Hospitals in crisis

Anna Pha

Last week Professor David Morris, director of surgery at the St George Hospital in Sydney, stepped down from his position. “I am aware of two patients that have died waiting and others whose cancer has progressed, and I do not think that is appropriate”, said Professor Morris. He added that 732 patients had waited more than a year for an operation and 185 “most urgent” patients had waited more than a month. “We have two theatres empty every day, and that is purely funding, not staffing.” The system is in crisis because of lack of funding.

St George Hospital is a major teaching hospital, one of the largest hospitals in NSW. It is not the only hospital in crisis.

The Children’s Hospital at Westmead (western Sydney) has a waiting list of around 1550, Gosford has 3181, Nepean 2398, and so the list continues.

Some patients die while waiting for treatment and thousands more are battling in pain and other preventable suffering, as they also count the weeks and months on waiting for admission to a public hospital.

Many families and older people are paying thousands of dollars in private health insurance (PHI) that they cannot afford to pay, so as to avoid being a casualty of such waiting lists. At the same time, public hospital beds and even whole wards remain closed.

Professor Morris is not alone in his concerns. And while he is still operating at the hospital, other doctors have left in disgust. Hospitals are finding it increasingly difficult to recruit nurses. The low pay and highly stressful conditions working in under-staffed, under-funded public hospitals have driven many nurses out of the system and into other employment: they leave because the situation prevents them giving patients the professional care that they are trained to give.

The alarm bells should be ringing. Yet the NSW government’s response is one of denial – it says it is spending more money and refuses to acknowledge the situation is unsatisfactory.

Other state governments are not much better. The pattern of under-funding of the public hospital system is national and is contributed to by the federal government.

There is enough money. It is a question of how the money is allocated. At present billions of dollars are being thrown to the private hospital system in an effort to shore it up.

People prefer the public hospital system. It offers superior treatment. It can be more efficient and more accountable. Yet many have been driven into taking out PHI cover and paying thousands of dollars in account to private institutions, more than the Medicare rebate.

The Howard Government is handing over almost $4 billion a year – and it is rising – in subsidies to the private system, more than $2.5 billion of that through the 30 percent uncapped tax rebate for PHI.

If that money were redirected to the public health system, public hospitals could be fully staffed, more wards and beds opened and hospital waiting lists eliminated.

continued page 2

Crisis in Macquarie Fields

As The Guardian went to press hundreds of mainly young people in Macquarie Fields, in western Sydney, were confronting police on the streets for the fifth day. The protests, which have seen police armed with fireworks, rocks and bottles, were sparked by the deaths of two youths in a car crash while being pursued by police.

Dylan Raywood and Matt Robertson died last Friday night in a stolen car during a police chase. Police began arresting people that night and continued during the following days.

Just as the simmering anger of the community in Redfern exploded in rage last year, so the deprived and unemployed in Macquarie Fields are venting their frustration. It is not simply Redfern replayed, but a number of the elements are paralleled: extremely low socioeconomic profile; the police bounding locals, particularly the youth; and a high crime rate.

With more than 11 percent unemployment, rents up to $250 a week, more than 1000 single parent households and basic infrastructure in a shambles, life for many in the mixed housing estate and private residential suburb is hard. The situation is compounded by a big police presence harassing the youths in the area.

Said one 15-year-old – “We’ve got nothing to do here. So the cops harass us. They pull up [outside homes] at four o’clock in the morning and play [the song] Bad Boys really loud and put their sirens on. We want revenge.”

In a sweeping statement of breathtaking simplicity, Premier Bob Carr rejected social disadvantage as the cause behind the protests, attributing them to the “illegal behaviour” of individuals.

Social workers and experts on sociological phenomena take a different view, pointing out that rigid law and order strategies are not the answer and noting the correlation between “rundown housing estates” in low income areas and profound social and economic problems.

Professor Ross Homel, who specialises in the study of juvenile crime, said of the police pursuit that capital punishment is a very harsh penalty for stealing a car.

There is enough money. It is a question of how the money is allocated.
The Guardian
March 2, 2005

More lies to justify troops to Iraq

At the very time a number of other countries are withdraw-
ing their armed forces from the Iraq quagmire, the Howard government is heading in the opposite direction. Its decision to send another 450-strong military contingent shows that it will do anything to rescue itself and its US and British allies from eventual defeat.

