

Palestine – Israel: the return of old formulas

by *Martin Thomas*

There are about 13 million Palestinians across the world. They do not have a state of their own. They are disadvantaged in all the countries where they are mainly concentrated, though in different ways from country to country.

About 2.9 million live in the West Bank, mostly in over 160 patches of land where the Palestinian Authority has limited autonomous powers of administration (mostly to hand out foreign aid money and jobs), but which are hemmed in and dominated by a surrounding Israeli military presence. About 2 million are in Gaza, which is nominally independent, but pauperised by being blockaded by and dependent for all basic supplies on Israel (and Egypt). About 3.2 million are in Jordan, and 1.9 million in Israel; in both those countries they are disadvantaged.[1]



The statistics indicate about 500,000 in Lebanon and about 500,000 in Syria. A large number of those from Syria will have fled from the civil war there to Lebanon or Jordan. Most of those in Lebanon and Syria are in official or unofficial refugee camps. In Lebanon they are denied access to public services and to many categories of jobs; in Syria they are denied citizenship. The other 2 million are scattered across many

(continued on page 17)

Workers' Liberty: what we stand for

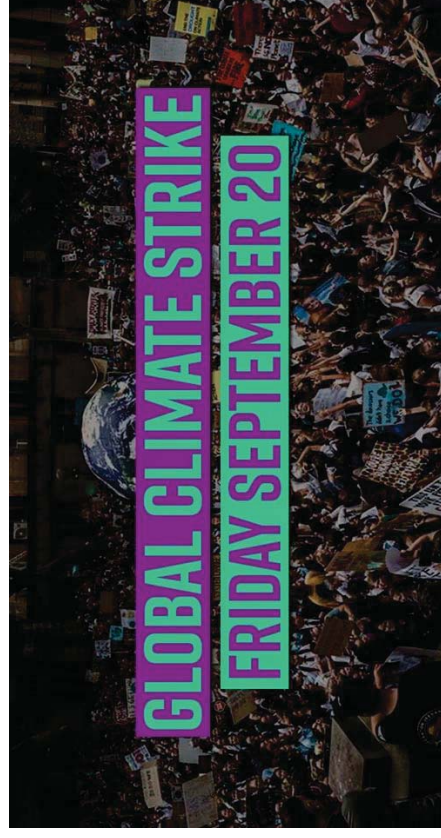
- Independent working-class representation in politics.
- A workers' government, based on and accountable to the labour movement.
- A workers' charter of trade union rights — to organise, to strike, to picket effectively, and to take solidarity action.
- Public ownership of essential industries, and taxation of the rich to fund renewable energy and environmental protection, decent public services, homes, education and jobs for all. End fossil fuel extraction.
- A workers' movement that fights all forms of oppression. Full equality for women, and social provision to free women from domestic labour. For reproductive justice: free abortion on demand; the right to choose when and whether to have children. Full equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. Indigenous control of indigenous affairs. Working class unity against racism.
- Free refugees, let them stay, right for workers to remain in Australia without insecurity of short term visas.
- Global solidarity against global capital — workers everywhere have more in common with each other than with their capitalist or Stalinist rulers.
- Democracy at every level of society, in trade unions, and from the smallest workplace or community to global social organisation.
- Equal rights for all nations, against imperialists and predators big and small.
- Maximum left unity in action, and openness in debate.

Workers' Liberty



The emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself
ISSN 1446-0165 No.71, August 2019 <http://australiaworkersliberty.org>

School students reach out to labour movement for climate action



INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- Radical union leader Bob Carnegie loses Queensland MUA election
- RAFFWU Fighting cuts to penalty rates, interview with Hayden Walsh
- Tax and wealth after the election, interview with Dick Bryan
- Reviews: Pamphlet on climate change, a book about the GFC and its aftermath, a documentary about Brazil and the Workers' Party.
- Corbyn reactionary on Europe
- International Socialist US collapse, and Socialist Alternative
- Palestine – Israel and the Right of Return

The Global Climate Strike on 20 September, initiated by school students striking for climate action is hugely important.

It is galvanising a large, energetic student movement, with strong links to the labour movement, for action on climate change that could force governments and corporations to take some positive measures on climate change. This won't be enough to stop corporations from continuing to find new opportunities for profit regardless of climate or human impact. Governments at worst make it is easy for capital to do this, or at best fail to keep up with capital's rapaciousness. The domination of society by for profit investment is the overarching obstacle to comprehensive action on climate change.

We support both action for specific and immediate measures to reduce greenhouse emissions, and also building a climate action movement towards taking power over investment away from private capital, and placing production in public ownership under grassroots democratic control. The climate action movement can be the seeds of that democratic grass roots and workers' control if, while demanding immediate action and integrating climate action with the industrial power of labour, it also sets its ambitions on economic and political overturning of capitalist domination.

Protest Demands

The organisers of Workers for the September 20 Global Climate Strike are demanding No new coal and gas; 100% renewable power by 2030; and Fund climate jobs and a just transition. Some but not all of the publicity refers to publicly owned power.

The movement for climate action will need a broader set of demands and measures both because these are not enough to limit warming to 1.5 C, and because different groups of workers and people are more able to take up different elements of the program of changes needed, depending on where they live and work.

More sources of emissions

According to ABC Four Corners electricity generation is the only emission source that is falling, currently 34% of carbon from Australia. It is followed by 30% from industry manufacturing extraction and processing resources, 19% from transport and 15% from agriculture. In transport, cars are the highest emitters, at around 44-45% of transport emissions, with commercial road transport making up over 35 %. Aviation emissions are 9% and projected to increase by a third by 2030. We all need to understand sources of emissions in more depth, to know how to eliminate or reduce them.

Workers' Liberty's additional demands

Some immediate measures we can demand are to redirect funds for Badgery's Creek airport in Sydney to high speed rail projects on the east coast. Other emissions lowering demands for transport include public transport instead of road projects, and electric vehicle facilities.

Publicly ownership of energy is essential. According to the Australian Energy Regulator in 2018 the major energy operators in the retail market are Origin, AGL, Energy Australia and Alinta in Queensland, NSW, Victoria and South Australia, and Aurora in Tasmania and ACTEW AGL in the ACT. Snowy Hydro in NSW and Victoria is still publicly owned, but not controlled by power workers and consumers.

