Push back the homophobes and transphobes: Defend and extend the Safe Schools Coalition

Right wing Christian attacks on the Safe Schools Coalition Australia (SSCA) are a threat; but also a great opportunity.

The review of the SSCA and subsequent cutbacks represent Turnbull caving in to pressure from the hard right of the Liberal party as exemplified by the homophobic, transphobic Cory Bernardi. The distortions and lies peddled by the Australian Christian Lobby have fed stigmatisation and discrimination against LGBTIQ people.

Their agenda is to create a climate of fear and anxiety in the lead up to the proposed plebiscite on marriage equality, hoping for an unlikely no vote. Despite oh-so-reasonable sounding language about opposing all bullying, they care nothing for the increase in victimisation and self-harm their campaign will create.

On the bright side is the positive and enormous response from both LGBTIQ activists and many mainstream politicians and organisations. We have seen the largest LGBTIQ organising meetings since the 1980s – with a new layer of leadership by trans activists in particular. Large demonstrations have been organised at a few days notice. ALP figures like Victorian Premier Andrews and federal opposition leader Shorten have made positive and heartfelt interventions.

ANZPATH, which represents health professionals working with trans people, has issued a strong, detailed response to the ACL’s distortions, calling on the ABC for a correction.

The right wing Christians are swimming against the tide of public attitudes, whilst the LGBTIQ activists are with it. Their actions have the whiff of desperation to them, as they sense that they are losing their previously strong positions of influence. We can drive that home through keeping the pressure on the federal government to not only retain the SSCA funding it, but to increase it. Funding for school chaplains should be eliminated, and replaced by programs that represent a diverse range of religious and secular ethical and moral viewpoints and extend extra resources to school welfare officers and counsellors.

We can take the opportunity to organise rallies, get our unions, community and professional organisations to take a stand, lobby politicians and the ABC, and take up the arguments in our workplaces and communities against all discrimination and stigmatisation against LGBTIQ people and for extending the SSCA.
**Tax for equality: Tax the wealthy**

Tax cuts for companies and the wealthiest Australians would actually benefit the rest of the population, according to the Treasurer and the Business Council of Australia. They would lead to growth and jobs.

But who believes that? Unions, community groups and the ALP won public opinion against plans to increase the GST to pay for tax cuts for companies and the top 20%. Malcolm Turnbull wasn’t prepared to risk his popularity for it.

The government is running a confused scare campaign against Labor’s changes to negative gearing and capital gains tax concessions, claiming they will reduce the price of housing and increase rents. Yet housing affordability can’t improve without reversing or slowing the rise in house prices. Home ownership is in decline, because house prices have been rising much faster than incomes. A decline in house prices would benefit home buyers and owner occupiers (people who only sell to move to another home) but it would decrease the wealth of property investors. Labor’s modest changes still rely on private investment to build new housing. Much more public rental housing is needed.

Labor says its plans to reduce the superannuation tax concessions that favour high-income earners would save $5.1 billion over 10 years. This is only about 10% of the around $50.7 billion that The Australia Institute (TAI) calculated that superannuation tax concessions will cost in 2016-17 alone. The TAI’s report *Sustaining us all in retirement* shows how a universal aged pension could be a much fairer alternative to the combination of superannuation tax concessions and a means-tested pension.

Labor, with support from the Greens and independents, has laid the groundwork to take a much bolder approach than this to more progressive taxation.

The last Labor government’s tax transparency provisions led in December 2015 to the publishing of a list of around 1500 corporations in Australia showing how little tax many of them pay. The Senate Inquiry into corporate tax avoidance, chaired by Labor Senator Sam Dastyari, has exposed the extent and methods of much tax avoidance.

“Australia is the seventh-lowest taxing country out of 34 in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Our tax to GDP ratio is lower now than under John Howard” observes The Australia Institute.

Recent books such as *The spirit level* and Piketty’s *Capital in the 21st century* have coincided with and highlighted the damage caused by sharpening inequality. (See article *Capitalism vs human life* in this newsletter)

A progressive taxation system which redistributes from the super wealthy to the less well off needs to:

- set higher rates of tax on the top 10% of personal incomes, corporate profits and capital gains;
- prevent off-shoring of profits and financial assets;
- simplify the tax system (which business says is too complex) by ending tax concessions as supposed incentives for desirable investment (ie loopholes) and instead make public investments in those desired areas;
- employ sufficient public sector staff and systems to enforce tax collection and accounting standards, including preventing the questionable activities of the large accounting firms.

**Capitalism vs human life!**

The 75 individuals who earned more than $1 million each paid no income tax at all in 2011-2012. The top 1% of income earners, ($300,000 a year or more) claimed over $2 billion in tax deductions, the same as the bottom 16%.

*by Martin Thomas*

Capitalism has created life-enhancing possibilities. It has even realised some of them.

My older daughter has epilepsy. In pre-capitalist times, if she’d had medication at all, it would have had no, or harmful, effects, and the seizures would probably have become more severe until they disabled and killed her. Today, she has been able to end the seizures with just a few pills, without side-effects.

Not only in Britain, but in many poorer countries too, almost everyone learns to read and write, almost everyone has easy access to music and visual arts, a sizeable proportion can study at university. Most jobs are cleaner, quieter, and require less physical strength than they or their equivalents used to. Food, clothing, and housing sufficient for all can be produced by maybe 20% of the total labour-time of society, while previous societies required almost all society’s labour-time to produce a scantier minimum. At the same time that capitalism, by advancing technology, creates those
possibilities, it also stunts and warps them. It diminishes and threatens human life. And in some respects the stunting, warping, diminishing, threatening increases.

Capitalism threatens human life through global warming. Capitalism has given rise to technologies which, with judicious development and use, could reduce carbon emissions and save the environment. Yet in recent years most energy investment has gone not into improving and cheapening renewables or nuclear power, but into “extreme”, high-carbon-emission, extraction of oil and gas: oil sands, shale oil, hydraulic fracturing. That offers the best profits in the short term. And capitalism puts profit before life. Other industrial emissions into the atmosphere threaten life. In the UK, 60,000 people die each year because of such pollutants as nitrogen dioxide; world-wide, 3.3 million. London went above its safe limit for that air pollution over the whole of 2016 as early as 8 January this year. Corporations like Volkswagen, in pursuit of profit, have the technology to limit the emissions, but also have also used technology so that vehicles observe the limits only in test conditions and spew out 70 times as much pollution in actual use.

Emissions into the atmosphere threaten everyone, rich as well as poor. But capitalism also works to diminish and shorten the lives of the worse-off and favour the lives of the rich. In Britain, people in well-off areas can expect to live much longer than people in poor areas. And they can expect to live in good general health, free of permanent limiting ailments, 20 years longer. In the poorest areas, on average you live to 52 without permanent limiting ailments. 52! Remember, the UK government wants to raise the state pension age to 70. In well-off areas, on average you live to 71 without permanent limiting ailments.

Inequality
Defenders of capitalism say that its inequalities are necessary to make it dynamic — by way of the striving generated by the competitive “rat race” — and benefit even the poorest, because we get pulled up along with, although behind, the rich. Yet, once economic life has reached the level that basic necessities can be produced by a small proportion of the available labour-time, and so almost no-one starves or freezes to death through sheer shortage, the evidence is that inequality, or relative poverty, is the major stunting factor.

Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, in their book The spirit level, show that among the more prosperous capitalist countries, a composite index of health and social problems shows much worse levels in the most unequal countries (USA, Portugal, UK) and better levels in the less unequal (Scandinavia, Japan). The correlation with the country’s inequality of incomes is high. The correlation with the country’s absolute level of average income is low or zero. The same pattern — high correlation with inequality, little or no correlation with absolute income level (within the relevant range) — is shown by comparisons between states in the USA.

Children’s well-being is better in less unequal countries, worse in more unequal countries, largely uncorrelated with absolute income level. People’s levels of confidence that they can trust neighbours and workmates are higher in less unequal countries, lower in more unequal, but by no means necessarily higher in countries with higher average incomes. Rates of mental illness are much higher in more unequal countries; so are murder rates, and rates of imprisonment.

In the abstract, a highly unequal society could still give better chances for an individual from a worse-off family background to rise high, and a less unequal society could rate low for that “social mobility”. In fact, the more unequal countries also have less social mobility. Exactly why being much worse-off than the other side of the tracks is more blighting than low income as such (above a certain minimum level), we don’t know. The fact is a fact. It is also a fact, documented in detail by Thomas Piketty in his book Capital in the 21st Century, that inequality, and the dominance of incomes from property, has been and is rising steadily across the most developed capitalist countries.

Stress
Despite crashes like 2008, on the whole capitalism tends to increase production. On the whole people get more smartphones, iPads, PCs, etc. than they used to. But simultaneously capitalism increases inequality and its blight on life. Some of the elements of inequality’s blight we know. Being overstressed; frustrated; isolated; “alienated” in the sense that your creative abilities are appropriated, manipulated, and abused by others for alien purposes, diminishes your resilience, and eventually your physical health.

Not all stress is unhealthy. Complete languor is not the ideal. Hard work is not necessarily unhealthy. Marx, while strenuously avoiding detailed blueprints of the future cooperative commonwealth, described the expansion of free time, as against enforced drudgery, as its cardinal feature. Yet by “free time” he didn’t just mean idling. “Really free activity, e.g. composing music, is at the same time precisely the most damned seriousness, the most intense exertion”.

While the demands on physical strength of many jobs have been eased, they have been made more harmfully stressful by the way they are organised. Sometimes this involves long and arbitrarily-imposed hours. Generally,
as Michael Marmot, a researcher in this field, notes: “Stress at work is not simply a matter of having too much to do, but also results from too little control over the work, and from insufficient reward for the effort expended”. (“Insufficient reward” means not just low wages, but lack of satisfaction in having done something useful, lack of appreciation from others). “The way work is organised is crucial. The way to address the problem of stress at work is to look hard at the organisation of the workplace”.

Capitalists look hard at the organisation of the workplace — but with the priority of exerting more control and squeezing out more profits, thus increasing stress. School teachers are rated by the Health and Safety Executive as the most overstressed trade, with a suicide rate 40% above the average. Most of that is due to arbitrary, often educationally counterproductive, impositions by school management. Those impositions are constantly increasing, and driven not by direct profit-seeking but by an imperative to imitate competitive profit-seeking norms. There is much talk about “executive stress”. Some managers, especially middle managers, are overstressed. Usually the highest levels of stress are not at the top of the heap but at the bottom. The trades with the highest levels of suicides are teachers, cleaners, construction workers, health workers, not top managers. In schools, students may well be more unhealthily stressed than the teachers — not because they are working hard at learning, which may be healthy, but because of petty school discipline and arbitrary and often irrational impositions from a competitive exam system.

In 2015, I spent a lot of time on a 24/7 picket line run by Brisbane dockworkers fighting sackings. New technologies have created the basis for making dock work much less life-sapping. Dock work now involves little heavy manual labour. Container terminals are quiet and clean. Yet the dockworkers smoke much more than Australia’s average (low by world standards). A doctor told me why: shift workers, especially shift workers with shifts that change constantly, smoke more than others. Although nurses know the dangers of smoking better than others, they smoke more because of the shifts they work. Those dockworkers are unhealthily stressed, despite the technical advances, because of the capitalist way the work is organised, with round-the-clock and unpredictable shifts, and arbitrary sackings.

In one of the most technically-advanced capitalist economies, Japan, since the 1970s “karoshi”, death through overwork, has become an officially recognised condition. Each year, hundreds of families, on an increasing trend, win compensation because a family member is officially certified to have died from overwork. Yet the compensation is from the government, not the employer! Since the late 1980s, “karojisatsu”, suicide from overwork, has also been officially recognised, with similar compensation. Overwork, in this context, means not just long hours, but “frustration”, “psychological burdens”, “lack of job control”, etc. The difference in other capitalist countries is only that “karoshi” and “karojisatsu” are not officially recognised.

**Loneliness**

A poignant finding from research in 2002 shows that people who become convinced that they will end up lonely suffer damage to their complex-reasoning abilities. Their simple information-processing capacities are not damaged. Expectation of future physical injuries does not damage their complex-reasoning abilities. But the conviction that they will end up lonely does.

And for many it is a well-grounded conviction. In Britain, 11% of all elderly people say that they talk with a neighbour, a friend, or a relative — someone they are connected with in a human way, rather than through market transactions or official procedures — less than once a month. Once a month!

Millions of less extreme cases are achingly lonely. In an 1845 book, Engels wrote about how capitalism had atomised people in a way unknown to all previous societies. In the big capitalist cities, people “crowd by one another as though they had nothing in common, nothing to do with one another... [with] brutal indifference... unfeeling isolation of each in his private interest... This isolation of the individual, this narrow self-seeking, is the fundamental principle of our society everywhere, [and] it is nowhere so shamelessly barefaced, so self-conscious as just here in the crowding of the great city.”

Capitalism has generated the possibilities of privacy, of “a room of one’s own”, of having “time to oneself”, of choosing a path in life radically different from one’s parents and neighbours. Those possibilities are progress compared to the conformity and narrow horizons imposed by many pre-capitalist communities. But capitalism also perverts those possibilities into enforced isolation and loneliness, and not only for the elderly. At the same time, the atomised nuclear-family households of modern capitalism create an imposed “togetherness” for young children, frequently over-supervised by their parents.

Capitalism is creating grand possibilities, but simultaneously stifling, blighting, and threatening human life. The choice for each one of us is passively to accept the stifling and blighting, and try to create a niche of relative contentment within it; or actively to take part in the collective struggle for collective democratic control over our economic life.
Unionists for refugees: backbone of vigil at children’s hospital

by Janet Burstall

The vigil that forced Peter Dutton to backdown, if only temporarily, was a long time in the making. Refugee advocates, human rights lawyers and health workers laid the grounds for the action long even before 2015. Health workers’ control, union solidarity, and the publishing of pictures of babies, were the elements that combined to win a small, fragile but important victory.

2015

Fifteen bodies representing health practitioners in Australia and New Zealand endorsed a Refugee and Asylum Seeker Health Positions Statement. 

