

Workers' Liberty



The emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself
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How could there be a Corbyn in Australia?

Could there be a political leader who could achieve success at galvanising a mass movement for the working class, against capital, as Corbyn has done in Britain? We start by looking at how Corbyn became Labour leader.

The 2008 slump hit Britain much harder than it hit Australia, so there has been more leftish agitation in Britain than Australia in the last 8 years, more sizeable left demonstrations, meetings, campaigns. This created a constituency in Labour Party politics in which the local party organisations swung a little to the left.

So one of the preconditions for Corbyn, was the almost invisible revival of some Labour left, and some hope of Labour moving left under Ed Milliband.

Ed Milliband as a very soft left leader was an electoral failure. This opened the way for a more serious left challenge to be welcomed by members, in the context of the impact of economic crisis in Britain. Milliband raised expectations, continuing to say leftish things from time to time, so he simultaneously raised hopes and yet disappointed them.

After Ed Milliband resigned, all the contenders to replace him competed as to who could be most right wing because they thought that was the way to win.

It turned out they were completely wrong, but that wasn't obvious to them in advance. If there has been a halfway plausible soft left candidate, Corbyn would have had no chance. But there wasn't.

The right also shot themselves in foot by pushing through a broad franchise for the leadership election. The party officials who worried about the decline in party membership didn't even imagine that there could be a groundswell that would elect a left candidate. Membership had been increasing since 2010, but Burnham, Cooper, etc. thought that the membership was right wing in majority, and supporters who could also vote were even more so.

As in Australia today, no one was sure there was a potentially persuasive leftist leader in the wings in Britain.

Corbyn was mostly seen as not particularly leadership material. He was reluctant to stand, and thought he probably wouldn't get enough nominations. Having run as a flying the flag exercise, he had leadership thrust upon him.



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So one lesson is that everyone underestimated the subterranean leftish swell, the diffuse left wing constituency in LP since 2010, and how pissed off even vaguely soft left union leaders were with the Labour right. Corbyn gave voice to these concerns, and was able to crystallise them. Some trade unionists and socialists had pronounced British Labour dead for the purpose of working class struggle. They could not see the contradictions the party still contained, based on labour organised in trade unions yet dominated by parliamentary ambitions to ensure peace between labour and capital. As that contradiction has blown open, thousands of people have joined Labour, and the disaffiliated RMT union is discussing rejoining.

In Australia the genuine left MPs are pretty much gone from state and federal parliament. The MPs who used to be on pickets and rallies for the left are all gone. This is very clear at anti fascist rallies now compared to the 90s. There may be some newer MPs who have some fight in them. Lisa Singh from Tasmania bested someone higher on the ALP senate ticket through attracting below the line votes. But there is little sign of a left revival in ALP branches or amongst rank and file members. The Greens seem to have drawn off a lot of the more leftist activists and left votes away from Labor, especially over refugee policies.

The contradictions that have exploded in British Labour are still deeply buried in the ALP.

It may be that some Social Democrats will conclude from Corbyn (and the debacle of the Dutch LP and French SP, both now down to 6%) that they can and must shift a bit left. Far more likely in Australia, than a socialist Labor leader, is a consolidation of the already apparent tactical shift by the ALP right to a more left economic policy, continuing their push on tax concessions for the rich etc. There is not the same electoral necessity in Australia to get out the youth vote, but they are likely to run left on education, e.g. university fees, HELP repayment, TAFE.

An instructive contrast is between Corbyn and Mélenchon in France. Mélenchon was much better known than Corbyn was before 2015, but has disrupted and diverted left rather than rallying it. He created a shoddy personalised vehicle with very poor politics, which has drawn people away from left parties but built nothing solid to replace them

A Corbyn from the unions?

Could a break in Australian labour movement politics start in unions rather than the ALP?

The Corbyn phenomenon didn't start with the unions. The groundswell started among Party members for some sort of left candidate, which then produced the Corbyn candidacy, which put pressure on the union leaders to back him. It would be quite a different process for a political leader to emerge from the trade unions. It is much more common in Australia than Britain for union

leaders to become MPs. But even those who seemed leftish as union leaders have become routine MPs, soft-left at best. Could there be exceptions in future?

Left trade unionists in Australia express the most disappointment about Labor for not having really reversed WorkChoices very much via Fair Work Australia. There is little sign of any swing to the left in the ALP, but Sally McManus as ACTU Secretary is stirring up some assertive discussion of the right to organise, to take industrial action, and of the need to stand up for workers' rights. She has even been mentioned as a possible Australian Corbyn.

However it could be possible that a union fightback could also rouse leftists inside the ALP, especially if the union fightback asserted more explicit left-wing demands, such as for re-nationalisations, the right to strike and a living wage for all, including the unemployed and people on pensions. The unions Build a Better Future campaign issues from the 2016 federal election look increasingly mild as both inequality and awareness of it grow. Sally McManus had a great deal of input into that campaign, which she promised to continue beyond the election but it hasn't. Her expressions of defiance have not yet translated into a new policy package that takes a sharper stand, let alone something that she would call socialist politics. The power of the position of ACTU Secretary is limited by the politics of the officials of the affiliated unions, and those can only be organised against politically across the labour movement.

If a break from right wing union leadership came, say in the form of Sally McManus developing a more militant social democratic platform, then we should advocate that the unions demand ALP commitment to it. That could produce a groundswell that might throw up a more left wing Labor MP committed to supporting and being a voice for workers' struggles.

A Corbyn from the Greens?

Does the Corbyn surge mean that if the Greens put forward a more explicitly social democratic platform, then they could benefit electorally?

A large part of Corbyn's appeal is that he carries the prospect of leading a government based on his policies (similarly to Bernie Sanders), which have clear working class content. The chance to achieve a workers' government is completely different from electing MPs from a minor party, even if they manage to hold the balance of power. It is a completely different prospect from ranking candidates against a suite of policies, which is how unions and leftish campaigns approach elections, and which the Greens encourage. And it is completely different from voting for a candidate or party that is flying a flag for specific policies against Labor. The prospect of a government that stands with working class struggles is profoundly undermining of capitalist order. And this is the inspirational component of the

Corbyn surge that cannot be replicated by the Greens, even in the highly unlikely case that Left Renewal could win the leadership of the parliamentary Greens.

