

Workers' Liberty



The emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself
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Photo: ETU Vic

The (un)Fair Work Act has to go

Union leaders are counting on Labor winning the next Federal election and then fixing the “broken” industrial rules.

Ged Kearney, Dave Noonan, and other officials, speaking at the Queensland MUA conference in November acknowledged that the ACTU failed the Your Rights @ Work campaign, by ending it once the Howard government lost the 2007 election. A further flaw was that YR@W was silent on union rights to organise and strike, yet employment rights and conditions depend on them. That

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let the Labor Government get away with replacing Work Choices with Work Choices lite. This time, the campaign will continue they said, after the election until unions have the right to organise, bargain and strike.

The ACTU is collecting ideas from unions about what should replace a repealed Fair Work Act, said Ged Kearney. Workers' Liberty believes critical points should be:

- Right to strike. No fines or gaol, for industrial action, including in solidarity with any other workplace, union or cause. No compulsory ballot process before industrial action.
- Right to organise. Delegates and workers can meet and communicate on site using workplace resources, and union officials have right of entry.
- A living wage. The minimum wage should be part of union wage bargaining, with demands backed by industrial campaigning. There should be a fresh assessment by unions of workers needs, to set a dollar figure to campaign for. The benchmark for increases should be transparent, so that workers know exactly how it stands up to increases in the cost of living and community standards.

The Change the Rules campaign talking about an independent umpire. A tribunal that can enforce workers rights against employers is not the same as the old Arbitration Commission that made union officials into a double-edged sword. Historically the Commission made decisions based on its assessment of what would be accepted by both sides, taking account of investment, employment and inflation. Union officials ended up having to choose between helping workers who want to keep fighting for their full demands, or being enforcers of the Commission's orders. Arbitration is not a substitute for union strength against the employers.

There are other big topics that the Change the Rules Campaign cannot afford to be silent on.

The Liberals and Nationals, the shock jocks, employer organisations and the Right in general will scream about economic disaster, union power and Labor being captive. Shorten will distance himself, ask the unions to be quiet, go softly and wait till after the election. Will our union leaders stay firm or go quiet for uncertainty that Labor could lose the election?

Whatever rights we demand, or win, the employers will claim that they will cause unemployment to rise. It is possible that unemployment will rise, whether or not it's because some employers calculate they're cutting investment because of increased labour costs. How will we stand up to this blackmail from employers, that workers either submit to work under their terms without industrial rights, or else we don't get to earn a living at all? We need to work out our answers. We need further demands to solve those next problems, such as shorter hours on same weekly pay, (re)nationalisation, and expanded public services.

Change the Rules is silent on two major controversial political issues, refugees and climate change. The least that Change the Rules should do is to circulate different points of view, and to encourage education and debate on these issues in the trade union movement.

Change the Rules needs more than launches and rallies, it also needs to be run in a democratic and accountable way. If members and delegates debate and endorse demands, this will raise commitment and energy, and unionists will be ready to stand up and fight back against attacks on these demands, and so members and delegates can discuss and vote on any offers before they are accepted by the union movement, to ensure we win no less than we are prepared to fight for.

Bill Shorten winning over business?

by Janet Burstall

An Australian Financial Review (22 November) article posed Bill Shorten as a Jekyll and Hyde, obviously reversing the good and evil positions as trade unionists would see them. The article is ludicrous about Shorten's class struggle credentials, his "natural instinct for class conflict" and praise "for the militant construction and maritime unions." Whatever mistrust corporate employers have for Labor, they are bracing for a Labor government. "The Chamber of Commerce and Industry has been working to improve relations in recent months, a Labor source said, and that effort culminated in last week's lunch at Sydney's Grand Hyatt" where Shorten gave a speech to the ACCI.

The article is succinct yet mild in explaining business motives and power. "Companies don't vote. But political leaders always want the confidence of the business community to encourage investment. Companies are also big political donors and can influence media coverage."

The need for investment to create jobs in a capitalist economy is the bottom line of blackmail by capital. Labor politicians and the ACTU have a record of caving in to this. We can count on Shorten to be trying to accommodate business demands and placate unions with sops on industrial law reform. This ought to be an impossible task for Shorten, if unions commit to hold out for genuine rights to organise and strike.

Thanks to Don Sutherland for highlighting the AFR article in Unions Australia facebook group: "Here we have an insight into Shorten LABOR'S relationship to the big business organisations. Union members and activists need to be paying attention to this, all the time sifting the wheat from the chaff. Key ALP figures have already said that in designing a new Fair Work Act they will replicate the role of the employers in the

design process. CLASSIC Laborism. That is, they will be on an equal footing with the union negotiators. This is the process that led to the "broken rules" of Labor's Fair Work 2009. The process is as broken as the rules. How do we prevent employers from having so much control over the negotiations for the next Act?"

Launching Change the Rules

by Janet Burstall

I heard Ged Kearney at Qld MUA conference say that ACTU leaders won't make the same mistake as they did letting Rudd and Gillard off the hook with UnFair Work Australia, after Your Rights @ Work. But at the CTR launch I went to in Western Sydney, Sally McManus urged us all to campaign for Kristina Keneally, without any recognition of the need to be ready to fight a Labor government. The whole event was so totally stage managed, there was no discussion from the floor at all.

We won't get a genuine grass roots movement within Change the Rules as it is. But I do see CTR as an opening for socialist trade unionists to raise the questions that are being left unanswered and educating around them.