Australian Primary Health Care Nurses Association (APNA) released a position statement on The Australian Border Force Act 2015, highlighting how the offences created by the Act “are inconsistent with the duties and obligations placed on nurses” by their codes of ethics.

The Human Rights Law Centre started legal proceedings in the High Court to challenge the government’s power to enforce offshore detention.

January 2016

Photos of 37 babies born in Australia to asylum seeker mothers, published by the media.

February 2

The challenge in the High Court is rejected. The government sees no legal obstacle to deporting 267 refugees currently in Australia for medical reasons, to Nauru or Manus.

February 12

Lady Cilento Children’s Hospital press release says that they refuse to discharge asylum seeker baby Asha to be returned to detention on Nauru. Queensland Unions mobilise immediate overnight support outside the hospital.

February 13

Queensland Unions organise unionists and supporters to maintain a 24 hour vigil in solidarity with hospital staff, to make sure “Immigration Officials don’t take this poor 12-month-old baby back to the place she was burned in the first place.”

February 14

Some people post their opposition to union support for baby Asha and the stand taken by the hospital workers. Others make the case for the union effort.

“What great to see the Unions showing the kind of leadership this country needs. Unions care about working men and women because they care about exploitation of the vulnerable within a system that caters for the privileged capitalist class. No refugee is responsible for shutting down Holden and Ford, for pushing unfair industrial relations policies, nor did they have a hand in the GFC. In any case, our health professionals are taking a stand and we should back them.”

February 20

Unions respond to rumours of an Immigration Department midnight abduction of Asha by rallying more people and by searching all cars leaving the hospital.

February 21

Immigration Minister Dutton announces that baby Asha and her family will be placed in community detention in Australia.

February 23

Dutton announces that baby Asha will be returned to Nauru at some point.

Refugee supporters commented on the problem.

“This is great, but Dutton and his mongrel border force have said baby Asha will eventually be returned to Nauru”

“I may be cynical, but community detention doesn’t sound as easy to protest outside of as the hospital is.”

What next?

It will be easier for the government to catch refugee supporters unawares, and to deport baby Asha from community detention than from hospital, where health workers were in control. The others amongst the 267 refugees in Australia for medical treatment are still at risk of imminent deportation.

The active role of union leaders in defending one asylum seeker baby is likely to raise expectations of members and refugee advocates of more solid union support for refugee rights in general, and opposition to offshore detention. The contradictions between ALP policy and this active union support are likely to break out, and unionists supporting refugees have new leverage and boosted morale.

The power of unions to support Asha

Bob Carnegie spoke at the picket of Lady Cilento Children’s Hospital.

I’m a trade unionist, an industrial trade unionist. My union is small only 2000 members but if you look at the clothes you wear, the shoes you wear, your appliances at home - 90% of them come across the wharves in a container. Hence that is where my organisation’s
immense industrial power comes from. Now I can tell you from the bottom of my union’s heart, we’re a little union with a big history, a little union numerically with a big heart, we say this.

If Turnbull and his government, and the village idiot, what’s his name Dutton - the clown, if you move on Asha you move on 15000 maritime union members Australia wide. (Applause). I can also tell you something because I’m a son of the waterfront and a man of construction. We have those wonderful comrades of the ETU, magnificent comrades up there in the CFMEU, wonderful comrades all round the place. If anyone in this country thinks they are going to move on this little kid, if anybody in the rich and the powerful of this country thinks they are going to abduct a child in the middle of the night and force her family in some horrific way out of this country, they’ve got rocks in their head because we will fight them.

High Court Ruling affects 267 refugees

by Daisy Thomas

On 3 February, the High Court of Australia ruled that the running and funding of immigration detention centres in foreign countries did not breach the Constitution.

That ruling affects 267 refugees previously transported from Nauru to Australia, many of whom required emergency medical treatment. Of these 267 refugees, there were 54 children and 37 babies. By this ruling, there is the risk that these refugees could return to conditions threatening their physical, sexual, psychological and emotional health, safety, and wellbeing. There have been reports of sexual assault and rape and of self-harming and suicide in response to the conditions on Nauru. There have been protests, newspaper articles, and social media activity (#letthemstay) and on 4–5 February a round of rallies in all capital cities.

In Brisbane on 5 February there was a lunchtime rally outside the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, which saw hundreds of people attending to show their support. Larissa Waters, a Greens senator, spoke out passionately about the dangers of sending any asylum seekers back to Nauru. Her concerns were echoed by Peter Catt from the Anglican Church. The protest was ended with a rallying call to “free, free the refugees!”.

We’ll be waiting with bated breath to see the outcome for these individuals.

Black lung is back

by Janet Burstall

In late 2015 four Queensland coal miners had been recently diagnosed with the supposedly eradicated killer disease, black lung. Some groups of miners staged
safety walk-offs and the CMEU pushed for an inquiry that has since begun in Queensland in March 2016. The union says up to 1,000 coal miners could have the disease undiagnosed. There is a backlog of 100,000 x-rays of coal miners waiting to be assessed. The x-rays of the recently diagnosed miners had been sent to the USA, because there were no medical experts in Australia with the specialist skills to assess for black lung.

Black lung had been eradicated in Australia more than 60 years ago, thanks to improved health and safety standards won by mining unions. Black lung or coal workers’ pneumoconiosis, is caused by a build up of coal dust in the lungs due to inadequate ventilation and health standards in coal mines. Queensland coal miners are supposed to have a Coal Workers Health Scheme medical assessment every five years to check for the disease. The backlog of 100,000 x-rays, and the lack of medical specialists to read them are signs that the system is not working.

The union’s vigilance on health and safety can fill gaps in government regulation, and help mine workers to make sure that companies and the government act to minimise risks to health and safety. Disabling injuries in Queensland mines were up 17% from 585 in 2013-2014 to 684 in 2014-2015. Fatalities doubled from two to four. Mine workers can take health and safety standards into their own hands. Union health and safety representatives could be better networked and able to bring hazards from across the sector to the attention of members, and to organise safety walk-offs.

The exclusion of casual and contract workers from some safety provisions available to the CFMEU, is reflected in the fatality statistics for the ten years to 2013. Contractors were 90 per cent of those killed in the coal mining industry. The CFMEU also needs a strategy for organising unorganised workers in the mining industry.

Black lung could be the metaphorical canary literally in the mines, pointing to dangerous consequences of cuts to public work health and safety enforcement agencies.

INTERNATIONAL
The Kurds, Turkey and Syria
Aso Kamal, a member of the Worker-communist Party of Kurdistan, spoke to Solidarity newspaper in Britain.

There is a recession in Iraqi Kurdistan, and there are strikes and demonstrations happening all the time.

Since 2006, Kurdistan has had a share in the world oil market. From 2013, the oil price fell and the budget of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has fallen. The price was $100/barrel but now it is more like $30/barrel. So there is a currency crisis and an economic crisis. Now the KRG is $22 billion in debt. They are selling one million barrels of oil a day, from Suleimaniya, Kirkuk, Erbil, Dohok.

For the last six months, the KRG has not paid any wages to its 1.5 million civil servants. There are strikes and boycotts everywhere. Public services are collapsing. Doctors, teachers, workers and everyone who is owed pay from the government is on strike. In February, the KRG said that they had to cut wages in order to manage their way out of the economic crisis. The civil service minimum wage is £100 a month for most government departments and the KRG wants to cut this by 25%. The people have not accepted it, they have said that the KRG rulers have a lot of profits being put away in European banks and so on.