An alternative perspective for the socialists in the Greens would be to reorient away from the parliamentary Greens, and towards alliances in the labour movement that include Labor Party members, for a more radical social democratic platform, that is a clear voice for working class struggles. This has the potential for a broader reach into shifting the labour movement leftwards, increasing the pressure on the Labor Party to make leftist commitments, and to raise the prospect of a working class government.

Conclusion

No one can recreate the British conditions that produced Corbyn, in Australia. But we can foster some of the conditions:

- position ourselves in the labour movement, engage in building and supporting union struggles as the basic terrain of the class struggle, mobilise against austerity, privatisations, for workers' rights.
- invite and pressure Labor MPs to participate in mobilisations.
- seek commitments from activists, labour movement bodies and leaders to a radical working class platform, and discuss what a workers' government could do.
- work for democratic reforms to unions and the ALP.

That also positions us best for when political openings appear, which could rapidly grow in the ALP as they did in Britain.

Carlo Carli on Corbyn

Workers Liberty asked Carlo Carli, former ALP MP for the State seat of Brunswick (1994 to 2010) for his view on Corbyn's election. Carlo has similar left social democratic politics to Corbyn, and a history as an MP of supporting left campaigns, speaking at rallies, etc. We asked him what he sees as the implications for left social democratic politics and the labour movement in Australia.

I think social democracy in Europe and Australia has entered a period of deep crisis. In part this is the structural changes within the workforce: the decline of a mass industrialised and unionised working class, deindustrialization, the growth of a precarious workforce and growing inequality. The second element to the crisis within social democracy is the crisis in the neoliberal consensus. There was a Faustian pact between social democracy and neoliberalism in Europe and Australia in the 1990s.

Social democracy in Government sought higher economic growth and economic returns from

globalisation, which resulted in policies of deregulation, privatisation, and a contraction of the welfare state. This strategy was successful for a period of time in increasing the level of perceived prosperity and economic growth, especially in Australia where the mining boom offset the deeper economic problems associated with the Global Economic Crisis. However the economic crisis hadn't disappeared it had just been moving geographically around the globe and is now imposing itself on Australia. For the UK and now Australia social democracy the neoliberal consensus period is over.

Meanwhile the reaction from the conservatives is greater austerity. That is why I think that the UK Labour manifesto provides a real alternative response by making state intervention relevant again in improving the lives of ordinary people and rallying people for action to gain greater control and power in their lives. The circumstances in Australia are different and the extent of the crisis and the failure of the neoliberal consensus hasn't yet been understood in Labor circles.

Britain

Why we need explicit socialist organisation

by Martin Thomas

The assessment by Ben Selwyn, an English correspondent for the Canadian socialist e-letter *The Bullet*, is typical: Labour's great mobilisation on 8 June "placed socialist ideas firmly back on the political agenda... let the proverbial genie of class politics out of the bottle". Even conservative commentators interpret the Grenfell Tower fire as showing how working-class people are abused in an unequal society. The word "socialism" comes up more in workplace discussions.

Paradoxically, Labour's 8 June manifesto nowhere uses the words "socialism", or "socialist", or equivalents. It nowhere uses the word "class" to mean sections of society defined by economic conditions. Labour manifestos have never used the word "class" that way, or referred to "workers" as a social category with class interests which Labour will promote. The nearest approximation was in February 1974: "Make power in industry genuinely accountable to the workers and the community at large".

Labour manifestos from the 1920s right through to 1987 did state the aim of socialism as a new society. It was always vague. Sometimes ridiculously so, as in the 1924 manifesto's call for a "Socialist Commonwealth, in which there shall at least be opportunity for Good Will to conquer Hate and Strife, and for Brotherhood, if not to supersede Greed, at least to set due bounds". In the 1950s, and again in the 1980s, "socialism" receded from being a name for a new society towards denoting "values" or "ethics" admixed to society. Neil Kinnock, in 1992 — not Blair in 1997 — removed "socialism" and "socialist" from Labour manifestos, and they have

not yet come back. Specific policies to tax the rich, to restore free education and the NHS, and bring in a £10 minimum wage, do more to shift perceptions of what's possible, and open up discussion about changing society, than a few vague words about socialism as a distant star or a desirable value.

Voters listened more to the tune of Labour's pitch for 8 June than to the detail of the lyrics, and the tune they heard was socialist. That's good. The question posed for the future: is doing good by stealth a workable strategy for socialism? To change society, doesn't the working class have to go beyond being what it is, and maybe nods and winks ("by 'the many', we mean the working class, but it sounds nicer as 'the many'"), to openly naming itself as a collective force?

Throughout the history of the left, the reformists, the Fabians, the ostentatious "pragmatists", however much sometimes they boost themselves as "democrats", have always argued for the manipulative, softly-softly approach, the idea that society can be made to "grow over" into socialism despite itself. Marxists have argued that socialism means the majority taking over the means of wealth and controlling it democratically, and there is no way to win democratic control other than the organised and self-aware way.

"The emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves", as Marx put it. Or as Engels put it: "The time of surprise attacks, of revolutions carried through by small conscious minorities at the head of unconscious masses, is past. Where it is a question of a complete transformation of the social organization, the masses themselves must also be in it, must themselves already have grasped what is at stake, what they are going in for body and soul".

The nature of the socialist aim disqualifies a "good by stealth" strategy. So does the nature of the obstacles to overcome. Syriza in Greece, in government since 2015, is the only the latest of many left-wing parties who first retreated to a "good by stealth" strategy, then found that, on the terrain of stealthy intrigue, established power was much stronger.