Religious right routed in marriage equality "vote"

by Riki Lane

The "postal survey" on same-sex marriage saw a resounding victory for lgbtiq equality: 61.6% said yes to marriage equality and over 12 million people (79.5%) participated in this voluntary, non-binding poll – a higher rate than the Brexit vote. All states had a yes majority, and 133/150 electorates voted yes, including almost all regional and rural ones.

However, 12 electorates in Western Sydney voted no, mostly ALP held, with working class, largely immigrant populations. These were systematically targeted by right wing religious organisations, and not so thoroughly

worked by the Yes campaigners. This pattern not replicated in similar areas – e.g. only 2 similar electorates voted no in Melbourne. This points to need for systematic work to make links between the struggles of oppressed lgbtiq and migrant/refugee people.

The strange beast that was the ABS postal survey – not a plebiscite, not really a survey – came about as a sop to the right wing conservatives of the Liberal/National coalition, who hoped that young people would not participate and a no vote would sneak through. Instead, 100s of thousands of young people enrolled and voted, energised by the campaign for equality.

Conservatives are on the back foot on the legislation to follow. Religious exemptions are unlikely to be too extensive, although they are already bad e.g. religious schools have the right to sack teachers or expel students. The religious right are correct to fear that this legalised discrimination is likely to be wound back in future; hence their attempt to entrench it further now.

There were many downsides to the process - 100 million dollars wasted and a lot of mental health harm caused, especially to young lgbtiq people, indicated by skyrocketing referrals to lgbtiq friendly counselling. Even experienced psychologist colleagues of mine who are queer felt the strain – much more than they expected.

Now the upsides are much more prominent, given the huge turn out and clear result – there is a great sense of inclusion, with some concerns in Western Sydney. Significantly, the newly energised layer, especially of young people, can have a lasting impact on activist and electoral politics.

Northcote By-election

by Riki Lane

In a historic loss for the ALP, Lidia Thorpe has won the inner city seat of Northcote for the Greens, taking their lower house members of parliament to three. The ALP had held the

seat for 90 years, but there has been an ongoing process of gentrification and swings to the Greens in inner city suburbs in the large cities. State ALP figures are seriously concerned they could be forced into a coalition or minority government at the next election.

The left have generally been inspired by her victory as Lidia has a strong record of activism around environmental and indigenous issues. She becomes the first indigenous woman member of the Victorian State parliament in its 161 year history, which highlights the entrenched racism that has been directed toward indigenous peoples.

A working class charter

Workers' Liberty proposes a platform to unite working class people to fix our problems.

- Union rights, the right to strike and take solidarity action, for organising the unorganised in workplaces and educating their delegates, to take on the employer and the government.
- Secure employment. For action against insecurity and casualisation. Transfer rights between employers, increase the dole, end work for the dole and renationalise employment services.
- Public ownership of banks and other financial institutions, and utilities.
- Union conditions and rates for all workers in Australia, whatever country they are from. Increase and enforce the minimum wage. Stop bosses intimidating workers with temporary work visas. International solidarity and welcome to refugees.
- Rapid transition to renewable energy, and renewable energy jobs, via public ownership.

We think that workers and voters are looking for new solutions.

Visit our Facebook page to tell us what do you think should be in a platform for action. <https://www.facebook.com/pg/workerslibertyoz/>

Queensland MUA global solidarity conference: injecting class politics

*Report of the 'Get Wise, Organise!'
Queensland branch biennial conference*

The threat of massive job losses from automation on the wharves is a worldwide concern addressed at the Queensland MUA international conference.



Professor Raquel Varela from Portugal explained that the decision by owners to introduce robots is both political and economic, and can be contested and beaten. There is not one single fully automated port in the world, robots have not yet achieved the same rate of unloading as worker operated machinery, and they are a very expensive investment that often relies on public subsidies. Her solutions to the threat of loss of jobs to robots include shorter working time hours without reducing salaries, and putting technology under the control of workers, not the dictatorship of the port owner. She challenged casualisation and company power to demand profits, saying “we don’t have kids and houses for 3 months of the year, so why should we only work 3 months of the year? If we have no salary we have no way to live. If the bosses do not have the same profits all the time, this will not question their life, their dignity. The right to have a profit is

not the same as the right to have a salary.” Jason Miners, Deputy Branch Secretary, declared Raquel Varela’s presentation to be “the best injection of class politics into a conference that I have ever heard.”

Queensland MUA delegates learned about the vast differences around the world in freedom to organise, working conditions and threats to livelihoods when they heard in person from International Dockworkers Council branch delegates from Belgium, Spain, Argentina, France, USA, and from the Hong Kong Dockers Union, the Confederation of Congress of Indonesian Alliance of Unions (KASBI) and the International Transport Federation.

Members were gob smacked when a Hong Kong dock worker described 24 hour shifts for Hutchison on cranes with a piss pot on board. In both Hong Kong and Argentina, trade unionists have “disappeared”. Terribly low pay in Indonesia and Hong Kong was shocking. The IDC delegate from Le Havre in France was applauded when he said that workers at his port will not allow full automation. The potential for international solidarity was made clear, and commitment to that solidarity visibly grew over the two-day conference.

Danger of serious injury and death at work was another common theme across the world discussed, with reports of recent serious incidents and a national report on what can be achieved through safety committees.

