system to cease the harm being caused. It calls for the immediate cessation of automated payment suspensions and for the development of a new system that reflects natural justice principles and respects human rights.

The new report includes important insights into how inadequate income support payments may be affecting decisions by women to leave an abusive partner, with data showing that women on the lowest incomes may be more likely to face challenges leaving a violent relationship than other victim survivors because of lack of financial resources.

ACOSS CEO Dr Cassandra Goldie said: "As a member of this Committee, I urge the federal government to deliver its top recommendation and substantially lift JobSeeker, Youth Allowance and related payments.

"The benefits are crystal clear. It would improve people's mental and physical health, it would improve wellbeing, and it would reduce poverty in one of the wealthiest countries in the world.

"It would also support women experiencing domestic and family violence, helping them to leave an abusive partner.

"The Committee again heard harrowing testimony from people receiving JobSeeker and related payments about how it is not possible to get by on such little income. People broke down in front of the Committee because of the severe stress they are under, not knowing if they can pay the next electricity bill and keep a roof over their heads.

"How many more times do people need to explain the distress and harm caused by living in poverty in one of the wealthiest countries in the world?

"The way to fix this, in ACOSS's view, is to lift JobSeeker, Youth Allowance and related payments to at least the pension rate of $82 a day so that everyone can get through difficult times."

ACOSS

Unanswered nuclear questions put Australians at risk

Australians for Affordable Energy (AFAE) is calling for answers after a widely respected international expert questioned the cost and timeframe of building seven nuclear reactors in Australia.

Leading US climate diplomat Jonathan Pershing has warned the Coalition's plan to delay the roll out of renewable energy in favour of delivering nuclear technology over a much longer time is a "big bet on an unknown future."

"Australians have one main concern: dropping the price of their power bills. Important questions remain unanswered about how much nuclear will cost and when it will actually deliver power, and now new questions have now emerged," AFAE spokesperson Jo Dodds says.

"We need to know why we would press pause on cost-effective and timely solutions in favour of a risky experiment funded by taxpayers?

"Jonathan Pershing is an expert and as he notes in the US, the high cost of building new nuclear facilities has led to nuclear energy declining as a share of the overall energy mix. Across the globe, the evidence shows us the cheapest option for reliable power is a combination of solar and batteries."

Climate Change Authority Chair Matt Kean's comments on ABC's *Q&A* have also raised new questions about the Coalition's nuclear proposal.

"A formal Liberal state treasurer has branded his own party as 'socialist' and criticised the policy as far too expensive, further reiterating our fears the taxpayer will be left to fund nuclear as private investors avoid it," Dodds said.

"Energy bills are rising sharply, and households and small businesses are set to bear the brunt if real solutions aren't found. Our energy future should not be shaped by unrealistic promises, Australians deserve clear answers on how to keep power affordable and reliable."

Australians for Affordable Energy

Move to enshrine reproductive leave in state awards

Unions NSW is making a concerted push to secure reproductive leave in state awards, ensuring hundreds thousands of public sector workers get the workplace rights they deserve from the nation's largest employer.

A wide ranging new report – Reproductive Leave, It's for Every Body! – exposes how the absence of reproductive leave is forcing workers in NSW to postpone critical healthcare, affecting their health, productivity, and workplace participation.

Results of a survey of more than 1,000 workers found 49 per cent postponed essential treatment due to lack of leave, while 81 per cent had their ability to work affected by reproductive issues.

"With NSW as the largest employer in the country, we have an opportunity to lead by example and give workers the rights they need now – not years down the track," Karen Willis, Gender Equity Officer at Unions NSW said.

"These findings paint a concerning picture of workers being forced to choose between their health and their job. No worker should have to delay critical healthcare because they can't access appropriate leave."

Unions NSW has formally written to NSW Industrial Relations Minister Sophie Cotsis, calling for the state government to lead by example and implement reproductive leave in state public sector awards.

In the letter, Unions NSW urged the government to take immediate action: "The NSW government has a unique opportunity to lead the way by implementing a dedicated reproductive leave entitlement for all employees within the NSW Public Service. As the largest employer in the Southern Hemisphere, a commitment to this reform would set a precedent for the broader workforce and affirm its dedication to health equity and workplace participation."

The letter calls for a minimum of 10 days paid reproductive leave per year for public sector workers, as well as flexible working arrangements and workplace adjustments, aligning with national health strategies.

"While there is a national campaign for 10-day reproductive leave entitlement, we are not waiting. We are taking proactive steps now to get the ball rolling and secure it in state awards," Willis said.

"As the largest employer in the Southern Hemisphere, the NSW public sector has an opportunity to set a new standard for workplace rights. This would benefit thousands of essential workers including nurses, teachers and community service employees.

"Workers are suffering and we need action now. This is about fundamental health rights in the workplace, and it is time for NSW to lead the way. We are urging the state government to support the move and set a precedent by bringing reproductive leave into workplace entitlements immediately."

The survey found strong support for reproductive leave, with more than 90 per cent of respondents indicating it would help them better manage their reproductive health.

Unions NSW

Photo: unionsnsw.org.au

ANU leadership under pressure

This week has revealed more scandals in the ANU's beleaguered leadership, Vice-Chancellor Genevieve Bell and Chancellor Julie Bishop.

In Senate Estimates this week, it was revealed that Bishop has engaged her old friend, and former Chief of Staff's consulting company, Vitner Consulting, paying from university and taxpayer money $35,000 in what can appear to be a conflict of interest. It has also come to light that Bishop raked up $150,000 in travel expenses in 2024, at the same time as calling ANU staff "inefficiencies."

Bell continues to be under fire, not just for her second job for Intel, taken while employed full time for the ANU as Vice-Chancellor and taking in a salary of over a million dollars, but for poor leadership and communication during a time of institutional turmoil, fostering a culture of fear, with Bell threatening to senior staff she will "find you out and hunt you down" if they leak confidential information.

This week, the ANU released a "Consultation Paper" about the university-wide cuts and redundancies, however, as the NTEU and staff who reviewed the paper quickly observed, the paper is light on information, with NTEU ACT Division Secretary Lachlan Clohesy and NTEU ANU Branch President observing in an email to ANU staff, "The paper states that it is anticipated there will be realignment or streamlining but can't say what or where. Staff have been asked to consult, but there's nothing to consult on. We are no clearer on future plans – we still anticipate hundreds of job losses this year." Staff are furious about this cynical release of a "consultation" paper with little to no consultation in it.

These latest developments are anticipated to lend further support to the No Confidence vote in the Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor's leadership that the NTEU is running this month. The vote is open to all ANU staff who are NTEU members. The results of the No Confidence vote will be telling for the future of ANU's management, who are in panic mode over the constant flow of scandalous revelations.

$10.7 million wage theft revelations show need for reform

The revelation that La Trobe University underpaid 6,774 of its staff to the tune of $10 million underlines the need for a sector wide governance reform, says the union which represents university staff, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU).

The wage theft headlines come only days after media reports Australian National University Chancellor Julie Bishop awarded consulting contracts to her long-time friend and former political staffer, in a potential conflict of interest.

"Someone needs to throw open the windows of the university sector and let some fresh air and sunlight in, there is a governance crisis," said National NTEU Secretary Dr Alison Barnes.

"Today's wage theft revelations of over $10 million stolen from 6774 staff at La Trobe University can just be added to the long list, in the last few years we've seen 154,872 University workers rorted out of almost $271 million, with potentially another $100m plus still to be exposed.

"There is something very rotten in the state of Denmark when on an almost weekly basis we have governance revelations like this, the entire sector needs a total review.

"We've been saying for years universities are the only multibillion dollar organisations in the country which have no real oversight, and finally people are starting to listen.

The revelations have also appalled Sarah Roberts, NTEU Victorian Division Secretary.

"The Senate is rightly about to undertake an inquiry into university governance - it can't come soon enough," said Ms Roberts.

NTEU

Freelancers take action at Nine Publishing

FK

Freelancers at Nine Publishing came together to flood the inbox of Nine's managing director Tory Maguire with messages about why ongoing negotiations between Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) freelancers and Nine must result in improved rates, annual increases, and a signed agreement.

Staff at Nine also continue to stand in solidarity with freelancers, postering offices in all states with messages in support of their freelance colleagues. Maguire received more than 50 individual messages from MEAA members over the space of two hours, sharing shocking figures about the stagnation of rates that has been experienced by freelancers over the last 20 years at Nine Publishing.

Freelance representatives will sit down with Nine management on 24 March. Members will then meet again to discuss management's response and plan their next steps accordingly.

Freelancers are paid by the word. One explained:

"I have been freelancing at Nine Publishing (formally Fairfax) for over 20 years. Back then, my rate was $1 per word. If that rate had kept up with inflation, it would now by $1.72 per word. Yet my rate now is just $0.70 per word."

Alfred born of fossil fuels

Anna Pha

When category 2 cyclone Alfred was downgraded to a tropical low there was no room for complacency. Flooding, strong and destructive winds, and power outages continued.

More than 200,000 people were left without power for days. Evacuation centres were filled to overflowing. Trees were uprooted, homes and businesses were flooded, some were left uninhabitable due to strong, destructive winds and flooding taking their toll. The water in streets flowed like rivers, and low-lying land was covered in water.

The emergency services workers and Australian Defence Force personnel that risked their lives to assist thousands of people seeking help are to be commended.

Thousands still need help, having lost their homes and possessions. The government assistance of the JobSeeker rate for 13 weeks is hardly sufficient.

Alfred hit from south-east Queensland through to the north-east of NSW and gradually moved inland. This tropical event descended far south of the tropics.

Extreme weather events are becoming more frequent and more severe. They cannot be described as natural events. They are **unnatural events** resulting from the actions of humans burning of fossil fuels.

One of the most dangerous aspects of a cyclone is when a storm pushes the ocean water over land. This is referred to as a storm surge. Sea levels have already risen 20cm due to climate change, resulting in far more dangerous storm surges which occur from a greater height.

The toll on crops is still to be counted, but one thing is certain – there will be shortages and higher prices. To what extent the fertile land remains fit for crops is another question.

