Audit the rich!

By Janet Burstall

It’s no surprise that a Commission of Audit headed by the head of the Business Council of Australia would propose changes that thieve from not only the poor but also middle income workers, and give to big business.

What is surprising is the vehemence of the critiques of the Commission of Audit from mainstream journalists, far more coherent and cutting than anything that Labor has said. Ben Eltham in the Guardian put it succinctly as “a recipe for a poorer, nastier and more brutish Australia” and summed up the vested interests of the Commissioners: “Needless to say, no one who worked on this Audit was a homeless person, a worker on minimum wage, or someone with a permanent disability. Instead, an unrepresentative and partisan group has used shoddy arithmetic and junk economics in an attempt to destroy a century of Australian social welfare.”

Labor seem more concerned that the recommendations are “a blueprint for broken promises”, than about their intentions. Shadow Treasurer Chris Bowen shows how out of touch he is with what is most worrying not only about what the Abbott government is up to, but the insecurity that business and government policies have been creating for working class people under recent governments both Labor and Liberal.

It’s astonishing that he expects to impress Labor supporters by saying how well Labor did at keeping debt down and AAA credit ratings up, concluding that “Labor understood the need for fiscal discipline and took over $130 billion in responsible savings to invest in hospitals, schools and the NDIS”. The “responsible savings” included cuts to higher education, the supporting parents benefit, and extending the age for the pension from 65 to 67. A foretaste of the Commission of Audit.

Like a predator sensing the weakness of its prey, profit-ravenous capital is keen to go in for the kill on the working class. That’s what the Commission of Audit is about. And Rudd and Gillard’s attempts to appease the beast only gave the Liberals and the ruling class more energy, to rage against the Minerals Resource Rent Tax, the carbon pollution reduction scheme, fairer school funding and Disability Insurance. The mining magnates and the Murdoch media machine managed to whip up enough hostility to get Abbott elected by a landslide. The labour movement would do well to learn from this that Anthony Albanese’s desire to fight Tories in the form of the Liberal Party, in parliament and at elections, is cast far too narrowly. As Abbott sets about dismantling any good that Gillard and Rudd managed to deliver, it’s also clear that any gains for the low paid, and equal access to public services are fragile, in the sights of the more powerful ruling class.

So let the critiques and complaints multiply. But they will lead to demoralisation unless we also rally round some clear principles and demands for how we want public provision, higher standards of living for people receiving welfare payments, homes for the homeless and a higher minimum wage. This is affordable with a more progressive tax system. It just takes a will to redistribute from the wealthy and powerful.

Which is the critical point. The ruling class has shown far more will than the labour movement and working class. We have to build our will, our commitment to

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something better.

Imagine if the unions adopted a set of demands, as an antidote to the Abbott-Hockey budget, and promoted them amongst all working class people, whether employed or not, especially those who stand to be hardest hit.

- universal pension indexed to average male weekly earnings, end superannuation subsidies
- no medicare co-payments, no private health insurance subsidies, medicare for all
- a living wage for all – unemployed, disabled, students, supporting parents
- free public education and child care, no fees for schools, TAFE or university.
- massive expansion of public housing and public transport
- public ownership of all energy and utilities, managed to cut carbon emissions
- public ownership of banking and insurance, to provide affordable credit, and stop the super profiteering of banks.
- a job guarantee by the government, where private employment is not available
- highly progressive taxation, including company tax and ending of tax rorts.

To answer critics who would say that this is not viable, the unions could organise think tanks, conferences, seminars, with speakers from amongst the many left economics commentators who have already skewed the Commission of Audit, and from workers and consumers in these sectors, to also undertake industry research, and build a picture of how much more efficient it will be to take care of the population and environment rather than profits.

This could rally new union members and the many community organisations that represent people who are not in work. The advocates of thieving from the working class could be identified and dogged by protesters. Political candidates and parties would be under pressure to support this program. A movement could be built that can roll back not only this program of theft, but also the power of the ruling class which has orchestrated it.

A class-war Budget

Joe Hockey’s 14 May 2014 Budget attacks the old, young, sick, disabled, unemployed, students, families, public service workers, indigenous people, foreign aid. Taking its cue from the Commission of Audit, the Budget starts dismantling the social wage.

- Pensioners — Pension age rises to 70 from 2035 and concessions cut
- Health — $7 co-payments for GP visits and possibly hospitals; billions slashed from hospitals as funding agreement torn up
- Schools – Gonski funding finished after 2018. Higher education – fees deregulated and will rise sharply: student loans interest rate increased
- Young unemployed: under 30 years wait six months before receiving allowances, then cut off after another 6 months. Under 25 get youth allowance at lower rate. People with Disability Pension under 35 to be reviewed with aim of placing them on reduced benefits.
- Family tax benefits – cut off at 6 years old instead of 18
- Public service — 16,500 full-time jobs gone in three years
- Indigenous people — $500 million cut to programs over five years
- Foreign aid – future funding increases frozen
- Dozens of other cuts – to councils, CSIRO, ABC, SBS….