"refugees" rather than Palestinians generally. UNRWA is the UN agency which was set up as a temporary device in 1949 to help the Palestinian refugees (and also, initially, Jewish refugees arriving in Israel). The political impasse leaves it still operating 70 years later. It logs people as Palestinian refugees if their father was logged as a refugee. Seventy years on, it has six million people logged as refugees, 2.3 million in Jordan, about 500,000 in each of Lebanon and Syria, 1,000,000 in the West Bank, and 1.4 million in Gaza.

So the 1.9 million Palestinians in the West Bank, the 600,000 in Gaza, who are not logged as refugees - what about them? 70 years on, the fact that their grandparents didn't come from what is now Israel doesn't make them better off than the others. In Jordan, the West Bank, and Gaza, to be registered as a refugee is, if anything, a ticket to slight alleviations, by way of the services provided by UNRWA.

In Amman, some 46% of households do not have piped water. UNRWA reported some years ago that only 5% of refugee-camp households in Jordan lacked piped water. In Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, many people live in slums. The UNRWA camps are slums with some minimal improvements funded by UNRWA. The worst-off refugees live there because they most value the meagre UNRWA provision. Only 17% of the registered refugees in Jordan live in camps, but 24% in the hemmed-in West Bank, 40% in blockaded Gaza, and 49% in Lebanon. Why? Because the Lebanese government bans Palestinians from a large range of jobs and from public services.

Outside the camps, refugee status is a ticket to the schools, health care, and occasional dole and loans, provided by UNRWA. UNRWA schools are overcrowded and often have to operate in two "shifts" per day. Yet they get better

results than the (also underfunded) government schools in Jordan and the West Bank. The scandal to be fixed is the plight of the whole Palestinian people, not just the registered refugees.

To make "right of return" the pivot of the Israel-Palestine question is to make the single "Arab land" the pivot, and not the two peoples now living.

Leftists who campaign to make "return" central present their efforts as just the expression of general anti-racist principles. But really it means putting hereditary right to land above living politics. It offers Palestinians no feasible redress, and signals to Israeli Jews that the aim is to deny them self-determination.

[1] The Palestinians in Israel are citizens with voting rights (except in annexed East Jerusalem: some 260,000 Palestinians there are ruled as part of Israel but are only "permanent residents"). But they are underrepresented in the government administration (only 11% of government jobs even after recent increases). Getting building permits, for example, is difficult for Palestinians, and demolitions of their "unapproved" shops and dwellings are commonplace. The police are almost exclusively Jewish, and infected in their dealings with Palestinians by the chauvinism widespread in a Jewish population long in conflict with its neighbours and intensified in recent years. Arabic-language schools and other public services in Palestinian majority areas are underfunded. The new Nation State Law is so far mostly symbolic, but threatens Arabic language rights. Already universities teach only in Hebrew and English. In general Palestinians are poorer; they have suffered more from the increased social inequality in Israel in the right-wing neoliberal Netanyahu years.

Seventy years on from 1949, "return" means the movement of the 1947-9 refugees' grandchildren, ten times as numerous, highly urbanised, few of them peasants, into an Israel whose population is also ten times what it was in 1948, and where only 2.3% of GDP is agricultural. That couldn't possibly restore the conditions of pre-1947, even if that were desirable. It surely doesn't express a preference that this or that Palestinian might have to live in a majority-Jewish society rather than a majority-Arab one. It is a coded form of the demand to stop Israel existing as the mainly-Jewish society it is - to overrun it, in fact to displace most of its population, among whom those who trace their origins to Arab and other Asian and African countries from where their families were pushed out after 1948 are more numerous than those descended from the Jews active in the 1947-9 wars. It won't happen.

If, through some twist of world politics, it could - then only through a shattering war of conquest. Life among the war-shattered ruins would be no "return" to previous joys for the Palestinians. This demand does not express an informed urge to find at least some "immediate" alleviation of misery. It is a highly "ideological" demand. It offers no prospect of improvements for the Palestinians. It serves only as a lever to substitute anti-Israel for pro-Palestinian activity.

As long as 26 years ago, in the "Declaration of Principles" agreed in 1993 as the start of the "Oslo process" (which was meant to lead to a Palestinian state but foundered), the PLO signed up to the idea that a peace settlement would include compensation, but no great collective "return". The two-states Geneva Accord of 2003 made by Israeli and Palestinian negotiators acting unofficially (then welcomed by PA leaders and denounced by

the then Israeli government) includes provisions for refugees, but no principle of "return". Of course many Palestinians, seeing "two states" prospects fade, have gone back to old formulas.

Of course Israeli leftists can and should press for Israel to offer acknowledgements, apologies, conciliations, easy entry for individual Palestinians. But focus on "right of return" as the principle blocks progress. As Norman Finkelstein, fiercely anti-Zionist himself, has said "they [the BDS people] think they are very clever because they know the result of implementing [their demands] is... There's no Israel!... They're not really talking about rights. They're talking about they want to destroy Israel". Take the Lara Alqasem case.

In October 2018, Alqasem, a US student of Palestinian family background, was detained at the airport when arriving in Israel to study at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem because she had taken part in pro-Palestinian campaigning in the USA, and admitted only after appeal to the Supreme Court. The BDS campaign was not bothered by the detention or relieved by the court decision. The bad thing, for them, was Alqasem's wish to study in Israel at all.

One of the founders of BDS, Omar Barghouti, himself moved from the USA to Israel for postgrad studies at Tel Aviv University. Israeli-Palestinians are 16% of the students at Israeli universities: it would be better if the percentage were higher, not if they "boycotted" those universities. Agitation like that against Alqasem is not helping Palestinians. Its only function is to brand Israeli Jews as outside human community.

All Palestinians or just refugees?

That the "right of return" banner is an ideological construct is also shown by its focus on those Palestinians designated as

A Just Transition needs to be spelt out in more detail, and to go well beyond looking after coal mining communities as coal-mines close down. We need a type of "Green New Deal" with democratic plans for "climate jobs" and secure retraining and redeployment for workers in all of the high-emitting sectors which need to be cut back. A Just Transition cannot depend on profitability of private investment to create alternative employment.

Worker's action

In Sydney at least the School Strike for Climate campaign is working with trade unionists, especially building from links forged at Sydney University. There are no doubt links being made elsewhere in Australia between students and workers.