IMPACT ON HEALTH

Apart from such obvious impacts as falls and injuries from flying objects and uprooted trees, chronic diseases such as diabetes or renal disease can be impacted due to lack of access to health-care services, medications, and hospitals.

The federal Department of Health and Aged Care warns that floods and cyclones can leave behind many health risks, including:

- bacterial infections
- loss of medications
- mould
- contaminated floodwater
- injuries
- animal bites from displaced animals
- mosquito-borne illnesses
- carbon monoxide poisoning from generators.

Respiratory problems can result from mould and damp housing in the aftermath of floods. In some areas residents were warned that their drinking water was unsafe, and that they should boil their water.

In the south of Brisbane sewage flowed through the streets, as one of the city's two main wastewater pipes was being repaired.

Mental health is another concern, especially if there have been repeated natural disasters. The more you're exposed to floodwaters in your home or business, the worse the mental health impacts are likely to be. Post-traumatic stress disorder is another health impact.

Repeated natural disasters could compound these mental health consequences. Southeast Queensland and the Northern Rivers in NSW have experienced multiple disasters over recent years.

The University Centre for Rural Health Northern Rivers *After the Flood* study examined mental health and wellbeing outcomes six months after the 2017 flood in the Northern Rivers. People who had floodwater in their home, yard or business, or who were displaced from their home for more than six months, were found to have probable post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety or depression, compared to those who didn't experience flooding or weren't displaced.

State and federal governments should be providing free counselling and other services in the months and years following floods.

The three tropical cyclones in the Eastern Australian ar

INSURANCE

Residents in flood-prone areas such as Lismore and the tropics in Queensland pay huge premiums or do not insure their homes and businesses because of the astronomic premiums insurance companies charge. Even then, it does not mean these parasites will not stall on paying out claims or use fine print to find excuses not to honour their promises.

Governments urging them to pay up quickly are unlikely to have much of an impact. The only way forward is a not-for-profit, public insurance company with universal coverage. The private sector has failed dismally to offer protection.

POLICY

Governments are simply not prepared. Development is driven by greedy developers, not by governments in the interests of people and the environment. Science-based planning is sadly lacking.

Houses are not built to stand up to

WATER CYCLE

- Climate change is affecting our water cycle, which refers to the way water moves about our planet
- Generally speaking, wet areas are getting wetter and dry areas are getting drier.
- Think of heating water in a pan: as it warms, it starts to bubble (more energy) and steam (more moisture in the air).
- More **moisture** can then mean that more rainfall comes in short, intense downpours. This can increase the risk of flash flooding.
- **Extra heat** in the atmosphere means there's more energy for weather systems that generate intense rainfall.
- Thus we are experiencing more of our rain in the form of intense downpours, leading to a greater risk of floods.
- Climate change has made our oceans hotter which is driving more ferocious and destructive cyclones.
- Cyclone Alfred tracked further south than cyclones usually do in Australia.
- Increasingly, we see that communities are being hit with one disaster after another, such as drought followed by fires followed by floods. The compounding effect of these disasters is taking a heavy toll.

Acknowledgements: Climate Council

Behind the Kurdish call to lay do

William Briggs

The call by Abdullah Öcalan, jailed leader of the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), to disarm and to seek a peaceful path to unity and democratisation in Türkiye is a significant development. A delegation from the Kurdish People's Equality and Democracy Party visited him in prison and were handed a letter calling on the PKK to cease hostilities. An ongoing guerilla war has been waged since 1984. More than 40,000 people have died. Most of these have been Kurds. An end to the war is welcome.

The PKK is routinely referred to as a Marxist party. It was formed in 1978 as a Marxist-Leninist party with a strong nationalist slant. Its aim was the creation of a separate Kurdish state in response to Türkiye's refusal to allow any expression of Kurdish national identity.

The ideological perspective of the PKK shifted over the years. It has long since ceased to be a Marxist party but the media still use the Marxist-Leninist tag. It is a deliberate ploy, used not only by the Turkish government but by states and media the world over. As the Turkish Communist Party recently stated; "the PKK is not a Marxist organisation. At a time when the self-termination of this nationalist-based organisation is on the agenda, we will not remain indifferent to the government's cunning attempt to shift the responsibility for the past onto revolutionaries and socialism." Importantly the Turkish Party made the point that "Marxism is fundamentally incompatible with nationalism infused with liberalism, or with having alliances with the United States or Israel."

The allusion to 'alliances with the United States and Israel' has special significance. It links the call by Ocalan for an end to the decades-long conflict with the current manoeuvring in Syria.

The PKK, while based in Türkiye is closely aligned, and indeed has a sister party relationship with the Democratic Union Party and its military arm, the YPG (People's Defence Units). A close relationship has developed between these groups and the USA.

This intricate set of relationships and alliances is especially relevant in light of Öcalan's letter or 'Call for Peace and Democratic Society.' His statement declares that "the inevitable outcome of the extreme nationalist deviations, such as a separate nation-state, federation, administrative autonomy, or culturalist solutions, fails to answer the historical sociology of the society." There is a direct appeal to "democratise" the existing state. This is long overdue, but unlikely as things stand.

The Turkish Communist Party says that they "are also struck by claims from ruling party circles that this process represents a major step forward for democracy in Turkey. The reality today is starkly different: extreme poverty and deep social inequality prevail, justice has been entirely eroded, and tyranny and unlawfulness have become the norm." Any 'coming in from the cold' on the part of the PKK is unlikely to change these realities.

Another aspect to this is the idea being touted that if Turks and Kurds form an alliance, Türkiye will become the most significant power in the region.

For the Kurdish people in Türkiye, and for the working class as a whole, these intrigues are of secondary importance. Tens of thousands have died. Whether a policy of 'Neo-Ottomanism' is being contemplated doesn't matter to them.

The manipulation of the region is having tragic consequences for the people. The hand of imperialism is painfully visible in post-Assad Syria as the jostling for position and power continues. Türkiye, Israel and the USA occupy territory. Assad loyalists are still on the ground. ISIS remains entrenched. The former jihadists attempt to juggle this and appeal to the West for material support. All seem engaged in a macabre game of chess for control. The people and their needs and aspirations are of little consequence.

What this means for Syria is clear. Dismemberment and virtual partition will become the long-term reality. The Syrian Democratic Forces, backed by YPG occupy nearly 25 per cent of Syria. There is a 'fluid' relationship between this group and the Turkish-sponsored Free Syrian Army that control a further 20 per cent of the country. It is in the interests of Türkiye, the USA and Israel that Syria remains divided. There is oil, and there is geostrategic significance to contemplate.

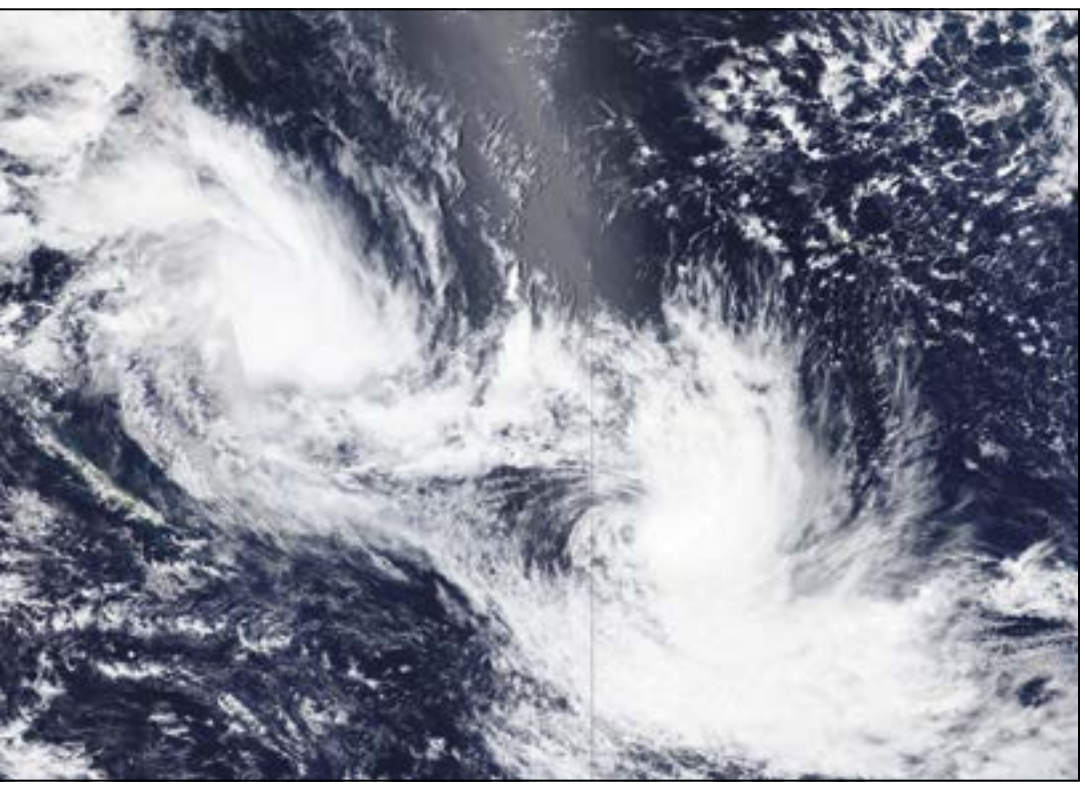
Against this are the calls by the PKK for democratisation, for peace, for unity. They are lofty calls and if they could be achieved in Türkiye, it would be a major step forward for peace and security in the broader region.

Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has warmly welcomed Öcalan's letter. A statement from the president's office claims that "the call basically said that there is no more [Kurdish] identity problem, that the denial [of Kurds] is over, that there are no two nations, no two official languages, no two citizenships, no demand for autonomy, no demand for federation. The unitary state has been defended."

The assessment of the Turkish communists is clear. "The cessation of the conflicts ... is a development that cannot be opposed. These conflicts have led to the estrangement of citizens based on ethnic origins, dragged them into a bloody confrontation, divided the working people, and distanced them from real solutions to Türkiye's problems. The TKP views calls for peace and any resulting agreements reached or to be reached in this regard as a positive step."