But for the rich, they will only pay a piffling amount extra in taxes, while:

- An increase in infrastructure spending will prop up construction company profits (and provide some workers with jobs), but is focussed on road not public transport
- Military spending will rise.

Make ALP-union link more democratic

In response to Bill Shorten’s threats to weaken the union’s say within the ALP, ALP left-wingers are discussing the following statement as the basis for a campaign:

The creation of the Labor Party opened up the possibility of political representation for working people. The relationship between the trade unions and the Party has been and remains central to the role of the Party in representing the interests of working people.

We therefore support: • The collective affiliation of trade unions to the Party • Representation for and involvement of trade unions at every level of the Party.

The link between the Party and the trade unions should be strengthened and made more effective. This can be done if it is made more democratic. To this end, we support the direct election of delegates to state conventions by members of the affiliated trade unions.
Reshaping our unions

By Bob Carnegie

The problem of corruption and misuse of union funds has plagued workers’ organisations almost from the heroic beginnings of trade unions.

More than a hundred years ago my hero (we all have a few) Eugene Debs, in a famous speech about the emancipatory nature of organised labour, pleaded that the labour movement had been “betrayed by traitors, bled by leeches and sold out by leaders.”

One hundred years on it is time we of the left tackle this problem and use a powerful moral argument to start bringing this problem to heel.

We need to put systems in place to stop corruption and end its bedfellow careerism.

Of the points chosen below the great majority are mine, with input from Janet Burstall and Martin Thomas.

The most important point overall is rotational leadership.

Why I place such importance on it, is because it has a tendency to force the point of what a person should stand for — either doing the best one can for working people or to become an official who is there for him or herself and to make sure the job has all attendant trappings.

Let’s all fight to make our unions accountable to the members.

Trade unions in Australia are about to be ruthlessly examined by a Royal Commission headed by probably Australia’s most brilliant conservative legal mind, Dyson Heydon. The Heydon Commission began its work on 9 April, and is due to report in December.

We need trade union structures that are more democratic and which by their very structure can be more open, honest and put probity at the top of the list rather than at the bottom.

1. Union officials should be elected, not appointed. Unions may of course appoint people to “back-room” jobs, but not to official positions with authority in the union.

2. Elected positions are for a maximum of two terms and then one must go back to the rank and file for a term at least.

To union officials who say “Bob, you are crazy, the union must have experienced leadership”, my reply is this: “The President of the USA is elected for two terms maximum”.

With all due respect to any union official, complex as they think their job is, they don’t have the capacity for annihilating the human race. Elected officials should also be subject to recall at any time.

3. All policy-making bodies and conference delegations should be made up of elected lay members only, and their agendas should be organised around proposals from elected members and from the rank and file, not around reports from full-time officials. Policy-making bodies should meet sufficiently often to have real control over the full-time officials, and all full-time officials’ reports should be sent to members at least a week in advance of meetings, with exceptions only for emergencies.

4. Minutes and voting records of policy-making bodies should be posted on the union website.

Members of policy-making bodies who vote against majority decision should be free to explain to members why they have done so.

5. Union officials’ wages. Wages must be linked to the industry in a simple, transparent formula. Some of the wages and benefits paid to many union officials are ridiculous and offensive.

The leader of the Queensland public services union Together is on a $300,000 package, when if he was a public servant paid on his skill and commitment to his class he would be lining up at the Salvation Army to get food to supplement his wages. He is only one of many.

6. An end to honoraria and excessive expenses for union officers and conference delegates. A full account of all expenses received by union officers and delegates and the claims on which they are based should be available for inspection by members.

7. Union officers should be banned from accepting gifts to themselves or to relatives offered in connection with their union activity.

8. Union accounts. Union accounts should be open to all members to observe how their dues are being spent. All unions should have elected financial probity committees made up of at least four rank and filers elected for set terms.

Auditors should be changed every four years. The Maritime Union of Australia have had the same auditors for the best part of 70 years! People get into bad habits that perpetuate themselves.

9. Union vehicles. Union vehicles should not be status symbols. They should be 4 cylinders, hybrid and practical. The current CFMEU construction president in Queensland drives a $110,000 V8 Toyota Land Cruiser.

It consumes more fossil fuel than a small Asian city and is purely a type of phallic status symbol. It is an example of treating members’ finances with contempt.
Melbourne: build public transport, not toll roads!

Stop Melbourne’s East West Tunnel!

By Riki Lane

Building Melbourne’s East West Tunnel was meant to be the winning stroke for the struggling Liberal/National Victorian State government at November’s election. Instead it has galvanised a broad and diverse set of campaigns, and has low and decreasing public support.