The Workers' Party in Brazil, in the 1980s, was a lively, democratic, party, openly revolutionary socialist. Over the 1990s its leaders curtailed its party democracy and pushed it to a strategy of amassing votes by vague formulas (it won the presidency in 2002 on the slogan "love and peace"), and then manipulating the system to make it more socialist. The Workers Party leaders were not cowards or careerists. They had been underground activists under the military dictatorship. They had organised illegal unions and strikes. Dilma Rousseff, Workers Party president of Brazil from 2011 to 2016, stuck to the struggle despite being tortured in jail. The Workers Party made reforms while Brazilian capitalism was buoyant. Then as crisis struck it became more and more conventionally neoliberal. After winning re-election in 2014, Rousseff adopted the Brazilian right's

economic policies wholesale. When she was removed from the presidency in 2016, on puffed-up corruption charges, there was almost no grassroots Workers' Party organisation left to regroup and resist.

In times when capitalism is buoyant enough to allow leeway — and, despite everything, now is such a time — a Corbyn-McDonnell government with the 8 June manifesto could make serious reforms. But it would leave much undone. And probably those reforms would be fried at the next crisis. To go further, and probably even to make the manifesto reforms, the Corbyn-McDonnell government would need pressure on it from the left, from a lively, radical, explicitly socialist, democratic labour movement, to counterweigh the enormous pressures from its right. Those pressures would come from the Labour right, from the House of Lords, from the courts, from the civil service and Bank of England hierarchy, from possible "strikes of capital" such as turned round the leftish government in France in 1983, even before they came from the military machine.

Capitalism is a resilient system. Its entrenched logics cannot be conquered by a well-meaning mechanic who goes into the system, spanner in hand, assuring the people that she or he is only adjusting the settings, and yet hoping that the successive tweaks will produce a socialist surprise.

The Labour Party now has an organised left wing, Momentum. Yet Momentum never proclaims itself socialist or even left-wing, never states a position to the left of Corbyn. When Momentum still had democratic structures, and they voted for example for freedom of movement in Europe, the Momentum office would not speak up to sustain Jeremy Corbyn's rearguard efforts to stick with freedom of movement, efforts which finally collapsed, in part because groups like Momentum would not support them. Then the "coup" carried out by its office in January 2017 abolished Momentum's democratic structures.

Since 2015, at the same time as it has turned left, the Labour Party has also carried out the largest purge of left-wingers, by the most bureaucratic methods, that it has ever done in its history. We know 618 members were "auto-excluded" during the 2016 Labour leadership contest. "Auto-exclusion" means no notice of charges, no hearing, no appeal, no possibility of readmission within five years. Hundreds of others were "auto-excluded" in the 2015 leadership contest and in between times. Almost all "auto-excluded" have been left-wingers. Many on Labour's soft left don't like this purge, but don't speak out against it, for fear of being purged themselves. That is just the "good by stealth" strategy at one remove: the idea that the movement can do without those who will speak out crisply for socialist aims, for unashamedly working-class politics, for strategic policies like public ownership of the banks, because the more cautious, more diplomatic, more soft-spoken types can wriggle through.

As Trotsky commented on similar ideas: “Live and let live. Aphorisms of this type cannot teach an advanced worker anything worthwhile; instead of courage and a sense of responsibility they can only instill indifference and weakness... Revolutionary ardour in the struggle for socialism is inseparable from intellectual ardour in the struggle for truth.”

In 1886, in one of the episodes of labour history which prefigures the current Corbyn surge, the United Labor Party and Central Labor Union candidate won 31% of the poll for New York mayor. The candidate, Henry George, was seen as a socialist. It was one of the biggest political breakthroughs for socialist politics in the history of the USA to date. The comments of Marx and Engels give us a guide on how to relate to the “socialist-but-doesn’t-dare-so-say” Labour surge of today. The election result, wrote Engels, was “epoch-making”.

“The first great step of importance for every country newly entering into the movement is always the organisation of the workers as an independent political party, no matter how, so long as it is a distinct workers’ party. And this step has been taken, far more rapidly than we had a right to hope...”

“That the first programme of this party is still confused and highly deficient, that it has set up the banner of Henry George, these are inevitable evils... The masses must have time and opportunity to develop and they can only have the opportunity when they have their own movement” in which they can debate and correct ideas.

In fact the United Labor Party and the Central Labor Union both soon broke up, and larger-scale socialist politics did not rise in the USA until 15 or 20 years later. But Engels’ general approach was right. Marx appreciated George’s work and “the sensation it has made” as “significant because it is a first, if unsuccessful, attempt at emancipation from the orthodox political economy”. At the same time he explained that “theoretically” George was “utterly backward”, and if George’s ideas were considered logically they were no more than “a last attempt — to save the capitalistic regime”.

The combative socialists then in New York were almost all German émigrés. Engels counselled them to do two things. Firstly, to educate themselves better in their socialist theory. Second, to make themselves an organised lever in the movement.

“The Germans have not understood how to use their theory as a lever which could set the American masses in motion; they do not understand the theory themselves for the most part and treat it in a doctrinaire and dogmatic way, as something which has got to be learnt off by heart but which will then supply all needs without more ado. To them it is a creed and not a guide to action...”

“It is possible to work along with the general movement of the working class at every one of its stages

without giving up or hiding our own distinct position and even organisation, and I am afraid that if the German Americans choose a different line they will commit a great mistake”.

That should be the guideline for socialists today.

Unite New Zealand "our confidence in the working class"

Mike Treen, the National Director of the Unite union in New Zealand spoke to Solidarity in the UK in 2013, about their drives to organise precarious workers in the fast food and service industries. We reproduce this article for its relevance to organising the new Retail and Fast Food Workers Union (RAFFWU).

The “Supersize My Pay” campaign in the mid-2000s established Unite in the fast food industry. We won agreements with the major chains — Restaurant Brands (which owns Pizza Hut, KFC, and others), then McDonald’s, and finally Burger King. It was a long and exhausting struggle. We realised that, given the competitive nature of the fast food industry, we needed an industry-wide approach and a public, political, and social mobilisation to achieve that result. That involved a lot of strikes, including student strikes against youth rates, demos, mass meetings, concerts with supportive bands. It was a major effort.

There was another fight with McDonald’s in 2008 to renew the agreement, and in 2012, Burger King also pushed back and tried to deunionise their workforce by forcing hundreds of workers to resign through intimidation and bullying. We’ve succeeded in defending union contracts and winning modest but significant improvements around workplace issues like guaranteed breaks and security of hours.