The TKP goes on to say "The Communist Party of Türkiye is determined to ensure the fraternity of the oppressed, the poor strata, and the working class by fighting against imperialism, exploitation, monopolies, and the rule of religious sects. We seek to unite the vast majority of Turks, Kurds, and all others – regardless of ethnic origin – who have been deprived of this country's wealth, not through heroic references to the past but through the realities of today."

On one hand there is the call from Öcalan. Inherent in this is the sentiment and politics of nationalism and the promotion of regional and narrow, sectional interests. On the other is the principled call of the Turkish Communist Party, committed to the needs of the people, regardless of ethnicity or nationality.



nd South Pacific basins on 25 February 2025. Photo: NASA's VIIRS Satellite (CC BY 4.0)

cyclones on the Sunshine Coast, in Brisbane and further south, especially those not usually associated with cyclones and flooding. No thought is given to providing ongoing shelter for those left homeless following cyclones and other extreme weather events. NSW Labor Premier Chris Minns cruelly decided to shut shelters before ensuring everyone had somewhere to go.

The biggest failure of governments – state and federal – is to continue to approve the expansion of existing and new fossil fuel projects. Coalition leader Peter Dutton's promotion of gas as the way forward for the next 20 or more years while nuclear reactors are built is nothing short of a smokescreen to cover up inaction on climate change.

State and federal governments have a responsibility for the well-being of those affected by the floods and other extreme weather events. Developers with governments in their pockets, and the authorities who approved the building of towns on flood plains should be held accountable.

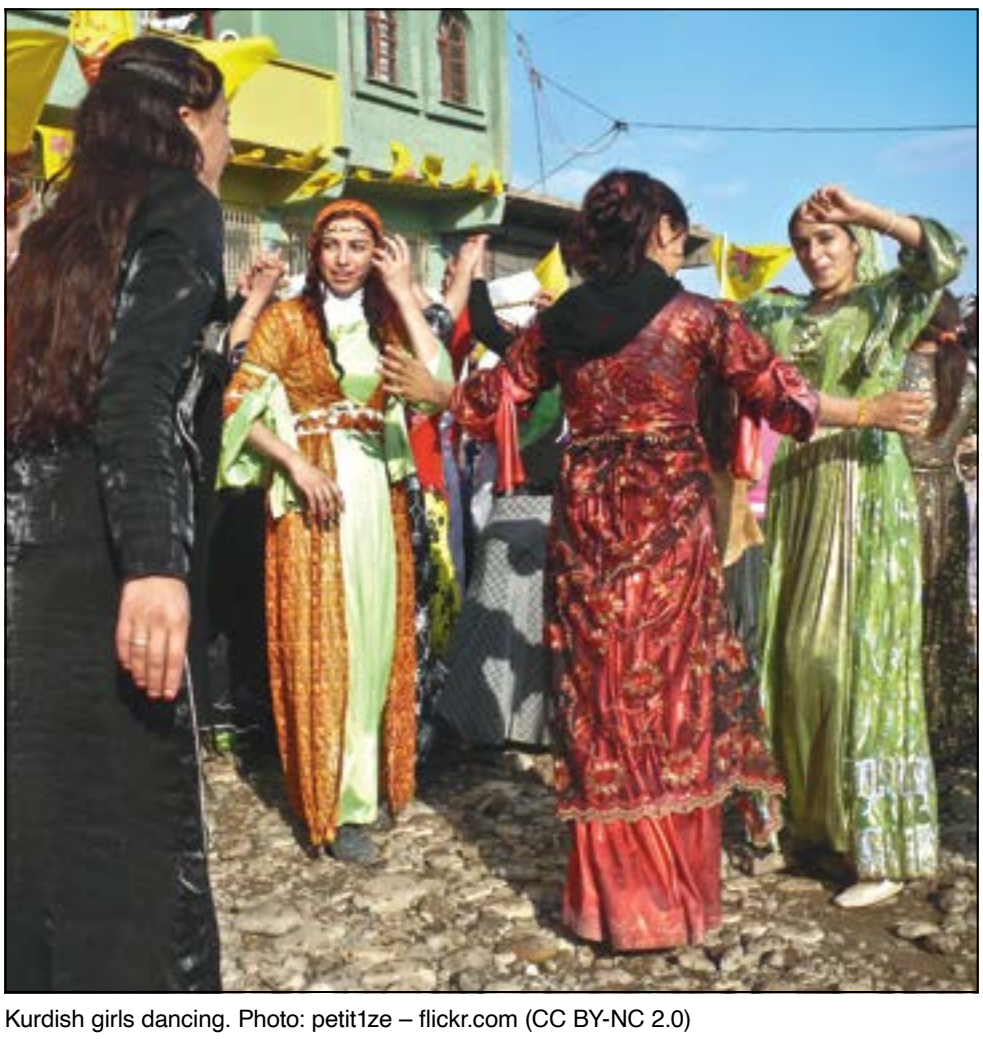
Planning is required along with engineering- and science-based adaptation and mitigation to cope with extreme weather events.

We live in "grey cities" with their sealed surfaces, dams, and concrete levees. This is one of the factors that results in such destructive and extensive floods. The water has nowhere to go.

There are alternative means to deal with cyclones and extensive rainfall. China, for example, is developing "sponge cities" as a means to prevent flooding, promote biodiversity, and cut emissions. They are a nature-based development of urban areas with abundant natural areas such as trees, lakes, artificial wetlands, and parks, along with permeable surfaces where the water falls through to urban drainage systems and is kept.

They not only allow for the absorption of water during high downfalls of rain but its release in times of drought. ✪

own its arms



Kurdish girls dancing. Photo: petit1ze – flickr.com (CC BY-NC 2.0)

Takeaways from China's 'Two Sessions'

Lianghui 2025

A Carruthers

What is China's "Two Sessions," or "Lianghui"?

China has a socialist people's congressional system. Liang (two) Hui (sessions) is the meeting of the two most important political bodies – the National People's Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). The latter, the CPPCC, is what socialists call a "United Front." It is not dominated by the Communist Party. In fact the Communist Party of China (CPC) plays a minority role in this organ. Of the 2169 seats in its largest body, the CPPCC National Committee, the majority are filled by minor parties, democratic organisations, independents, farmers, People's organisations (like the All-China Women's Federation, All-China Federation of Trade Unions, China Disabled Persons' Federation, and so on).

In other words, Lianghui, the ten-day conference that has just concluded, is the biggest annual event in Chinese democracy. Unlike Western elections, which happen every 3 to 4 years, and are hyperpoliticised, money-fuelled cycles of misinformation, disguise, and hidden power-play, Lianghui happens every single year, exposing the workings of government and opening policymaking wide out to the people.

It is all about concrete actions and proposals, of which thousands are put forward, and many passed into law.

The following are five takeaways that stood out to me from the Work Report and sessions of Lianghui 2025:

1. Women's Rights

Women's rights is front and centre this year. Zhang Jingjing from a Ceramics university in China and who is a delegate, said the following to on-site media: "we women still need to keep strengthening our expertise – one needs to be strong to forge iron – proving ourselves to earn equal opportunities. Equally important, we must break the culture of silence. Rights aren't given freely, they're claimed. If something's unfair, call it out. And let talent shine, loud and clear."

Using the CPPCC as a forum to call out unfair discrimination and break the culture of silence, activist women like Zhang Jingjing are given a voice in the Congress to protest against ongoing inequalities, as well as make concrete proposals and pass proposals on women's equality into law.

2. Disability

This year's Government Work Report, delivered by Premier Li Qiang, was published in Braille for the visually impaired, and given special prominence at a meeting attended by political advisors from the welfare and social security sector.

Events marking International Women's Day, celebrated this year during Lianghui, put on by the All-China Women's Federation, placed special attention on how women can overcome physical disabilities to empower others. The Government Work Report also placed emphasis on workers' rights for people with disability: "More help will be give to those finding it hard to obtain work because of age or disability," the Report noted.

3. Minorities

Ethnic minority groups have a special presence at Lianghui each year. Their visibility is heightened by the fact that they attend meetings and sessions in their traditional costume. 55 ethnic minority groups are represented in the NPC, whether Xinjiang or Yi Indigenous people or many others – every ethnicity is represented.

One national political advisor Yang Yuni, a Hani woman, came dressed in an intricately embroidered decoration sewn by her grandmother. Her proposal focussed on "integrating intangible cultural heritage into primary and secondary school education."

This is something often misunderstood in the West. It is often assumed that China is all one ethnicity, meaning Han. It is not. In fact many of these groups have lived side by side in peace as part of China's larger socialist society, where they could very well have been at war if external interference had come into play (as we have seen in Yugoslavia, Myanmar, and countless other places).

No matter how small the ethnic group is, the Congress operates on a minority preferential system – even if you are a tiny ethnic group, you will have at least one representative. This preferential system dates back to the very beginning of revolutionary China.

4. New Productive Forces

The terminology of Marx, Engels, and Lenin is always at hand in China's biggest democracy event. This year "new productive forces" is the buzzword, which happens to be a term from Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy. Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin used it and thought deeply about the idea across their lives and works.

AI and robotics is being considered to be a "productive force," but the discussions are very targeted: the question is how will this improve people's wellbeing, and lift up the lives of the masses?

China has also announced, at Lianghui 2025, that it will shortly be mass-producing flying taxis – this too could be considered part of this new drive to develop quality new productive forces.

5. Democratic Transparency and Accountability

In some sessions of the Two Sessions the President, Xi Jinping, sits to vote not in front of the delegates, but among the peoples' delegates. President Xi, it is worth recalling, makes a meagre salary of about $30,000 AUD equivalent per year. In a tradition that goes back to Mao Zedong and the Chinese revolution, the leader never stands above the people, but must be at the level of the people, and know the people well. Unlike Western leaders, who are buttressed by big Capital and lord it over the ordinary citizens, in China the leader is always among the people.

For those who follow it closely and seek to understand it, China's socialist democratic system is clearly superior to that of the Western "liberal democracy." Lianghui gives us hope for democracy in a world of growing corporate autocracy and authoritarianism, especially in Western countries like the United States. Unfortunately, the useful idiots of Western media will continue to hide the fact that Chinese democracy is growing in strength as Western capitalist liberalism falls apart.