Organising to stop the tunnel is an important campaign for the left and the labour and environmental movements: it is a campaign we can win; it links to important debates and struggles in the labour movement, and it focuses attention on central issues of capitalism and climate change.

The tunnel is a disaster on every level – urban planning, environmental, and financial. The current government desperately wants contracts signed before the election, so they are rushing through the proposal against all usual approaches – the final tenders will be put in before the project outline is fully completed. It is a big step in exactly the wrong direction on climate change – why build huge roads, when we need to replace private vehicle traffic with less emission intensive public transport? Infrastructure Australia says the project is not high priority and is not financially viable. The State government has not released their business case, but even based on highly optimistic traffic forecasts, they only predict a return of 80 cents in every dollar spent. Given the compromised planning process, costs are certain to blow out.

The ALP has a half and half position – opposing the Tunnel, but saying they will honour contracts if they are signed before the election. They raise arguments about “sovereign risk” – that financial markets will rate down the new Government if they tear up a previous government’s contracts. Sovereign risk arguments are often used to limit radical pro-working class reforms, but in this case don’t hold water even in conventional capitalist terms. They ignore the reality that the ink will hardly be dry on contracts that are based on dodgy forecasts and planning – a bold and clear statement by the ALP before the election that they will not honour such contracts will put any tenderer on notice.

Central to winning this struggle is to gain support of the unions, and building pressure on the ALP from within and without. Despite its rotten politics, the ALP

A few bold strokes by an artist can convey an idea more vividly and fix it more firmly in the viewer’s mind than an editorial or an article would. The cartoons collected in a new book depict US politics, workers’ struggles, America’s “Jim Crow” racism, Roosevelt’s “New Deal” and Harry Truman’s “Fair Deal”, and Stalinism in its era of greatest prestige and triumph, as revolutionary socialists saw them at the time. A$15 plus $3.50 postage from P O Box 313, Leichhardt, NSW 2040
is still organically tied to the working class through the unions, which retain some power to affect its policy positions. The unions are divided – with the Rail Train and Bus union taking a strong stand against the tunnel and for public transport, while the AWU has supported the tunnel for the jobs it will bring their members. The CFMEU are equivocal, while the ETU have responded positively to approaches from MCAT.

This is the case for building public transport infrastructure instead of the East West Toll Road and Tunnel:

a. The $8 to $15 billion for the East West Tunnel could pay for urgently needed infrastructure projects such as: a modern signalling system across the rail network, train lines to Doncaster, the airport, Rowville and Merdina, the Metro tunnel from South Kensington to Caulfield, rail line duplications, grade separations over rail lines, bus network expansion, bicycle projects and extension of tram routes.

b. This public transport infrastructure would create more jobs for skilled and unskilled workers in construction and public transport. It would also contribute to reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

c. The EW Tunnel would destroy scarce parklands in central Melbourne’s Royal Park, cause the eviction of many sporting clubs and endanger animals in the Zoo, and will destroy over 100 houses.

d. The rushed Comprehensive Impact Statement process is flawed, as it is considering an unfinished proposal where even the geology of the route has not been clearly explored.

A wide range of community organisations have emerged to oppose the tunnel through local campaigning, electioneering, direct action and rallies. Their politics and approaches vary widely, and no generally agreed overall coordinating group has been established. Some attempts to do so foundered on disagreement over statements of principles and issues of who would be in control. The Public Transport Users association set up the Public Transport not Traffic group, with left-liberal politics and close links to the Trade Hall Council and the Greens. They recently held a community summit, which was useful, but strongly oriented towards electoral campaigning in marginal seats to get rid of the Liberals.

The tunnel picketers group had high profile direct action aimed at delaying test drilling. It is led by the Socialist Party with strong local support from Fitzroy residents who will lose houses and suffer from the construction. The Murdoch press demonised SP figures in the campaign as “serial pests” – surely a mark of pride. Now they are running a caravan tour around suburban and regional area to raise support. They initiated a call for a 28 June city wide rally. Making that a success is important – and we need to build it a large inclusive rally, in which the “rip up the contracts” theme is strongly expressed, but does not exclude those who disagree. The SP have done really useful work in building the tunnel picketers group and mobilising residents, but in their characteristic fashion, maintain a strong hold over the group.

MCAT is a broad campaign with local residents and ALP members involved as well as Greens and Socialists. Socialist Alliance are prominent, especially Sue Bolton, who as a Moreland councillor has been pivotal in building the group and maintaining council support. MCAT held the most successful rally so far, ad has done significant work in convincing unions to come out against the tunnel. Where the PTNT has concentrated on electioneering to “kick out the Liberals”, MCAT has focussed on getting the ALP to shift their position away from honouring the contracts.