“It’ll be grim under Tim” Nicholls if Labor loses the Queensland election. Peter Ong of the ETU, Ros McLennan of the QCU, David Greene of the MUA and the Qld MUA-backed candidate for the seat of Everton, and Labor Minister Mark Bailey all made the case for a Labor vote. Peter Ong recounted how the ETU had fought both Bligh Labor and Newman LNP governments to stop electricity privatisation, and ended up in hot debate about the value of affiliation to the ALP. ETU members decided to remain affiliates in order to get commitments to ETU policies

and pro-union election candidates, as well as continuing public campaigns regardless of Labor election prospects.

Professor David Peetz from Griffith University provided some figures and research on declining union density that suggested the best antidote to declining membership that unions could use right now is to make sure that delegates are part of democratic union decision-making, and effective activists in every workplace. Christy Cain from Western Australia reported some success in forming a young workers' group within the MUA, and the NSW Branch is also trying this out.

Ged Kearney brought solidarity greetings from Australian Unions, and spoke about the new 'Change the Rules' campaign, asking everyone to complete the online survey for it. A major component of Change the Rules is to restore legal rights for unions to organise and strike. Dave Noonan from the CFMEU and barrister Peter Morrissey SC also highlighted the problems of criminalising industrial action and why unions should resist the law and order agenda in electoral politics.

Solidarity collections to support workers locked out for over 132 days at North Oaky by Glencore raised over \$2800, to top up donations that had already been made by MUA branches around Australia. And the MUA Queensland Branch is co-ordinating members to drive up to the North Oaky picket line.

Lots more went on at this conference, a great step forward for education, agitation, organisation and working-class solidarity.

The most vital power

In closing the conference Queensland Branch Secretary Bob Carnegie quoted American socialist, Eugene Debs:

“The labor movement is the child of slavery—the offspring of oppression—in revolt against the misery and suffering that gave it birth. Its splendid growth is the

marvel of our time, the forerunner of freedom, the hope of mankind.

Ten thousand times has the labor movement stumbled and fallen and bruised itself, and risen again; been seized by the throat and choked and clubbed into insensibility; enjoined by courts, assaulted by thugs, charged by the militia, shot down by regulars, traduced by the press, frowned upon by public opinion, deceived by politicians, threatened by priests, repudiated by renegades, preyed upon by grafters, infested by spies, deserted by cowards, betrayed by traitors, bled by leeches, and sold out by leaders, but, notwithstanding all this, and all these, it is today the most vital and potential power this planet has ever known, and its historic mission of emancipating the workers of the world from the thralldom of the ages is as certain of ultimate realization as the setting of the sun.

The most vital thing about this world movement is its educational propaganda-its capacity and power to shed light in the brain of the working class, arouse them from their torpor, develop their faculties for thinking, teach them their economic class interests, effect their solidarity, and imbue them with the spirit of the impending social revolution.”

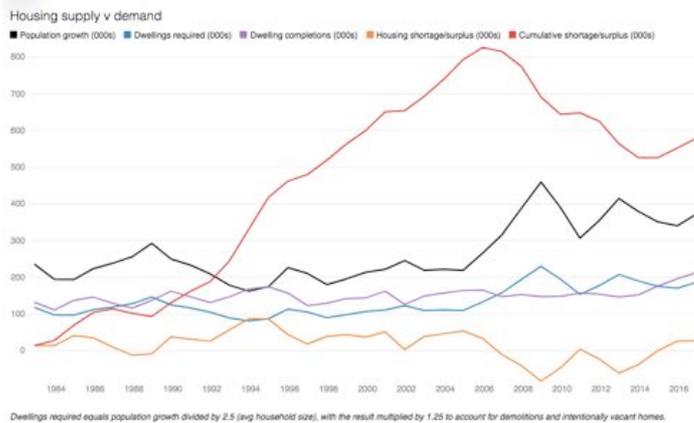
Fake housing shortage: homes not investments

by Janet Burstall

If you count growth in population and dwellings since 1982, there is a cumulative surplus of around 579,000 dwellings in Australia, shown by the top line in the graph.

When prices go up, construction increases too, and when housing prices are falling, there is less home construction. When housing is on an investment market, it isn't built to meet the need for homes, it's built in expectation of making a profit. Capital demand for housing doesn't equal people in need, nor does it deliver housing to those who need it. Increasing housing supply is not the

answer to housing affordability or homelessness.



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics

ABC journalist Michael Janda says the reasons behind unaffordable housing are “the level of speculative demand and ability to pay more for properties facilitated by record low interest rates, financial deregulation and investor subsidies such as negative gearing and the capital gains tax discount.”

The 2011 census counted 0.5% of the population, over 105,000 people as homeless. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare more recently reported that 280,000 people or 1 in 85 people used special homeless services in 2017. The number of people homeless on one night when the census is taken is a lot lower than the number of people who may experience a period of homelessness in their lifetime. But the number of dwellings needed to end homelessness is far less than the extra dwellings that have been constructed over the last 30 years.

Many of those dwellings could be homes instead of unoccupied investments. People also need a lot more off the market housing – i.e. publicly owned housing. Extended tenants’ rights, rent controls, penalties on owners for leaving dwellings vacant, as well as an end to investor subsidies, would all help to get affordable accommodation to people who need it.