We’re quite encouraged by the UK unions’ new focus on zero-hours contracts. People are aware of that in the New Zealand labour movement, and it’s helped raise the profile of the issue. Zero-hours contracts are almost universal in the kind of industries we’re organising in and so far, the agreements we’ve won don’t get rid of them. We’ve won a lot more transparency and advance notice for workers about rostering, and have stopped bosses in McDonald’s using shift allocation as an arbitrary reward-and-punishment system for workers, but we’re yet to win guaranteed hours. We had a big campaign in McDonald’s to win a fairer rostering system, demanding that shifts were offered openly and there was a fair appeals process. We’ve given KFC, McDonald’s and Burger King notice that we’ll be pushing for guaranteed hours and an end to zero-hours contracts in the next round of bargaining in the two years’ time.

Rest and meal breaks are another big issue. We have a quite a major court case against McDonald’s for failing to guarantee breaks. The company has responded by

claiming the collective agreement wasn't lawful. That's ongoing.

From the fast food industry, we've pushed into cinemas. There are three main cinema chains in New Zealand, and we have agreements with all of them and high membership. We have a presence at Skycity Casino in Auckland, which is the largest private-sector workplace in the city. It has over 3,000 workers, of whom a third have part time status with only eight guaranteed hours per week. We also have a presence amongst security guards, and in call centres. We have collective agreements with the two main hotel chains in New Zealand – Millennium Copthorne Kingsgate and Accor.

We launched Unite nearly 10 years ago. We currently have 7,000 dues-paying members, but because we operate in industries with 100% staff turnover, we need to recruit around 5,000 new members every year just to stand still. Tens of thousands of workers have been through membership of Unite. It's many young workers' first experience of the labour movement. The average time spent in membership of Unite is one year, and the average time we have a union delegate [rep] in a workplace is eighteen months.

We started Unite as a group of left activists from the Alliance, some socialist groups along with some anarchists. The Alliance Party emerged from a left-wing split from Labour in 1991, and when that project collapsed many of us, including Matt McCarten who had been the president of it, saw an objective need to reconnect leftist politics with workers' organising, particularly amongst young workers. Starting a union from scratch was a radical idea, and went against some traditional leftist notions.

Some of our starting points were particular to New Zealand. At the time we launched the union, there'd been a period of economic recovery and growth after a period of deep recession in the 1980s and 1990s. We thought workers might therefore be more confident about taking risks and putting their heads above the parapet. The Labour-led government, which was elected in 1999, had also made legislative changes that made union organising slightly easier. Previously, union organisers had only been given access to workplaces to talk to existing members, which made organising in currently-unorganised industries almost impossible. A new law meant union organisers had more general access and could talk to non-union members. The third factor, though, is more general and is one that others could learn from. We simply had confidence that workers, and young workers in particular, would respond to new approaches that gave them the chance to fight for themselves in a militant way.

We always aimed to be a serious operation — we set up an infrastructure and an apparatus with an office, but we operated on the basis of volunteers rather than paid officials. We wanted the union and its campaigns to be

open. A number of people have lent money or used personal credit cards to keep the union going. We had no financial or institutional support from other unions. Today we have an annual income in excess of \$1m and our 2013 conference will be the first time the union has been debt-free!

My campaigning and mobilising experience is in the rank-and-file of industrial unions, the car workers and meat workers in the 80s, but also social movement campaigning around fighting apartheid, fighting militarism, and so on. I brought that experience to bear, and Matt's experience as a political strategist and prominent figure in several national political initiatives was also very valuable.

The most fundamental element, though, was our confidence in the working class.

Although we were setting up a new union, we were determined to be part of the broader labour movement. We affiliated to the New Zealand Council of Trade Unions [NZCTU, the equivalent of the TUC], and we deliberately chose to organise in industries where no other union was organising.

Nobody argued about our organising in the fast food industry; no-one had touched that. There were unions who claimed that hotels, security, and some of the other sectors was their territory, even though the union presence was minuscule. The old hotel workers' union (the Service and Food Workers' Union, SFWU) claimed we were poaching their members. It was a Labour-affiliated union, and as we'd come out of Alliance there was some hostility and suspicion on the part of SFWU and other unions' officialdom. There was a little backlash — one union official called us a "scab union", and a motion was moved at the NZCTU Executive to expel us. The NZCTU president, however, was sympathetic to what we were trying to do and his intervention helped stop that motion passing.

That suspicion and hostility was by no means universal. One effect of our organising and new approaches is that it enlivened members and officials in existing unions, and many union officials, including in LP-affiliated unions, were very excited about what we were doing.

We did have a situation in Skycity where 200 workers wanted to defect from SFWU to us. There's an NZCTU protocol for those situations, which we followed, and advised the workers to seek meetings within SFWU to resolve their problems. There are close to 1,000 union members at Skycity now, with around two thirds of those being our members. We have a joint collective agreement with SFWU. We have a principle of never badmouthing other unions in our publicity. We prefer to focus on pushing ourselves positively.

Unite has also been involved in union solidarity with other workers taking action, with protests against racism, and has taken action in support of workers internationally, especially in Palestine.

Unite's resources don't allow us to focus too much on lobbying work. We leave that to the NZCTU, but we did make a submission to a Parliamentary Select Committee recently, because the government is trying to introduce legislation to abolish guaranteed breaks and that is an area we have real expertise on. We're not affiliated to a political party but we're supportive of attempts by the central union movement to act politically and secure commitments from Labour and the Greens, who have a chance of forming a coalition government after the next election. Some of us are supporters of Mana, a leftist political party based mainly in working-class Maori communities.

The idea of the living wage has become more current in New Zealand, and we supported a recent push to get the new Labour leader to commit to introducing living wages for government workers and contractors if they're elected next year. The minimum wage is currently \$13.75 per hour, and the living wage would be \$18.40, so that would be a significant step forward. That issue has a lot of traction in the unions and the Labour Party.

