

Workers' Liberty



The emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself
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Are Australian unions going to “Change the Rules”?



What a welcome surprise it is for union activists to hear defiance of the bosses, and passion for workers' rights, from an ACTU Secretary, while she makes a point of attending picket lines and workers' disputes. Is the movement going to be turned around after years of decline, and start to deliver surprises of substance for Australian workers?

The Change the Rules campaign <https://www.australianunions.org.au/change_the_rules> launched in July 2017 by Sally McManus for the ACTU poses the big issues as inequality, tax evasion by corporations and workplace laws that cripple unions.

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These are positive steps to build on, which could rekindle a will to fight by some in the union movement. Is this kit going to help make unions more powerful? What does Change the Rules actually offer union members and activists?

What Rules to Change and how to change them?

The Change the Rules campaign kit is primarily aimed at framing the problem issues, and broadening popular awareness of those issues by collecting stories of “inequality and power” and “the broken rules”.

It contains fact sheets on inequality, tax, industrial action, wage theft & workers’ rights, dispute resolution, enterprise bargaining, penalty rates, insecure work, minimum wage, modern workplaces (i.e. gender and balancing paid work and caring work), temporary visa workers, ABCC and asbestos. The CFMEU is the only union that gets its own issues on a fact sheet. The kit flags some changes, often with reference to how things used to be better (“taking back power” as if corporations haven’t always had the power), and mostly without being very explicit.

1. Strikes

Strikes should be legal, on both industrial and economic and social policy issues. Victimisation of strikers should be illegal.

This vital point could be amplified with the idea that withdrawing labour is the main power that workers have against employers, and we need to relearn how to use it, because past union deals have contributed to the erosion of our ability to use it.

Sally McManus speaks out in favour of workers’ rights to break unfair laws and has held her ground against employer hysteria, explaining that “these aren’t decisions that are made lightly” in view of the fines on unions. Practically unions could right now be refusing to pay fines, and campaigning

against fines, which can be in the hundreds of thousands of dollars.

2. Industrial courts

Industrial rights, pay and conditions should be legally enforceable via specialised industrial tribunals, that also have the power to settle disputes. “The law used to allow for conciliation, and, if necessary, a decision could be reached by an independent umpire.” Unions should not be forced into expensive civil proceedings.

This point should be qualified by acknowledging that reliance on arbitration weakened unions, the “independent umpire” is a euphemism for brokering a deal that is acceptable to both bosses and workers. That system broke down in the 1980s and 90s because bosses calculated that they could screw workers more without it, and unions didn’t mobilise their industrial clout to prove the bosses wrong.

3. Enterprise bargaining.

The kit says “The enterprise bargaining system was intended to provide workers with fair wages and conditions in exchange for business improving productivity. While companies have enjoyed increased productivity, they’ve failed to share those benefits with workers. They’ve just lined their pockets. Profits have soared, wages have not. Big business has too much power and working people are paying the price.”

It’s very unclear whether this implies unions will be demanding a return to a system of national awards, or reforms to enterprise bargaining. Regarding enterprise bargaining, the employers had one intention – to increase their power by dividing workers up by enterprise, cutting them off from broader solidarity and isolating them from union negotiated pay and conditions. Unions imagined an opposite possibility, that they could escape the “no extra claims”, flat rate increases that the commission had been making in the 1980s at the expense of higher

paid workers, and that they could win productivity gains enterprise by enterprise. Unions failed to anticipate who really had the power to get their way, when the basis for workers solidarity was so much narrower. To turn this around now, unions could be making claims outside the allowable matters, organising pattern bargaining despite it being prohibited, and preparing members to ignore the “protected action” restrictions.

4. Insecure and casual work.

“For many employers, it’s now a business model. Our work laws have made it more and more difficult to protect permanent work. The rules need to change to make our jobs, and our lives, more secure.”

Changes that could improve job security include unfair dismissal laws, limits on the length of casual employment, and clauses to limit proportions of casual and temporary employment in enterprise agreements. These are worth fighting for, but employment insecurity is always present when there is extensive unemployment or underemployment, as insecurity is the result of employers in a position of strength in the labour market shifting risks and costs onto workers. Insecurity has also been fuelled because it includes the possibility of flexibility, and has been the only avenue for many women workers to be able to combine paid work and unpaid caring work (See point 6 on Modern Workplaces below). Insecurity will persist if it is left up to private enterprise to provide better employment terms and full employment. A massive expansion in public sector jobs at union rates, and re-nationalisations are needed to undermine that power.

5. Minimum wage.

“For almost 100 years Australia’s minimum wage was about workers’ standard of living. That’s no longer the case. Today

the minimum wage is decided by a panel of ‘experts’ dominated by economists. The result is that the minimum wage has fallen badly behind and no longer protects working families from poverty...The ACTU argued that ...more pay to workers will give people more money to spend in their communities, and that more spending would create more jobs.”

This history of minimum wages airbrushes out distributional conflict between capital and labour evident even in the old arbitration commission, as the cost of living was being abandoned as a standard for wage setting, during the Accord years. The level of the minimum wage reflects the strength of the labour movement, especially the willingness of sections with most industrial leverage to stand up for the whole working class including the lowest paid. Even as corporations recognise that low demand is caused by low wage growth, none of them are volunteering to pay higher wages, and they generally argue that lower labour costs will create jobs. The ACTU applied for \$45 per week increase in the minimum wage in 2017, and the commission awarded only \$22.00. Unions could be backing up the national wage claim by organising members to take action for the claim, in defiance of industrial laws against such action, especially as more workers become subject to national awards rather than enterprise agreements.