The KRG wants to use religious leaders in their battles. There is a religious ministry in Iraqi Kurdistan, paid by the government. At Friday prayers, the preachers promote the government’s decisions and arguments. They tell people to wait and be patient, to end the boycotts and strikes, and work without pay. For that reason, people are turning against the preachers. These are the methods that the government is using to keep the people down.

There is a political crisis in Iraqi Kurdistan. The [ruling] KDP won’t work with the Change Party (Gorran, a split from the PUK and the official opposition), leading to deadlock in the parliament. The crisis came about after Barzani, having served his term, refused to step down. Parliament is not working, the ministers have gone home. The people and the representatives of the strikes and demonstrations have lost faith in the leaders of Change and other opposition parties, including Islamist parties. Teachers, doctors, electricity and water workers, are demanding their wages from the last six months and they are against the 25% minimum wage cut. They also want the money that has been stashed by KRG leaders in foreign banks to be returned to Kurdistan, and for money that has been siphoned off by corrupt officials to be returned to the public coffers.

There is a lack of clarity about income from oil. The oil revenue is controlled by the Barzani and Talabani families. Nobody knows where the money goes, how they spend it, and so on. People are asking for clarity on this question. They know that if KDP and PUK are still in power, it is because they have militias and they are ruling on the basis of a militia system. It is clear that the oil is going cheap. Other companies in the region, like Gulf and General Energy, hold shares in the oil of Iraqi Kurdistan. They have a share in the administration of the oil, and they have power there. The cheap oil in Iraqi Kurdistan is going to international companies and
to Turkey. And income is going straight to the KDP and the PUK.

There is no stability in the Middle East. Kurdistan stretches across different countries — Turkey, Iraq, Syria. There is conflict between the big powers: Russia and US. In the region there are two poles: on the one hand, Iran and Assad, and on the other, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Political parties and powers are divided between those two poles in the region.

Erdogan sees the local administration of the Kurdish people in Syria as a threat to his power, and the Turkish state has a long long-running conflict with Turkey’s Kurds. In the last election in Turkey, the Kurdish party, HDP, won seats in parliament.

The Turkish government started to attack Kurdish cities in Turkey, killing hundreds of people. They want to prevent the raising of the Kurdish question in the Middle East. Turkey has also attacked Kurdish cities in Syria, to prevent Kurdish fighters from fighting Daesh.

Turkey allows the border with Syria to be used to pass weapons and fighters to Daesh and al-Nusra. The Kurdish fighters want to close that border traffic. In Iraqi Kurdistan too, in the Kandil mountains, there are Kurdish fighters, under attack from Turkey.

Turkey is intervening in Turkey, Iraq and Syria - it’s like a declaration of war on Kurds everywhere. Yet Turkey has good relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government, and with the KDP, the ruling party in Iraqi Kurdistan. Turkey gets oil very cheap from the KRG.

There have been protests outside Turkish embassies. Yet the Turkish government has killed several hundred people inside Turkey and won’t stop there. The Turkish government has a plan to dominate the region. It wants influence in Syria, Iraq and other countries, and it wants to rival Iran.

The Turkish government sees Kurdish resistance as standing in the way of of this planned “new Turkish empire”. In the event of a collapse in Syria or Iraq, the Turkish regime wants to have a hand in the changes that will follow.

**Bernie Sanders and the dilemma of the Democratic Party**

*Selections from an article in* New Politics *by Jason Schulman, extensively quoting Barry Finger. Read Jason’s full argument here: http://newpol.org/content/bernie-sanders-and-dilemma-*

Some months ago I responded to a piece that appeared on the New Politics blog by my longtime fellow NP editorial board member and friend Barry Finger. ... I believe that Barry suffered from misunderstandings regarding just how different American political parties are from parties anywhere else in the world, and there were defects in his suggestions as to how left-wing socialists should relate to the Sanders campaign.

### The Non-Party Party

Regardless of their origins, today the Democratic Party and Republican Party are not real, “European-style” political parties. The political machines with their party bosses that used to control who could run for office on which party label — particularly in the Democratic Party — are overwhelmingly a thing of the past.

Barry and others have some understanding of this. But where their analysis goes awry is the conclusion that if you are running on the Democratic Party ballot line, you yourself are necessarily being “sustained and disciplined by the mobilization of outside capitalist wealth.” Were this true, it’s unlikely that Bernie Sanders—with his rather radical platform and his steadfast refusal to take any money from “the billionaire class” to fund his campaign—would be able to run for president in the Democratic presidential primary in the first place. …

Given the circumstances — [US political] parties that are not really parties and an oligarchical system of campaign financing—I do not consider supporting the leftmost Democrats to be a betrayal of class-struggle politics, or to be the equivalent of supporting (say) the Canadian Liberals. There are, of course, Democrats who obviously represent the ruling class, like Barack Obama and his dominant wing of the Democratic Party, and also there are Democrats who, however very imperfectly, represent the working class. I see nothing class-collaborationist in opposing the former and critically supporting the latter. Yes, ruling-class politicians usually win Democratic primaries simply because they raise more campaign funds, have name recognition, are incumbents, and so on—but not always. …So when genuine left-liberals or radical leftists win office on the Democratic Party ballot line, as has happened and will continue to happen in various parts of the country, the Democratic Party is not simply a “political utility of the ruling class.” It would be if the neoliberal, bourgeois leadership of the Democratic Party could impose parliamentary discipline on all elected Democrats, but there really is very little that it can do beyond removing dissidents from congressional committees.

### A labor party in the USA

Does this mean that it’s likely that the Democratic Party will be taken over by progressives, that the “realignment” sought by the late Michael Harrington is
near? No. But the primary reason for this, aside from the fact that it’s rather hard to democratically control a state-run ballot line, is the same reason why an independent labor party, which left-wing socialists have advocated for years, is not forthcoming any time soon. Organized labor is simply too weak and, due to the AFL-CIO’s lack of control over its affiliated unions’ political choices, too diffuse. I agree with most American socialists that a labor party based on the unions should have been formed at least by 1948, when 35 percent of the U.S. workforce was unionized and the United Auto Workers in particular was a real power in the country. But Walter Reuther didn’t do what we wanted him to do, and today we are unfortunately where we are. I was active in Labor Party Advocates and then the Labor Party in two states in the 1990s; I really wanted it to take off and become politically important. It didn’t.

Nor is it likely that the Green Party, which has existed in one form or another since the 1980s, will ever displace the Democrats. As former Labor Party national organizer Mark Dudzic has said, “If you can’t even put out enough poll watchers to cover every precinct in an election campaign, and you can’t call on a substantial portion of the labor movement to come out and support your candidate, you’re not building anything, and there’ll be little that remains afterwards.” I’ve voted for Greens many times in my life but eventually one tires of voting for protest candidates.