Why the British Leyland shop stewards lost

Jim Denham, a former Leyland shop steward himself, gives this account of the decline of union power in British car industry in the 1970s, on the death of the famed former senior steward Derek Robinson. It is a reminder of issues that can be the downfall of even strong unions, and that there are no simple mechanisms for reconciling working class interests with capitalist profitability. The agitation by Australia’s manufacturing unions for enterprise bargaining in the 1980s appeared briefly to allow that particular concession to employers to deliver security, along similar lines to the Leyland shop stewards’ concession to accept Measured Day Work in place of union controlled piece work. Both cases were followed by factory closures and job losses.

For a brief period in the 1970s, Derek Robinson (who has died, aged 90) was widely regarded as the most powerful trade unionist in Britain.

The so-called “Red Robbo” wasn’t a full-time official. He was a shop steward (albeit a senior steward, allowed time off by management, to devote himself full-time, to union duties).

I was a shop steward at the same car plant as Robinson (Longbridge, Birmingham) in the 1970s, and was one of those who went on the picket line when he was sacked in 1979. If some of what I say about Derek seems harsh, it’s because it’s essential we learn the political lessons of his downfall and that of the shop stewards’ movement. I have never doubted or questioned Derek’s personal integrity nor his commitment to trade unionism, socialism, and the working class. Although we frequently clashed, when we occasionally met in later years Derek was unfailingly friendly and unsectarian.

When the company went bust the Wilson government promptly nationalised it.



The response of Wilson's government differed dramatically from that of Blair's which presided over the terminal decline and eventual closure of Longbridge (under Rover) between 2000 and 2005. This can be explained in part by the rise of neoliberal economics and the corresponding transformation in official Labour politics. But abstract ideology is not the decisive factor (after all, Heath's Tory government nationalised Rolls Royce in 1971). The crucial factor is the strength of the organised working class and, specifically, within the threatened workplaces. And in 1974 our class was strong and the Longbridge plant was probably the most powerfully organised (as well as the largest) workplace in Britain.

Longbridge had been gradually unionised after the Second World War. Communist Party (CP) members played a central, and in many ways admirable, role. The plant's first recognised union convenor, Dick Etheridge, was a CP member and in those days it seemed a natural step for active, militant trade unionists in the plant to join the Party. By the 1960s, the Party had a factory branch numbering around 50, and sales of the Daily Worker (later Morning Star) inside the plant (not on the gates) were in the hundreds. Management once tried to prevent sales by seizing a bundle, but were forced to back down by immediate strike action.

The CP's influence went far beyond its formal membership and permeated the Joint Shop Stewards' Committee (JSSC), numbering around 500 stewards from the AEU, TGWU, Vehicle Builders, Electricians

and the multitude of smaller white and blue collar manufacturing unions like the Sheet Metal Workers.

Apart from a few bastions of right-wing (or "apolitical") trade unionism, the shop stewards' movement at Longbridge was dominated by the ideas of the CP, even though the Party never had a majority of card carrying members on the JSSC.

When, in the late 1960s and early 70s, the old British Motor Corporation merged with Standard-Triumph and Leyland to form the giant British Leyland Motor Corporation, the influence of the Longbridge-based CP stewards spread throughout the whole combine. The only organised opposition was the much smaller number of Trotskyist and semi-Trotskyist stewards grouped around the Socialist Labour League in the Cowley Morris plant.

By now, Etheridge had retired and handed the convenor's job to his protégé, Derek Robinson. When I worked at the plant Etheridge was still remembered with affection even by people with no political sympathy for the CP. Feelings about Robinson tended to be less enthusiastic. In Etheridge's day the CP's role was to be the best and most conscientious union organisers at shop floor level — a task they combined with low-key Stalinist propaganda. When Robinson took over in the early 70s he was immediately faced with a series of crises that demanded political answers and exposed the underlying weaknesses of the CP's approach.

First, there was the question of the abolition of piece-work and the introduction of measured day work (MDW). The shop stewards' movement throughout the motor industry had been built around the piece-work system: stewards determined staffing levels, arranged work patterns, negotiated the "price for the job" and, ultimately, their effectiveness could be judged by the weekly wage packet. Piece-work had many drawbacks, but it did at least ensure that stewards were directly accountable to their members

and it gave the union a central role in determining the link between work and payment.

Robinson and the CP supported the introduction of MDW, dismissing the widespread shop-floor opposition as “short-sighted”, “money-militancy” and (the ultimate put-down in those days) the work of “a bunch of Trots”.

What they didn’t understand was the vital part piece-work played in keeping the stewards’ movement in touch with the membership. Bureaucratic arrogance and high-handed dismissal of shop-floor opinion was to characterise the CP’s approach throughout the 70s and finally led to Robinson’s downfall.

Nevertheless between 1971 and 1978 it seemed that Robinson and the CP had been right — the workforce enjoyed the security that came with MDW whilst retaining the mutuality and shop-floor organisation that had been built up under piece-work. It seemed like the best of both worlds. Meanwhile, a much bigger crisis was looming: in 1974 the company faced bankruptcy.

The Wilson government decided to nationalise the firm, but the price for the workforce was to be acceptance of the Ryder Report. Ryder recommended bailing out the company but insisted upon far-reaching “rationalisation” of work practices, with the aim of achieving speed-up of production and a “slimming down” of the workforce, though this last point was not spelt out in any detail.