6. Modern Workplaces (i.e. women, work and care)

“The ACTU have applied to the Fair Work Commission for a new right for workers to temporarily reduce their working hours to help them better manage their work and family commitments ...We need to change the rules so workers can reconcile work and family responsibilities and align workplace norms to the reality of modern working families...The lack of access to flexible working hours plays a large role in

the continuing gender pay gap, discrimination during pregnancy and on return to work with high levels of occupational downgrading. The gender pay gap has stubbornly been between 15 per cent and 19 per cent for the past two decades, and workplace laws have not been adequate enough to close it.”

This is a contradictory approach to a bigger problem, of growing inequality between households based on wide variations in both total hours of paid work performed by household members, and in rates of pay between workers. Access to unpaid time off work, whether in the form of leave or part time work, in order to meet caring responsibilities serves to increase financial stress and inequality, and push down on women’s earnings. This risks further widening the gender pay gap and increasing inequality between households. Shorter standard working hours and more paid leave would be far more effective, and arguably if demands for these had been pursued by unions in the 1970s and 1980s, the rapid growth in insecure employment since then could have been considerably retarded.

Clear demands on employers or vague hopes for a Labor government

One clue to the lack of explicit proposals could be the campaign’s perspective on timing “Once we build our movement, we will need to fight for the solutions. This won’t be won overnight, we want to change it for the next generation.” Jeff Sparrow https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jul/12/winning-back-basic-industrial-rights-wont-be-easy-but-its-time-to-fight?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other makes a point on why this is a weak way to proceed. “unions that don’t strike can’t win pay rises – and without that, they won’t enrol members. That’s why there’s no dodging the fundamental issue. If unionism is to survive,

it must reclaim industrial freedom. For better or for worse, that means a fight.”

Another clue to the vagueness of Change the Rules is who it expects to make the changes to corporate power. Will a government more favourable to workers deliver, or is it essential that workers themselves take on the corporations’ power directly through unions?

Change the Rules doesn’t critique the core of employers’ power – their control of productive resources (including labour) and the imperative to allocate those resources for the purpose of increasing the value of assets. This translates especially as capital’s right to hire and fire, and to develop production regardless of damage to humans or nature.

Whilst Change the Rules refers many times over to the excessive power of corporations, it explains that power as residing essentially in advantages in the legal system and law non-enforcement, applying to taxation and industrial relations. So Change the Rules is in effect asking for a government to change the rules, and is not a proposition to the union movement to use its clout against employers. Labor is already promising to collect more tax from the wealthy and to make industrial laws less restrictive on unions.

Change the Rules could very easily become little more than another election campaign tool for Labor (like Build a Better Future, which was led by Sally McManus), if it doesn’t make clear demands on both employers, governments and specifically the ALP, and also focus on equipping workplace delegates to build support for industrial action on those demands. As it stands Change the Rules provides union delegates with talking points, but not yet a tool for mobilising members against the employer.

Changing the rules inside our unions

Given the politics and history of the ACTU and its affiliates, the inadequacies of Change the Rules are unsurprising. The fact

that the campaign had to be launched at an organisers conference, and not a delegates conference is a measure of the weakness of the union movement. Unless delegates are cultivated as the democratic decision makers of the union, then union campaigns will lack the collective will and commitment of members that is needed to beat the employers and governments. Joining a union and paying dues is secondary to that. “Organising” without them produces cynicism that unions are about funding their own bureaucracies by selling insurance policies that they can’t pay up on. Where are the union leaders who really understand this and act on it, as opposed to paying lip service?

Sally McManus is no doubt constrained in her ability to give direct effect to her combative stance, because that is in the hands of separate union apparatuses, with their own history of organising and relating to their members. But it is not clear what she specifically advocates or that her strategy is insistent on workers organising themselves.

Union leaders who are serious about taking power from corporations cannot deliver unless they free themselves to develop and advocate a program outside the business as usual confines that infect trade unions. A political (ie policy based) organisation in the union movement could take on these issues and shift the terms of traditional “factional” politics of turf positions and personal allegiances, to democratic deliberation in order to set clear political and industrial demands and to lead a fight for them.

We need a new era of unionism in which delegates, members and leaders understand that durable strength rests on courage and willingness in the workplace, among workers, to take on the employer, and to act in solidarity with workers in other workplaces doing the same. We need to recognise that the employers, capital, are not

our partners (neither actually nor potentially) in achieving a fair and decent society, and that state institutions cannot be relied on to protect us from employer power.

Vote Yes to Marriage equality, no boycott

Evan Gray, anarchist, queer rights activist, former convenor of Community Action Against Homophobia (CAAH) and current member of Left Renewal explains their response to the Government’s planned postal plebiscite.

We should campaign for a yes vote in the postal plebiscite even though it’s being set up in such a way as to manipulate and obstruct the yes vote. Our core demand is marriage equality, it is not for a process. There is no principle in waiting for parliament to vote for it. We want full marriage equality with no exemption for religion, no delay. We have to challenge homophobia in the campaign.