Pushing political discourse to the left

This brings us back, to Bernie Sanders. Whatever the flaws in some of his political positions, his running as a candidate in the Democratic presidential primary has led millions of people, even in the corporate media, to talk about “democratic socialism” and “political revolution.” His interpretation of those terms may be far more moderate than that of NP writers, but he is pushing political discourse in the U.S. significantly to the left, and in a country where “socialist” has long been a swear word in mainstream politics, this is no small feat. His campaign is providing an opening for U.S. socialists that hasn’t existed in decades, and he’s made it clear that it won’t be possible to win the radical reforms that he (and we) want without an ongoing mass movement that will outlast his campaign.

Yes, we must, as Barry says, “hold Sanders’ feet to the flames if he wavers or weakens his stance against the Party establishment.” But to do this effectively we have to actively support him, not abstain and only offer criticism, however constructive, from the outside. Both the “critical” and “support” in “critical support” are very important in this case. Support of Sanders is the only way to get the thousands of working-class people already involved in Sanders’ campaign—most of whom know nothing of Marxism or the organized socialist left—to take us seriously. Criticism of Sanders’ shortcomings will fall on deaf ears if we do not work with such people in an honest effort to get Sanders elected president.

And Sanders would not be winning over millions of Americans if he had not decided to run for president as a Democrat. He would not have been able to introduce himself to millions who knew little or nothing of him via the Democratic presidential candidates’ debates. The mainstream media would have simply ignored him, and so would have virtually everyone else in the country, had he run as an independent or as a Green.

As the late Julius Jacobson, founding co-editor of NP and a genuinely revolutionary democratic socialist, said of Jesse Jackson’s run for president as a Democrat in 1988, “To take advantage of the facilities offered by a Democratic Party primary involves no necessary compromise of socialist principles” provided that it is being used “as a vehicle for propagandizing a position with an eye on building a movement outside the Democratic Party.” Jackson failed to do this, but this describes precisely what Sanders is doing, which is commendable.

Furthermore, contrary to the “Bernie Sanders as sheepdog for Hillary Clinton” argument made by various far-leftists, at the moment there’s hardly anyone at all to “sheepdog,” not even a quasi-mass movement for a left-wing third party. If there was, my judgement of Sanders running in a Democratic primary would be quite different. I do acknowledge that Ted Kennedy in 1980, Jesse Jackson in 1984 and 1988, Dennis Kucinich in 2004, and John Edwards in 2008 all ended up endorsing the candidate of the ruling class in their respective Democratic presidential primaries once they lost. And they should not have done so.

But it’s important to realize that they did not have to do so but chose to do so. Most have forgotten, but Jerry Brown did not endorse Bill Clinton in 1992. More recently, on the Republican side, look at Ron Paul. He very openly did not support John McCain in 2008 or Mitt Romney in 2012; he supported minor right-wing party presidential candidates. And yet he remained in office as a Republican. Look at the Seattle Democratic
elected officials that have endorsed Kshama Sawant’s re-election campaign. Such a thing is simply not possible anywhere else in the world—try to imagine Canadian Liberals endorsing New Democratic Party candidates for office!—and it further proves that our “parties” are not real parties because they lack party discipline, and that applying class-struggle principles to U.S. electoral politics is a far messier business than it is anywhere else in the world.

Yes, Sanders has already said he would endorse Hillary Clinton if he loses to her in the 2016 Democratic presidential primary. But Sanders, as explained above, can’t be forced to do this. He’s made a choice. Contrary to what some socialists believe, there are no actually enforceable Democratic Party rules that prohibit him in advance from “harming the Democratic Party.” So, I think that socialists should pressure Sanders’ campaign to “pull a Ron Paul”; at the very least he should not encourage his voters to support Clinton if he loses the presidential primary. If he refuses this request we should openly criticize him for it. But again, the only way we can effectively apply such pressure is if we are active in his presidential campaign. Pressure from the outside simply won’t work.

By all means, let’s relentlessly attack Clinton and other “billionaire class Democrats” who dominate the Democratic Party line. One can do this just as easily as a registered Democrat as a registered Green or independent. No one can silence you, just like Fannie Lou Hamer couldn’t be silenced as a civil rights and anti-Vietnam War activist of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, which in 1968 did become the official Democratic Party of Mississippi, despite being betrayed by Lyndon Johnson and those who supported him in 1964.

**Barry Finger says**

If the Sanders campaign is competently run, Hillary Clinton and the Democratic Party establishment will be confronting an incipient rank-and-file mutiny demanding the complete overhaul and repudiation of what the party currently stands for.

An increasingly politically conscious grassroots movement motivated by a militant and credible anti-austerity message heralds the development in the foreseeable future of a “split” situation in the Democratic Party when these demands are blocked, watered down, frustrated or compromised with, as they invariably must.”

This split may very well happen. Sanders campaign activists are quite aware of the problem of Democratic Party Superdelegates. To quote a recent email I received from People for Bernie, the Superdelegate system is “one of many ways that the system is rigged to ensure corporate-friendly Democrats almost always get the presidential nomination. And it’s almost always longtime party insiders that cast votes as Superdelegates. In an ordinary election year, it’s one of many ways that they disenfranchise people like us.” This is why it’s important that Rep. Raul Grijalva and Rep. Keith Ellison endorsed Sanders, and more pressure needs to be put on other Congressional Progressive Caucus Democrats to do the same. Selection of Superdelegates in fact depends on state Democratic Party rules, and state Democratic parties are not immune to popular mobilization.

But let’s assume the ruling-class Democratic Party Superdelegates turn out to be the sole barrier keeping Sanders from winning the Democratic presidential primary. Then it’s entirely possible that People for Bernie and the mass movement supporting Sanders will make up the base of an independent left-wing party, sooner rather than later. But again, we need to be in the Sanders campaign to help make this happen, and, as NP writer and lifetime class-warrior-unionist Steve Early has said, we need to get as many unions as possible to support Sanders and not Clinton (either in the primary or the general election).

And we will need the leftmost elected Democrats—the ones who support social-democratic reform and primarily rely on union PAC money and the financial contributions of “ordinary” people—to “jump ship” to this new party, which requires critically supporting them as well. (I see this as no worse than voting for the social-democratic wing of a popular front, which revolutionaries certainly did in the past, and the Democratic Party today is more like a popular front unto itself than a genuine political party.)

Yes, this is a complicated process, and I wish Marxists could simply stand outside Democratic Party politics entirely and convince the toiling masses to “break with the elephant, break with the ass, build a party of the working class.” But decades of revolutionary socialists doing precisely this has been no more successful than the attempt in the 1970s by the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee, a predecessor of today’s Democratic Socialists of America, the only U.S. socialist group fully supporting the Sanders campaign, to realign the whole of the Democratic Party into a social-democratic party. The movement to elect Sanders represents the best opportunity to build a much larger socialist movement—and hopefully a split from the Democratic Party that results in an independent leftist party—that I’ve seen in my lifetime. To make that party a reality, ironically enough, means getting involved in a Democratic Party presidential campaign. Yes, most elected Democrats are ruling-class politicians; yes, the Democratic Party was once the party (a real party) of
white supremacy in the United States; yes, it was the party of dropping nuclear bombs on Japan and of the Vietnam War. Therefore any involvement in Democratic Party primaries involves “dirty hands” to some extent. But, to paraphrase a French philosopher, “it is easy to have clean hands if you have no hands.” Better dirty hands than none at all.