The way forward: Three strategic components are needed to win: build an active campaign that increases public awareness and visible opposition to the tunnel and if possible avoids contracts being signed before the election; get the Liberals out at the next election; get ALP to rip up the contracts. How to get there? Build a united rally; get unions to come out against the project and for job-creating public transport; pressure the ALP to change their stance before the election, then continue our activism after the election to make sure they axe the contracts.

Marxist Revival is published by the Iranian Revolutionary Marxists’ Tendency and the Alliance for Workers’ Liberty as an international discussion journal of revolutionary Marxists. The first issue includes articles outlining the aims and plans of Marxist Revival; explaining why internal democracy is a precondition for effective organisation; debate between the IRMT and AWL on Israel-Palestine and on the Stalinist states; and a study by the Turkish socialists of Marksist Tutum on capitalist development in Turkey. A$3 plus $1.40 postage from P O Box 313, Leichhardt, NSW 2040
Next steps in the NSW PSA

By Janet Burstall

Has the PSA got stronger since the Progressives won in November 2012?

If the measure of strength is the PSA members’ level of organisation, awareness and preparedness to campaign and win against the employer, then the PSA has not become stronger. What has been achieved within the PSA pales into insignificance against the government’s success in transferring public services to the private sector, cutting labour costs and reducing union power.

Many of the government’s attacks are on specific services and agencies. They broadly amount to privatisation and contracting out, but the PSA has not so far mobilised across the union in solidarity with a specific section of the membership fighting a specific threat, such as the Disability Home Care workers in Newcastle who have committed to stopping the privatisation of their work through the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

The entire membership is affected by the legislated salary cap, which also covers claims for conditions. Opposing privatisation and cuts resonates more with public opinion, than public sector wages and conditions. But they are the unifying factor for most of the membership. And the government’s legislation limits the scope for real public sector unionism, as in some US states, notably Wisconsin.

So what is the state of the PSA?

Anne Gardiner, the General Secretary of the PSA withdrew from the Progressive PSA (PPSA) group straight after the election that she won on their ticket. The PSA Executive consists of six members of various factions of the ALP old guard, plus Anne. About half the Central Councillors are members of the PPSA, the other half were contacts enlisted to fill the Progressive ticket, many of whom are not union activists. This was necessary because the PPSA did not have enough activist contacts to fill all positions in the “winner takes all” election system instituted by the ALP old guard, plus Anne. The PSA Executive consists of six members of various factions of the ALP old guard, plus Anne. About half the Central Councillors are members of the PPSA, the other half were contacts enlisted to fill the Progressive ticket, many of whom are not union activists. This was necessary because the PPSA did not have enough activist contacts to fill all positions in the “winner takes all” election system instituted by the ALP old guard, who expected they would always win. The ALP old guard also factionalised and used the staff. It was a huge achievement that the PPSA managed to win the 2012 election and open up the space at least for activists to advocate on Central Council. The efforts of Progressives to get the PSA to engage members in a union wide campaign against the government have produced some tentative steps, but have not had the wholehearted backing of the General Secretary, the Executive, the staff or Central Council.

Anne Gardiner’s visible measures have been consultations with the government, court action, media, a PSA staff restructure to set up a call centre, and getting Departmental Committee delegate elections happening, where elections have been long overdue. Her primary media message has been that the government has not explained a direction for public services. There has been some media attention on PSA analysis of cuts, but the PSA’s biggest successes at reversing NSW Government attacks have been specialised. No Hunting in National Parks, which was fronted by national parks users, severely curtailed the intended free for all shoot up. Minister Pru Goward was exposed for lying to conceal the government’s failure to fill child protection case-worker positions, and forced to recruit. The Member Support call centre opened in March 2013 and the staffing restructure is practically complete.

Anne Gardiner has not explained her idea of a direction for the PSA. She brought projects to Central Council after they were partially implemented; a new staffing structure, recruitment processes with no Central Council representation, lodging of pay claims. This has effectively excluded Central Council from most serious decision-making. She has won votes with the support of sufficient of the Councillors who are not members of the PPSA, and of alternate delegates. For its part, the PPSA failed to agree on and press a clear policy on the role of Central Council in staff structure and recruitment. Anne Gardiner has encouraged members understand themselves as paying customers buying a sort of insurance policy, in preference to promoting a view of the union as a collective that provides mutual support to all its members, as well as other workers and citizens, standing up for the same rights.

She seems to be of the view that the main force that can make the PSA effective is the staff, that issues in the PSA office have a higher impact than elected officials and delegates in explaining the political and industrial challenges faced by public sector workers. It is not clear that she recognises the urgent need to equip delegates to lead members, and to build grass roots democratic governance of the union.

Prior to the PSA election the PPSA had reached agreement on a very broad set of goals for a stronger, more democratic, accountable union. But we had no strategy, or plan on the sequence of steps for pursuing
those goals.