The boycott doesn’t have mass support. There is an almost unanimous view amongst meetings of Community Action Against Homophobia (CAAH), DIY Rainbow, and campus groups like Queer Action Collective (QuAC), that we need to enrol people to vote and fight for a yes vote, whatever we feel about the survey process.



During the British miners strike lesbian and gay solidarity won reciprocal solidarity from miners.

As leftists we shouldn't underrate ourselves. Marriage equality campaigners are planning to run stalls on campus every day for the next month, calling for a yes vote and holding rallies. We should commend them, not condemn them from the sidelines over a disagreement about the process for achieving a shared demand. Some of the left gripes about the postal survey are that the yes vote is non-binding, while the no vote is binding, that it delays equality when we already had a bill that could've passed in August, that we're not given an indication on the wording of the legislation that will be put should we get a yes, that the survey is put forward in such a manner to disenfranchise young people (last time something like was done, turn out was like a third of under 25s), that many Indigenous communities and queers with unstable housing situations will be disenfranchised.

Conservative anti-plebiscite campaign

Last year the NGOs argued to wait for a change of government, while the Liberals proposed a plebiscite.

The NGO led campaign against the plebiscite was disgusting, it was to the right of Brandis, arguing that politics belongs in the hands of MPs, that the working class is inherently homophobic, a plebiscite is unwinnable, that mass action is irrelevant and that people should be happy to wait for a change of government to deliver marriage equality. Some justification included quotes from Ayn Rand about the rights of the individual not being subject to the majority.

These arguments are from a family of NGOs run by 'progressive' independents who in a different world would be Liberals. The core of it is Australian Marriage Equality (AME), a marriage equality NGO chaired by Alex Greenwich, who is an independent MP for the seat of Sydney backed by Clover Moore and alongside her backs candidates for local council (and has soft interventions

in Mardi Gras board elections). AME's federal election interventions in the past have also called for votes for Liberal party candidates so long as they support marriage equality. AME set up an additional front group, called Australians 4 Equality (A4E), which receives millions from wealthy Liberal donors and can't directly criticise the Liberal party. Their biggest donor is an owner of the Canberra airport, and they've hired a campaigner from Ireland as one of their lead organisers. AME's closeness to the Liberals led to one of its long standing activists, Rodney Croome, (who has historically defended even Abbott for making 'progress') splitting to form 'just.equal' as a more progressive alternative.

The conservative anti-plebiscite campaign also played with the idea of "safer spaces", contributing to the idea that a plebiscite would be dangerous rather than liberating. The "safer spaces" issue is a liberal discourse around shutting disagreement and dissent out of politics, because it might be upsetting. It has sometimes been used to smother leftist arguments as for example at a queer conference that banned socialists because it might be "triggering" to talk about politics.

Labor and The Greens

Labor and The Greens opposed the plebiscite, and The Greens are in a court case against the postal survey. They should have moved for a real plebiscite a year ago, with their own wording and conditions, to stop it being biased towards failure.

During the Gillard era the Left actively argued for a plebiscite to break the grip of opponents of marriage equality, and as a confidence building expression, as it had been in Ireland, where many more people came out after the successful vote.

The plebiscite was cynical on the part of the Liberals to move against the primary goal of getting to marriage equality as quickly as possible with no concessions. The

far right wing of the Liberals want a no vote, or at least minimal yes vote, in order to shut down marriage equality and declare a victory over the 'gay agenda', embolden homophobes, and crush Turnbull's supporters in the name of a more pure Liberal party. They genuinely seem to see queer rights as an existential threat (the Safe Schools cuts being another example).

The plebiscite could have been more progressive than a postal survey.

Venezualan crisis deepens

by Pablo Velasco

Venezuela's growing social polarisation and slide towards civil war has intensified in recent weeks, the combined result of right-wing destabilisation and the actions of the Maduro government.

The current political impasse arises from the unravelling of the "Bolivarian" project of Hugo Chávez. His successor Nicolás Maduro narrowly won the presidential election in 2013, but failed to retain the regime's popularity with the majority of Venezuelan people.

Maduro's ruling PSUV party lost the National Assembly elections to the right wing opposition in 2015. Last year, the president suspended the recall referendum demanded by the right-wing opposition under the constitution and then the regional elections. The current crisis was triggered in March this year, when the pro-Maduro judiciary effectively undermined the National Assembly's legislative powers. The right-wing began weeks of daily demonstrations in Caracas in response.

On 1 May, Maduro announced elections for a Constituent Assembly, formally intended to redraft Chávez's 1999 constitution but in reality to circumvent the existing parliament. These elections took place on 30 July and were boycotted by the opposition, resulted in a heavily pro-Chavista body.

One of the first acts of the Constituent Assembly was to remove former Chavista attorney general Luisa Ortega from office. Diosdado Cabello, deputy leader of the PSUV has already proposed that the Constituent Assembly should meet for two years. It is clear that Maduro hopes to use the new legislature to stabilise Chavista rule and ride out crisis. However there appears little in these moves to widen democracy or make more space for the working class to organise itself independently.