Having enthusiastically launched into war on the lie of mass destruction, the gang of three – Bush, Blair and Howard – hope that the continued use of military force will somehow ultimately lead them to a successful solution.

The US, Mexico and the EU are already arguing Howard Government’s latest decision. The Australian contingent’s of-
cial task is to protect an unarmed Japanese contingent already in Iraq. This contingent has been protected by Dutch troops who are about to go home.

The conservative Japanese government is attempting to overcome Japan’s Constitution which forbids the despatch of Japanese troops overseas. It has used the task of rebuilding Iraq as a means to get Japanese boots on the ground in an overseas country. The ultimate objective of the Japanese government is to tear up the constitutional restrictions so that it can take part in the new Asian wars that the US is already planning against the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea and, eventually, against China.

Howard is neglecting the reasons for Japan’s constitutional stance – the wish of the peoples of Asia and the Japanese them-
self to avoid suffering casualties by that categories of US soldiers during WW2 should never be repeated. Howard is keen for the current Japanese government to throw off these restraints. That is one reason why he has rushed to replace the Dutch troops with the Australian contingent. He fears that if the Japanese contin-
gent is not protected it will be forced to pull out of Iraq and he is not prepared to let Australian lives on the line to ensure that they do not.

This is one reason for sending troops that the Howard govern-
ment has not told the Australian people.

Furthermore, it was originally claimed that the request for the troops came from the Japanese themselves whereas the truth is that it was the British government that first made the request and only later by the Japanese. More lies! Howard’s claim that the US leaders were not involved also passes belief given that the US military will be part of the new Asian war operation.

The government’s decision also repudiates the clear state-
m ents made before the election by Howard personally that no additional Australian troops would be sent to Iraq. Another lie.

Howard in his most recent announcement failed to rule out the possibility of sending even more troops which indicates that there are other, even more serious, considerations being dis-
cussed behind the government’s statement and that there was another reason behind the deployment: “It is very important that the opportunity of democracy – not only in Iraq but also in other parts of the Middle East – be seized and consolidated”.

The US and Israel are preparing for air strikes against Iran’s nuclear power installations. Bush’s soft soap while in Europe recently was an attempt to line up European countries behind the US’s future military adventures and drag Australia further into an extremely dangerous situation that could lead to nuclear war as the US leaders pursue their goal of world domination.

In March important demonstrations will take place in many countries again in the run up to a European day of action in April. The government’s new coalition government is using the response to the US attack on Iraq as the reason to move, the unproven accusation that Iran is planning the production of nuclear weapons.

Scott Ritter said that the war plans had already been submit-
ted to President Bush and approved. His claim follows a report made some months ago by investigative journalist Seymour Hersh in the New Yorker that “the next strategic target [is] Iran.”

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On 2 March the National Farmers’ Federation president issued a new “voluntary” visa to plug up labour shortages in rural Australia does not provide any solution to rural employment problems and pays the way for exploitation and abuse of foreign workers.

Immigration Minister Amanda Vanstone stated last week the law was “very, very interested” in the scheme, although she had no reservations on how to get rid of the workers once the employers were finished with them. She expressed frustra-
tion with immigrants who – after finding a job, setting up a life and contributing their best to the country – wanted to stay.

“Cupid has a funny way of appearing after requests for inter-
vention are denied – people fall in love and have a baby”, said Ms Vanstone. “There are issues as to whether people will go back. We’re working through these.”

Numerous revelations of employers abusing temporary workers have surfaced over recent years, including high-profile cases involving Indian and South African construction workers.

“This is an idea which has been pushed many times over the years”, John Sutton, National Secretary of the CFMEU’s Construction and General Division, “but these kinds of quick fixes will not solve our skills shortage problems in the long term.”

Mr Sutton also questioned the true intention of the government with the “guest worker” scheme. “These workers are being exploited and manipulated to underwrite wages, conditions and health and safety standards.”

He cited the deaths of three such workers on Sydney sites over three consecutive months in the early part of last year as examples.