The almost total exclusion of Progressives from PSA decision making over the previous years meant that there was little experience or deep knowledge to draw on. The peculiar nature of the election result, with PPSA winning Central Council but having not even one single position on the Executive made that even more difficult. The Progressives now need to regroup and agree to a perspective and plan for the PSA to fight the government and become stronger, that they pursue both at Central Council and amongst the PSA membership. This will be a big challenge as there are diverse views within the PPSA. This plan needs to look both outwards to the issues facing NSW government workers, and inwards to the organisational issues in the PSA. The Progressives have won Central Council support for a campaign of rolling action against the government, to be built on input from department and workplace groups. This provides an avenue for the PPSA to mobilise more widely, beyond Central Council, and to make contacts in areas of the membership where we have none.

A strategic assessment is needed of departments under attack, and which issues offer the most scope for leverage and mobilization, as well as how to give members a meaningful say in what the union fights for and how. There are promising signs that this is beginning to happen in the PSA’s campaign against privatisation of Ageing, Disability and Home Care that is part of the National Disability Insurance Scheme. The Progressives need to be vigilant to ensure that the campaign is not ended prematurely for less than members are willing to fight for.

Other threatened privatisation targets are TAFE, electricity and the Roads and Maritime Authority. These can be fought by the PSA together with other unions and community backing. Working with other unions means the PSA insisting on a united front based on equal pay for work of equal value, and especially to seek support of other unions that could benefit from covering a privatised workforce. The Government Sector Employment Act, Rules and Regulations, increase senior management’s scope for performance management, bullying and arbitrary dismissal, and provide for covert removal of previous agreements which benefit public sector workers. The PSA needs to be alert to every abuse that the GSE Act might allow, and challenge early.

The legislated 2.5% salary cap, “efficiency dividends” and resulting job cuts, are of great concern to members. The PSA has challenged this only in the courts, where the government appeals every decision favourable to the union. The government won its appeal in the High Court against being forced to pay the Superannuation Guarantee on top of the 2.5%. If this stands, it effectively locks the union out of placing wages and conditions claims on the government. No other union has yet fought the pay cap.

The danger of running only court cases with no parallel industrial campaign by members, is that if and when the union fails in court, it will be far more difficult to mount a fightback, and too late to influence the court’s thinking with member action. To hesitate for fear of public opinion means to lose out altogether.

The PSA would be more able to win both public and other union support if it were to take a very public stand, including an industrial campaign, rather than wait for an alliance. The work of members of other unions is better understood by the public - nurses, teachers, firefighters - and if those unions would fight the government’s wages and industrial legislation too, then that would be a great step forward.

The PSA can build towards union wide industrial action by announcing the intention to do so, and by organising local activities and protests for members to be involved in. Education, organisation, agitation amongst the PSA membership needs to be a higher priority for the Progressive PSA.
Regrouping the labour movement

By Martin Thomas

A comment by former Labor minister and former ACTU president Martin Ferguson on Abbott’s anti-union drive focuses some of the issues behind the ballyhoo about union “corruption”.

He says he is pleased that Abbott is suggesting what he calls “sensible industrial relations reform”. Gas bosses, he says, could lose billions “because of over-regulation”. And “high labour costs” — not high profits, not high pay-outs to bosses — are a problem.

“High labour costs and low productivity are an unsustainable mix. And therefore elements of the Fair Work Act must be looked at”.

Ferguson made his entire career in the labour movement, starting off with a straight-from-university job as a union research officer. He was reckoned to represent the “soft left”.

There’s no evidence that he had his fingers in the till, or could be taken as an example by Abbott in his search for dodgy finances. (You notice no-one is doing a Royal Commission into the world’s big banks, despite one huge scandal after another being revealed as they’ve come under more strain since 2008!)

But Ferguson exemplifies a deeper corruption in the unions — the corruption constituted by the fact that being a union official has become more a career option than a chance to serve rank and file workers.

After quitting Labor politics in March 2013 with a blast against Julia Gillard, of all people, for “class war rhetoric”, Ferguson is now chair of the Australian Petroleum Production and Exploration Association.

The ACTU and Labor leader Bill Shorten have opposed the Royal Commission; but weakly. The labour movement still has not regrouped to fight the Abbott government, or the aggressive conservative state governments such as Campbell Newman’s in Queensland, or even Dennis Napthine’s minority administration in Victoria.

Latest opinion surveys show that the coalition has recovered from its fairly routine sag in the polls after winning the federal election in September 2013. It has done that with the help of its new campaign to engineer more curbs on workers’ rights under cover of an outcry against financial corruption among union leaders.

The same opinion surveys which show a large majority backing Abbott’s plan for a Royal Commission investigating the unions also show a large majority saying no to the idea that “workers’ entitlements and conditions need to be reduced to make Australian companies more competitive”.