Economic collapse

The context for this crisis is an economic collapse of enormous proportions. Whereas Chávez benefited from rising oil prices, swelling government coffers and funding welfare programmes, Maduro's regime has suffered as oil revenues collapsed. According to the IMF, Venezuela's GDP is currently 35% below 2013 levels – a crash on a par with the Great Depression and the collapse of Stalinism. Runaway inflation has decimated living standards and doubled levels of poverty. An academic study found that three-quarters of Venezuelans have lost 9 kilos (over a stone) in weight over the last two years.

Maduro's response to the economic crisis has been to draw up plans to exploit Arco Minero, Venezuela's Amazon region. Previously ruled out by Chávez on environmental grounds, Maduro has offered multinational corporations concessions to mine the region. The government also formed Camimpeg, an autonomous company run by the ministry of defence to administer the zone. If these plans succeed, they may salvage the regime, but only at the expense of ecological catastrophe.

The right wing opposition

The political context for the current crisis is also the deliberate strategy of the right-wing opposition around the Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (MUD) to destabilise

the Maduro government. The traditional Venezuelan bourgeoisie, which enjoyed higher living standards off the back of oil rents for decades, never accepted the legitimacy of the Chávez government. It sought by attempted coups and lock outs to overthrow the regime in 2002-03. With the death of Chávez and the incompetence of Maduro, it believes its time has come again. Yet it remains deeply divided, with no authoritative leader and shallow social roots.

The right wing opposition has been strongly backed throughout by successive US administrations, from Bush to Obama. Trump has imposed sanctions on individual Chavista leaders and threatened Venezuela's oil exports. Mercosur has suspended Venezuela, while the Organisation of American States has condemned the Maduro regime. The ambassadors of Britain, France, Spain and Mexico have backed the old National Assembly against the new Constituent Assembly.

There are ominous signs of armed unrest. On 28 June, a helicopter attacked government buildings. On 6 August, paramilitaries attacked Fort Paramacay army base in Valencia, Carabobo state. Over 120 people have been killed since the right-wing destabilisation strategy escalated this year. One thing is crystal clear. The right-wing opposition are not democrats. They do not respect the rule of law nor do they offer more freedom for Venezuelan workers. If they succeed they will impose an authoritarian neoliberal government, hell-bent on privatisation, deregulation and austerity that would throw back workers' living standards.

The Chavista regime

The first principle of Marxism is to tell the truth to the working class, to state what is. From the beginning Workers' Liberty has criticised the Chavista regime from the perspective of working class self-emancipation. We never accepted its rhetoric

about "Bolivarian revolution" or "21st century socialism". Venezuela under Chávez promoted only social welfare capitalism. There has been no revolution, in the sense of the working class overthrowing bourgeois state power and establishing its own rule. We have never accepted the fantasy of Chavista nationalisations constituting "workers' control", particularly when most of the economy remained in private hands.

We have defined the Chávez government as a bourgeois Bonapartist formation, what Marx called "the rule of the praetorians". We pointed to the essential role of the civic-military alliance in Chávez's project, whereby the army is central to the Chavista form of rule. Today the Venezuelan armed forces control a huge variety of companies in banking, agriculture, transport, communications, technology, construction, mining and other sectors. The military runs many social welfare programmes. It has special shops on military bases, other privileges and access to foreign currency. This is military state capitalism – venal, corrupt and ultimately reactionary.

The left

The current crisis underlines that Chavismo was never part of the socialist project. What Chávez did was to incorporate wide sections of the Venezuelan left behind his project and to cauterise the militant labour movement that developed in the early years of his rule. Out of struggles to advance working-class living standards and defeat the right wing opposition, the UNT trade union confederation was formed. However today the largest union centre is the Bolivarian Socialist Central of Workers (CSBT), close to the regime.

On the Venezuelan socialist left, many took the disastrous decision to join the ruling PSUV. Some tendencies such as the United League of Chavista Socialists (LUCHAS) remain within, while previous supporters such as Marea Socialista (Socialist Tide)

have now left it. Chavismo disorientated the majority of socialist militants. That is the real tragedy in the current crisis: the absence of an authentic working class socialist pole of attraction to organise the millions disillusioned by Chavismo but who also understand the need to defeat the right wing opposition.

Responsibility for this debacle lies heavily with the international left. The worst offenders have been the International Marxist Tendency (Socialist Appeal in Britain) and Green Left Weekly in Australia, who peddled illusions that Chavismo was somehow socialist or could lead a socialist revolution, lamenting that Chávez had stopped “half-way”, ignoring that the regime was never about socialist goals nor socialist methods. Hands Off Venezuela, the Venezuela Solidarity Campaign and similar initiatives have operated as external propagandists for Chavismo and apologists for the Venezuelan government, not with making solidarity with workers and their own organisations.

International socialists must help the Venezuelan workers to defeat the right-wing coup plotters, so that they can then settle their accounts with the Chavista regime. Real working-class solidarity means telling the truth about the neoliberal opposition as well as the current government, while advocating independent working-class politics as the way through this crisis.

Letter: Rojava PYD democracy lacking

by Dan Katz

Riki Lane writes about PYD rule in Rojava (Solidarity 444), “Overall this is essentially standard bourgeois democracy, but with a strong emphasis on bottom-up democratic development of a social economy.”