A previous government plan to bring workers on temporary visas was mooted in 1992, when seasonal workers were to be brought in on temporary visas from the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea and near-by countries in order to gain training and skills and earn hard-
currency to return home.

However, that scheme – widely endorsed across the political spec-
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ernment to take advantage of the US military’s budget and the US labour markets and finances of our neighbours.

The recommendation came from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), a “think-tank” set up by the Howard government, to provide it with allegedly “inde-
pendent” advice. Yet the ASPI is financed out of the Federal govern-
ment’s military budget and played a leading part in preparing for and justifying Australia’s occupation of the Solomon Islands.

From page 1

In addition there would be mil-
ions of dollars left to spend on a unique and extensive dental health system, on rehabilitation programs, preventative health care, aged care and other unmet needs.

The running down of the pub-
lic hospital system is deliberate. The aim is to privatise the Medicare system and allow the private system to force people into the pri-
ate system.

The Howard Government’s “Lifetime Health Cover” was announced last month approved further price rises.

There are dozens of funds to select from, and of each of the funds offers a range of options as to type and extent of cover and whether excesses are paid, whether the full cost of hospitalisation is covered, etc.

The average person does not want all these choices. They expect to be expert at the age of 31 and 32, so they want security and peace of mind. The private system offers none of these.

A woman’s place is in the Struggle

Invitation to a Morning Tea
To celebrate: INTERNATIONAL WOMEN’S DAY

Guest Speaker: MARGOT BOETCHER
Help to stop the attack on women’s rights, particularly, the right of choice

SUNDAY 6th March, @ 10 am
1 Salar Place Dianella, Perth
RSVP: Sheila on 9276 9144
Entry by donation
A plate/drink is appreciated
Organised by the Communist Party of Australia, CPA WA Branch

“Temporary Guest Worker” visas no solution

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Dental services should be covered by Medicare

Dental services in Australia are at crisis point. Chronic under-funding at both state and federal level and the decline of graduated pensioner numbers plus the lack of oral health professionals in general are barring tens of thousands of people from access to oral health. Although the situation is worse in NSW, the need is for a national dental health service covered by Medicare.

Horrible examples of pain and trauma abound among people unable to afford to go to a dentist. Mild toothaches that have developed into serious medical conditions; aged pensioners forced to live on baby food; people having to patch dentures with glue, dose abscesses with battery acid and force aspirin into cavities.

In NSW dental hospitals more than 100 children every month have to put under general anaesthetic for oral surgery - most from low income suburbs and rural areas. Four children on average every month have what is called a "full clearance procedure", when all their teeth are pulled out because all are damaged.

Waiting lists for public hospital dental clinics are counted in years. And children's braces have become an indication of the level of income of their parents. Households on average incomes and lower mostly have no choice; they simply don't have the money.

One family The Guardian spoke to must pay $500 a month to an orthodontist until the required $6000 is reached for the braces on their daughter's teeth.

They point out that a decision had to be made to dig into their savings to give their child the chance of oral health in childhood. It was outrageous, they said, that access to dental services isn't universal and free under the umbrella of Medicare.

The NSW Council of Social Service has called for a national summit to resolve the crisis in light of the fact that people in NSW are waiting up to eight years for treatment in the public system and that the number of children needing treatment in hospital for dental work has more than doubled in the past 10 years.

"The poverty of the public dental health system is scandalous and is causing avoidable pain and poor dental outcomes for large numbers of low-income households", said the Council's director, Gary Moore.

"The NSW Premier should gather the other state and territory leaders and thrash out a solution with [Prime Minister] John Howard.

"The trouble is the Howard Government is not interested in a solution being, as it is, a part of the problem. In 1997, less than a year after it was elected, the Howard Government scrapped the national dental funding scheme which had successfully reduced waiting times for treatment.

Welfare “reforms” re-launched

With a Senate majority within sniffing distance the Howard government has re-launched its “welfare reform” agenda, and is planning to place those with disabilities and Indigenous Australians. These budget cuts will be made in order to supplement the $14.7 billion in income tax cuts Howard has already delivered to high earners.

The government has established a "work-age reform group" of Ministers to target four main categories of welfare beneficiaries with "low workforce participation rates": sole parents, the disabled, mature-age men and Indigenous people.