Most people won’t know the exact statistics which show that the richest 10 per cent of Australians have gained almost 50 per cent of the growth in income over the past three decades. But most people do know the general picture of the increase in inequality, and they don’t like it.

Despite the fall in union density over the last decades, and the unions’ failure to sustain the tentative reversal of that trend achieved during the fight against Work Choices, organised workers still have significant strategic positions of strength in the Australian economy. The task is to build on those positions, reach out, and work on an assertive programme of reducing social inequality, rather than an uninspired and uninspiring diet of damage-limitation.

Doing that goes hand in hand with transforming the labour movement and dealing with the real problems of union-leader financial corruption from inside the movement, by way of workers taking control of their own organisations rather than the conservatives exploiting scandals in order to slash workers’ rights.

As Jack Waterford put it in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the labour movement’s political weakness means that “the government is successfully creating a legend that the six-year interregnum [of Labor administration under Rudd and Gillard] was the absolute byword for financial and administrative mismanagement”.

Despite the Labor for Refugees campaign, the ALP appears as bad as the coalition on refugee rights
In fact, the period of Labor administration was one where Australia was the only OECD country to avoid a full-scale recession during the world economic crash following autumn 2008. That happened more because of Chinese government policy — a huge expansion of investment projects, which gave Australia rich export markets — than because of any cleverness by Rudd and Gillard. But it happened. Since then, under the coalition, unemployment has risen to 6%, the highest rate in over a decade. Labor has opposed Abbott’s repeal of the carbon tax, but again had a limp, defensive response to Abbott’s blatant policy of favouring profits now over longer-term environmental safety.

Rudd’s and Gillard’s terrible record in government on asylum seekers gives Labor little chance to build on the widespread anger against the Manus Island atrocities. “Those who have been appalled by the policies of both parties have no reason to see Labor as ‘less bad’, though now they do know that Labor is ‘less effective’ at being awful” (Jack Waterford in the SMH, again).

Nor is there much effective campaign by the labour movement against the coalition’s refusal to guarantee the federal funding for schools called for by the Gonski report.

Campaigns like that against the road tunnel in Melbourne, and mobilisations like the March in March, show that there is a base for resistance. The task of socialists is to turn the labour movement out to link up with that resistance.

Strike activity (striker-days) saw an uptick in 2011-2, but generally has remained low by historic standards.

In Australia, 50% of the gains in income between 1980 and 2008 went to the top 10% — a more unequal result than other rich capitalist economies, except the UK and the USA.

The unionisation rate (% of employees) has not sustained its promising upturn in 2007-8.
Self-determination for Ukraine!

By Martin Thomas

Many on the left see events in Ukraine only as a clash between Russia on one side, the US and EU on the other.

The trouble with this perception is that it fades out Ukraine’s right to national self-determination.

From the perception, some deduce support for Russia because they identify “imperialism” solely with the US and the EU. Others see Russia also as imperialist, and deduce “a plague on all houses”.

Some put all the blame for current troubles in Ukraine on a “US drive to expand eastwards”. Others confine themselves to lamenting the big-power conflict, even-handedly.

In its reporting on events the US Socialist Worker (linked to Red Flag in Australia) registers more light and shade than some; its bottom-line conclusion is still just “a plague on all houses”.

“As the confrontations play out in eastern Ukraine, there are signs of hostility toward both imperialisms — the US and its EU allies to the west, Russia to the east — and of a desire for an alternative that defends the interests of the working class. But it is exactly this alternative that the imperial powers battling over Ukraine both wish to squelch... As long as Ukraine remains a battleground for imperialist rivals — and proxy forces representing one power or the other — working people in Ukraine will bear the brunt of the poverty, violence and suffering”. (Alan Maass, socialistworker.org, 21 April).

In some circumstances, to fade out the specifically Ukrainian issues would be a wise refusal to let secondary issues obscure the gist. During World War One, some socialists argued for backing Britain, France, and Russia on the basis of the “Belgian” and “Serbian” issues, i.e. the rights of the people of Belgium and of Serbia to resist German and Austrian conquest.

Lenin retorted: “Let us suppose that all the states interested in the observation of international treaties declared war on Germany with the demand for the liberation and indemnification of Belgium. In such a case, the sympathies of Socialists would, of course, be on the side of Germany’s enemies. But the whole point is that the... Entente is waging war not over Belgium... England is grabbing Germany’s colonies and Turkey; Russia is grabbing Galicia and Turkey, France wants Alsace-Lorraine and even the left bank of the Rhine... In the present war waged by the present governments it is impossible to help Belgium without helping to strangle Austria or Turkey, etc.”

Today, the specific Ukrainian issues are not, or not yet, overwhelmed by a world war over which big power dominates where, a war to which socialists can respond with Lenin’s call to “turn the imperialist war into a civil war” or Trotsky’s call in 1940 for a “proletarian military policy”. Responding as if the Ukraine crisis is world war now produces no more than bland hand-wringering — not so much “third camp” as “no camp”.