The main political change we want is greater freedom to organise – the ability for workers to organise and take industrial action without having to jump through so many hoops. There's severe restriction on the right to strike. That needs to be addressed, and we need to get rid of legislative barriers to organising.

If there's a Labour government, or a Labour-Green coalition, after the next election, we want to hold them to commitments they've made to the unions. There are obvious limits to that, but those political possibilities shouldn't be dismissed. [See here for more on Unite's political strategy.]

Unions need new approaches to succeed in the kinds of industries we're talking about. The "organising model" that came out of the American SEIU [Service Employees' International Union] in the 1990s was turned into a kind of religion in the global labour movement. It was related to as a mantra, in an almost cult-like way, and it wasn't working. An approach of recruiting union members one by one can't work in these industries, because the boss can find out where that's going on and bully people out of it. People often aren't in these jobs for long enough for that slow accumulation of union members to work or make a difference. In America, even in the places where that slow accumulation has reached the level where it can trigger a ballot for recognition, those ballots are usually lost because employers bring in professional union-busting operations. You need public, political campaigns that provide protection for workers. It's important to move to public, political, and social movement mobilisation as early as possible in the organising process. That gives workers confidence. The union has to be framework for workers to find their voice and lead struggles.

It has to be all-or-nothing. "Supersize My Pay" was a public, political campaign against the fast food

companies which exposed them as exploiters. We went after their "brand", which they value above all else. The American unions have now taken a new approach more akin to that, which I think is very exciting. Unions like SEIU and the United Commercial and Food Workers' Union [UFCW] are financing and supporting campaigns like OurWalmart and Fast Food Forward, which organise on something more like a minority-union basis rather than focusing on that slow accumulation of members building up to a recognition ballot. They're bringing the community in – so, when the union members, who might be quite small in number, in restaurant go on strike, they get community activists and other members of other unions to walk back in with them when the strike's over to give public support and prevent victimisation. When those approaches gains momentum, workers start to gain confidence that maybe the risk of standing up for themselves is worth it. That's the key question – how do you build that confidence?

Our modern unions, in the UK for example, emerged from new models of industrial organising breaking away from craftism. There are some differences in size between the industries those unions were based in and the key industries in western countries now, such as retail, service, and finance, but a large call centre in New Zealand might have 500 workers or more — which in New Zealand terms is a pretty big workplace. McDonald's employs almost 10,000 workers – it's one of the biggest private-sector employers in the country. Those workers are young workers, migrant workers, semi-casualised workers. Those are the people producing surplus value in New Zealand today. That's the working class!

The bottom line is that organising in these industries, where more and more of the working class, and particularly the young working class, in western countries is now employed, has to be done — by any means necessary.

Fighting the mine bosses in West Papua

by Rosalind Robson

In May the US mining company Freeport McMoRan sacked 3,000 workers at the Grasberg copper and gold mine in West Papua, Indonesia. Workers had just begun a 30-day strike protesting against the company's furlough policy — the temporary laying off of workers because of breaks in production. A further 1,200 miners have been fired at other locations where Freeport is involved.

The company has been in dispute with the Indonesian government over new conditions for its licence to mine in West Papua and this had interrupted production. Since 2011 there have been a number of strikes at the mine over wages and conditions, the

backdrop to which has been continuing human rights and environmental abuses in the territory.

West Papua, the western half of a large island, makes up 22% of the land mass of Indonesia, but it is at the periphery of the archipelago. The eastern half of the island is part of politically independent Papua New Guinea. There are strong connections between the indigenous peoples of both halves of the island. From 1898 West Papua was colonised by the Dutch. After the Second World War Indonesian nationalists fought war to get sovereignty over the Dutch East Indies. This was achieved with the exception of West Papua. Then the territory was annexed in 1969 by the dictatorship of Suharto. Since the early 60s, between 100,000 and 500,000 West Papuans have lost their lives at the hands of the Indonesian military.

Suharto also began a policy of “Indonesianisation”, organising the migration of people from Java to West Papua so that the indigenous peoples are now a minority. West Papua is rich in natural resources, yet the population of 3.5 million in one of the poorest in Indonesia. The Indonesian military continues to repress, detain and kill the population. The army raises money from payments from the extractive companies for security.

Freeport is implicated in shooting incidents around the Grasberg mine. Freeport started its operations in West Papua in 1972 and the Grasberg mine started in 1988. In recent years the company, which in 2015 had a net income of \$12 billion, has tried to wean itself off payments to the army and improve its human rights record. But it has not used its power (e.g. as the single largest Indonesian taxpayer) to stop the brutality of the army, including the shooting dead of two striking workers in 2013.

After the latest strike began the company declared it illegal. They deemed anyone striking had indicated a “voluntary resignation”. Mining companies around the world wield tremendous power; they right roughshod over workers right to organise, and are implicated in wider human rights abuses. Everywhere they are responsible for environmental damage. In West Papua the waste products from the mine have destroyed forests and wetlands, killing off fish and other wildlife.

In 2015, the new Indonesian president, Joko Widodo, claimed he was willing to work towards a “better Papua”. However, human rights violations have increased since he took power, according to Indonesia’s Commission for the Disappeared and Victims of Violence (Kontras). It has logged 1,200 incidents of harassment, beatings, torture and killings of Papuans by Indonesian security forces since his election in 2014.

Israeli – Palestinian solidarity on May Day

Based on a report on the WAC-MAAN website 9 May 2017 <http://eng.wac-maan.org.il/?p=1863>

“Music without borders mingled with an encounter of solidarity among humans” in a special May Day celebration, with Palestinian garage and carpentry workers, art teachers, musicians, agricultural workers and cleaners, Jews and Arabs, Israelis and Palestinians.

The WAC MAAN Workers Advice Center organised this gathering in Jerusalem, and WAC backs all the campaigns and projects presented there.

At the centre were to be Palestinian workers from the Zarfati Garage, who were held up for an hour at a checkpoint into Israel, a daily experience for thousands of Palestinian workers. Finally they arrived and the evening began.