This creates an opening for more engaging longer-term strategy for workplace action. Workers, on whom production depends, are in the box seat to redesign production, and use industrial leverage to back demands on both governments and corporations, to reduce carbon emissions, and other environmental, health & safety damage



which result from production. Trade union leaders who don't tackle climate change could become more exposed to challenges from their ranks. Workers control of production can be for the good of people and planet, rather than subordination to the purpose of accumulation of profits.

Losing the climate election

The Australian Labor Party's climate action platform for the May 2019 Federal Election was the most ambitious yet. Pre-election polls showed climate change was a high priority for voters.

The Liberal-National coalition was divided on climate action. Climate-change deniers controlled the party room, and had elected Scott Morrison as leader, an MP who had famously cradled a lump of coal in parliament to show his support for coal-fired power. Yet Labor lost the election.

Both major parties lost about 1% of their first-preference voters with minor parties, especially right-wing parties, picking up first preferences. The Greens (who usually swap preferences with Labor in Australia's alternative-vote system) did poorly. The post-mortem on why and how Labor lost continues. Climate action was only one of several policy areas that are now being debated, amongst the Labor Party, the unions, the Greens, and the left.

Climate change policy was a central issue, but its impact on voting can only be understood in connection with employment and economic policy. The biggest swings against Labor were in coal-mining areas of North Queensland and the Hunter Valley in New South Wales.

In North Queensland, Labor was caught between two poles of opinion. The Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy union stoked misguided hopes that Adani, a huge new coal mine project, will provide jobs in a region where unemployment is over 8%. Climate activists, especially the Greens and striking school students, had "Stop Adani" as a central demand.

New coal mines make no sense when we need to reduce consumption of fossil fuels,

not increase it. However, "jobs fear" is a ready weapon for the conservative side of politics. Neither Labor, union leaders, nor the Greens, had satisfactory or convincing answers for workers concerned for their livelihood.

Labor and the ACTU both adopted a "just transition" approach to phasing out coal-fired power stations, including a Labor commitment to funding an Energy Transition Authority. But the weaknesses of the Energy Transition Authority proposal were many. It was low-key, and not particularly highlighted. If it was developed with any consultation with communities based around coal-fired power stations, that was not apparent.

The rationale was a claim that coal-fired power was coming to an end anyway, because it is becoming unprofitable. Labor does not have a "just transition" policy for other climate-change implicated industries, including mining for export. It proposes no public employment programmes along the lines of a "Green New Deal".

The shock of the Labor defeat, and the implications that the Australian government will fail to seriously curb carbon emissions for another three years, is generating debate on the way forward among supporters of climate action.

The Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy union includes both supporters of Adani — in its mining division leadership — and opponents elsewhere in the union. Construction secretary of Queensland, Michael Ravbar, has expressed doubts about Adani. Queensland Maritime Secretary Bob Carnegie is the most outspoken union leader in the country to make the case against Adani. The National Union of Workers, after the election, issued a statement on secure jobs and safe climate which points in the right direction. They said

"it's time for our movement to think big and take a lead".

Getting workers and job-hunters to support action on climate change needs unions to have out the debate on climate issues, to involve affected communities in developing concrete proposals for how they can transition to industries which do not continue to pump out atmospheric carbon. Where private enterprise does not do this, communities need to come up with their own ways to take the initiative. Only by involving workers and their communities will unions will be able to win workers from the right-wing parties that support the Adani coal mine. There's plenty of debate about how to do this since the election, and prospects for developing a more positive approach look good.

Single term radical union leaders

by Janet Burstall

When Bob Carnegie lost the election for Queensland Secretary of the MUA after one term in office, this matched a pattern for successful rank and file challengers to long term incumbents with ALP factional roots. Here are some other examples.

In the NSW Nurses Association, the Nurses Reform held office from 1982 to 1987, with Jenny Haines as Secretary and Bronwyn Ridgway as Assistant Secretary. Irene Bolger was elected Secretary of the Victorian Branch of the Royal Australian Nursing Federation in from 1986 "on the basis of her commitment to forging union solidarity and encouraging industrial action" and led a two-month strike at the end of 1986. She narrowly lost office in 1989.

There are other examples of leaders elected to office as rank-and-file or left-wing candidates but who in office became conformist, such as Trevor Deeming, elected

Palestine – Israel: the return of old formulas

(continued from back page)

countries, with the largest groups in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states; the USA; and Latin America, especially Chile.

Independence for Palestine

For every oppressed nation, the first democratic remedy is national self-determination: the right to form an independent state. The compact core of the Palestinian population is in the West Bank and Gaza, where almost 90% of the population is Palestinian. An independent Palestinian state there would allow real self-rule and enable all the scattered Palestinians to have a citizenship to refer to and a "homeland" to return to if they wish. Its creation would be a lever to help the Palestinians in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Israel win equal rights. It would also improve the economic prospects of the people.

A thorough transformation of those prospects requires a socialist federation of the region, capable of sharing the immense natural riches now confiscated by a few. To make a socialist federation requires a working class united across borders. And that requires both a common democratic policy of mutually-recognised rights, and a framework at least minimally able to allow industrial and working-class development.

Bit by bit from the 1970s - and decisively since the first mass mobilisation of the Palestinians, in the West Bank and Gaza in 1987-8 - the democratic programme of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel ("two nations, two states") was moved from being a way-out proposal of the Palestinian and Israeli left to being the subject of diplomatic negotiations. To being a "consensus" — in words. Not in facts. In the

early 1990s a precarious path to "two states" looked open. An upsurge of right-wing chauvinist forces both in Israel and among the Palestinians, and the force of inertia, blocked it. Any development other than a worsening of the impasse will require big political shifts to make it happen.

"Two states" requires political shifts which are possible, and could then facilitate further shifts. If we have no confidence in the underlying (for now submerged) strength of the desire of the working people on all sides for peace, democracy, mutual respect, then the shifts look impossible. And old formulas revive.

Pro-Palestinian, or just anti-Israeli?

The "Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions" agitation claims that it "does not advocate for a particular solution to the conflict", but actually makes its main distinctive demand the "right to return" of "more than 7.25 million Palestinian refugees" to what is now Israel. Hamas has organised demonstrations in Gaza for more than a year now under the title "Great March of Return".