I think Riki is the victim of a PKK public relations operation. The PYD is an off-shoot of the Turkish Kurdish PKK, which remains a militarised Stalinist-nationalist party. The PKK/PYD is dissembling for an international audience because they want support against Turkey and currently they are listed as a banned, terrorist group. They aim to present themselves as unthreatening.

A better parallel for the PYD/Rojava is not with radical bourgeois democracy, it is with Stalinism/Eastern Europe in 1944-8. Now, admittedly, that analogy needs qualification. We are not living in the late 40s, and Stalinism is a withered force. Stalin’s Red Army had enormous power and prestige. Nevertheless the nod at democracy, the creation of a political alliance where the PYD has gathered a number of other parties around itself, for camouflage, reminds me of Poland in the late-40s. As does the fact that the PYD maintains a monopoly on state force.

Although the PYD operates within international constraints, and taking into account their relative lack of power in relation to the Turkish military, they still have a considerable amount of room to do whatever they choose in Rojava. The PYD run a centralised state which has a functioning taxation system, some public services and has recently introduced conscription. They repress their political opponents. A 107-page Human Rights Watch (HRW) report from 2014 (Under Kurdish Rule: Abuses in PYD-run Enclaves of Syria) begins, “[Our report] documents arbitrary arrests of the PYD’s political opponents, abuse in detention, and unsolved abductions and murders. It also documents the use of children in the PYD’s police force and armed wing, the People’s Protection Units (YPG).”

In March 2017 HRW commented on the repression inside Iraqi Kurdistan and Rojava following clashes between Barzani’s Iraqi

Kurdish forces and the PYD. Political opponents of the PYD inside Rojava were arrested, peaceful demonstrations were broken up and the offices of political opponents were ransacked and closed. Similar actions took place against PYD-PKK supporters inside Iraqi Kurdistan. Of course, back the PYD in fights against Daesh. But let's not go any further in our political support.

Labour Party socialists in Britain

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Why Clarion? This is what they say.

The Clarion is an unofficial magazine produced by socialist activists in the Labour Party and Momentum, with the aim of promoting debate, sharing information and ideas and strengthening socialist politics

The Labour Party and the entire country is standing at a crossroad.

Jeremy Corbyn's first election as Labour leader in 2015 opened a space for socialist politics to re-emerge into the British mainstream. His re-election in 2016 showed that there are hundreds of thousands of people who want to see an end to neo-liberalism, to austerity and to the worst misery inflicted by the capitalist system. There are hundreds of thousands of people who at least aspire to a better society than capitalism. The socialist left of the labour movement has a historic opportunity now – we must seize it.

That means an open discussion on politics and principles, assisting the grassroots of the labour movement to develop our own policies and programme for a Labour government and for transforming society,

building on and critically engaging with policies proposed by the leader's office, the unions, the constituencies, and other parts of the movement

It means democratising the Labour Party, preventing further coup attempts against the leadership, and preventing further unjust purges, suspensions, and expulsions

It means facilitating debate on Momentum, its purpose and its future.

The Clarion is a contribution to those debates. In addition to news and reports from our movement, our coverage will particularly focus on:

- Debate and discussion on class and class struggle today, and how we go beyond “new politics” and “progressive politics” to revive working-class politics.
- How we make socialism, a new society based on common ownership and need not profit, the basic, unifying goal of the left, and fight for bold socialist policies in the here and now.
- Fighting nationalism, building working-class solidarity across borders and between workers of different backgrounds and communities.
- Taking a serious and consistent approach to equality and liberation struggles.
- Standing up for rational debate and against nonsense, against the culture of clickbait, conspiracy theory and instant denunciation which has taken root in some parts of the left.

We welcome involvement from comrades who are in broad agreement with these points. We aim to complement rather than compete with the existing publications of the Labour left, and to critically engage with ideas from across the left.

The mess the ostensible Left is in, and the way out

Paul Hampton reviews a new book from Workers' Liberty, The Left in Disarray by Sean Matgamna

Why is the revolutionary left in such a mess today, despite the economic problems of the last decade, the crises of many neoliberal states, the enormous size of the global waged working class, the potential power of the trade union movement and the signs of revival in left politics? The answers to why the Marxist left is in such a state are comprehensively hammered home in this collection of essays. The book is a tour de force history of the revolutionary left over the past one hundred years. The short answer is: Stalinism.

But the syphilis of Stalinism is not only about the states that were or still are ruled by Stalinists. It is also about how the ideology of Stalinism has taken root even among the anti-Stalinist and social democratic left. Sloughing off this Stalinism is an essential prerequisite for reviving the authentic Marxist left.

Why disarray? Matgamna tells the story of the degeneration of the revolutionary left with great verve. The revolutionary left that emerged from the 1917 Russian revolution was essentially healthy. It had opposed the First World War and arose triumphant to lead the Russian workers to power. These revolutionaries formed the Communist International, a school of revolutionary strategy that by the early 1920s had built mass communist parties made up of the finest working class militants internationally.

The principal blow came with the isolation of the Russian workers' state, already depleted by three years of bitter civil war and compounded by the backwardness of the inherited Russian social formation. Concomitantly, no communist party was

able to lead the workers to power outside Russia.