Hatem Abu Ziadeh, head of the workers’ committee at Zarfati Garage, thanked the workers who stood by him during the struggle to organize with WAC. Four years ago the Zarfati workers were employed at low wages, with no social benefits. The struggle and their membership in WAC brought real change. Hatem also expressed his hope that other workers in Mishor Adumim would join WAC and unionize. Amir Basha, the labour lawyer who advocated for the Zarfati Garage workers told how he had “never seen a case in which the employer began with such a negative attitude – firing the workers’ committee head, accusing him of criminal acts, submitting complaints with the police about WAC and its lawyer” before understanding they must reach an agreement.

The event was led in Hebrew and Arabic by the theatre writer and director, Guy Elhanan and Hanan Manadreh Zoabi, WAC’s Chairwoman, who invited various musicians and speakers onto the stage.

Hanan Zoabi explained that this Labor Day celebrates solidarity between Palestinian and Israeli workers, and also solidarity with human beings in their struggle for democracy, freedom and human rights.” She was the first of many to support “the struggle of the Syrian people against the bloodthirsty regime of Bashar Assad.” Elhanan’s current play “Above and Below the Scaffolding” in Arabic is about accidents in the construction industry.

Ala Khatib spoke on the struggle against work accidents in construction, after a particularly bad year. Khatib noted that the government refuses to invest in supervision and training to reduce accidents. Rania Salah, WAC’s woman coordinator from East Jerusalem, spoke of her daily work in the struggle against poverty and the exploitation of workers and the unemployed in the city. Wafa Tiara, WAC coordinator for working women, came to the event together with a big group of women agricultural laborers and cleaners from a region of Arab Towns and Villages inside Israel. She spoke

about the struggle to increase employment opportunities for Arab women. “We women will not stand aside. We demand an equal place in all areas of life” she said.

Artist Galia Uri spoke about her work in the NGO “Wings” guiding artists with special needs. Her colleagues had joined WAC, because many among them do not get social benefits” and because “WAC works for solidarity in many ways, both inside and outside the Green Line, between women and men, between workers in various fields.”

Kiki Keren Hos, a music teacher at Jerusalem’s Musrara College, is a workers’ committee activist there. She described how administrative staff joined WAC, with the full support of the teachers.

Musical performances included a Turkish piece, a song from the Threepenny Opera performed by Jewish classical musicians; and a well-known song of the Lebanese fishermen “Shidu al-Hima” performed by Palestinian musicians from East Jerusalem. The song has become a hymn of workers’ struggles throughout the Arab world. Improvisations expressed the empathy between musicians, ending the night with jazz sounds of flute, saxophone and darbuka.

Erez Wagner, director of WAC’s Jerusalem office, said “On 24 May 2017, Jerusalem will mark 50 years to the occupation that was imposed on its Palestinian residents and on the entire West Bank.” Breaking down the walls through joint struggle for workers’ rights, workers’ and an end to poverty is “the way to overcome the violence in which we live, and to finally move from a reality of occupation to a reality of peace, progress and freedom.” He noted the need to recreate the concept of “left” which is often associated these days with support for dictators like Putin or Assad.

WAC director Assaf Adiv closed the event emphasizing WAC’s unique character as an organization which crosses borders and walls, and said he is proud of the fact that it was the only workers’ organization in Israel that unequivocally stands by Palestinian workers against the occupation. “We don’t buy empty slogans. The creation of a popular workers’ movement, both on the Palestinian side and on the Israeli side, is our answer to anyone who says peace cannot be made between the nations.

“The democratic vision to which we are committed in Israel in Palestine and the Arab world, is linked to the need to redefine the workers’ movement and the Left around the world, where unfortunately today many workers vote for nationalist and racist leaders like Trump, Le Pen and Netanyahu. Many workers in Israeli society are xenophobic and nationalist. We are not prepared to trail behind those regressive trends. On the other hand we also reject dogmatic leftism. Our effort is part wherever possible of the effort to create of a new democratic left, struggling against savage capitalism, and aspiring to build an equal, pluralistic society that embraces difference.”

The Young Karl Marx : a film by Raoul Peck

reviewed by Janet Burstall

How did two migrant young men at around the age of 30 become spectres that have been haunting the globe for over one and a half centuries?

The *Young Karl Marx* opens with scenes of poor people gathering dead wood in a German forest being chased and struck down by men on horseback, to narration from Karl Marx’s description in the [Rheinische Zeitung](#) of how wood gathering was made illegal, and the gatherers were persecuted. We see Engels working for his father in a Manchester woollen mill, taking the side of the workers and learning about the conditions he wrote of in [The condition of the working class in England \(1845\)](#). Neither Marx nor Engels softened for polite society what they said about the brutality of capital, and the law, how it affected the living and working conditions of labouring people. They began with exposing those material conditions.

The movie covers a short period of time from 1843 to 1847, which includes the publication of five of their early works, beginning with the two mentioned above, and concluding with the Communist Manifesto. In that time Marx and Jenny move from Germany to Brussels and Paris before arriving in London.

Marx, Engels, the sharply intellectual Jenny, and the stridently class conscious Mary Burns teamed up to storm through political debates and struggles.

First they took on the philosophically idealist young Hegelians whose “critical criticism” our heroes replied to jocularly with the title “The critique of critical criticism”, and which was published under the title we know better [The Holy Family](#).

Next was a rejoinder to Proudhon’s *Philosophy of poverty* under the title [Poverty of philosophy](#). In banter Jenny nails Proudhon’s claim that property is theft for not explaining anything, because the concept of theft is premised on the existence of property.

Finally comes the *Communist Manifesto*, written not against any one philosophical position, but a statement for the newly formed Communist League, when Engels and Marx persuaded the League of the Just that its slogan “All men are brothers” was unfit for dealing with the capitalist class that showed no brotherly (or sisterly) concern for the working class.

Raoul Peck’s movie could stand as a drama about romance and survival, even if you don’t know or care much about Marxist ideas. It is so much richer for viewers who are familiar with the times, the individuals and the desire to clarify political philosophies. It is well cast, with some illuminating and entertaining dialogue. Dramatic licence has been taken with sequencing of some events, and with imagining what is unknown about the women, especially Mary Burns.