The demand to "return" to some better or supposedly better past condition cannot make good the bad turns of history. Not in the world, not in Israel-Palestine. The Holocaust, the closing of doors to Jewish refugees from the Nazis, and 1940s antisemitism in Europe, cannot be undone. The crimes and misdeeds of the Jewish forces in the wars of 1947-9 cannot be undone. Nor can the crimes and misdeeds of the Arab forces in those wars. Nor can the pushing-out of 600,000 or more Jews from other Middle Eastern countries after 1948. Progress is possible only by finding a basis to move forward in solidarity and mutual respect among living people, now, without each trying to find redress for the sufferings of their grandparents.

They are models because they encouraged and facilitated mass struggles. What of the politics of the IWW and the CPA (beyond general advocacy of socialism)? Their programme? The fact that the same CPA headed off the mass strike wave of 1975 and aligned the unions behind the union-Labor Accord which after 1983 devastated the Australian labour movement? Not mentioned.

A small organisation, like SALT or ISO, is building rot into its foundations if it develops on the basis that precise programme doesn't matter — if it suggests that being (1) a socialist “virtue-signalling” group, and (2) energetic in pushing along whatever is broadly defined as left-wing, is enough.

To be sure, the fact that they have systematically organised meetings and put out publications puts SALT and ISO ahead of other currents of the left. The ISO had, and SALT has, a good number of impressive young writers and speakers. Yet their press and their meetings have been largely devoid of intra-socialist debate or polemic (and, in my experience at SALT meetings in Australia, often actually hostile to debate). They have largely lacked effort to establish continuity with or reasoned departure from the hard-won traditions of revolutionary Marxism, the “classics”.

The British revolutionary left in the late 1960s and the 1970s, when I first became active, was not much more numerous than it is now. It was materially much poorer in its facilities for publishing and communicating. Yet if you were an activist then, you would have many political arguments every week — sometimes foolish, sometimes off the wall, but real arguments, referring to more-or-less Marxist common stock — in individual conversations, in meetings, in print.

Bullying replaces real debate

Now you're more likely to have your adversaries throwing personal abuse via social media, and your friends telling you that they don't dispute your politics but are “too stressed” to join in. As Sean Matgamma wrote in *Solidarity* 469: “The atmosphere on the ostensible left is heavily charged with heresy-hunting, trolling (which is only another name for gang mobbing and bullying), shouting-down, and drowning-out. There is little or no real political debate or dialogue...”

“Malice does service for information, hostility is enough to establish guilt on whatever charge you can think of. Anything-goes demagoguery smothered, reasoned, truthful discussion...”

“Social media both are the vehicle, and provide the new model of discourse. There is it possible to spread opinions without knowledge, and rampant prejudice with no basis other than itself”.

ISO and SALT have adapted to and skirted round that soundbite, virtue-signalling/ vice-denouncing culture, rather than fighting it. And that has rotted the ISO, at least (I wouldn't expect SALT to collapse, unless and until its longstanding leaders suffer personal meltdowns. I say only that what it does is politically inadequate).

A low level of direct working-class struggle, and a consequent pressure to look elsewhere for socialist virtue, frames all this. We cannot raise that level at will. We can and must be aware of the effects on the culture of the left, and fight against them. The ISO collapse is a startling example of the possible consequences if we fail.

NSW secretary of the ACOA (then the federal public service union) in 1985, or Anne Gardiner, elected General Secretary of the PSA in NSW in 2012, who lost office back to the ALP-backed faction in 2016. But even leaders who have remained principled have often only had short terms.

It's not possible to reduce these experiences to a single lesson, but it's clear that to achieve fresh and enduring leadership requires many ingredients. They need to aim to win multiple official positions. A network of democratically organised supporters of the candidates' principles with roots in the delegates' structure and workplaces saves the fresh leaders from isolation, and white-anting by the old guard. The network needs to be able to anticipate the nature of the enemies of the workers' interests, and plan ahead to keep the membership united and strong during industrial action.

Bob Carnegie has been a principled leader. But I think it's fair to say he lacked the supporters of his principles that could outdo the machine that backed his opponent.

Only one union fighting cuts to penalty rates: RAFFWU

The latest stage of Fair Work Commission cuts to minimum penalty rates came in on 1 July 2019. The union that is taking on employers and keeping penalty rates is the Retail And Fast Food Workers Union. We spoke to Hayden Walsh, a Sydney retail worker and member of the RAFFWU National Committee.

Sydney RAFFWU ranks-and-file members organised a snap speakout in the CBD on 6 July to coincide with the 2019 cut to penalty rates. About 40-50 people came along. It was fun. We know it's possible to retain penalty rates.



Recently, we had a win at Readings bookshops in Victoria. Management had planned to implement the FWC reduction in Sunday penalty rates. Readings promote themselves as a “progressive bookshop”, supporting refugees and marriage equality. But when they said they'd cut penalty rates, this led to a mass of workers joining RAFFWU, who challenged management collectively and won! They are now paid at the original higher rate.

Cutting penalty rates to the level set by the FWC is optional and open to challenge. It's therefore phenomenal that the ACTU affiliated unions are not motivating workers to challenge the cuts. Some young activists with Hospo Voice (an affiliate of United Voice in Victoria) have done some media stunts to expose non-payment of penalty rates. But we need more action.

Negotiations

RAFFWU argues in every EBA negotiation for restoration of penalty rates to pre-2017 levels. The SDA has not supported this, but has gone along with the FWC minimum rates.

New EBAs are now BOOT (Better Off Overall Test) compliant, as a result of a worker challenging Coles in 2016. RAFFWU also makes some minimum claims arguing for better conditions. RAFFWU campaigned for a No vote in the recent Woolworths EBA. Although the EBA

got voted up, RAFFWU exposed the SDA for making agreements with employers outside of the official EBA negotiations. RAFFWU brings workers to negotiations. They actually get to be involved in this process. The SDA does not involve members.

RAFFWU's development

RAFFWU's membership is growing. The union is only 3 years old and already has around 1400 members. Building density is the biggest challenge. We need activist members to recruit new members. RAFFWU encourages members to vote up delegates in workplaces with 5 or more members. The union keeps in touch with delegates, encourages them to be spokespeople or bargaining representatives in negotiations. We are learning from the UNITE union in New Zealand, even though there are differences in NZ laws which make it easier for them.