These proposals stood little chance of success without the co-operation of the shop stewards’ movement and thus was born “participation”. This was a comprehensive scheme to involve stewards, convenors and officials in joint committees with management at almost every level of the company from the shop floor to national level — except that Ryder made it clear that

management would retain the final say and full decision-making power.

The shop floor overwhelmingly saw “participation” for what it was: a scheme designed to take stewards off the shop floor and draw them into an unequal “partnership” with management.

Robinson and the CP went for the scheme in a big way. As with Measured Day Work, shop-floor opposition was dismissed as an unprincipled alliance of “money militants”, right-wingers and the hated “Trots”. Robinson (in an infamous pamphlet of 1975, written jointly with CP theoretician Jon Bloomfield) went so far as to describe participation as “a step towards workers’ control”.

Robinson and the CP argued now that the company had been nationalised the workforce had a duty to pull their weight and make a go of it. Robinson and the Longbridge Works Committee clamped down on unofficial strikes (“downers”) and insisted that the disputes procedure was kept to at all times. “Continuous production” became the gospel propounded by the CP and by Leyland management alike.

When, in 1977, toolmakers throughout Leyland struck for a wage claim that in practice challenged phase two of the Labour government’s Social Contract, Robinson and the CP joined forces with the AUEW Executive and the bosses in denouncing the toolmakers and breaking their strike.

The behaviour of Robinson and the CP was not the result of individual treachery or corruption (though that was often how it was regarded on the shop floor): it stemmed from a fundamentally bureaucratic political philosophy that equated nationalisation with socialism and regarded the spontaneous actions of the shop floor with suspicion and hostility. The result of all this for the shop stewards’ movement throughout British Leyland (and in Longbridge especially) was nothing short of disastrous. Stewards were

seen as little more than the bosses' policemen and an enormous gulf of distrust and cynicism opened up between the plant-based union organisation and the membership.

The rest of the story is tragic history: at the end of 1977 Labour appointed a proven union-basher called Michael Edwardes as chairman of British Leyland. Edwardes immediately announced 40,000 redundancies and the closure of 13 plants. Shop meetings throughout Longbridge voted to oppose the Edwardes plan and yet at the official presentation of the plan the Longbridge senior stewards (along with most other BL union representatives) gave Edwardes a standing ovation!

Edwardes must have realised that the majority of senior stewards in British Leyland were severely out of touch with their members. He dispensed with the soft-soap Ryder approach, drove a coach and horses through participation and, finally (with Thatcher's Tories now in power), thanked Derek Robinson for his past co-operation by sacking him on a trumped-up charge in November 1979.

The Robinson sacking (in which the Duffy/Boyd leadership of the AEU was complicit) was a traumatic blow to union organisation in Longbridge and throughout BL. In fact, it was nearly a death blow: Leyland bosses gave serious consideration to the idea of withdrawing union recognition throughout the Group and creating a company union. Probably because they realised that they already had a de facto company union in the AEU, they pulled back. But they had won a decisive victory and followed it up with a purge of militants and left-wingers at Longbridge and Cowley in the early 1980s.

Union organisation in the company survived but never recovered and was powerless, when in 2000, the then-owners, BMW, "sold" (for the token sum of £10!) Rover Cars and the Longbridge plant to the dodgy asset-strippers

of the Phoenix Consortium, who renamed it MG Rover Group.

Many financial commentators claimed that the plant was not modern enough and that the company would run out of money within a few years. In April 2005, this happened; the Phoenix Consortium put the MG Rover group into administration, leaving more than 6,000 workers without jobs.

The virtual collapse of the British Leyland shop stewards' movement was not inevitable: it happened because a tremendous strength built up under piecework was frittered away in participation committees; because stewards lost their roots in the shop-floor and became petty bureaucrats. Most of all, it happened because the dominant politics of the movement (i.e., the CP) had no answer to the financial crisis of the company beyond giving full support to everything that flowed from the Ryder Report. In the mid-70s they had the strength and (for a while) the shop-floor support to fight for real workers' control.

The tragic collapse was down to politics, not personal weakness or (as some shop floor workers occasionally suggested) personal corruption. The best of these people – Derek Robinson, for instance – were in fact personally principled and even courageous individuals, who devoted the best years of their lives to trade unionism and socialism, as they understood it.

So I feel I can say now, without any hypocrisy, farewell comrade Derek: you fought for what you believed in and you never sold out.

Catalonia: rights and unity

*Editorial from British newspaper
Solidarity 454*

On Saturday 11 November, 750,000 people (on the city police's count) demonstrated in Barcelona to demand the release of Catalan government ministers and pro-independence association activists jailed by the Madrid regime to await trial on charges such as

sedition. A general strike called by a pro-independence union confederation, Intersindical-CSC, under the slogan “Defend Our Rights”, on Wednesday 8 November, also had impact.

The reports suggest it was more through demonstrators blocking railway lines and roads than the major concentrations of workers deciding to strike. Intersindical-CSC is only the fifth largest union confederation within Catalonia, and the big Spain-wide confederations, CCOO and UGT, are stronger there. They have 85% of union members in Catalonia. Their stance (as reported in *Solidarity* 453) is to oppose the jailing of the ministers and activists, and Madrid’s imposition of direct rule, but also to oppose the summary declaration of Catalan independence made by the Catalan parliament following the 1 October referendum.