Lianghui 2025 shows that China has matured as a socialist country, and is keeping the beacon of economic democracy, accountability and government transparency alive in the 21st century. ✪

China's socialist democratic system is clearly superior to that of the Western "liberal democracy."

Letters to the Editor
The Guardian
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Theory and Communism

Graham Holton's tribute to 'La Passionaria'(3 March), urges the reader to explore the world, the politics and the literary work of Dolores Ibarruri. We need to read, to learn, to build a theoretical framework to fight against capitalism. We need to always link theory to practice and in building and strengthening theory, to strengthen the practice of Marxism-Leninism. We need to know who we are and what the Party is for.

Holton's paraphrasing of Ibarruri raises some serious questions. He says that "she does not quote Marxist theory to prove her point," and that "being a comrade is something special, something far more than merely being a Marxist. For our Party to succeed, as Communists, we work with and through the people for the class struggle." Is not quoting theory something to be valued? If it is, then why?

Not quoting theory when it is important to know and share ideas is not good enough. It does not elevate, but diminishes the communist. Not quoting Ibarruri, is not good enough. We need at least a semblance of context. Being a Marxist and understanding and applying Marxism-Leninism is what is important.

The concept of being a comrade in its truest and richest sense comes from a communist world view and a theoretical appreciation of the world, and of the struggle that gives the Marxist-Leninist party its reason to exist.

There are political parties on the "left' that regard Marxism as just one tendency within a broader panoply of ideas. The reader of the article could be forgiven for thinking that theory is to be watered down for the sake of 'mass work.' This would be to deny the central and leading role of the Party and of what ought to be our theoretical underpinnings.

William Briggs

Return to Yalta

Comrade Editor,
Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin met in 1945 at Yalta, Crimea. Presidents Xi and Trump could work together and help achieve a ceasefire in Ukraine. Return to Yalta. Presidents Putin, Zelensky, and Trump would have direct talks. The world would watch.

Yours faithfully,
Nelson Underdown
South Australia

Worth Streaming

Severance

Peter Farmer

'Alienation' used to be used so much it was in danger of just meaning 'mopey,' but there was a time when it was used to explain everything. The word has a specific meaning for communists, and Marx spends some time clearly explaining how alienation is fundamental to how capitalism operates. As they say, it's a feature, not a bug.

Alienation is turned up to eleven in *Severance*, a super-smart and entertaining series. The main concept is in the title. 'Lumo' is a giant biotechnology company with a 'campus' that looks a lot like the sort of 'campus' Apple or Google would build for their workforce. To work there, staff have to have an operation called 'severance' that makes it possible for them to be 'severed' from their non-work lives. When they walk into work, there's a buzzing noise in the lift, and they emerge knowing nothing about their life outside. When they leave, there's another buzzing noise, and they have no memory of what happened for the eight hours they were in the office.

This might sound like some workers' dream. There's no bringing your work back home with you, and it's literally impossible to talk shop when you're out with your mates. The advantages for Lumo are less obvious, since for a long time we have no idea what the workforce does – they play around with numbers on computer screens but they don't know what those numbers represent. Whatever Lumo is up to, it's impossible for the workers to talk about it once they're on the outside.

Here, the show waxes philosophical. The workers divide their lives into 'innies' and 'outies' referring to their in-the-office and not-at-work states, and the two lead different lives and are different people. The 'outie' makes the decision to work at Lumo, and gets to choose if they stay there, no matter how much the 'innie' might want to leave. After a while, they're like two people sharing one body. If an 'outie' resigns from Lumo, their 'innie' self ceases to exist.

The company dresses up its extremely sinister and cultish operations with the sort of caring management-speak we're all subjected to (we know one comrade in a warehouse job with little slogans like 'We care, share and have fun' on their safety vest).

Like all good sci-fi gimmicks, this one starts going wrong almost from the beginning, as the 'innies' start trying to communicate with their external selves, and there are strong hints that the severance procedure might not be as water-tight as their sinister employer thinks.

It's all very creepy, but there's a lot of comedy in the show. John Turturro is perfect as a Lumo worker who goes along with everything the company suggests, but hints at yearnings for a life outside. Christopher Walken does a short celebrity drop in as a somewhat sinister type who looks after all the portraits of the company's founder. The company's little morale-raising-but-really-bossy rituals will be very familiar from most people's work lives. Teachers who have to have their coffee break next to a sign reading 'Let's have no negative energy here,' will recognise the vibe.

(Severance is on Apple TV. There's no suggestion that the fictional Lumo has any connection with the Australian company Lumo Energy, the British train operator 'Lumo,' or any other real companies with the word 'Lumo' in their name.)

Film Review: *Mickey 17*

Peter Farmer

"You'll love this film, it'll be great for your Communist newspaper." I've scratched the person who gave me that tip from my list of trusted advisors. *Mickey 17* is good fun, but it doesn't have a lot for communists, other than the following profound insights:

***Insight One*: Bosses can be bastards**

Mickey (Robert Pattinson) is desperate to get away from earth, so signs on to an expedition to a faraway planet as an 'expendable.' That means an imprint of his entire body and mind is taken, after which he's sent on a series of certain-death missions. After each death, he's reprinted from a machine that looks like a cat scanner and works like a printer overdue for replacement. A lot of the fun is watching him casually putting up with various grisly fates. The film is based on a 2022 sci fi novel (*Mickey 7*), but the basic set-up (if there are copies of me, which one would be the real me?) has been around since some philosopher had a moment's thought about the 'beam me up, Scotty' scenes in the original *Star Trek*.

***Insight Two*: We're in for a lot of Trump impersonations over the next four years**

Mickey's expedition is led by Mark Ruffalo, playing a corrupt, not very bright, self-centred US Senator who's a cross between Donald Trump, and a sleazy televangelist (so more Trump). Ruffalo seems to have prepared for the part by watching Stephen Baldwin's Trump parodies, but there are moments of Jimmy Swaggart. Toni Collette does a good job as the manipulative wife who tells Ruffalo what to do when he gets confused.

***Insight Three*: It's wrong to judge people (and aliens) by appearances**

I don't want to spoil *Mickey 17* to the extent that it's possible to spoil a film that telegraphs its punches so clearly, so will just say not everyone is what they seem.

***Insight Four*: It's wrong to be a rapacious colonist, try being a nice one instead!**

This I knew from the deeply terrible *Avatar* which spent a fortune as well as hours of my time letting me know that evil colonisation is bad. *Mickey 17* is shorter and much more fun than *Avatar* (as are most movies), but in case we missed *Avatar*'s lessons, we get them again. If you must colonise, do it nicely!

That's about it for this communist. There's a faint hint that life's unfair on earth, and that's why so many people are willing to volunteer for a colonisation

effort led by an idiotic personality cult leader (there are shades of Elon Musk and Mars here). Other than that, all is Robert Pattinson being likeable, Naomi Ackie being absolutely brilliant as a hotshot Space Agent who's also Pattinson's love interest, and Steven Yuen as Pattinson's cheerful but sleazy friend. The movie is worth seeing for Ackie's performance and because it's fun.

Solutions to Class Crossword

***Guardian* 10 March 2025 #2136**

Across:

3. **Consciousness** – What classes need before revolution and the formation of socialism is viable
4. **Lumpen** – German word meaning "ragged," part of the name of the lowest underclass in Marxist theory
5. **Petite** – French for 'small,' this term works in conjunction with another class typically that of small business owners
6. **Clergy** – Religious class often aligned with the ruling class to spread false awareness
7. **Emerging** – What the revolution is, once the masses are educated and mobilised
9. **Peasants** – Class that was central in China's history, agrarian economic class tied to land they live/work on itself
10. **Slave** – "The ___ is sold once and for all; the proletarian must sell himself daily and hourly" – Frederick Engels

Down

1. **Proletariat** – The class that must sell its labor to survive within Capitalism
2. **Handicraftsmen** – Pre-industrial class who own their tools and create goods/commodities by hand
8. **Kulak** – Wealthier subset of the working class in pre-Soviet Russia, owning more land/ resources than others

Trump and Hegseth purge US military

William Briggs

The purging of leading US military leaders, recently announced by US President Donald Trump and Defence Secretary, Pete Hegseth signals a shift in American military thinking. It also indicates a contradiction between an administration that promotes a virtual isolationist 'America first' alongside Trump's repeated 'peace through strength' arguments.

The elevation of Dan 'Razin' Caine to the position of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is more a political move than anything like a natural fit for such a crucial role.

The 'America First' slogan that Trump adopted has its roots in the pre-WW2 US far right movement. It was a conscious move to keep out of Europe, from being forced to take sides in the looming war against fascism and to promote the USA's capitalism. Trump has been labelled an isolationist as a consequence. It's an odd sort of isolationism that sees him attempting to 'cut deals' as an expression of foreign policy, and to promote American global ambitions

Trump is also fond of the 'Peace Through Strength' slogan. Roman Emperor Hadrian was the first to use it. Ronald Reagan, as he was unleashing his 'Star Wars' strategy to weaken the USSR, was another devotee. Like Hadrian and like Reagan, Trump recognises the simplicity of the slogan. Dominate and threaten your adversaries. Let them know that you are prepared to destroy them if need be. It is one arm of imperialist strategy. The other is economic power and coercion. It's a good strategy – at least until your adversary achieves some sort of parity.

The changing of the guard in the upper echelons of the American military is clearly designed to get rid of any Biden-appointees but also to ensure that whatever measures Trump, Hegseth and Secretary of State Rubio, demand are carried out without argument.

Some observers are portraying the sackings of the six leading military figures as an attack on 'diversity.' Hegseth has previously criticised the promotion of women and Afro-Americans to high-ranking positions. Some of his comments, especially those regarding the outgoing Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Brown, are clearly racist. He rhetorically asked whether Brown got the job because he was black. Admiral Lisa Franchetti, Chief of Naval Operations was another to be sacked. There had been some questions as to her appointment under Biden, and Hegseth quickly seized on these to prove an obscure point about 'wokeism.'

The accusations of racism, sexism and misogyny can all be argued. This is even more apparent as the new leadership in the White House continues to play to its more reactionary support base, but things are often more complex.