Recent steps towards greater democracy include the establishment of a National Committee made up of 10 delegates and ordinary members elected during the union's AGM. Any member can nominate to be on the Committee or challenge for RAFFWU's executive roles, including Secretary, President and Treasurer. RAFFWU is working towards having delegates conferences in the near future.

The generally accepted belief about retail and fast food is that it will forever be a low pay sector. Fighting low pay is a broad and butter issue, and these sectors need organising. RAFFWU wants to run campaigns outside of the limited period of enterprise bargaining. There's no reason why retail and fast food workers can't take industrial action. We will pursue bold industrial campaigns where our members want us to. If RAFFWU members ever go on strike, we hope we'd be supported by

other unions, even if unofficially. An obstacle to solidarity with RAFFWU is the SDA, who has a close relationship with the ACTU. The SDA was a major funding source behind the Change the Rules Campaign.

Some ALP and Greens unionists say to us, "you're not real, you're not official" and ask when are we going to register with the Fair Work Act, as if this has been beneficial for unions that are registered. But we don't need that. While we are a registered union and organisation under different laws, I think unions should be edgy. Lots of people are not being represented by the ACTU. RAFFWU members were part of a Break the Rules forum in Sydney in July, with groups like Extinction Rebellion, Australia Asia Worker Links and the Australian Unemployed Workers Union. There was a lot of enthusiasm at that forum for fighting for penalty rates and the right to strike. RAFFWU members are linking these issues and taking on issues that affect all workers, like marriage equality and climate action.

Tax and wealth after the election

Dick Bryan spoke to Janet Burstall for Workers' Liberty about Labor's tax policies and the federal election results. Dick researches the significance of financialisation, for capital, labour and households. He is Emeritus Professor of Political Economy at Sydney University and co-author of the book Risking together.

Q: Is it possible that policy changes initiated by Labor in the 1980s and 1990s (and then built on by Howard) that were designed to increase household savings and their financial exposure, have altered the perspectives of traditional Labor voters on taxes targeting wealth? If so, how?

Good in the abstract

"More than this, it was an outreach organisation designed to draw more such people into the socialist circle. That was the purpose of paper sales, public forums, socialism classes and even – in the minds of some – participation in political demonstrations..."

"There was an inclination to see the ISO as an association of the good people, of pure souls, standing up against the immorality and viciousness of capitalism, animated by the hope or promise that the working class majority also has the potential for such purity..." Le Blanc quotes some ex-ISOers: "Our politics were mostly good in the abstract. But in practice [when the ISO went beyond general advocacy of socialism] we adapted to the hostile territory".

The ISO, from Le Blanc's description, focused heavily on establishing regular local public meetings and stalls, especially at university campuses. I have observed a similar focus by the ISO's Australian sister-group, Socialist Alternative (SAIt).

In our times, when young people gather on university campuses in much larger numbers than anywhere else, and it is easier to run and advertise stalls, meetings, etc. on those campuses than anywhere else, I think that is sensible. It's worked well for SAIt. Despite what some ISOers seem to have said, such regular activity is nowhere near so demanding as to exclude activity in unions, strikes, etc. Yet the heavy focus on apparently "educational" activity left the ISO with a culture that went not far beyond moralistic self-praise: "we're the good guys, the socialism-from-below guys". And despite being perceived by those around it as very active and "punching above its weight", the ISO "adapted to the hostile territory" and did not work as an ideological lever to transform the labour movement.

Astounding lack of will

Any broad political explanation leaves questions unanswered. That not a single member of the ISO had the will and energy to continue the building of a revolutionary socialist organisation is astounding. Every single one, apparently, opted for becoming inactive, continuing only in a local ex-ISO collective, disappearing into the DSA, or (presumably, for the old leadership) officiating over the large leftist publishing house previously linked to the ISO, Haymarket Books.

As they say, a pet is not just for Christmas. And commitment to build a revolutionary socialist organisation is not just for a few years when you are young and healthy and footloose, or when there are no nasty jolts or setbacks. It is a life's work.

The completeness of the ISO collapse suggest some prior personal exhaustion in the old leadership. Maybe the recent rise of the DSA, and setbacks from the ISO arising from DSA competition (ISO is reported to have gone down from 1,300 members in 2013 to 800 or 900 before the collapse), demoralised them. I don't know. An article on "why organise" which SAIt published as an implicit response to the collapse of its sister group (though without telling its readers about that collapse!) gives us clues about general political issues behind the paradoxes.

What of the politics?

The article cites two models of how a revolutionary socialist organisation can do good work. Not the Bolsheviks. Not the Trotskyists who kept the flame alive in hard times and were then able to do much in the explosions of 1968 and after. No: the syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World, before 1914, and... the Communist Party of Australia in the 60s and 70s.

Losing the thread: ISO's collapse

by *Martin Thomas*

The veteran Marxist writer [Paul Le Blanc](#) has written the most substantial and critical account yet of the collapse of the USA's International Socialist Organization, of which Le Blanc was himself a member, though not a central one.

The ISO was the most active revolutionary socialist organisation in the USA, with 800 or 900 members. At its convention in late February 2019, opposition groups displaced its longstanding leaders with a platform promising wider activism. Le Blanc (who was outside the USA at the time) reports “at the convention’s conclusion there seemed among people I trust considerable optimism about the future of the ISO”.

Then “two scandals erupted – (1) what was seen as a possible rape cover-up, and separate from this, though in some ways related, (2) revelations of what was seen as a pattern of abusive and unacceptable behaviour by a central figure of the once-dominant leadership”. Of course resignations, expulsions, nasty disputes followed. Also, within a few weeks and not at all “of course”, followed complete collapse.

By 19 April the ISO's publications Socialist Worker and International Socialist Review had ceased. Its website had stopped taking new posts. Its summer school had

been handed over to the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), Jacobin magazine, and the Haymarket publishing house. It was all over.

Le Blanc reports that friends have complained to him that in the arguments that led to winding up the ISO “the primary focus has been on exposé, indignation, anger, pain, at times flowing into a destructive and depressing trashing of

former comrades and former beliefs, with contributions laced with one variety or another of ‘purist’ conformism, followed by multiple ‘likes’ spiced by jokes and flashes of going one better than what the last person said.