That referendum got only a 43% turnout, mainly because of the Madrid government’s attempts to stop and sabotage it, but opinion polls (and the voting figures in the 2015 election which produced the current Catalan parliament) suggest that still only a minority, though a large minority, in Catalonia back independence.

The Catalan nationalists have responded to Madrid’s imposition of direct rule not by head-on confrontation, but by focusing on trying to win a majority in the new elections for the Catalan parliament to be held on 21 December. Maybe impatient police actions by the Madrid regime, and heightened anger in Catalonia, will push things to a crisis before then; but for now the major political forces are focused on 21 December.

The Catalan government has not gone into hiding and declared itself still the day-to-day authority. Its ministers are in Spanish jails, or have fled to Belgium. (Moves by Spain to get them extradited are unlikely to finish their path through the Belgian courts before 21 December). Catalonia’s police chief, arrested after the 1 October referendum and accused

of insufficient cooperation with Madrid’s police action against the referendum, now says Catalan police should obey orders. Public administration is continuing normally.

Since these elections will be organised by the Madrid regime, and since before the imposition of direct rule Spanish prime minister Rajoy was recommending new Catalan elections as the way to resolve the crisis — at that point, the Catalan government refused — it will become very difficult for Rajoy not to back down in some way if the nationalists win a majority on 21 December.

Catalan separatism is not an arbitrary whim. Catalonia has existed as a distinct linguistic and often political unit since the early Middle Ages, with its distinct economic relations centred on Barcelona and the Mediterranean. The Spanish monarchy imposed thorough control, sidelining the old Catalan political institutions, only in the early 18th century. There have been previous moves for Catalan independence, in the mid 17th century for example, and in 1931. Catalonia’s national rights were suppressed under the fascist regime of Francisco Franco from 1939 to 1975. Public use of the Catalan language was banned.

The case against independence is that Catalonia has won extensive autonomy since the end of the Francoist regime. It could almost certainly win more, maybe not under the current conservative government in Madrid, but in the medium term and without erecting new borders. In fact, one of the sparks of the current crisis is that a 2006 law extending Catalonia’s autonomy, approved both by the Spanish parliament and by a referendum in Catalonia, was annulled in 2010 by Rajoy’s PP government, using the constitutional council.

A sizeable section of Catalonia’s population today, especially of its working class and especially in Barcelona, has been formed by successive waves of migration from the rest of Spain and elsewhere, as Catalonia has

become the most economically dynamic part of Spain. Respect for specific Catalan rights can probably be won without new borders; but new borders would have divisive and economically disruptive effects in the working class, and might lead to the large “Spanish” minority in Catalonia and other migrants feeling hemmed-in and oppressed.

But it is up to the people of Catalonia to weigh those arguments. The decision should be theirs. Workers in Spain and across Europe should insist that Madrid and the EU respect Catalonia’s right to national self-determination.

Curiously after so much turmoil, the latest opinion polls for 21 December show as little change from the last Catalan elections in 2015.

The CUP, a left-wing Catalan nationalist party which advocates a larger independent Catalonia including parts of France and of Valencia, has gone up from 3 to 7 per cent, but all parties are on very nearly on the same scores as in 2015. The top scorer in the poles is the ERC, a historic Catalan nationalist party with a broadly leftish tinge which dates back to 1931.

In 2015, ERC ran in a bloc with Puigdemont’s party, PDeCAT, a newer party which is right-wing, notorious for corruption, and historically hesitant about Catalan independence. Puigdemont wants the bloc repeated, but the ERC are saying no. Rajoy’s perspective must be to scare the more tentative supporters of independence through his hard line, and persuade them that independence is too scary and risky. His line could work the other way: the crackdown may push people toward independence.

From a distance, certainly, and maybe on the ground, it is impossible to tell which way it will go. Rajoy’s party, the People’s Party, has been and is very weak in Catalonia. The big pro-unionist parties are the Citizens’ Party and the social-democratic PSOE (called PSC in Catalonia). Citizens’ is a socially

liberal, economically neo-liberal, Spanish unionist party, which started in Catalonia primarily as an anti-separatist party, and which still has its headquarters in Barcelona, though it has now spread across Spain.

The balance after 21 December may be held by an electoral coalition of Podemos, a Spanish-wide leftish party coming out of the Indignados anti-cuts movement of 2011, and Catalonia in Common, the party of Barcelona’s leftish mayor, Ada Colau, which is standing in Catalonia-wide elections for the first time. That coalition has broadly the same stance as the big trade unions: it opposes direct rule and demands a proper referendum, but also opposes Puigdemont’s declaration of independence.

Catalonia in Common has broken its previous coalition with the PSC on Barcelona’s city council because of the PSC’s support for Rajoy’s imposed Madrid rule. There is some tension in Podemos about this stance. A survey of members got a majority for the line, but some Podemos MPs in the Catalan parliament voted for Puigdemont’s declaration of independence, and the Podemos leader in Catalonia has resigned. The left-wing Anticapitalistas faction is for independence.

Looking back over the evolution of Spain and Catalonia since 1975, it seems likely that a very wide range of opinion would settle for an expanded autonomy for Catalonia within a united Spain, at least as an acceptable second best. Although Rajoy currently rejects expanded autonomy, his hand may be forced on 21 December.

It is hard to see how the major bourgeois forces on either side can find a path from the current conflict to such an outcome. It remains for the working class and its movements to uphold the cause of solidarity, mutual respect, internationalism, and respect for national rights.