The result was the bureaucratisation of the Russian workers' state. The bureaucratic tentacles strangled the organs of soviet democracy, the trade unions and finally the Bolshevik party — the last living mechanism through which the Russian workers could exercise their rule. The Stalinists "revolution from above" defeated the Left Opposition, imposed forced industrialisation and collectivisation, and destroyed democratic, national and civil rights. After 1928 the new bureaucratic ruling class held the levers of control over the surplus product and inaugurated a totalitarian semi-slave state. After that, the Communist Parties acted as the overseas agents of Russian foreign policy, as well as incipient bureaucratic ruling classes in places where they got a foothold.

The monstrous form of the Stalinist counter-revolution threw most of the revolutionary left back to a state of reactionary anti-capitalism, shorn of working class agency and of the consistently democratic programme they had once espoused. The tiny forces that coalesced around Trotsky put up a spirited rearguard action, keeping alive the flame of authentic Marxism during the 1920s and 1930s. But the Trotskyist movement itself was wrecked on the cusp of the Second World War, its main forces unable to explain the expansion of Stalinism outside of the USSR and later to understand the revival of capitalism in the post-war epoch. Most of the post-Trotsky Trotskyists embraced the Stalinist advance into Eastern Europe, China and beyond as somehow creating "workers' states" (without the active intervention of workers), or painted despotic post-colonial regimes as somehow the embodiment of permanent revolution.

Matgamna itemises the bitter array of failures in the years after the Second World

War. Among the litany of terrible errors were: • Support for North Korea's war in 1950 • Failure to support the East German workers uprising in 1953 • Uncritical support for the Vietnamese Stalinists • Uncritical support for the Castro Stalinists in Cuba after 1960 • Soft backing for Mao's Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution • Opposition to Israel's right to exist after the 1967 war • Backing Catholic chauvinism in Northern Ireland • Opposition to the UK joining the European Union from 1971 • Fantasies about the murderous Khmer Rouge in Cambodia • Support for clerical-fascist theocracy in Iran from 1979 • Support for Russia's murderous war in Afghanistan in 1980 • Support for Argentina's invasion of the Falklands in 1982 • Backing Iran against Iraq in their sub-imperial conflict during the 1980s • Siding with Saddam Hussein after his invasion of Kuwait 1990-91 • Support for Serbia's assault on the Kosovars in 1999 • Softness and refusing to condemn Al Qaeda in 2001 • Support for Saddam in the 2003 war • Uncritical backing of Islamist Sunni and Shia militias in Iraq, even as they slaughtered workers.

Matgamna eviscerates the justifications used by sections of the left for these stances. He is scathing about the "anti-imperialism of fools", a species of "my enemy's enemy is my friend" that leads to support for despotism under the cover of anti-Americanism. He also denounces "left antisemitism", defined as the exceptional denial of fundamental national rights to Jewish people (including the right to their own state) and demonisation of all Jewish people for the crimes of the Israeli state.

Sloughing off these rationalisations for reactionary politics is essential for renewing the revolutionary left. Matgamna's descriptions of the practices and ideologies of the post-Stalinist left are often thought-provoking. The left Stalinist embalming of Lenin is described as the work of a

"Leninolator" and of "Lenin-olatry". The Stalinist picture of the world is "totalitarian utopianism" and the former Trotskyists who capitulated to Stalin "self-depoliticised ex-Bolshevik social engineers". Liberal interventionist are dubbed "mañana third campists", their "socialism" always for the distant tomorrow.

The text also has engaging cultural references — tales of Prester John, Kim Philby, slaves crucified on the Appian Way, Marlon Brando and others. Avid followers of the left will enjoy Matgamna's pen portraits of the principal leaders of the post-war Trotskyist groups in Britain.

Gerry Healy led the SLL and WRP until it exploded after his sexual abuse of members was made public in 1985. By then Healy had sold the organisation to the Libyan, Iraqi, and other Arab states, as an agency to spy on the left and refugees. The Healyites were characterised by their millenarian catastrophism, their frozen words of Trotsky used to justify political lurches, and by gangster politics.

Ernest Mandel was the principal theoretician of the post-Trotsky Fourth International, responsible for rationalising its adaptation to the Stalinist "workers' states" in Eastern Europe, China, North Korea, Cuba and Vietnam. Mandel died in 1995, a few years after the collapse of Stalinism had destroyed his theoretical edifice, leaving a movement clinging to a venerable name while desperately wondering where the "revolutionary process" had gone.

Ted Grant spawned the current Socialist Party and Socialist Appeal. He redefined socialism as "nationalise the top 200 monopolies" and an enabling act. He peddled the fantasies of "proletarian Bonapartism", the military substitutes for working-class agency under Stalinism, but also in Syria, Portugal and latterly Venezuela. Grant's supporters eulogise the capitulation of Liverpool city council while

evading concrete political questions with fantasy sloganeering. Grant did not teach his followers to think, but to do political parrot work.

Tony Cliff was a purveyor of toy-town Bolshevism, a man who bent the stick so far on the revolutionary party that the SWP came to represent a parody of third period Stalinist mono-factions. Cliff joked about trying to find your way around the London Underground with a map of the Paris metro, but the legacy he left was more akin to a map of the Moscow sewers. For the SWP, nothing is forbidden in pursuit of organisational advantage. This makes for an increasingly incoherent group that is now a galaxy away from the Marxism of its origins.