“Some inclined to disagree have held back... because they do not want to become the focal-point of online trashing. All of this has seemed to my outside interrogators to be the opposite of serious revolutionary politics...”

Le Blanc does not say that his friends are wrong — and, myself, I think they are right — but he says that they have missed part of the picture. The ISO, writes Le Blanc, had usefully recognised that it was “the nucleus of the revolutionary vanguard party”, already fully-formed except in not yet being big enough. But, he writes, “For some members, the ISO was more or less an affinity group of those who believed socialism is a good idea, and also an educational and discussion group for those who share such an affinity.”



A: Labor Government policies of the 1980s and 90s generated a critical turning point in a number of ways. Some would say that these governments performed the transformations of Thatcher and Reagan, but with trade union support! I think that's a bit cynical, but nonetheless by the early 2000s Australia, the US and Britain had all turned in the same direction. Howard was, in critical senses, a continuum of this agenda, but was able to take up the right-wing turn for which the Labor governments had built the preconditions.

But in Australia, major reforms came with the inclusion of trade union support, and superannuation was central. Its effect was indeed to change savings culture, and in complex ways. On the one hand, households became critically and increasingly invested in the performance of the stock market via compulsory investment there. Another was that households took on debt, in the knowledge that part of their wages were already going to compulsory savings through superannuation. But the effect of engaging debt, especially from banks pushing loans, was that households became vulnerable to variability in income, in interest rates, in house prices, etc. In these circumstances I think people can readily become anti-tax - they would rather have the money in their own pockets to meet their financial obligations than pay more tax in the hope of benefits from improvements in health and education, etc. The tax is seen as both compulsory and unaffordable. The promised social expenditures are seen as hypothetical and unpredictable.

Q: Some prominent Labor figures have criticised Chris Bowen's tax reform package as too radical. How would you assess that policy package?

A: It is interesting what the word 'radical' means in this context. The tax reform package was perhaps radical in the sense

that it gestured at challenges to the wealth of the wealthy. And I think that this intention needs to be acknowledged. But it was gestural in terms of real reform in wealth distribution. So it is interesting how, in the public relations exercise (election campaigning), the Labor package could be condemned as an assault on 'ordinary people'. It's a positive sign that the right didn't feel it could defend the rights of the rich; it's an alarming sign that they didn't need to!!

So the analysis could get strategic at this point: how could Bowen have put grandfather clauses on policies; caps on tax increases, etc. so as to minimise the critique. For those of us who want the nature of capitalism itself to be an issue for open discussion, it is good that he didn't dapple in these softeners more, but oddly un-strategic. I think Bowen landed in that space where a (slightly) reformist set of policies needed to come out of a bigger reframing of debate in Australia: to make talking about class and wealth, and how wealth is acquired more a part of mainstream discussion. Thinking you can just introduce these issues in an election campaign and not get push-back is odd politics.



Q: What are the prospects for reforms to make the taxation system more progressive? What might make them both more appealing to voters, and worthwhile?

A: I think if politics starts with tax levels and what is fair, it is hard to build a successful politics. It is, as we have just seen, too easy for those who will lose from reforms to wheel out cases of people who are not wealthy who will be disadvantaged by the changes. Tax must be the policy consequence of an alternative reframing of how society and the economy work differently for the wealthy and those on high incomes from how it works for those who are poor and on lower incomes. Tax cannot be the starting point of debate. Unless we challenge the underlying processes, it is too easy for the right to open issues like the deserving, hard-working, self-made rich person in contrast with the un-deserving, welfare-scheming poor, etc. as if these cases are representative of their 'class'.

I think that this recent election in Australia, like that of Trump and the Brexit referendum, suggest that we need to re-think class in relation to politics. Working class people angry with their displacement will vote for disruptions that may not be progressive. People on low incomes, and especially volatile incomes, and people with high contractual commitments (especially debt) will vote for tax cuts because they want money now, not state services in the future, and they don't trust the state to deliver.

So really tax is the tip of the iceberg. How to deal with people's experiences of volatility and insecurity, without making promises that we can initiate policies to go back to the forms of job security (for white men!) of the 1970s, is critical, I think. I sense we are in an era of significant change, where there is diminishing trust in the state to deliver benefits, security and stability.

Accordingly, the very legitimacy of even current levels of tax is under challenge. Turning that around is not (particularly) about making the state bigger, at least not before we have seriously reconsidered how the state can play a supportive role in the emerging new era.

“This pamphlet helped me understand how socialism can drive change”

Daisy Thomas, who recently became a climate change activist in Brisbane, discussed the Workers' Liberty pamphlet For workers' climate action (http://tiny.cc/dosdz), with Janet Burstall.

I was aware of socialism as an idea. This pamphlet gave me more understanding of how socialism can be used as a driver for change. It made me realise the importance of tapping into workers as a social mobilisation force that can be part of their own solution, including in fossil fuel industries that are going to be phased out. I've also started reading a book on the Green Bans.

The opening article by Neil Laker is persuasive, it sets out the issues. I hadn't known before about workers' action for climate justice and the occupation of coalmines in Germany explained in the second article. The review of Malm's book *Fossil capital* about the rise of steam power seemed to be too far back, and disconnected from what's happening now. The book *Burning up* by Pirani seemed more relevant, with the reviewer discussing the reasons for growth in fossil fuel consumption and the impact of privatisation. I agree that the corporate bottom line means there is not much disincentive for corporations that are increasing their carbon emissions, and that it is the disadvantaged who are affected by climate change, whether by providing their

types into silence. The British CP had a powerful influence in the trade unions and in the left of the Labour Party. There was also a strong sentiment in the Labour right and centre of commitment to the British Commonwealth.

Britain stood aloof from the initial Common Market of France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg, set up in January 1958. It was part of a much looser association, EFTA. When Britain made its first attempt to join the EEC (as it then was) in 1961-62, the right wing Labour leadership of Hugh Gattskell, Denis Healey, etc. opposed it (together with Labour leftists such as Michael Foot), and thereby won much credit with the anti-European nationalist left. All the Trotsky-tinted left groups poured contempt on the British-nationalist “left” opposition to the EEC, though without ourselves positively favouring European unity, even bourgeois unity, as, it now seems plain, we should.