There isn’t even a military symmetry over Ukraine. The US Socialist Worker, despite its hand-wringer “symmetrical” conclusion, notes that: “As for the US and its allies in Europe, their reaction to the eastern Ukraine uprisings has been a lot of hypocritical rhetoric about respect for sovereignty and the rule of law — but little action to back it up”. It also factors in the historical background: “All parts of Ukraine suffered from Russia’s imperial rule — first, for centuries under the Tsar; then, after a brief recognition of national self-determination following the 1917 Russian Revolution, under the tyranny of the Stalinist counter-revolution; and now, under Moscow’s new empire re-established after the breakup of the ex-USSR...”

The US and the EU are predatory capitalist outfits. But their interest in Ukraine is to integrate it into the capitalist world market dominated by themselves through economic clout, not to subdue it militarily. Neither the US nor the EU is about to send troops to occupy and annex a chunk of Ukraine.

The crisis in Ukraine broke out not because of conflicts between the big powers for which Ukrainian movements were essentially just proxies, but because of the mass movement in Ukraine which toppled the pro-Russian president Yanukovych on 22 February.

Russia has responded by invading and annexing Crimea, by massing troops on Ukraine’s eastern borders, by instigating or encouraging local seizures of power by elements of the ethnic-Russian minority in some districts of east Ukraine. It refuses to recognise the ouster of Yanukovych, and wants to stall the 25 May elections in Ukraine.

Against those Russian moves, socialists should support national self-determination for Ukraine, while giving no endorsement or confidence to the neo-liberal, oligarch-dominated government which has replaced Yanukovych in Kiev.

As well as the perception of the events as essentially a EU/US-vs-Russia clash, with Ukraine functioning only as a token, another consideration pushes socialists towards a stance of just wishing that the conflict would go away. That is the right-wing tone of Ukrainian nationalism.

There is some cross-cutting here: the far-right forces in the anti-Yanukovych movement, Svoboda and the Right Sector, are not pro-EU, so if you want to dismiss the movement as a proxy of the EU, then you must fade out the far-right element in it, and if you want to dismiss the movement as far-right, then you must fade...
out the “EU vs Russia” dimension.

There were strands of anti-Russian Ukrainian chauvinism in the movement, and the rights of Ukraine’s Russian minority should be defended. But those elements should not be exaggerated, as they are by many Stalinist nostalgics (both people, sometimes workers, in east Ukraine, and commentators in the West). Kiev is a majority Russian-speaking city. And the dominant political tone in the pro-Russian separatist movement in eastern Ukraine is right-wing or far-right.

The anti-Yanukovych movement was dominated by conservative and neo-liberal forces, and the new Kiev government is oligarch-led. Support from socialists worldwide for the frail forces of the Ukrainian left is urgent.

That should not mean fading out Ukraine’s national rights. But it does for some.

Thus the French Trotskyist weekly Lutte Ouvrière avoids dismissing the conflict as just a proxy battle, but comments: “The popular masses of Ukraine are caught between opposed nationalisms, and called on to choose one or other camp, though neither is theirs”. (Lutte Ouvrière, 18 April).

Just as the right to free speech is not conditional on saying left-wing things, and the right to vote is not conditional on voting left, the right of nations to self-determination is not conditional on the nation having left-wing leadership.

In the decades after 1945 when dozens of nations won independence from European colonialism, the national movements often had a leftist tinge. But the leftism was rarely solid enough to stop the independent governments becoming crony-capitalist outfits, and sometimes it was the fake-leftism of Stalinism, which would make the independent regimes prison-houses for the workers. Those nations deserved support because of the democratic principle of self-determination, not because their leaderships were left-wing enough.

National self-determination for Ukraine is a right, even when the Ukraine is under right-wing governance.

In a world where big powers jostle for advantage, national struggles by peoples oppressed by one big power will almost always attract support from the rival big power, which will gain advantage from the people gaining independence or moving to some degree into its sphere. The independence struggles after 1945 of Europe’s colonies usually got support and encouragement from the USSR; they still deserved support.

The picture of the crisis in Ukraine as being generated by a “US [or EU] drive to expand eastwards” is as disorienting as the old right-wing European imperialist line which condemned every independence struggle as the work of “the communists”.

In 1989 the nations of Eastern Europe escaped four decades of stifling Russian domination. Most have sought to cement their independence and seek the least-bad terms for integration into the capitalist world market by joining the EU. The EU is, to be sure, bureaucratic, capitalist, and neo-liberal, as is the world market. In relation to Ukraine, socialists should demand that the US and EU cancel Ukraine’s foreign debts, instead of helping the IMF to impose neo-liberal measures as the price for bail-out loans.