The decks were always going to be cleared. New administrations do that. The outgoing military figures might have been more or less partisan than the new ones. They performed their respective roles to the complete satisfaction of the president and the American war machine. Being black or female did not define them. That has become politicised by both supporters and enemies of Trump. Gender and race, as far as US imperialism and those who promote and execute military threats are less than significant. The Biden years were hardly years of peace, harmony, and goodwill on earth. US imperialism continues to threaten adversaries and promote disharmony and war, regardless of who sits in the Oval Office.

Perhaps the most significant casualty of the purge was General Charles Brown, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. His replacement is the lower ranking and officially retired general, Dan Caine. None of the heavy-hitters in the American military establishment have much to recommend them, but Caine's resume is interesting. His last position was as military liaison to the CIA. This followed an 'illustrious' career in Special Operations, the main task of which is to organise and control the assassination and covert operations arm of the US military.

There is nothing odd about a shift in personnel when the presidency changes hands. There is, however, at least a pretence that the military hierarchy remains apolitical. Serious doubts are being raised that even that fig leaf of neutrality is being swept aside.

Trump and his inner circle are threatening all the old verities. Much has been written of the threat of destroying, or dismantling, or walking away from institutions. The traditional relationship with NATO is seemingly shaky. Some observers question the commitment of the US to major financial institutions. International law is routinely flouted and ridiculed.

New Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Lt Gen John Caine. Photo: public domain

Hegseth, before becoming Secretary for Defence, responded to a question about his attitude towards the Geneva Convention in relation to the US military. His response was chilling. "An America First national security policy is not going to hand its prerogatives over to international bodies that make decisions about how our men and women make decisions on the battlefield."

Hegseth is an extremist; a far-right appointee of a far-right president. He represents a real and present danger to the world, and the people everywhere. It is a sign of the times that such as he can occupy powerful positions, can affect and dictate terms for the peace of the world. But despite the rhetoric, despite the threats of brutality emanating from Washington, there are precious few reasonable voices being raised.

US Democrat Senator, Tim Kaine, a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, objected to the firings of Brown and Franchetti because, he said, Trump and Hegseth weren't focusing on offered this analysis of the new appointment. "Steps to ensure our military remains the most lethal in the world," and urged Republican Senators to prioritise "readiness and lethality." In other words, Kaine too wants 'peace through strength.' He just disagrees on how to get there.

Chicago gathering outlines US labour's plan for immigrant rights

Mark Gruenberg

With millions of migrant workers caught between corporate exploitation and GOP Trump regime deportations, activists at the first-ever Chicago Labour Forum brainstormed ideas for the entire working class to come to their aid and protection.

If there was one theme that ran through the hour-long session at the Unity Center on Chicago's South Side, it was that, given that the Trump tyranny is thinking "outside the box" in rounding up anyone and everyone with brown skin – including kidnapping kids from schools, invading hospitals and dragging drivers from cars – defenders must "think outside the box" for new tactics, too.

Trump's tactics aren't new, but they are intensified, one of the two guest speakers, Chicago Federation of Labor Vice President Don Villar, himself from a migrant family, told the group.

"We saw this played out in 2017 [with] the drama of a 10-year-old kid coming out of school and finding there's no one there to pick him up" because Trump's federal agents during the convicted felon's first term in the White House had arrested and deported the kid's parents.

For that kid, "it was having your world turned upside down," and now the situation has gotten even worse with Trump's return to the presidency and with his "enforcer" making migrants in Chicago their #1 national target, due to the Windy City's "sanctuary city" status and active resistance.

Among the new ideas floated, and in some cases, implemented, and discussed at the session:

1. Mass education of migrants: The Chicago Federation of Labor (CFL) pioneered "know your rights" flash cards for migrants, telling them the law protects them from federal agents without a warrant, from being split from other workers, and from being denied a lawyer. It mandates they can demand immigration hearings.

2. Organise, organise, organise: Migrants seeking protection are increasingly turning to unions for aid, support and structure against the Trump-named raiders.

3. Get out in the streets and put on bottom-up pressure to change immigration laws, making it easier to legalise the undocumented workers

Bacon pointed out the civil rights revolution of the 1960s produced an end to both discriminatory white nationalist immigration "quotas" which existed since 1924, and the hated "bracero" system which began two decades later to provide imported Spanish-speaking farm workers.

Campaign in the streets to modernise migration law

The 1965 immigration reform and its 1986 successor, which further reformed migration, had one big loophole, Bacon said. It legalised the undocumented people already in the US at that time but made employment of future undocumented people illegal.

They've been illegal ever since. Those undocumented people are the ones Trump hates and rounds up. They're also the most exploited since employers seeking to maximize profits pay them starvation wages, often house them in hovels and threaten them with deportation should they speak up or go to the authorities.

Seek corporate partners, who will be stuck without a labour force if Trump deports all the migrants

Agriculture leads the list, said Bacon. One million of all farm workers, he stated, are undocumented migrants. But other industries that would suffer labour shortages include meatpacking, construction, day labour and healthcare, especially home care. Migrant advocates can make the case to businesses that they can't survive without enough workers, paid living wages.

Use the power of the ballot box, and the threat of voter retribution

"We think of voting as a privilege. We need to think of it as a weapon for working people," Bacon said.

Reach and work with advocacy groups, such as workers' centres and pro-migrant organisations.

Bacon stressed there are more potential allies out there than migrants realise: women's rights groups, LGBTQ rights groups, groups representing people of colour, minority religious groups, civic groups, environmentalists and unions.

People's World (edited for space)

Peace in Ukraine?

Vijay Prashad

Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Friedrich Merz discussed military assistance and steps to establish a just peace. Photo: (CC0 1.0 Universal)

The whole thing is a fiasco. The theatrical drama in the White House's Oval Office triggered a series of predictable responses around the world. Outrage at US President Donald Trump for his rudeness and ridicule for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy were some of the reactions. Then, the failure of French President Emmanuel Macron to create a European agreement with the United Kingdom's Keir Starmer and Zelenskyy revealed the absolute dead ends that confront this exhausted war in Ukraine. The question that these discussions provoke is simple: is there an exit for this war?

PERMANENT WAR

If the war aims of Zelenskyy and his European partners are to weaken Russia or to overthrow the government of Vladimir Putin, then this war might either go on forever or accelerate into a dangerous nuclear scenario. Opinion polls in Russia show that Putin's approval rating is now at 87 per cent. Even taking this with a mountain of salt, this is far higher than the approval rating in France for Macron. With Russia's economy resilient during this war, it is unlikely that it will be further weakened with the continuation of hostilities. What the evidence shows, however, is that Europe's economy is suffering from war inflation that has not been reduced. If this war is to continue, Macron said, then European states would have to increase their military spending to 3 per cent or 3.5 per cent of GDP. This would further damage the living situation of most Europeans. Would young, working-class Europeans be willing to go and man the dangerous frontline in Ukraine on behalf of a war aim (weakening Russia) that is impossible? It is unlikely (There is a separate cruelty of middle-class Ukrainians fleeing the country for Western Europe and then working-class Western Europeans being asked to come and defend that country for them).

A permanent war will lead to unnecessary loss of life in Ukraine and to a permanent economic crisis in Europe. It is also unlikely because the United States will not financially and militarily back such a war indefinitely, resulting in the collapse of any long-term European commitment to Ukraine.

THE KOREAN SOLUTION

If neither Ukraine nor Russia are willing to move to a ceasefire and a negotiated settlement (which would include security guarantees for all sides), then there is the possibility that the current frontline that stretches from northern to eastern Ukraine will become a permanent Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Ukraine would thereby be divided indefinitely with an immense waste of social wealth to maintain a perpetual frontline. This is the most likely scenario, although it might not be palatable for Europeans to have a Korea within their continent.

The South Korean military maintains 600,000 troops along the 38th Parallel, alongside almost 30,000 US troops. Much the same is the situation in the north. Billions of dollars are spent annually on surveillance and logistics for over 900 square miles of territory that is not available for economic use. Europe would have to underwrite this Korean solution for Ukraine for eternity (just as the United States provides guarantees and funds to South Korea, and China does the same for the DPRK).

A SECURITY CONSORTIUM

The Helsinki Process that emerged to bring the US and USSR into negotiations in 1975 and that formed the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has played almost no role for peace in the war on Ukraine.

The only interlocutors that have been given permission to speak about the war in Ukraine on behalf of Zelenskyy have been the United States, the Western European leaders, the leaders of the European Union (EU), and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Leaders from Europe's east – apart from those who are integrated into the NATO-EU – have been either silent or told that their opinions do not matter. But it is these eastern European countries that share with Ukraine the fact of having a border with Russia, and it is these countries that most need to form a security consortium that includes Russia and provides mutual guarantees. Those countries that directly share a border with Russia's west are – from north to south – Norway, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Belarus, Ukraine, Georgia, and Azerbaijan (Lithuania and Poland share a border with the Kaliningrad Oblast, a Russian exclave on the Baltic Sea). Three of them (Finland, Estonia, and Latvia) are members of NATO and of the EU, while Norway is a NATO member but not in the EU.

Would it be possible for these eight countries to call a conference with Russia on the broader issues of security rather than the narrow issue of Ukraine? That three countries that border Russia are already NATO members (one of them, Norway, was a founding member in 1949) suggests that the problems in Ukraine are separate from NATO membership itself. Rather, they stem from anxiety about a border line created in a hurry when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 (this impacts Estonia, Latvia, Belarus, Ukraine, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, but not Norway and Finland, which were not part of the Soviet Union).

In the early 1980s, former Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme chaired the Independent Commission on Disarmament and Security Issues, whose 1982 report *Common Security: A Programme for Disarmament* made the case that 'The task of diplomacy is to limit, split, and subdivide conflicts, not to generalise and aggregate them.' In other words, all conflicts cannot be settled at the same time. A ceasefire is good in itself; the issues to resolve need to be separated, and those that are easier dealt with first to build confidence. To bundle all issues into one problem makes a dispute intractable.

The countries that border each other, including those that border Russia to its south and east, must live next to each other. They cannot lift themselves out of their geography and go elsewhere. Ukraine cannot be relocated to France. It must remain beside Russia. In that case, these countries need to find a way to build trust.