Perhaps the greatest success of Raoul Peck's film is that it rescues Marx and Engels from the lifelessness of a Soviet stone statue, or the disdain of a postmodernism, by presenting these men alongside their loves Jenny von Westphalen and Mary Burns as living, flesh and blood characters.

There is so much material for drama in the characters of Marx and Engels, but it seems there is only one previous biopic made in 1966 in the then USSR, and it wasn't a hit. But I'm eagerly awaiting the TV series in production based on Mary Gabriel's wonderful *Love and capital*, begun as an account of the women in the lives of Marx and Engels.

US coalition moves on Raqqa

Simon Nelson 21 June, 2017

After several months of deadlock, the US-led operation with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to take Raqqa has begun. Lama Fakih the Middle East director at Human Rights rightly points out, "The battle for Raqqa is not just about defeating ISIS, but also about protecting and assisting the civilians who have suffered under ISIS rule for three and a half years."

However the largest force on the ground in the Syrian Democratic Forces is the People's Protection Units (YPG). As Raqqa is a predominantly Sunni Arab city, there are legitimate concerns about a non-Arab force helping to take the city, especially one which has scores to settle within the Daesh capital.

Human Rights Watch is concerned about the YPG's persistent recruitment of child soldiers. The Kurdish police (Asayish) have been accused by both HRW and Amnesty International of detaining and mistreating many. It has detained medics who have given treatment to captured Daesh fighters. An estimated 400,000 civilians remain in Raqqa governorate, and 160,000-200,000 in the city of Raqqa. More than 200,000 civilians have so far been displaced, according to the UN. Of those left, 40,000 are children.

The coalition is determined that the "liberation of Raqqa" should be done much faster than the slowly progressing operation in Mosul. Raqqa is the Caliphate's capital, and the destruction of Daesh there would be highly symbolic. As in Mosul, the defeat of Daesh should be welcomed. However there are real and serious misgivings about the forces that will undertake the operation. We should have no faith in the combination of militias and the US to respect the interests of the civilian population of Raqqa.

Around 50,000 forces are technically available if all of the YPG and other Syrian Arab militias that have been approved by the US and Turkey are deployed. Daesh have laid mines across the city and booby trapped houses, and have installed a network of tunnels under the city. There are regular announcements through megaphones during bombing raids, warning civilians not

to leave their homes. Those that do flee are shot at by snipers, and civilian vehicles are torched. The coalition has responded by using white phosphorus. This incendiary chemical is legal if used to make a smoke screen or to guide other forms of artillery. However, Raqqa is densely populated, and the consequences of white phosphorus coming into contact with civilians is lethal. There have been well documented cases of burns through to the bone; wounds can reignite when dressings are replaced. The use of white phosphorus in civilian areas should be considered a war crime.

The coalition has accepted that in recent airstrikes almost 500 civilians were killed. Who will control Raqqa following the defeat of Daesh is hard to know. The YPG will not enter the city itself. Whoever ends up in control will probably find themselves fighting the Syrian government. Maybe a deal can be struck between Turkey and the US over who can maintain control. The situation has been made more complicated by the involvement of Iran and Russia. Both have increased their direct involvement in the conflict, and both back Syrian President Bashar Assad.

Russia has warned the US that it will consider US aircraft legitimate targets and will stop the communication that was set up to try to prevent shooting incidents in the air. Following an attack on the Iranian Parliament by Daesh, Iran's Revolutionary Guards have launched several missiles into eastern Syria. This is the first time Iran has played a direct role in the conflict.

Mosul: Daesh to fall

The last district in Mosul held by Daesh is likely to fall soon. 100,000 civilians are trapped in the Old City, the most densely populated area of Mosul. The Iraqi army has said that air and artillery strikes will be used sparingly to minimise loss of life in the narrow passageways and old buildings that make up the Old City.

About 230 civilians have been killed in western Mosul in the first two weeks of June — the result of air strikes and rocket attacks, with a smaller number killed by Daesh snipers as they try to flee. Although there is officially a humanitarian corridor running out of the city, high numbers of casualties are incredibly likely.

This is not helped by the desire of some of the military to blow up the Nuri mosque, made famous for having Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi made his only public and recorded appearance there.

Rojava, socialism and Kurdish politics

(continued from back page)

He is commonly known as Apo, meaning uncle. His published books, particularly since his arrest, are

His control of over the PKK and its affiliates from prison remains very strong. The apparent shift in their ideology from a nationalist variant of "Marxism-Leninism" (Stalinism) to the theory of "democratic confederalism" has not widened democracy within the PKK itself, which retains a strictly hierarchical and largely military apparatus.

Murders of former members and rivals have continued, and Öcalan himself has had to request that no more of his supporters go on hunger strike for his release or repeat the act of six of his supporters in self immolating in order to get his release.

The People's Democratic Party (HDP), which is currently the largest legal Kurdish party in Turkey, called for Öcalan to be the lead negotiator with the government on a peace deal. Alisia Marcus an expert on the PKK has said that if Öcalan were to die in prison then the Turkish state would be seen as complicit and this would make any deal much harder to negotiate.

The PKK and PYD strongly argue for the rights of women and LGBT people in their publications. Many women are involved in combat operations and that they play a major role in the fighting against ISIS in Syria. Their stance on these issues is distinctively progressive for a large force in this region.

However, former members of the PKK, such as Mehmet Cahit Sener, who have been expelled or left have also made claims about the PKK leaders' attitudes to women, including allegations of sexual assault.

The PKK dropped the hammer and sickle from its flag in 1991 and now does not consider itself a nationalist organisation as it no longer calls for an Independent Kurdistan. It views itself as the military wing of the "Kurdish freedom movement", and although it remains committed to armed struggle in defence of Kurds it no longer describes this as its main field of activity.

Like the Provisional IRA and Sinn Fein the PKK has now moved towards gaining wider political legitimacy. The Union of Communities in Kurdistan (KCK) is now the umbrella organisation that brings together the PKK and all its international affiliates, political parties and campaigning organisations.