Our model on such questions was discussed at length in a long pamphlet by Lenin in

1913, summing up on many debates in the socialist movement of his day. The nation wishing to secede should have the right to vote on it; the main job of socialists, particularly those in the bigger power, is to argue for respect for the democratic choice. Lenin praised the Swedish workers' response when Norway separated from Sweden in 1905: firm backing for Norway's rights, while leaving it up to the Norwegian workers to decide whether autonomy was enough or they wanted independence.

Against Madrid's clampdown, for Catalonia's rights, and in all circumstances for working-class unity across the national and communal divides!

Zimbabwe's power struggle: no gain for workers

by Mike Chester

The resignation of Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe followed a bizarre fortnight of events which started with Mugabe's removal of Mnangagwa as Vice President and resulting in the Zimbabwean Defence Forces taking over TV stations and government installations around the country. Then the Central Committee of the Zimbabwe's ruling party, ZANU-PF, resolved to remove Mugabe as its leader, replacing him with Mnangagwa. Mnangagwa has long been favourite of the ZANU-PF's old guard to succeed Mugabe. The Vice President has a strong base in the security services and state bureaucracy.

The backdrop to these events is a country sitting in a chronic state of economic ruin, endemic corruption and political repression.

A two-year long factional battle within ZANU-PF has recently been intensifying; this is between the so-called "Team Lacoste" faction around Mnangagwa and "Generation 40" around the country's "First Lady" Grace Mugabe. The dismissal of Mnangagwa and the worsening economic situation has given Team Lacoste an excuse to act.

Is there any real political difference between Mnangagwa and the Mugabe factions? Mnangagwa has talked about liberalising the economy to deal with the economic crisis. Much is being made about his recent visit to China, a major investor in Zimbabwe, where he allegedly received the blessing of Beijing as the chosen successor to Mugabe and promises of further economic investment. But prior to Grace Mugabe's arrival on the scene Mnangagwa – a veteran of the "Rhodesian Bush War", a war of independence - was widely seen as the "chosen successor".

Chinese economic imperialism in Africa is rife and Zimbabwe, a resource rich nation, is no exception. The Chinese and other powers want political change and economic reforms to improve stability and make the country more open to international investment. The gold and diamond mining sectors which are currently marked by high levels of corruption and inefficiency.

Zimbabwean workers have nothing to defend in Mugabe's continued rule. The notionally pro-worker labour laws, corrupt attempts at land redistribution and anti-imperialist rhetoric are meaningless in a country with 80-95% unemployment, a shortage of money in the banks, bread queues, and a chronic health crisis.

Mugabe and ZANU-PF have presided over a tyrannical regime which has repressed the free press, rigged elections, murdered political opponents and civilians, plundered the economy for personal gain and caused horrific food and health crises. While his personal downfall should be celebrated, those leading this coup are just as culpable.

The largest trade union centre, the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions, led by the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, has called on its members to support rallies calling for an immediate end to Mugabe's rule.

A joint statement released by the majority of trade unions and many civil society organisations on 15 November called on Mugabe to step down, demanded the army abide by the constitution, that parliament establish a roadmap to free and fair elections in 2018 and liberalises media and press laws by repealing recent authoritarian legislation.

These minimal democratic demands, refusing to explicitly take sides with the generals, are sensible and trade unionists around the world should show solidarity with those making them. However, we should be clear that in the long-term, if it's Chinese capitalists and/or a different group of ZANU-PF bureaucrats plundering the Zimbabwean economy and stitching up the political process, the workers will continue to lose.

Socialists and trade unionists in Zimbabwe should be using this opportunity to develop a strategy for winning democratic control of the economy. Around the world we should demand an end to African debt, an increase in state aid and to gear-up to protest against any further political repression of the people of Zimbabwe.

Paradise papers. Seize their wealth!

by Cathy Nugent

Another day, another revelation. The super-rich avoid paying tax.

The leak of 13.4 million data files (the "Paradise Papers") to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in Germany, shared with media around the world, has shone a light on the pathologically anti-social behaviour of the rich pile up their wealth and refusing to contribute to the financing of hospitals, schools and the care of the old, sick and disabled.

They do this by getting fancy lawyers to set up obscure companies, massage profit figures, and stash money away in accounts in low-tax countries like the Bahamas or the Cayman Islands (many of which are British

"dependencies", former colonies, but outside British tax laws).

Yet these people can afford to help pay for services. Their wealth is sometimes so vast that they need an army of personal shoppers to spend it, £6,000 on Cartier watches today, or £6 million on luxury yachts.

The fact that this behaviour is "legal" is for the rest of us, the non-rich, like having caviar rubbed in our faces. It seems the force of the law is always directed against us. We get evicted when we fall behind on our mortgage or rent. But the rich get away with what is, by any normal definition of the word, robbery!

And why would anyone not pay tax while people die for lack of ambulances, drugs, enough doctors?

These people, whom Bernie Sanders called the "new international oligarchy" don't think about people stacked up on hospital trolleys waiting to be seen by overstretched doctors because they live in a bubble. They sleep at night because they think that we, the have-nots, are just jealous of their wealth. They think they deserve to hang onto as much as possible of their cash because it is "hard earned". That say their wealth will, eventually, "trickle down", but they don't know how and care less.

That's the point about being an oligarch — you do not know or do not want to know how the vast majority of the world lives.