If the history of the left is so miserable, what examples of hope are there? There is much to learn from the small third camp Trotskyist tradition around Max Shachtman and Hal Draper which survived during the 1940s and 1950s. Some of the left have sobered up over Syria, where few socialists could support the Daesh terror even by implication, and where most recoiled from any support for the barbarous Assad regime. Similarly, the Brexit vote saw sections of the left abandon their previous nationalist positions. There is something of a revival in social democratic reformist projects.

The bigger picture includes some disarray among our main enemies, the ruling classes, as illustrated by Trump and May. Most of all, the politics of the AWL provides the most important embodiment of hope.

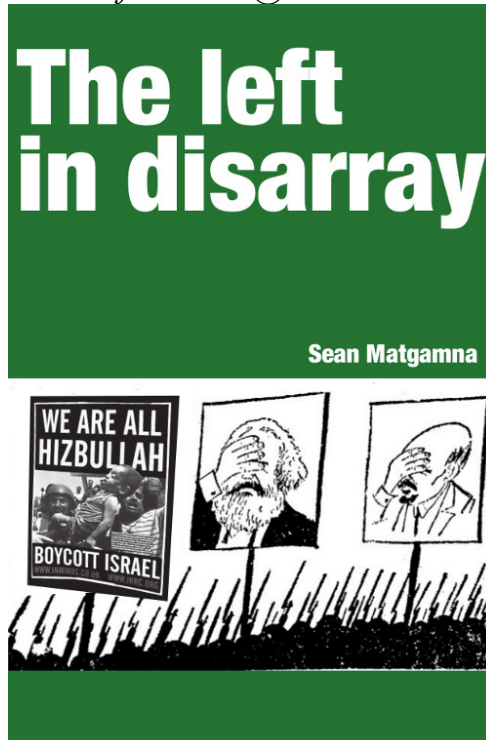
The AWL has forged a living tradition of rational Marxist politics, with realistic assessments of the great global events of the last half century and a series of interventionist political conclusions aimed at mobilising the working class and transforming the labour movement.

The AWL has renewed the great Marxist tradition from a century ago. We do not start from scratch. All is not lost. Much of the left

may be in disarray, but the forces of independent, third camp Marxism are alive. With our help, the new generation of socialists will make this politics their watchword.

Books from Workers Liberty

Order from wl@workersliberty.org.



There is a quickening of life on the left. But, politically, the left is still very weak and disoriented. *The left in disarray* traces the turns and realignments imprinted on this left over many decades by the ascendancy of Stalinism and by the post-Stalinist global reshufflings after 1989-9. Independent working-class politics needs a sense of its own path and its own compass. The left needs to emerge from defining itself primarily in a negative and reactive way, and rediscover what, positively, the real left must be for. A companion volume, by Sean Matgamna, to *Can Socialism Make Sense?*. \$20.00 including postage in Australia.

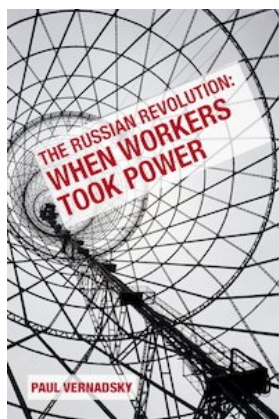
The Russian Revolution

The 1917 Russian revolution was the greatest event in political history so far – the first time working class people took political power and held it for a decade. Yet the real history is buried under myths. Many Western academic accounts portray 1917 as a mutiny of peasant soldiers leading ultimately to a coup d'état, led by a small group of fanatics who established a Stalinist totalitarian state.

Worse, the mirror image of 1917 became the foundation myth of the Stalinist state: the 1917 revolution was used both in Russia and across the world by 'Communist' parties to glorify the terrible Stalinist regime that endured after workers' self-rule was extinguished in the twenties. The original, liberatory working class essence of the original revolution was lost.

Since the 1960s – and especially since the opening of archives in Russia from the 1990s, much more is known about the Russian revolution. This book aims to bring original Marxist perspectives together with a wide range of scholarship. It is written from what Lenin and Trotsky called the 'third camp' independent working class socialist perspective.

This book explains some irreplaceable ideas developed a century ago – uneven and combined development, permanent revolution, democratic centralism, soviets (councils), workers' control, consistent democracy, socialist feminism, transitional demands, the united front and the workers' government. These ideas are highly relevant to students and activists in today's struggles..



\$20.00 including postage in Australia.

Big ideas in a union newsletter

Does an in depth Marxist analysis of neoliberalism, thirteen pages long, belong in a union newsletter? Could workers really be interested in reading it? Queensland Branch MUA members received exactly that in a special edition branch newsletter of 10 August 2017. Bob Carnegie, Branch Secretary thinks it is important to respect the intelligence of union members. Some will look at the graphics, especially the iPhone supply chain. Others will dip in, while some, especially seafarers with more time to read, will read the whole thing.

Nine years on: the new left, neoliberalism and the new right

by Martin Thomas

The global credit crash of 2008 and the ensuing travails have produced delayed political effects. A shift to more rightwing, nationalist, and "identity" politics may move neoliberalism sharply to the right, or even explode it from within. The economic turmoil has also produced new life on the left, as yet on a low wattage. For those who fight for a cooperative commonwealth to replace the grey miseries of neoliberalism, or the brutalities of the more right-wing alternatives, there are three imperatives: to be inside the new left-wing surges, helping them or their best elements to develop; to bring to that activity a political program not cramped and blurred by the malign effects on the left of the decades of neoliberalism and of the decades of Stalinism; and to give priority to helping new young left-wingers, and not only among the educationally credentialled, to organise and develop. Let us investigate what neoliberalism has been; why it has been, and still is, resilient but by no means all-enveloping; what its effects have been on the left; its entropies of today,

and the dynamics of the right-nationalist surges.