The second of Britain's failed attempts to join, by a Labour government in 1967, was opposed by such Labour leftists as Michael Foot, and of course by those influenced by the CP. The major “Trotskyist” group, the SLL (later WRP) now joined the anti-EEC outcry. Why? Well, you see, the Wilson Labour government was going for the EEC instead of building socialism in Britain. That was the first time that socialism, in the future, was counterposed to European unity, in a political reality where the alternative to joining in the creation of European (bourgeois) unity was not socialism but the capitalist Britain we had. Slowly the Trotskyist left stepped into line with the political ancestors of the modern Brexiters. Britain's final, successful, attempt to join the EEC, in 1971-73, triggered a shift to opposition by the main hold-outs against it, the IS (today's SWP). [1] IS-SWP shifted in order not to be out of step with the politics

of the big battalions on the left. From 1971 opposition to the EEC came to be an article of faith for leftists, one which scarcely needed thinking about. It was an addled expression of opposition to capitalism. Newcomers were inducted into this political culture rather as now new leftists are inducted into the politics of root-and-branch hostility to Israel.

The powerful Labour left shot its bolt in campaigning — in company with right-wing Tories and worse — against the EEC in the 1975 referendum on it, and collapsed after its defeat. The Labour Party shifted to accepting British membership of the EEC. After reverting to Brexitism again in the early 80s, it shifted again, and solidly, to a pro-EEC line from the mid late 1980s.

Corbyn and the group around him, were politically formed in the 1970s or early 80s. Under pressure from the base of the labour movement, they backed Remain in 2016, and now have shifted to backing Remain against a Tory deal. But they still pull as hard as they can against a clear and unequivocal Labour commitment to Remain.

The good news here is that now most people — including MPs — who in any real degree are on the left on the Labour Party oppose the neo-Stalinist Brexiters at the head of the party and support “Remain and Transform”.

I repeat: the politics of the group around Corbyn and his Leader's Office are not just wrong on this issue. They are thoroughly reactionary. What might be called the contrarian left — Workers' Liberty and others — have a pressing duty to oppose and fight them.

[1] The expulsion from IS of the predecessors of Workers' Liberty was triggered by our opposition to that change of position on Europe.

Corbyn is reactionary on Europe

by Sean Matgamma

The British Labour Party's victory in the Peterborough by-election on 6 June was of course good news. It was also bad news. It seemed to vindicate the Labour leadership's political cloak-work and shilly-shallying on the EU.



In the 2016

referendum

Labour fought

Brexit. But now,

even after the

Labour has with

ostentatious

reluctance

committed to a

“people’s vote” on

any Tory deal and to backing Remain

against that, the people round Corbyn still

suggest that if it comes to a general election,

Labour will stand as a Brexit party.

Brexit amounts to rolling back the film of

EU development over the last near-half-

century, at best retreating to a mere

Common Market and cutting loose from the

structures of European political union. This

is both reactionary and profoundly

undemocratic. The idea that the 2016

referendum vote to leave, by a very ill-

informed electorate inflamed against Europe

by fears about immigration, precludes later,

better-informed reconsideration is

shamefully undemocratic. It is a one-shot

automatic-pilot conception of democracy,

locking us into a mechanical trajectory on

the authority of a referendum already three

years in the past. Except that automatic-pilot

systems do not rule out reassertion of direct

human control.

In a Europe experiencing a wave of right-

wing populism, xenophobia, hostility to

immigrants, the “left” Labour leadership

around Corbyn veers again and again to the nationalist politics of the right. There is nothing “left” about that. Certainly, this is a matter of catch-penny opportunist electoral calculation. But it is more, much more than that. It is the Labour leaders and the left around them reverting to politics that we seemed to have outgrown years ago.

The British left was for decades as bitterly

opposed to the EU

(the Common

Market, the EEC,

etc.) as the Morning

Star — the paper of

the rump

Communist Party of

Britain, which each

day carries the same

lauding

endorsement from

Jeremy Corbyn — is now. There is no

mystery about why. The Communist Party

opposed the EU because Russia, naturally,

opposed any strengthening of the bourgeois

starters in Europe. From the late 1940s the

policy of the Communist Parties was to

foment nationalist opposition to the USA, in

Britain, France, Belgium, etc.: pseudo-

nationalist opposition to loss of “national

sovereignty” to Europe was parallel to that.

It didn’t matter to the CPs that the

nationalism of the strong capitalist powers

had been thought of as reactionary by

socialists and Lenin-Trotsky communists. A

thing was rendered reactionary or

“progressive” according to its relationship to

Russia and the “socialist state’s” perceived

interests. Foul could be fair: black, red;

national chauvinism, the highest form of

internationalism.

In the early 1960s, Trotskyists had to fight

against such slogans on peace marches as

“Yankee bastards, go home”. That was

before the growth of the US movement

against the Vietnam war shamed the CP

labour or living in poor countries, and the Pacific Islands.

Some of the challenges for workers action on climate change include the private ownership of the energy companies, that where capitalist bosses are after profit they’ll oppose any movement or efforts at sustainability that threatens profits. A challenge is to get through to workers, to help them see beyond the short term needs of their families, that everyone is at risk from climate change in the long run, and to cut through the lies.

One of the main ideas I got from the pamphlet is that workers could be strategic ecological actors, forming a democratic collectivist movement that takes action, such as strikes and occupations. I read the point about having workplace representatives active on environmental issues in the review of Paul Hampton’s book. In my own way, I am active at work encouraging people to reduce waste and to recycle, which I know is kind of low level.

I support all the proposals for the British Labour Party conference, including a national strategy, nationalisation of energy, expanded public transport, and energy efficient housing combined with ending fossil fuel extraction and airport expansions. A national strategy like this is important because it shows both sides of the action we need, ramping up renewables and stopping fossil fuel extraction. Only in an ideal world could we stop all coal now, so looking at alternate sources of energy can help the transition.