Tax dodging is just another part of a system which ensures that a very few people can get unimaginably rich. This is a system where just 8 people are as wealthy as half the world's population.

In this system the wealthy own or part-own capitalist enterprises which accumulate wealth through squeezing profit out of waged labour. Governments around the world then pass laws to make it possible for that wealth to be hidden away in private companies so that it is out of the reach of their own tax collectors!

Sometimes governments make half-hearted attempts to “crackdown” on tax avoidance.

Theresa May claims an extra £160 billion in tax has been collected since 2010. But that’s £26 billion extra a year, when total government expenditure is nearly £800 billion a year. When the best estimate of world-wide tax dodging is \$500 billion a year.

Governments like the current Tory government let tax evasion happen, just as they give tax breaks to the rich and allow the super-exploitation of workers. All the better to keep the UK’s status as one of the most unequal developed societies in the world and the preferred home of the super-rich.

Meanwhile, as Jeremy Corbyn put it, “Schools, hospitals, housing, all those public services lose and the rest of the population have to pay to cover up the deficit created by tax avoidance.”

What should be done? The Tax Justice Network calls for public information on the activities of tax havens and tax avoiders. John McDonnell, the Shadow Chancellor, says that the government should be allowed access to company profits before firms are able to move them to tax havens.

That’s good but not nearly enough. A Labour government needs to be tackling the system. In the first place by bringing into public ownership and democratic control the major sources of wealth.

Renationalising the utilities, the big six energy companies, and renationalising Royal Mail are necessary commitments.

Public ownership of the banks should be an active plank of Labour’s policy. Banks and high finance are central to the economy’s functioning, and their greed for profit has been central to the economic chaos, the licensing of rich people’s greed, and the growing inequality.

Capitalist disease, Australian politics and a Marxist response

Greetings from Workers Liberty in Australia to Alliance for Workers Liberty Conference London November 2017

Dissatisfaction with the symptoms of capitalist disease is growing in Australia – the insecurity and inadequacy of wage and benefit incomes, and inequality of wealth, as well as environmental destruction for profit.

The diagnosis from the reformists, organised labour movement and much of the left is that the cause is neoliberal policy. For them the cure is a return to post war boom public policy which they believe more fairly balanced the interests of capital and labour around a common national interest, through regulation of the worst excesses of capital, state arbitration, industry policy, and raising incomes to stimulate demand.

As Marxists we know this cure is an impossible nostalgia. Corporations pursue profits globally not nationally, supply chains cross national boundaries, bourgeois governments are compelled to create national conditions for profitability, capital shifts risks and costs onto the working class, and employers continue to want to reduce their wages bills. The imperatives behind government policies to minimise regulation and taxation of capital, to maximise controls on unions, and flexible lower-cost labour supply are the imperatives of profitability, that drive capital’s war on the working class.

An alternative right-wing reaction to this insecurity is opposition to refugees, extreme nationalism and racism. Social democratic reformists are ineffective at standing up to this, because they at some levels also look for solutions that exclude non-Australian workers, and are ambivalent about “foreign investment”, rather than the system of capital investment for profit, and are shy about challenging nationalist attitudes.

The Greens advocacy for refugees and the environment attracts much of the left that is

disillusioned with the parliamentary Labor Party's capitulation or vacillation on these issues, and they also endorse demands for union rights, taxing the rich and so on. Despite a somewhat organised left in the NSW Greens, and participation in protests and rallies, the Greens are both explicitly a bourgeois and parliamentary party, without a critique of capitalism, a perspective on the working class as the independent force for changing the system, or on winning support for refugee rights amongst workers on the basis of international working class solidarity. The left in the Greens may develop greater political clarity through its debates and conflict with the rest of the party, but so far it seems to lack the necessary focus on an outward looking platform for a specifically working class fight back.

Australian Unions have appointed a new leader, Sally McManus, who is the most publicly assertive spokesperson for working class interests in a long time. She withstood bourgeois outrage when she defended the right of unions to break unjust laws, and she has launched a union campaign to Change the Rules, under the general premise that the rules are broken for working people and we need to restore balance and fairness. This is still a top down campaign, placing considerable reliance on getting Labor committed to restoring union rights, and on getting Labor elected in 2019. But it is raising the expectations of trade unionists and workers of reforms that we support, and as such it opens up scope to discuss what reactions workers should be preparing for from Labor, the Coalition and employers, and what further reforms and demands we really need. It is a given that Shorten and the ALP machine will be looking to balance, between the demands of the unions and what it assesses will be acceptable to capital. Capital has the upper hand, and there is a chicken and egg problem for unions to regain industrial rights – essentially they are rights that are won by exercising them.

The legitimacy of existing approaches to politics is under challenge, increasing the unpredictability of Australian electoral politics. Right wing groups are becoming more organised through this process. The socialist left has not been growing as it should be. We need to bring socialist ideas and critique of capitalism into the labour movement, and to elevate debate for a platform of independent working class politics as an antidote to the right, racism, and illusions in the possibility of regulating and enticing capital to accede to working class interests. Agreement on a political platform of radical demands and reforms is central, and to this end Workers Liberty is promoting a draft working class charter. (p 4)

Workers' Liberty in Australia takes inspiration from you in Britain. We make our own small contribution to education, agitation and organisation in the Australian working class on the foundations that you have laid for us. We stand in solidarity with you and wish you the best for your conference.

Join the fight for socialism

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