Corbyn-haters target the Alliance for Workers’ Liberty

In February, a number of socialist activists connected in some way to the Alliance for Workers’ Liberty were expelled from the Labour Party in Britain. This comes after other such expulsions late last year.

The new expulsions include Jill Mountford, chair of Lewisham Momentum and a member of the Momentum national steering committee, and now the editor of Solidarity, Cathy Nugent.

Jill’s expulsion letter arrived when she out was canvassing for Sadiq Khan for mayor of London. She is well known in the local Labour Party and her expulsion has provoked widespread outrage, not just on the left. Cathy is women’s officer of Goldsmiths University Labour Club.

As well as those who are or have been linked with Workers’ Liberty, or are said to be or have been linked, other left-wingers have expelled or excluded from Labour. But since Jeremy Corbyn was elected leader we have been the main target of the “Compliance Unit”. Not because Corbyn and McDonnell support such expulsions, of course - in fact McDonnell has spoken out against them - but because the Compliance Unit is in effect a right-wing factional body not subject to any democratic accountability.

Why have Cathy, Jill and others close to Workers’ Liberty been targeted? Expulsion letters from the Compliance Unit have varied, but this is what they told Cathy and Jill:

"It has been brought to our attention that during your current period of Labour Party membership you have been closely involved with and supported the Alliance for Workers Liberty. Although AWL de-registered as a political party... it remains a political organisation the programme, principles and policies of which are not compatible with those of the Labour Party..."

So the charge is retrospective. There is no due process: the “sentence” arrives before the charge.

And, most interestingly, the target is now not any organisational breach, but political ideas. These comrades have been expelled because they are fighting for a militant, class-struggle labour movement and for socialism.

The AWL’s Marxist ideas are in a minority in the Labour Party and labour movement. But then so are the ideas of the Blairite officials driving the witch-hunt against us. Their neo-liberal, right-wing, explicitly pro-capitalist ideas and policies have never been popular with Labour members, and are now in a small minority.

The difference is that we proceed with arguments, debate and education, whereas their preferred weapons are bans, administrative suppression, the right-wing press. They cannot defend their shameful record – of joining the persecution of migrants, say, helping the Tories justify austerity, or initiating privatisation in the NHS – in discussion.

With Labour Party members or trade unionists who are honestly convinced that the right of the Labour Party is correct on issues, we want to have a comradely discussion. The problem with most Blairite zealots, and particularly those at the top, is that they do not want to discuss.

That is not primarily because they are unreasonable people; it is because they have no loyalty to the labour movement, and do not want the labour movement’s interests, concerns and democracy to disrupt their relationship with official society. "Labour" multi-millionaires like Blair and Mandelson are extreme cases in point.

From the point of view of the Blairs and Mandelsons and their dwindling number of acolytes, we are dangerous, not because we want to disrupt the labour movement but quite the opposite – because we want to strengthen it. They hate us for the same reason they hate Jeremy Corbyn and the whole movement behind him; but their administrative police feel we are easier to target, at the moment.

What surely alarms the witch-hunters is not just general support for socialism, but our agitation for the labour movement to revive itself and fight militantly for the interests of workers and oppressed people on every front – in official politics, in workplaces, unions and strikes, in communities and on the streets, and in the battle of ideas.

That is what the Alliance for Workers’ Liberty exists to do, and that is what we and our friends in the labour movement and left will continue to do, regardless of this persecution. For every person they have expelled, more in the Labour Party have been persuaded to help us, work with us and join us.

If you want to stop this witch-hunt so we can unite to take on the Tories and the rich; if you want a Labour Party and labour movement that fight on every front; if you want to fight against capitalism and for socialism – read our literature, discuss with us, work with us.
COP21: worthless words
by Stuart Jordan

“It’s a fraud really, a fake. It’s just bullshit...worthless words. There is no action, just promises.” Professor James Hansen, Columbia University on the COP21 deal.

For two weeks in December 2015 the political representatives of the capitalist class gathered in Paris to discuss climate change. They emerged to much fanfare with a commitment to try and keep temperatures "well below 2°C" rise above pre-industrial levels and "endeavour to limit" them to 1.5°C. They also pledged to raise £100 billion a year to aid the transition to a low carbon economy. For a bunch of capitalists there was surprisingly little “cost-risk analysis” of the expected droughts, floods, crop failures, species extinctions, coastal erosion, and extreme weather that will result from business-as-usual. There was no mention at all of the widely expected mass migrations.

Given that climate change poses an unprecedented threat to human civilisation, the money is small change. Less than the collective wealth of just two citizens of planet earth and equal to 8% world military spending, it falls far short of the £19.3 trillion the International Energy Authority estimates is necessary to decarbonise our energy supply. The rest of the agreement is vague aspirations.

Paris has been another lesson in capitalism’s inability to solve the climate crisis. This series of articles explores the structural reasons for capitalism’s inability stop global warming and charts out an alternative strategy based on building working-class organisation and power.

A brief history of climate change

Whilst methane producing cattle farms and deforestation are big drivers of climate change, they are problems that could be solved without any radical change to our way of life. We may need to eat a few less burgers and source wood from sustainable sources, but the march of human history would continue. The same cannot be said for our energy supply.

Beyond near subsistence levels of existence, we require energy to transform nature to meet human needs. For the past 150 years we have used energy from fossil fuels to transform the earth’s resources into useful things that are the material basis of our civilisation. Our world is made possible by the immense energy released when we burn the long dead plant and animal remains under our feet. Whereas our ancestors had to largely rely on the physical force of their muscles to eke out a living, with small exertion we can unleash vast quantities of energy, which focussed through our machines produce vast wealth.

We live in a time of unprecedented wealth and technological innovation. For the first time in human history there is the potential for everyone to live in relative comfort, freed from the nature-imposed tyrannies that dominated the lives of our ancestors - cold, hunger, disease, dark, drudgery. As Friedrich Engels said “The possibility of securing for every member of society, by means of socialized production, an existence not only fully sufficient materially, and becoming day-by-day more full, but an existence guaranteeing to all the free development and exercise of their physical and mental faculties — this possibility is now, for the first time, here, but it is here.”

What Engels did not foresee, is that the energy that drove this immense increase in productive power would incrementally produce a waste product that could radically destabilise the earth’s ecology. In the last 150 years we have shifted billions of tonnes of carbon, which remained underground for hundreds of millions of years, into the sky. That extra carbon dioxide is increasing the greenhouse effect, resulting in rising sea levels, and increasingly severe and frequent extreme weather. Our world’s vital resources and infrastructure are under threat. Water supplies, crops, vast areas of human habitation, may drive people into resource wars and mass migration on an unimaginable scale.

If we continue to burn fossil fuels then the material foundations of our civilisation will collapse and we will plunge back to the absolute poverty, barbarism and violence of the past. Yet without the immense amounts of energy that fossil fuels currently provide, we will be faced with similar societal collapse. We can only sustain 7 billion human lives if we keep the machines running.