Further reading on climate action

The Green New Deal and workers’ control

- <http://tiny.cc/tumsdaz>

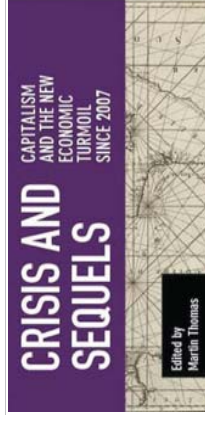
Green bans in Australia -

<http://tiny.cc/9psdaz>

The fight against climate catastrophe needs free trade unions - <http://tiny.cc/ajdsdz>

Crisis and sequels by Martin Thomas

Book reviewed by Janet Burstall



Could broader agreement be reached amongst political economists about the causes of crises and what developments to expect in the near future?

In paraphrasing Richard Brenner, Martin Thomas outlines the guide he has followed himself in compiling these interviews into a book. “Analysis must proceed not from a blurred outline of a “typical” capitalist economy, but from the complex reality of a world economy with its own structure and within it national economies substantially different in pattern both from the global structure and from each other.”

Crisis and sequels contains 32 interviews with, or contributions by, about 16 economists, organised into 5 chronological sections from 2007 to 2015. In each follow up interview the economist is asked to consider their earlier assessments. Thomas explores differences between the economists in his interviews, and follows up with an afterward and three appendices.

These are some of the questions put to the economists. What were the cause and trigger for the Global Financial Crisis? Does the period of the crisis mark the end of neoliberalism, and if so in what sense? What does the crisis and its aftermath show about the role of the USA in the global economy? Does the USA remain the dominant force, undented in its power, or is it beginning to

crumble? What does financialisation mean? Where does it fit in economic development?

Martin Thomas does not make a final judgment of his own on all of the matters under discussion. He and the reader are all challenged to keep on thinking through these questions.

This book is an endeavour to point to both the value of trying to reach a common understanding, and how it might be worked towards through critical dialogue. It is also a challenge to the conventional popular formulae of Marxist economics inherited from the Stalinist tradition, and is a contribution to their re-examination, just as Sean Matgamna has re-examined the history of Trotskyism.

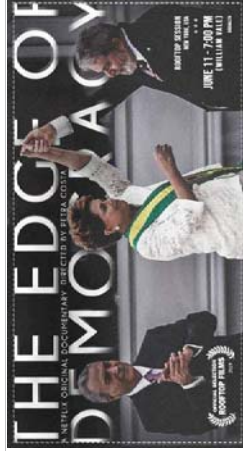
Importantly he does challenge the residue of Stalinist economics which holds sway. “Many on the left ... make elaborate plans to fight the last war. The spectre of the 1970s (and even the 1920s) still hang over much of the left. Many socialists still regard imperialism in terms of (a garbled version of) the analysis Lenin made during the First World War. They repeat a cannibalised “Leninist”, actually Stalinist account of imperialism.”

Appendix 3 explains why we should reject the explanatory power of the idea of a tendency of the rate of profit to fall. The tendency of the rate of profit to fall is just one tendency, amongst countervailing tendencies, operating in a limited context, and excluding other variables. It “developed and traction in the early years of Stalin’s rule, as a convenient reason to abandon revolutionary agitation on the grounds that capitalism’s collapse was inevitable.”

Socialists need to be able to discuss contemporary challenges to working class interests, in terms of Marxist political economy, in ways that are relevant and well-informed. This book will help us to do that.

The Edge of Democracy (2019)

Film reviewed by Tony Brown. See it on Netflix.



Petra Costa’s film is about Brazil’s democracy since the end of the 21-year military dictatorship in 1985 and the election this year of the extreme right wing Jair Bolsonaro. It’s a very personal film as her parents had organised underground against the dictatorship and believed that the creation of the Workers Party (PT) under the leadership of the charismatic Luiz Lula da Silva the Steelworkers’ Union President would usher in a radical, transforming government.

Costa was born as the dictatorship was ending so she is a child of the ‘Democracy’. Her film is a personal quest to make sense of the deep disappointment and the missed opportunities of the past thirty years.

The PT set out with a radical program of nationalisation and redistribution but failed at its first attempts to win elections. Eventually in 2003, after moderating its program, Lula became President of a coalition government with the PT the largest party. For a time his approval ratings were the highest of any elected leader in the world. After two terms he was succeeded by Dilma Rousseff in 2011 who, like the director’s parents had been arrested and tortured as a young activist under the dictatorship.

PT reforms reduced poverty and brought electoral success, however they failed to address the underlying sources of power, especially within the construction industry and the corrupt payments and patronage that fed the parliamentary parties. Opponents of the PT initiated an investigation into corrupt political funding. The economic instability following the 2014 crisis made it difficult for the PT government to fund its programs. These two developments provided the opportunity for opponents of the PT to stir up popular opposition to the PT, and to use legal institutions that had not been changed since the dictatorship to first impeach Dilma Rousseff and later jail Lula.

Costa has assembled footage of her family, of protests, of interviews with PT supporters, with PT Presidents Lula and Dilma Rousseff, and of parliamentary proceedings to build a story that helps explain how these manoeuvres developed. There are many moving scenes (Lula’s speech to the crowd before he is jailed) as well as engaging ones (the male politicians celebrating Rousseff’s impeachment, and Bolsonaro’s gun firing stance).

The detailed behind the scenes account of how the PT lost government, and Jair Bolsonaro became President contradicts the impression given by mainstream media that Lula and Dilma were ousted because they were corrupt, and shows rather that Brazil is now back in the hands of an elite which is making it safer for the corrupt.

The Edge of Democracy is worth seeing because it raises questions about how a radical workers’ government can survive against opposition from the privileged and powerful.

The sense that Brazil’s democracy is on an edge comes over very clearly. With Bolsonaro’s election the question is, will it step back or go over?

Join the fight for socialism
Contact Workers Liberty today

WORKERS’ LIBERTY
www.workersliberty.org



- help distribute this bulletin
- come to our political discussions

- Sydney 0428 957 704
- Canberra 0419 493 421
- Melbourne 0400 877 819
- Brisbane: 07 3102 4681

Facebook:

www.facebook.com/pg/workerslibertyoz/

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

Like reading print? Get this newsletter in the post – send us your address.

Socialism Makes Sense



The economic crisis of 2008 and its aftershocks cracked the mystique which the world capitalist system had built in the two decades after the collapse of Russian and European Stalinism. Socialism is again on the agenda — a society based on human solidarity, social ownership of industry and banks, and on political, economic, and social democracy.

This book confronts head-on the strongest arguments against socialism.