To begin with, the assertion that one cannot trust a neighbour is the worst way to build confidence between the peoples of neighbouring countries. Neither the EU nor NATO (without full US military backing) can subordinate Russia and force it to bow before Ukraine. A British cabinet minister said last year that his country would last only six months in a full-scale war with Russia. Meanwhile, a Kiel Institute for the World Economy report suggests that Germany is spending its money buying weapons but does not have a standing army capable of self-defence, let alone winning an offensive war against Russia. Europe, without the United States, is a shadow.

It would behove all parties if a country that borders Russia calls for such a security consortium to be built and if it is able to get guarantees from NATO not to expand further eastward and from Russia to draw back its military from the border regions. There are long relations among these countries, with families on both sides of the border. Any lessened tension in general is good for humanity, and if such a manoeuvre will lead to peace in Ukraine, that would be far better than a permanent scar on this part of the European continent.

Globetrotter

... the separate cruelty of middle-class Ukranians fleeing the country, and working class Western Europeans asked to defend that country for them

Britain: jail for protesters

Elizabeth Short

Thirty protesters outside the Royal Courts of Justice turned their backs on judges last week to reveal T-shirts reading "corruption in court," after it was announced that only six years would be shaved off a 41-year prison sentence for climate protesters involved in peaceful action.

In January, a rare mass appeal was held for 16 Just Stop Oil (JSO) protesters who were handed the draconian sentences last year.

Last week only six of them saw their sentences reduced in a ruling that has been condemned as having "no place in a democracy that upholds the right to protest."

Among them were the "Whole Truth Five," who sparked outrage after being given record-breaking sentences for "conspiracy to cause a public nuisance" after organising a protest on the M25 motorway over Zoom.

JSO founder Roger Hallam, who was handed the longest sentence, five years, saw his jail time reduced to four.

Cressia Gethin, Louise Lancaster, Daniel Shaw and Lucia Whittaker De Abreu, who were originally handed four years each, saw their sentences moderately cut to between 2.5 and three years.

The only other protester who saw a reduction was 78-year old Gaie Delap, whose sentence for participating in an M25 protest was cut from 20 to 18 months.

All 16 protesters had been taking part in non-violent actions calling on the government stop issuing new oil and gas licences, a demand which has now been met.

Among the challenges thrown out were those of Phoebe Plummer and Anna Holland, who were sentenced to two years and 20 months for throwing soup on glass covering Vincent van Gogh's painting *Sunflowers*.

After the ruling, Plummer said in a statement that Britain's democracy is being "sold off to the highest bidder," with the nation's courts "corrupted by the oil and arms industries."

The harsh sentences were imposed last year after now-sacked extremism adviser Lord Walney released a report agitating for tougher punishments on activists while pocketing money from arms and fossil fuel companies as a paid lobbyist.

At last week's ruling, Lady Chief Justice Baroness Carr acknowledged that "conscientious motivation" was a "factor relevant to sentencing in each case," but that this "did not preclude a finding that any appellant's culpability was still high."

Last year, in cases such as the Whole Truth Five, activists were repeatedly prevented from talking about climate change during trial.

The claimants' lawyer, Raj Chada, said his team would be reviewing the judgement and considering an appeal to the Supreme Court.

Extinction Rebellion said the sentences were "only made possible by legislation written by think tanks funded by fossil fuel companies and other powerful interests."

Policy Exchange, an oil industry-funded think tank, has been credited as helping shape the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act under which some of the protesters were sentenced through its 2019 report Extremism Rebellion.

Kerry Moscogiuri, Amnesty International UK's director of campaigns, said the ruling highlighted the urgent need for Britain's protest laws to be revised.

"We call on the UK government to drop the new anti-protest laws that they have just tabled themselves and institute a fully independent and public review of the protest laws that have been passed in recent years."

Areeba Hamid, Greenpeace UK co-executive director, said the sentences "have no place in a democracy that upholds the right to protest."

The long sentences are upheld as the prison system grapples with an overcrowding crisis which led the government to implement an early release plan last year.

Just Stop Oil said in a statement: "To consider what the Just Stop Oil 16 have done without considering the horror of a heating world, of billions dying in the coming decades, without recognising that our current economic system risks ending the rule of law and ordered civil society, is frankly immoral.

"Today's ruling is another nail in the crucifixion of justice."

Morning Star

Photo: Alisdare Hickson – flickr.com (CC BY-SA 2.0)

Sydney Vigil

STOP USA BLOCKADE ON CUBA

4:15pm till 5:00pm Thursday 17 April

USA Consulate, 50 Miller Street North Sydney

Global Briefs

SYRIA: Syrian interim president Ahmed al-Sharaa announced the formation of an "independent committee" to investigate armed clashes and massacres that killed more than 1,300 people, including 800 civilians, who were mostly summarily executed by the new security forces. Russia and the United States have requested closed-door United Nations Security Council consultations on the situation in Syria "over violence against civilians in western Syria."

ZIMBABWE: Zimbabwe is doing everything within its powers to join BRICS, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Amon Murwiwa said, following a visit to Russia. Murwiwa said that Zimbabwe was looking towards engaging with groups like BRICS in a bid to find the best ways to grow its economy. "According to our constitution, we must not only be Pan-African, but also join progressive groups that are good for the socio-economic growth of our country and for promoting peace in the world and normally, peace is fostered through economic development," Murwira said.

GEORGIA: The Georgian Parliament's speaker has rejected attempts by the three Baltic states, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania to involve Georgia in what Georgia sees as their anti-Russian plans. "There is only one way the authorities of these countries are interested in Georgia. They want us to be a tool and a means against Russia. These three post-Soviet countries have their own fears regarding Russia. Instead of standing firm against these fears and openly confronting, if necessary, they are trying to use other states to make Russia focus its attention on other issues," he said. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have banned some Georgian individuals from entering those countries.

LIBYA: The National Oil Corporation (NOC) of Libya announced its first tender for exploration of oil and gas fields since 2008. Twenty-two new onshore and offshore areas will be offered to international oil companies. Libya, an OPEC-member country, has the largest reserves of raw hydrocarbons in Africa, it is ranked 12th globally among oil exporters with 1.6 million barrels produced per day before the civil war started in 2011. Oil production is currently growing and was above 1.4 million barrels a day on 3 December 2024.

TURKEY: Twenty-six Kurdish militants were killed by Turkish security forces in the past week, despite the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) declaring a ceasefire. A Defence Ministry spokesman said the militants were killed during a military operation in the Kurdish areas in the north of Iraq and Syria. "Our Turkish armed forces will continue its operations in the region for the survival and security of our country," the Ministry said.

NEPAL: Thousands of monarchists greeted former king Gyanendra Shah. An estimated crowd of 10,000 people demanded the reinstatement of his rule and the return of Hinduism as the state religion. As king, Shah disbanded the government and parliament, jailed politicians and journalists, cut off communications, and used the army to rule the country. In 2008, the king stepped down from the throne after parliament ruled to abolish Nepal's 240-year-old Hindu monarchy, transforming the country into a secular state.

CANADA: Ontario, the Canadian province with the largest population, has said it will impose a surcharge of 25 per cent on electricity provided to US states as a response to new US tariffs imposed on products from Canada by US President Donald Trump. Claiming that the US tariffs are "a disaster for the US economy," Ontario Premier Doug Ford has said the money raised by the electricity tariffs will be used to support local businesses and workers affected by Trump's decisions.

IWD: Women demand an end to inequality and violence

Women took to the streets of cities across Europe, Africa, South America, and elsewhere to mark International Women's Day with demands for ending inequality and gender-based violence.

On the Asian side of Istanbul, Turkey's biggest city, a rally in Kadikoy saw members of dozens of women's groups listen to speeches, dance, and sing in the spring sunshine.

The colourful protest was overseen by a large police presence, including officers in riot gear and a water cannon truck.

Protesters pushed back against the idea of women's roles being confined to marriage and motherhood, carrying banners reading "Family will not bind us to life" and "We will not be sacrificed to the family."

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan withdrew Türkiye from a European treaty, dubbed the Istanbul Convention, that protects women from domestic violence in 2021. Turkish rights group We Will Stop Femicides Platform says that 394 women were killed by men in 2024.

"There is bullying at work, pressure from husbands and fathers at home and pressure from patriarchal society. We demand that this pressure be reduced even further," Yaz Gulgun said.

In Poland, activists opened a centre across from the parliament building in Warsaw where women can go to have abortions with pills, either alone or with other women.

Opening the centre on International Women's Day across from the legislature was a symbolic challenge to authorities in the traditionally Roman Catholic nation, which has some of Europe's most restrictive abortion laws.

From Athens to Madrid, Paris, Munich, Zurich and Belgrade and in many more cities across the continent, women marched to demand an end to treatment as second-class citizens in society, politics, family and at work.

In Madrid, protesters held up big hand-drawn pictures depicting Gisèle Pelicot, the woman who was drugged by her now ex-husband in France over the course of a decade so that she could be raped by dozens of men while unconscious.

Pelicot has become a symbol for women all over Europe in the fight against sexual violence.

Thousands of women marched in the capital Skopje and several other cities in North Macedonia to raise their voices for economic, political and social equality for women.

Organisers said only about 28 per cent of women in the country own property and in rural areas only 5 per cent, mostly widows, have property in their name.

Only 18 out of 100 women surveyed in rural areas responded that their parents divided family property equally between the brother and sister. "The rest were gender discriminated against within their family," they said.

In Russia, the women's day celebrations had a more official tone, with honour guard soldiers presenting yellow tulips to girls and women during a celebration in St Petersburg.

In Berlin, German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier called for stronger efforts to achieve equality and warned against tendencies to roll back progress already made.

"Globally, we are seeing populist parties trying to create the impression that equality is something like a fixed idea of progressive forces," he said.

He gave an example of "large tech companies that have long prided themselves on their modernity and are now, at the behest of a new American administration, taking down diversity programmes and raving about a new 'masculine energy' in companies and society."

In Nigeria's capital, Lagos, thousands of women gathered at the Mobolaji Johnson Stadium, dancing, singing, and celebrating their womanhood. Many were dressed in purple, the traditional colour of the women's liberation movement.