To avoid both these apocalyptic scenarios we must decarbonise energy infrastructure. Yet this is the essential task that the Paris climate talks failed to address. The earnest participants of the talks hope that there will be a rise in fossil fuel prices. This will make room for a booming market in renewables, entrepreneurial scientists and engineers will develop new carbon neutral technologies, and the “hidden hand of the market” will guide humanity to salvation. The more cynical, conservative governments imposed their same weak relaxed regulations on fossil fuels and slashed subsidies to renewable energy.

As the climate crisis deepens, all sorts of religious cranks will emerge offering the comforting sureties of blind faith and advocating prayer as effective political strategy. The leaders at COP21 were involved in their own religious phantasy, but their god, their hope and salvation was Capital. Those who wish to face the material reality of climate change squarely, and not seek solace in the heavens, must act now to build a working-class force capable of changing history.
The Big Short: the people who gambled with our future
by Ira Berkovic

In a scene fairly early on in the The Big Short two financial traders visit a Florida housing estate where, they’ve discovered, most of the homeowners are well behind with mortgage repayments.

They break the news to one of the tenants (he’s working-class: we can tell because he’s fat, wears a stained tank top, is covered in tattoos, and looks and sounds a bit Latino), who asks whether he’s going to lose his home. “Has my landlord not been paying the mortgage?” he asks, stunned. “But I been paying my rent!” On their way out of the estate, the traders are frightened by an alligator lurking in a swimming pool. A violent predator lurking beneath a seemingly placid and inviting surface. It’s literally a metaphor.

Later, impossibly loathsome mortgage brokers discuss duping immigrants and poor families into debt. “Why are they confessing?”, someone asks. “They’re not confessing, they’re bragging,” comes the reply. ‘Crazy’ by Gnarls Barkley plays in the background. A Standard & Poor rating assessor wears dark cataract glasses and complains that she can’t get an appointment with her eye doctor (Get it? She can’t see it coming.). I could go on. The Big Short is not long on subtlety.

But the film isn’t supposed to be subtle. It adapts Michael Lewis’s non-fiction account of the subprime mortgage crash into a self-consciously fictionalised comedy-drama, which still contains a few lessons in recent economic history. The cast is stellar (Christian Bale in particular does what is arguably career-best work), and the fourth wall enjoyably structurally unsound. The soft-surrealist quirks, like having Margot Robbie, playing herself, explain what a subprime mortgage is while drinking champagne in a bath, stop just the right side of annoying and self-indulgent.

The financiers at the centre of this film aren’t hedonistic playboys like The Wolf of Wall Street’s Jordan Belfort: they are, for the most part, eccentrics and oddballs, who make a fortune betting that the cool kids have screwed up. We know they win, because we know what happened; it’s satisfying to see the smug, braying executives at the mega banks scythed down, but the victory for the audience, and for many of the characters, is completely pyrrhic, because of the tragic human cost: mass unemployment, home foreclosures, and the rest.

As Brad Pitt’s Ben Rickert puts it: “If we’re right, people lose homes, people lose jobs, people lose retirement savings, people lose pensions. Know what I hate about fucking banking? It reduces people to numbers. Here’s a number: every one percent unemployment goes up, 40,000 people die. Did you know that?”

There’s a rather hopeless nihilism about the film’s bleak conclusion. Steve Carrell’s Mark Baum predicts that the government will bail out the banks, making the American people pay for the bankers’ greed, “and in a few years everyone will blame poor people and immigrants.” And lo, Donald Trump leads the race for the Republican presidential nomination.

Characters in the film repeatedly attack the “crooks” responsible for the crash, but Baum at least ultimately realises that it’s not a case of bad people misusing an otherwise adequate system: it’s that the system itself encourages, indeed requires, crookedness. He realises, and seemingly resigns himself to, the fact that he’s part of the problem. This film will entertain you, and it’ll certainly help you expand your finance-sector vocabulary. It will also remind you that the gamblers on the casino floors that are the world’s financial markets are not just playing number games but are making multibillion dollar bets with other people’s money, houses, and pensions. But don’t look to this film for anything approaching a perspective for change.

The closing montage shows us our tattooed tenant and his family, all their worldly possessions piled into a car, presumably homeless. Unless you’re a financial worker of some kind, he is the closest thing to you in this film. He is you, and the Florida stripper duped into taking out risky mortgages is you, and the “poor people and immigrants” getting the blame for it all is you. They are you, they are us. We are the ordinary people who had to pay, and are still having to pay, for that crash. In the film’s narrative those people, our people, are passive victims; we do not have to be.
Was it asking for trouble?

Tom O’Lincoln reflects on his evolution as a Trotskyist, in this response to The two Trotskyisms confront Stalinism (The Fate of the Russian Revolution Vol 2) edited by Sean Matgamna. London, Phoenix Press, 2015. AUD$45.00

Arriving in West Germany on an exchange program, where I could do what I liked, away from unsuspecting parents, I had immediately joined the most radical left organization I could find. This turned out to be the Socialist German Student League, the SDS. They were planning an anti-war rally. It was 1967.

The obvious next step was to set about building the rally from amongst the 100 or so Americans in town for the exchange program, and feeling pleased with myself when we succeeded in drawing surprising numbers of US students. But the next day the flak began to fly. Someone had burnt an American flag at the rally, and Tom was extremely unpopular among his compatriots. It was a stinging first experience of the need for international perspectives.

The SDS was theoretically diverse. Its cadres had been expelled from the SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany) and displayed varied degrees of sympathy for Chairman Mao, the East German or Yugoslav regimes, and/or the emerging Prague spring. Someone from Sydney writing in Tribune, the Eurocommunist weekly of the Communist Party of Australia, waxed lyrical about events in Prague. But I took no notice. I had no plans to visit Australia.

I don’t recall any Trotskyists. I guess they were absorbed in the social democratic parties with Ernest Mandel’s French turn. If so that was an awkward place for them to be, given the popular SDS slogan Wer hat uns verraten? Sozial Demokraten! Who has betrayed us? The Social Democrats!

Germany was holiday distances from several drab Stalinist or semi-Stalinist regimes. You could hire a room overnight and listen to a Bulgarian local Communist explain that, while American companies had top quality machines, in Sofia, tout le monde travaillée. You could book yourself into a youth labour camp near Zagreb, building a dam, where I flogged myself to earn a shock worker badge. Yes that was the term udarnik meant shock worker. It was supposedly building a dam. The real goal was national unity. As we know now it didn’t succeed.

In addition there was, of course, the Berlin Wall. This monstrosity prevented any chance of me embracing the “workers’ and peasants’ state” that built it.

I had also been at Berkeley, where I met the Independent Socialists.

They set up lit tables (bookstalls) in the heart of the Berkeley campus. So did lots of others, but few were so interesting, let alone entertaining.

The SDS had taught me Marxism. Now here I was planning to teach all the Berkeley radicals about it, but they were way ahead of me. They had read Lenin, even Trotsky, and the Independent Socialists were putting out the most original writings. The latter’s intellectual leader was Hal Draper. I seldom met him, yet he set the tone. A cantankerous tone, some might say. He had many writings to his name, but one stood out. It was the sort of thing you read more than once. It bore a title drawn from Goethe’s Faust Two Souls of Socialism. The on the ground leader was Joel Geir.