Following Öcalan's arrest and imprisonment there has been a supposed change in his ideology to something he refers to as "Democratic Confederalism". This is influenced by the American leftist Murray Bookchin. He previously described himself as an anarchist until rejecting the label in his later years.

Öcalan is quoted as saying this rests on replacing the basic elements of modern society, "capitalism, the

nation-state, and industrialism" with "democratic nation, communal economy, and ecological industry".

To do this requires three distinct programmes for a "democratic republic", for "democratic-confederalism", and for "democratic autonomy". This means in short, the granting of Kurdish civil rights, and a move from representative forms of democracy to a "more direct... political structure".

Some of the left believe that this is being achieved in parts of Syrian Kurdistan and in Diyarbakir, the largest city in Turkish Kurdistan.

On the ground, assemblies exist and do organise in a non-sectarian manner. But they are dominated by the PYD, almost along the lines of a one party statelet. The PYD also controls all the arms and military actions in the area. In a report by the Crisis Group, a resident of Qamishli is reported as stating in an interview: "People's councils are for everybody, not only Kurds. In Qamishli, Christians have their own council leader responsible for gas distribution who is selected by the PYD.... Members and leaders are selected by the PYD and report to the PYD-controlled police".

Another is quoted as saying: "I was in the YPG (People's Protection Units) since before the uprising... Since last year, at least 400 new PKK military personnel came from Turkey and Iran. They are not Syrians, and they want to control everything".

The PYD, whilst tolerating opposition parties and activists, remains in full control of the Kurdish held territory. Salih Muslim, the PYD leader, has also made statements suggesting Arabs may be forcibly expelled from Kurdish areas.

David Graeber, in his widely-read Guardian article "Why is the world ignoring the revolutionary Kurds in Syria?", says in passing: "Clearly, authoritarian elements remain", but does not expand on what this means and how or whether this will be overcome.

The KCK contract which is part of the political basis for Rojava states that: "This system is one that takes into account ethnic, religious and class differences on a social basis... Three systems of law will apply in Kurdistan: EU law, unitary state law, democratic confederal law".

Whilst the Rojava cantons are vastly superior to the medieval barbarism of ISIS we should not have illusions that such a system has somehow abolished class antagonisms, or that a guerrilla movement with a Stalinist background has been able to transform itself so readily and with little opposition into protectors of a libertarian autonomous zone.

The PYD and its allied forces are defending the Kurds from IS fighters and protecting the right of Kurds to self-determination. That is enough to mandate international solidarity; but the need for independent working-class and socialist politics among the Kurds is still very real.

Rojava, Socialism and Kurdish politics

by Simon Nelson

The Democratic Union Party (PYD), and the movements it leads are the main forces resisting ISIS in Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan). Workers Liberty strongly supports these struggles and Kurdish self-determination.

However, we don't see them as representing independent working-class and socialist politics. The PYD are closely linked politically with the Turkish based Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). What is the PKK?

The PKK was founded in 1977 by a small group of students who had previously been involved in the banned Dev-Genç (Revolutionary Youth) organisation, one of several revolutionary organisations that formed in Turkey in the 1960s.

PKK defined itself as a "Marxist-Leninist" organisation prepared to wage armed struggle for an independent Kurdistan, and its base was mainly the Kurdish peasantry in the mountains of South Eastern Turkey.

It found auxiliary bases of support across Europe among Kurdish workers who had emigrated. At that stage the PKK described its mode of operation as "revolution in the countryside" which would have to take a "national character".

Since the PKK's formation, over 30,000 people have been killed in fighting between their fighters and Turkish state forces.

In 1980 a guerilla group called the Revolutionary People's Liberation Party-Front (DHKP/C) assassinated Turkish Prime Minister Nihat Erim. A general crackdown on armed and opposition political groups forced the PKK leadership and much of its militia to flee to Syria and Lebanon. Abdullah Öcalan, one of PKK's founders and its current leader, had already set up bases there and began to build contacts with other movements.

The PKK had uneasy relationships with Kurdish groups and parties in Syria, Iraq and Iran. However, in the late 1980s and early 1990s it was able to operate across the borders of those states particularly during the 1991 Gulf War. It has been alleged that it was associated with the importation of heroin through Iraq.

Early attempts by the Turkish government at peace negotiations fell apart in 1995 following the death of Turgut Ozal, a half-Kurdish Turkish Prime Minister. In the mid 1990s, after Kurds in Iraq gained a form of regional self-government, the PKK restarted its campaign against the Turkish state with a series of bombings, coupled with thousands of PKK prisoners going on hunger strike.

Following clashes with the two major Iraqi Kurdish parties, the PKK was forced to retreat from its bases in Iraq. It was then largely forced to operate from Syria and

under increasing international pressure to use peaceful methods to fulfil its aims. Further international pressure increased following several suicide bombings, largely conducted by women within Turkey.

Relations between Turkey and Syria were increasingly under strain as the Government of Hafez al-Assad had sheltered Öcalan and the PKK leadership and allowed their military and intelligence training and other activities to continue with relatively little interference.

At various points the PKK has sought and received support from Syria, Iran, Iraq and Armenia. Under increasing pressure from Turkey and Germany, where there are both large Kurdish and Turkish communities, the Syrian state confirmed it would assist Turkey in driving out the PKK.

The Syrian regime incurred Turkish ire for its lack of action, but when Turkey broke off diplomatic relations in 1998, Syria reacted and Öcalan was deported.

From exile in Rome, Öcalan declared that he wanted an end to the war and to get a political solution to Kurdish autonomy through a "process of peace and democracy".

He was arrested in Nairobi by the Turkish intelligence forces and has remained in a Turkish prison in Imerli ever since. He was sentenced to death, but pressure from the EU, which Turkey was hoping to join, commuted his sentence to life imprisonment. Through his lawyers, he remains the PKK's leader. extensive, and his image adorns the yellow flags of Kurdish protestors and activists across the world. Zaher Baher of London's Haringey Solidarity Group and Kurdistan Anarchists Forum has commented that the work of Öcalan is treated almost as "sacred", and that schoolchildren are told about him as the great leader of the Kurdish people.

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