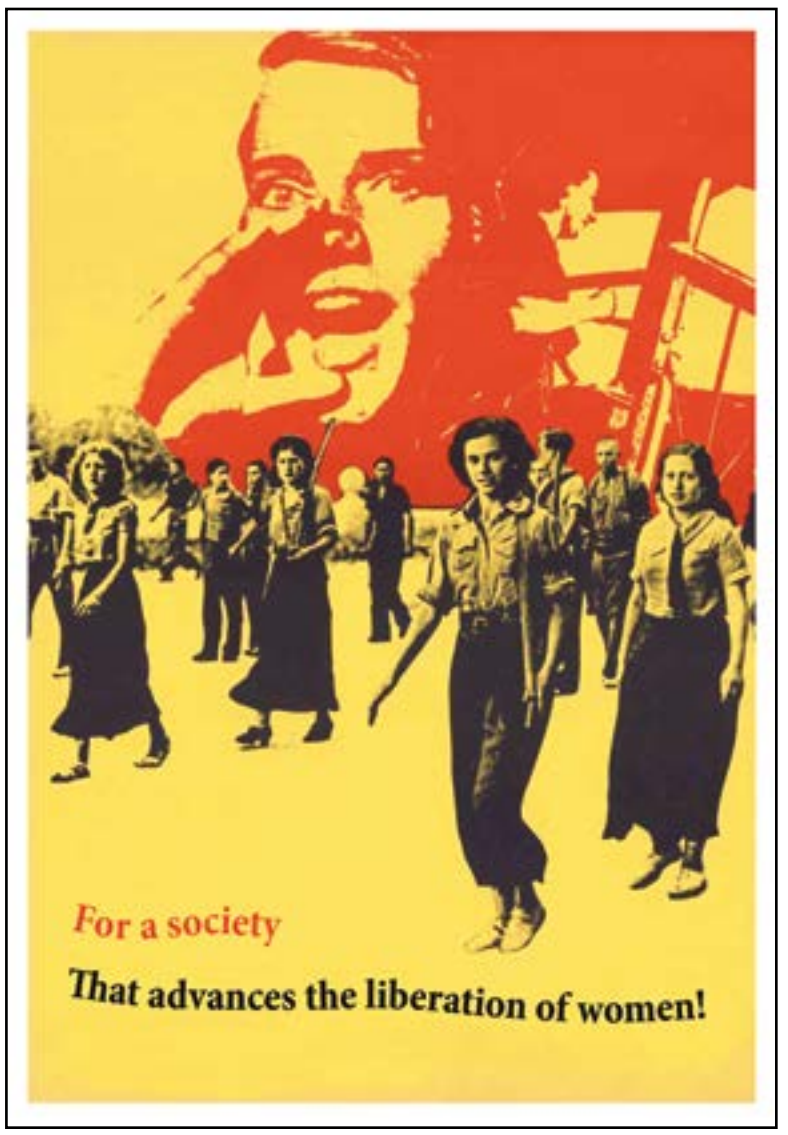
In South America, some of the marches were organised by groups protesting the killings of women known as femicide.

Hundreds of women in Ecuador marched through the streets of Quito to steady drumbeats and held signs that opposed violence and the patriarchal system.

"Justice for our daughters!" some demonstrators yelled in support of women slain in recent years.

In Bolivia, thousands of women began marching late on Friday, with some scrawling graffiti on the walls of courthouses demanding that their rights be respected and denouncing impunity in femicides, with less than half of those cases reaching a sentencing.

Morning Star



IWD Luncheon Adelaide

Celebrating the 50th anniversary of IWD

First Nations artist and writer, Tabith Lean, an eloquent advocate for criminalised women, recounted not only her own devastating personal experiences on first being incarcerated, but also how Aunty Pat who works with Aboriginal women in prison, brought her hope out of total despair.

Poverty was clearly identified as the main driver of criminalisation as revealed by a women being imprisoned for failing to pay for a pie at a service station in an effort to feed her child. Currently the South Australian premier, Peter Malinauskas, boasts about his Government's additional spending on prisons and police, when those millions would be better directed towards programs for disadvantage children at school or more affordable government housing.

Aunty Pat revealed how difficult it is for a person who has been in jail to secure a job. Prison is a fact that has to be concealed, a further crime, in order have any chance of success with employment. Areas of work where police clearances are required, even with some cleaning jobs, become out of bounds.

Both Aunty Pat and Tabitha agreed that more love and compassion is needed in dealing with unacceptable behaviour at the community level, possibly from friendly, understanding neighbours. In family situations, for instance, when police are called, one partner can usually end up criminalised and as a consequence, children may be unable to see their father and a vital income may be lost to the family.

Another highlight was the discussion with First Nations women, looking back over the 50 years since the UN Year for Women was declared and several International forums since, plus IWD celebrations each year. What have these done for Australian First Nations ? There are now higher incarceration rates of Aboriginal women, more of their children being taken away and domestic violence and police brutality has increased. The Aboriginal women felt that IWD has become a middle class development leaving them behind.

A clear message was that *all* women, including criminalised women, should be offered the opportunity to *march forward.*

R Hall

Panama Canal ports sold to US consortium

A Hong Kong-based conglomerate has agreed to sell its controlling stake in a subsidiary that operates ports near the Panama Canal to a consortium including BlackRock.

The deal would effectively place the ports under the control of the United States after President Donald Trump alleged Chinese interference with operations on the critical shipping lane.

CK Hutchison Holding said it would sell all shares in Hutchison Port Holdings and Hutchison Port Group Holdings to the consortium, in a deal valued at nearly $23 billion (AUD $36bn), including $5bn (around $8bn) in debt.

The deal will give the BlackRock consortium control over 43 ports in 23 countries, including the ports of Balboa and Cristobal, located at either end of the canal. Other ports are in Mexico, the Netherlands, Egypt, Australia, Pakistan, and elsewhere.

The transaction, which must be approved by Panama's government, does not include any interest in a trust that operates ports in Hong Kong, Shenzhen, and south China, or any other ports in the country.

Some 70 per cent of the sea traffic that crosses the Panama Canal leaves or goes to US ports.

The US built the canal in the early 1900s as it looked for ways to facilitate the transit of commercial and military vessels between its coasts.

Washington relinquished control of the waterway to Panama on 31 December 1999, under a treaty signed in 1977 by president Jimmy Carter.

President Trump has claimed that Mr Carter "foolishly" gave the canal away, has complained about the passage fees that ships are charged, and maintains that China has been operating the waterway.

In January, US Senator Ted Cruz, Republican chair of the Senate committee on commerce, science and transportation, raised concerns that China could exploit or block passage through the canal and that the ports "give China ready observation posts" to take action.

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio visited Panama in early February and told President Jose Raul Mulino that Panama had to reduce Chinese influence over the canal or face potential retaliation.

President Mulino rejected the accusation that China had any control over canal operations.

Frank Sixt, co-managing director of CK Hutchison, said the transaction was 'the result of a rapid, discrete but competitive process in which numerous bids and expressions of interest were received.

"I would like to stress that the transaction is purely commercial in nature and wholly unrelated to recent political news reports concerning the Panama ports."

Morning Star

Puerto Rico vs Trump

Popular dancing in Puerto Rico. Photo: Jaime Olmo – flickr.com (CC BY 2.0)

Graham Holton

US President Donald Trump signed an Executive Order on 2 March 2025, that designates English as the United States' official language. This has created much concern within Puerto Rico, a Spanish-speaking US territory. The order rescinds the Clinton mandate requiring agencies and recipients of federal funding to provide language assistance to non-English speakers. As a territory, Puerto Rico is under the plenary control of Congress, which makes rules on the language for the territory. For now, Spanish remains the language of the island's government, its public affairs and its schools.

While English is a mandatory academic course, less than a quarter of Puerto Ricans speak it with any proficiency. Puerto Rico identifies intrinsically with Spanish, especially in the debate of Puerto Rican territorial status to statehood. When Congress debated the Puerto Rico Status Act, the Power 4 Puerto Rico coalition advocated to preserve Spanish as the island's language. If Puerto Rico becomes a state, it will have control over what will be its official language. If Puerto Rico gained independence Spanish would be its official language.

Trump has a track record of equating English use with identity. In 2015, Trump criticised Jeb Bush for speaking Spanish at rallies in Florida: "This is a country where we speak English, not Spanish." The Trump administration claims that speaking English "opens doors economically" and will help people "engage in their communities," both true enough, but for Trump the priority is to reinforce white ruling class dominance, and display his trademark xenophobia.

Trump does not like Puerto Rico or its people. In his now-infamous rally at Madison Square Garden in 2024, which critics saw as an equivalent to a 1939 Nazi rally, Trump called Puerto Rico a "floating island of garbage." Trump had earlier opposed the federal disaster agency FEMA paying the US$20 billion federal funding that Congress had allocated for the 2017 Hurricane Maria disaster.

For Puerto Rico, English as the official language has underscored its political relationship with the US since the US militarily occupied the island in 1898, during the Spanish American war. In 1900 the US government anglicised the island's name to 'Porto Rico' and set about 'civilising' Puerto Ricans by converting the island's political and legal system to that of the US. This process aimed to turn Puerto Ricans away from their native culture and identity by adopting the US way of life, against their will.

The public education system was a part of this assimilation. English, the language of their occupiers, became compulsory in schools. US teachers were sent to Puerto Rico to instruct in English, while Puerto Rican teachers were sent to the US to learn English. Teachers who refused had their employment terminated. Resistance to US policies increased. In 1912 the Asociación de Maestros de Puerto Rico (Puerto Rican Teachers Association) was created to resist US ideology and its attack on national identity. During the 1930s, with unemployment at 65 per cent, the population faced overwhelming poverty, malnutrition, illiteracy and disease. Popular resistance led Puerto Rican officials to identify Spanish as the national language and Congress allowed the island to elect its own governor in 1947.

From 1949 the Nationalist Party prepared for an armed revolt in 1952, when the US Congress was set to create the Free Associated State (*Estado Libre Associado*) for Puerto Rico. Anti-US passions came to a head in 1950 with the Utuado Revolt (*El Grito de Utuado*). The US government responded by sending ten P-47 Thunderbolt fighter planes from Ramey Air Force Base to bomb the town of Jayuya. US infantry and the Puerto Rico National Guard attacked the towns involved in the nationalist uprising, killing 28 people and wounding 50. The last major attempt by the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party to draw attention to Puerto Rico's colonial situation was in March 1954.