But the EU is a capitalist consortium, not a colonial empire like those of the first half of the 20th century. Brussels does not rule Poland or Bulgaria in anything like the same way as London used to rule India and Nigeria. The EU has not stopped the Czech Republic, for example, maybe the East European country most integrated with the “west”, being a notorious “awkward squad” member within the EU.

There is no prospect of Ukraine joining the EU soon, because the EU will not admit it soon. A desire by Ukrainians for closer ties with the EU is not a desire to become part of an empire ruled from a foreign city. To see the (hesitant) EU and US support for the anti-Yanukovych movement and the new Kiev government as the symmetrical counterpart to Russia’s military imperialism in Ukraine is to skew things badly, and to fade out essentials.

RS21, a recent splinter group from the SWP (UK), has generally suggested the same “plague on all houses” line as the SWP. But its website has carried an informative article on the miners of the Donbass: “When protestors in Kiev were attacked by the security forces in December 2013, miners in the Donbass put out a statement that they were prepared to go on all-out strike to bring down Yanukovych: ‘People of Ukraine, in 1989, you supported our mass strike for our rights. Today’s miners stand with you’. Now the miners are torn. Russia cut its investment in coal by 40% last year, so incorporation into Russia has little to offer; meanwhile, the EU-Ukraine deal will also mean dramatic ‘downsizing’ of the coal industry, in favour of onshore
Ukraine. From page 11

gas exploration by multinationals...” (Nick Evans, 16 April)

The International Socialist Network (ISN), which splintered from the SWP-UK in 2013, has carried an informative article on the right-wing mafioso character of the pro-Russian “people’s governor” who briefly took over Donetsk in early March. On 19 April its website published an article by Tim Nelson which rightly stressed “the direct military threat Russia poses to Ukrainian self-determination”.

“The Stop the War Coalition argument that ‘the real enemy is at home’ slogan was appropriate ceased to be a principled anti-imperialist position, and became nothing more than apologism for Putin’s Russia and the regimes he supports. This is not internationalism, as the real enemy for the people of Syria was not the US, but Al-Assad and the Russian state backing him. The same is true for the Ukrainian people now”.

As Nelson comments, “the anti-imperialist consensus” — i.e. the consensus in a large-ish circle that being left-wing in world affairs meant backing whoever fought against the USA — “has largely broken down”. Ukraine shows the need for more substantive, less negative, criteria in politics.

Inspiring and revitalising

Riki Lane writes on the March in March

It seemed to come from nowhere, then it was everywhere. It was against everything, but not clearly for anything.

It was the largest political mobilisation for years, but the mainstream media virtually ignored it. It was inspiring and revitalising for workers, union and community activists, but had little support from the larger campaigns and parties.

“March in March” on March 15-17 brought over 100,000 people onto the streets against the Abbott government’s policies — over 30,000 in Melbourne. Rallies were held in all cities and dozens of regional towns. Initiated through social media by a few rural individuals, the call spread rapidly, meeting the broad feelings of discontent with the attacks on so many fronts. Refugees, climate change, union rights, civil rights — these were prominent issues, but among dozens.

Like almost all the left, I was surprised by the numbers. Awareness crept up as I realised friends and family who do not usually attend rallies were going to this one. Clearly this form of broad non-specific protest met the mood: people sick of the constant attacks from governments of ALP and Coalition alike.

March in March was not built by the larger campaigning groups and parties such as GetUp, Amnesty International the Greens or the ALP.

The organisers’ politics were mild, summed up in their overall slogan of “Australians united for a better government”. They emphasised after the rally that they were not “the left” but all people.

Yet this very broadness and lack of control by larger groups allowed an enormous range of smaller community groups, campaigns, unions and parties to mobilise. In my case, it was building a rally for a local campaign against an environmentally destructive and economically ridiculous Tollway (the Melbourne East-West Tunnel).

The marches marked the re-emergence of a fighting spirit amongst tens of thousands of workers and activists. Yet mass media coverage was minimal – both of the lead up and the rallies themselves. The little coverage focussed on angry slogans directed at prime minister Tony Abbott and the government – complaining these were “hateful”. You would expect that of the Murdoch press, but the usually left-liberal ABC, SBS and Fairfax media also found little worth reporting.

There are plans for follow up marches on 30-31 August 2014.

This is the second, revised, edition of the book Antonio Gramsci: working-class revolutionary, published in 2012. It summarises Gramsci’s life and thought. It presents the major ideas from, and engages in debate with, Peter Thomas’s big study, The Gramscian Moment; disputes the “post-Marxist” readings of Gramsci; discusses the relation between Gramsci’s ideas and Trotsky’s; and, in this new edition, includes a “Gramsci glossary”, critically reviewing concepts and terms from Gramsci now widely used or misused in political discourse.

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