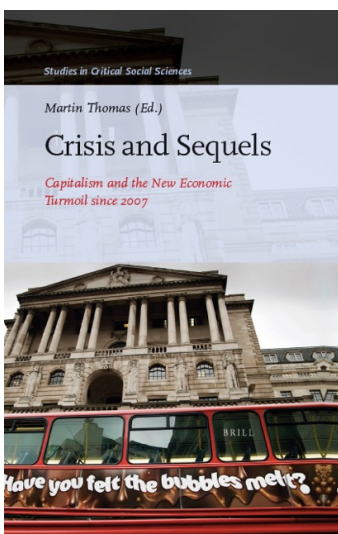
The term "neoliberalism" came into use in the 1990s, to describe a regime which had been installed on a large scale since a series of defeats for the working class in the early 1980s quelled the social turmoil of the 1970s and allowed the beginning of a revival of profit rates. David Harvey, in his *Brief History of Neoliberalism*, describes the characteristic policies of this new regime as "deregulation, privatization, and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision", and its essence as "restoration of class power". A 700-page Handbook of

Neoliberalism produced in 2016 by Simon Springer and others defines neoliberalism as the "extension of competitive markets into all areas of life, including the economy, politics, and society". These definitions are incomplete. Neoliberalism emerged from a crossing-point of developments in the 1970s.

Continue reading the Special Edition Queensland Branch News No 98 10 August 2017 -
http://www.mua.org.au/queensland_branch_news

Crisis and sequels: Sydney seminar with Martin Thomas and Dick Bryan

Wednesday 30 August, 12:00-2:00pm
Sydney University, Abercrombie Business School Room 2130



Like every crisis, 2008's surprised.

By collating a series of discussions, conducted with a variety of left-wing economists in real time, as the crisis and its aftershocks evolved, Martin Thomas's forthcoming book *Crisis and Sequels:*

capitalism and the new economic turmoil since 2007 (Brill) tries to learn from the surprise, and not to dissolve it in a scheme of ineluctable generalities.

The book also wonders what shape of capitalism would emerge from the crash. Frequently in the history of capitalism, economic crises have broken the inertia of bourgeois wisdom and triggered political shifts or conflicts. As of 2016, when the

discussions collated in the book were completed, the evidence was that neoliberalism had proved eerily resilient.

So it has: and we need to understand why. We need also to understand its developing fragilities, and the possible scope of attempts such as Trump's to stretch neo-liberalism to the point of disrupting it from the right.

The interviewed political economists include Fred Moseley, Costas Lapavistas, Leo Panitch, Simon Mohun, Trevor Evans, Dick Bryan, Michel Husson, Andrew Kliman, Robert Brenner, Barry Finger, Daniela Gabor, Hugo Radice, Andrew Gamble, Alfredo Saad Filho.

Emeritus Professor Dick Bryan will be joining Martin Thomas to discuss the book of which he says "Martin created a really interesting project. It will be illuminating to watch people's views change (or not) and a great stimulus to see why (or whether) debates within Marxism matter in framing conjunctural analysis."

Martin Thomas is a long-time writer for Solidarity and Workers' Liberty, based in London, and author of Gramsci in Context (2014).

What we stand for



Today one class, the working class, lives by selling its labour power to another, the capitalist class, which owns the means of production. The capitalists' control over the economy and their relentless drive to increase their wealth causes poverty, unemployment, the blighting of lives by overwork, imperialism, the destruction of the environment and much else. Against the accumulated wealth and power of the capitalists, the working class must unite to struggle against capitalist power in the workplace and in wider society. The Alliance for Workers' Liberty wants socialist revolution: collective ownership of industry and services, workers' control, and a democracy much fuller than the present system, with elected representatives recallable at any time and an end to bureaucrats' and managers' privileges. We fight for trade unions and Labor to break with "social partnership" with the bosses and to militantly assert working-class interests. In workplaces, and trade unions; among students; in local campaigns; on the left and in wider political alliances we stand for:

- Independent working-class representation in politics.
- A workers' government, based on and accountable to the labour movement.
- A workers' charter of trade union rights — to organise, to strike, to picket effectively, and to take solidarity action.
- Taxation of the rich to fund decent public services, homes, education and jobs for all.
- A workers' movement that fights all forms of oppression. Full equality for women, and social provision to free women from domestic labour. For reproductive justice: free abortion on demand; the right to choose when and whether to have children. Full equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. Black and white workers' unity against racism.
- Open borders.
- Global solidarity against global capital — workers everywhere have more in common with each other than with their capitalist or Stalinist rulers.
- Democracy at every level of society, from the smallest workplace or community to global social organisation.
- Equal rights for all nations, against imperialists and predators big and small.
- Maximum left unity in action, and openness in debate.

Workers' Liberty

<http://www.workersliberty.org/oz>

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