Puerto Ricans remain a proud people, despite their poverty and President Trump's ridicule. English, while useful, is a symbol of oppression by an occupying power that denigrates them and their culture, and is not something Puerto Ricans need shoved down their throats to satisfy Trump's xenophobia. The great majority of Puerto Ricans, 76 per cent, prefer to speak Spanish. For many there is hope for independence from the US.

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Half the Sky

Clare Marino

"All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others." George Orwell's quote from *Animal Farm* is a reference to the hypocrisy of governments that proclaim the absolute equality of their citizens but give power and privilege only to a handful of powerful, capitalist cronies.

Until recently, the terms diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) were so-called motherhood statements, the category of ideas that are so patently fair and worthwhile that it's hard to imagine any logical argument against them. This still holds true, there are no logical, evidenced-based rational arguments against them, but these important representations of equality and fairness are under attack, nevertheless.

The United States president's 21 January executive order stopping "radical and wasteful" DEI programs in federal agencies ought to be great cause for alarm, especially when conservative politicians in Australia appear to be dog whistling their support for these retrograde ideas.

Many large companies have been quick to follow the president's lead and adopt his anti-equity agenda, including those that do big business in Australia. Goldman Sachs has announced that it will end its formal board diversity program, requiring at least two diverse members on its board of directors. Deloitte has announced it will "sunset" its annual diversity report.

Over the past few months, the list of companies either scrapping or announcing plans to wind back their DEI policies and practices has grown. Huge corporations including Walmart, Meta, and Amazon have released official statements announcing plans to abandon DEI commitments and end programs designed to support underrepresented groups. A Google spokesperson announced that company would no longer celebrate cultural days including Pride Month and Black History month. Disney says it is "rebranding" DEI!

Some of these corporations are hiding behind the fig leaf of corporate double speak, saying while they have abandoned formal measures their commitment to equity remains. This is patently ridiculous. In the absence of formal policies and practices, such as quotas and other measures to facilitate the inclusion of women, the evidence is that progress towards equality will stagnate or reverse. Look at the number of women in the quota-free Liberal Party, or the number of female CEOs and board members. In the recent list of the 100 highest paid athletes there was not one female name.

Look at Australia's highly gender-segregated workforce where 'women's work' is under-valued and under-paid. The struggle of nurses, carers, and teachers for equal pay for work of equal value is far from won, while other higher paid occupations in mining, construction, and engineering are male-dominated with some of the highest paid workers. Women face many barriers to entering the workforce, such as lack of affordable childcare, caring for an elderly relative, lack or educational opportunity or outright discrimination in the workforce. It is no coincidence that women are more likely to be found in casual employment or lower paid jobs.

Australia has some important examples of systemic commitment towards inclusion that it can be proud of. Think of Medicare, compulsory super and the NDIS. Not perfect systems by a long shot but important moves in the right direction.

It is crucial that we call out the scrapping of DEI for what it is, an attempt to allow blatant discrimination, wind back progress towards fairness and equity and enshrine privilege. With a federal election looming we need to name and shame those candidates jumping on Trump's bigoted bandwagon and call out candidates and bosses doing the same.

Gaza: peace so far away

William Briggs

Just recently night-time temperatures in Gaza dropped well below average. It meant that people living in temporary shelters, tents, and in the open, suffered even more. Around them, talks go on, promises are made and broken. Around them people still die, unnecessarily. The occupation continues, aid is restricted, hopes are raised and dashed. The agony that is Gaza goes on.

The sudden and short cold snap led to the deaths of six newborn babies.

The bombardment of Gaza by the Israeli military, since October 2024, has resulted in more than 80 per cent of all health facilities being either damaged or destroyed. The ceasefire deal saw Israel agree to allow the delivery of much more humanitarian aid. This included 60,000 mobile homes and 200,000 tents. This and the associated food aid is now being 'delayed' as innocents pay the price for stalled negotiations.

The claims and counter claims of violations of the terms of the ceasefire and the handover of Israeli hostages and Palestinian prisoners are leading to increasing hardship. Netanyahu has announced a blockade of aid into Gaza. Moves toward resolution were pushed aside.

Israeli media reported that the government was about to enforce a total blockade of food and water. Israel's energy Minister, Eli Cohen was quoted as saying that Gaza's electricity supplies would be cut off.

This has been met with condemnation around the world. Oxfam was quick to denounce the blockade as yet another Israeli war crime, calling it "a reckless act of collective punishment, explicitly prohibited under international humanitarian law."

UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Tom Fletcher was another voice of condemnation, saying "Israel's decision to halt aid into Gaza is alarming. International humanitarian law is clear: We must be allowed access to deliver vital lifesaving aid."

Caroline Seguin from Doctors Without Borders declared that "Israel is once again blocking an entire population from receiving aid, using it as a bargaining chip. This is unacceptable, outrageous, and will have devastating consequences."

The entire population of Gaza is still suffering and suffering unnecessarily. The UN has estimated that in the past four months, 19,000 children had been hospitalised for acute malnutrition. Things appear to be worsening regardless of the state of the ceasefire. The bombs might not be falling just now, but the suffering has not gone away.

The World Food Programme issued a warning in early March to the effect that food supplies required to keep 'public' kitchens and bakeries operating would run out in two weeks. 500,000 people are entirely dependent on food aid.

Immediate fears of starvation had receded following the ceasefire of mid-January. Supplies of food and water increased dramatically. Wells were re-opened, doubling the levels of available water for the population. While this was still below the level that existed in October, 2023, there was hope. Those hopes are daily being dashed.

Food prices in Gaza are spiralling as a result of the shortages. The price of flour and vegetables has doubled.

The foreign ministers of the UK, Germany, and France issued a joint statement which says in part that "a halt on goods and supplies entering Gaza, such as that announced by the government of Israel would risk violating international humanitarian law …. Humanitarian aid should never be contingent on a ceasefire or used as a political tool." The foreign ministers spoke for all when they said that maintaining the ceasefire was vital, that the hostages must be released and that aid must continue to flow.

There is a sense of foreboding, almost of inevitability that hangs in the air. An end seemed possible. The civilian population of Gaza danced amid the rubble when the ceasefire was announced. Their aspirations are simple fair and reasonable. They want a chance to live in peace and to rebuild their lives. Belligerent attitudes as well as the on-going desire to rid Gaza of its people are once more in the ascendancy. Nothing that Netanyahu says or does is possible without Washington's approval and active support.

After the Israeli decision to use aid to try to force a change to the ceasefire agreement, a White House National Security spokesperson remarked that "Israel has negotiated in good faith since the beginning of [the Trump] administration to ensure the release of hostages held captive by Hamas terrorists … we will support their decision on next steps, given Hamas has indicated it is no longer interested in a negotiated ceasefire."

Armed with such assurances, the extremist Israeli Finance Minister, Bezalel Smotrich was emboldened to say that "the decision … to completely stop the entry of humanitarian aid into Gaza until Hamas is destroyed or completely surrenders and all our hostages are freed is an important step in the right direction." His usual level of vitriol accompanied his remarks and were almost identical to Trump's threats of "all hell breaking loose."

Trump's vision of a Gaza free of Palestinians; in the vein of the Nazi *Judenrein* slogan, but with the added spectacle of Las Vegas on the Mediterranean, has not been going well. Arab nations have expressed their readiness to fund the rebuilding of Gaza without evicting the population. The Palestinian people are not prepared to simply disappear.

The most recent issue of accusation and counter-accusation between Hamas and Israel has allowed Trump to fulminate and to issue threats. He has promised to give Israel everything they need to destroy Hamas.

US military support for the Israeli war machine is growing. Secretary of State Marco Rubio has announced that another $4 billion US worth of weapons is on the way. As he put it, the USA will "continue to use all available tools to fulfill America's longstanding commitment to Israel's security, including means to counter security threats." There are reports that these "means" include thousands of 2,000-pound bombs. Biden had already shipped enough hardware to allow Israel to all but totally destroy all structures in Gaza. Trump is providing so much more.

Netanyahu was buoyed by the announcement. Disregarding the ceasefire and its importance now and into the future, the Israeli leader praised the decision and Trump. "Donald Trump is the greatest friend that Israel has ever had in the White House …. He has shown it by sending us all the munitions that were being held up. This way, he is giving Israel the tools we need to finish the job."

The ceasefire might technically hold, but given such rhetoric and given the stated ambitions of Netanyahu and Trump to clear the land, then peace is a mirage.

The nights became chilly in Gaza. Babies died from the cold. Starvation again stalks the land. The people cry, and their simple cry is that they be given a chance to live in peace and with dignity in their own land. ✪

Photo: Hla.bashbash – wikimedia.org (CC BY 4.0)

APAN condemns 'hell plan'

The Australia Palestine Advocacy Network (APAN) is demanding urgent Australian action as Israel moves to escalate its already devastating, and illegal, blockade on Gaza under a program reportedly referred to as the "hell plan."

This plan, which aims to cut off essential food, water and electricity supplies to Gaza's 2.2 million Palestinians, is an egregious violation of international law and an unacceptable intensification of the ongoing humanitarian disaster that Israel has manufactured in the besieged territory.

APAN President Nasser Mashni has called the so-called "hell plan" a barbaric act of collective punishment, deliberately starving 2.2 million Palestinians in Gaza. This is not just a humanitarian catastrophe – it is a calculated, and deliberate expression of the intention to commit a war crime, unfolding in real time.

"Palestinians in Gaza have endured months of relentless bombardment, mass displacement, starvation and unspeakable terror. Now Israel is tightening the noose with a blockade designed to push Palestinians beyond the brink.

"International law isn't upheld by words – it's upheld by action. Australia cannot demand that Israel abide by international law while ignoring its own obligation to enforce it. Talk about a "rules-based order" is meaningless without concrete actions to defend it.

"The Australian government must condemn this plan, and Israel's ongoing genocidal assault on Palestinians, outright, or face being accused of complicity in Israel's siege and starvation."

The bombs might not be falling just now, but the suffering has not gone away

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