The core message was to contrast authoritarian versions of socialism (the USSR, China) with the original Bolshevik tradition. Later in 1994 when two Australian socialists set about publishing a newsletter for Indonesians, our first issue was called was called Dua Jiwa Sosialisme - Two souls of socialism.

The expression had traveled to the antipodes in 1971 with Janey Stone and me. Some theoretical concepts were harder to transplant. This was the body of ideas known as “Shachtmanism”. The small group of Australians who by 1975 began calling themselves the International Socialists were more impressed with the outlook of the British organisation of the same name.

Among the Australian rank file there was a social and political pattern whereby the longer-established Melbourne cadre tended to stick to their Shachtman while newer recruits were more attracted to the prestige and sophistication of Tony Cliff and the British organisation. They were of course repulsed by the “state department socialist” fate of the Max guy himself.

I had again set out to educate people of another land in Shachtmanism, with little success. It now seemed to be a purely American phenomenon. This was now a one-way flow. Nobody from the British group ever abandoned “Cliffism” to become an Australian Shachtmanite. The 1950s rapprochement between the Cliff group and Shachtmanites went unremarked, as it does in this book.

I personally might have been expected to stick with Shachtmanism but in fact I drifted steadily into the SWP’s theoretical orbit. The key influence on me was the writings of Nigel Harris. Unlike Cliff, whose work was often formulaic, Harris built his work around a sense of the dynamic character of capitalism.

This was embodied in a number of books and essays which can only be called brilliant, including the seminal essay on the origins of Stalinism Marxism’s journey east and a sustained and ferocious critique of Third
Worldism. “Isn’t he wonderfully articulate” grumped a rival paper seller one Melbourne day. Nigel also posed an organisational challenge. We were absorbed with sending students into industry – the policy known as “industrialisation”. Nigel tore this policy to shreds as “substitutionism”. A later influence was Duncan Hallas.

One good thing about such a big fat book is that everyone will find something in it for them. I was quietly pleased to find a discussion of Zinovievism. These days the term is used to mean hackish party-building. The leading figures on the Marxism List seem to think they invented it. Not so. I heard it back in Berkeley.

Follow the endnotes and you will know all the details on Zinovievites, not to mention Lovestonites and Fosterites. More importantly, you will find such left literary gems as Max Shachtman’s debate with Earl Browder, with its thrilling ending - and his dissection of Isaac Deutscher.

True, there is an underlying partisanship on the editor’s part. But that’s half the charm. Can you imagine what this book would be like if it was rigorously neutral? Come to think of it, the other half of the charm lies in its obscurity. It’s no good Sean Matgamna lamenting that the book is called “sectariana”. That reflects the realities and will remain so until some Trotskyist force embodies its ideas in a mass movement.

Fighting fascism (cont’d from back page)

The ETU has produced videos in Queensland and Victoria that take a stand against racism and these racist demonstrations, and organisers will wear anti-racist union t-shirts when addressing members. These are important steps, even though the content of the videos can be pretty weak. The Victorian branch video was thoroughly nationalist, but trying to advocate for an inclusive, multicultural nationalism that celebrates diversity. Some key themes they miss is the way bosses use racism to divide workers, and that these fascist groups are very hostile to unions.

CARF has recently established a union working group – activists will both organise at rank and file level and seek to convince union leaderships to take a better stand. Even distributing materials like that of the Victorian ETU would be a step forward.

AAWL has an approach of trying to get a union endorsed festival and march against racism, thus far without result. This does not seem too distant from the No Room broad anti-racist approach.

A concurrent strategy that deserves coordinated effort would be to get the anti-racism/anti-fascism demands and/or speakers into other campaigns and events, such as the Palm Sunday Peace March, #LetThemStay and May Day rallies, and to work more closely with pro-refugee groups. It is important that out of these initiatives a broader coalition may emerge that brings in the “soft left” groups, community, multicultural, solidarity, church groups as well as unions.

All the approaches taken – counter demonstrations; getting unions to take a better stand; broad anti-racist organising – need to be pursued and coordinated. A useful approach could be to build a broader coalition of all the existing groups on a national basis. The key however, is to get the organised labour movement active in fighting this threat.
Fighting fascism in Australia
by Riki Lane

Fascist groups are gaining the greatest support at demonstrations in decades – at least since Hanson in the 1990s, and possibly since the New Guard of the 1930s.

Unlike the Hansonite right wing populism, which focussed on Asian immigration, the key to this wave of far right support is anti-Muslim racism. The leaders of these groups try to hide their fascism away - banning displays of swastikas, ejecting some overt neo-Nazis, saying nothing overtly against Jews, Asians, queers and women. They have been trying to recruit in the union movement, with some success as indicated by people attending their rallies wearing union insignia (e.g. CFMEU).

They have mobilised far beyond the ranks of those who explicitly support Nazism and other forms of fascism. Both Reclaim Australia (right wing populist, with significant fascist elements) and United Patriot Front (clearly fascist.neo-Nazi led) rallies have had support from some people of colour - Asian, indigenous and Polynesian, based on the idea that Muslim immigration will lead to a takeover of Australia and introduction of sharia law. The heartland has been the Victorian city of Bendigo, around opposition to building a mosque.

Action against these fascist-led rallies has been principally organised by the far left – socialists and anarchists. The ALP left and the Greens have been absent. In Victoria there have been two coalitions – Campaign against Racism and Fascism, and No Room for Racism. CARF – including Socialist Alternative, Anarchist Affinity, Freedom Socialist Party, Socialist Alliance and others, has focussed on organising counter demonstrations. No Room for Racism, led by the Socialist Party, has worked with ethnic organisations to build broad forum discussions. The SP has participated in some Melbourne counter-demonstrations rallies, but not the regional ones. Given the SP have just split, it will be interesting to see whether either of the resulting groups will start working with CARF.

In Melbourne, the left has always been able to outnumber the fascists, but in Bendigo (and some other rural centres) it is reversed. At the 27 February Bendigo rally, the UPF had over 500 people, while the anti-fascists attracted 100. Police kept the UPF and anti-fascist rallies separated, and stopped UPF breakaways from attacking the anti-fascists – we were in the terrible situation of being happy there was a large police presence to stop anti-fascists being physically attacked.

“Through the fascist agency, capitalism sets in motion the masses of the crazed petty bourgeoisie and the bands of declassed and demoralized lumpenproletariat -- all the countless human beings whom finance capital itself has brought to desperation and frenzy.”
Leon Trotsky How Mussolini triumphed in What next? vital questions for the German proletariat. 1932.

Despite the differences amongst some left forces in Victoria, there has been a definite attempt to build a coalition that can confront the fascists. However, they have managed to build and grow despite our best efforts.

What is the way forward for anti-fascist organising? Having counter demonstrations is essential to say that fascists can't control the streets without being contested. But we need much larger demonstrations, with support from the union movement and other social movements. Broad anti-racist organising in community groups and unions also has an important role to play.

Most unions are reluctant to take a stand – worried they will lose members by challenging nationalism and racism amongst their members, and they don't want to endorse rallies where there may be “violence”. There is a false idea that it is just the extreme left versus the extreme right, with both sides as likely to cause violence – rather than seeing that self-defence by anti-fascists is completely justified.

(continued inside back page)

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