The government has touted its “reforms” in language designed to win public support for its agenda – "shame on you” theme. It says it will not remove people from the Disability Support Pension, it will only “lift the bar” for new recipients.

And what Howard has made it clear he will enact tough “mutual obligation” requirements on Single Parents, he also attempted to assure them: “We are looking at matters in this area and I think that’s desirable, but we’ve not in the business of punishing sole parents”.

"The government appears determined to target vulnerable, low-income groups by imposing harsher conditions on them for income support payments that barely cover the basic costs of living”, said Greens Senator Kerryn Neelie.

"The government would prefer to target these groups rather than address the serious obstacles to people entering the workforce – like effective marginal tax rates, affordable childcare, support for disabled workers, insecure work and transport."

"The government needs to invest more in education and training, in supporting disabled workers and removing barriers such as employer discrimination and inadequate the money.

Mr Howard’s definition of “low workforce participation” must be questioned. Already one third of sole parents are juggling their family responsibilities with paid work.

Under Mr Howard’s policy there will be two sets of standards for families. Two-parent families can choose how they manage work and family commitments. However sole parents will be given no choice when their youngest child turns five.

If the parent does not voluntarily take up work they will be forced into schemes to make them “work ready” – study, community service or work-for-Meole – or have their benefits taken away.

"If the government wants to help others who are in a position to join the labour force then it should improve access to childcare, not waste need, on a childcare tax rebate that gives most to high earners”, said Senator Nettle.

"The government should also abandon its push for “workplace flexi-dental” outcomes for large scale work without leaving entitlements.”

Palm Island Indigenous health crisis

Alf Wilson*

Australian Medical Association (AMA) northern representative Dr William Frischman has identified Palm Island as one Aboriginal community which needs urgent funds to improve the health of its residents.

"It is absolutely dreadful. Health in many Aboriginal communities is the same as it was for whites back in the 1920s. Men and women are dying at an average age of 20 years younger than white people”, Dr Frischman said.

The Koori Mail visited Dr Frischman at his Townsville prem- ises on January 30 and he said the AMA had identified Palm Island as one of the most needy Aboriginal communities in the country.

"Health is a major problem for Aboriginal communities right across Australia but some up this way are more urbanised and Palm Island is not so”, he said.

Dr Frischman described Palm Island as “third-world-like” and in need of funding to improve facili- ties.

"Improvement is needed in primary facilities such as having running water and then we also need to train more Aboriginal health workers and doctors”, he said.

"It is shocking… we live in a rich country like Australia and health this is happening in these communities”. Dr Frischman said Australia had the best health facilities in the world but many Indigenous people did not have access to them.

He supported the call by AMA president Dr Bill Glasson for $400 million to be injected into Aboriginal health in the Federal government’s May Budget.

"Palm Island should be amongst those communities which need some more funding for health”, he said.

Dr Frischman said Aboriginal children suffered diseases such as
gastric, pneumonia, and iron defi- ciency.

“Adults suffer kidney disease, heart problems, diabetes and effects of alcohol. Aborigines have the highest rate of rheumatic fever in the world that affects the heart”, he said.

Dr Frischman said many of the health problems suffered by Aborigines resulted from living in unhealthy and often crowded condi- tions.

“Aboriginal people suffer from third-world diseases which have not existed in white people for 50 years”, he said.

Palm Island is 90 kilometers from Townsville and has a popula- tion of about 3000.

There is a hospital there with excellent facilities, however its resources are often not enough to cope with the amount of disease.

Another concern is that many residents do not seek medical treat- ment.

Dr Glasson said Aborigines did not have the same health standards of other Indigenous populations around the globe, which included the American Indians and New Zealand Maoris.

The AMA has urged politicians to visit many Aboriginal commun- ities to check out the problem themselves.

* Koori Mail 23-02-2005

Pass it on!
When you’ve finished this issue of The Guardian share it with someone else.

Help The Guardian get around.

Pete’s Corner

Koori Mail

Back to the 1800s

Employees of a Melbourne sign maker are resisting AWA's that ban music, encourage discrimination, and condemn them to long trousers, or full length skirts, even in 40 degree heat.

Six of eight employees at Civiquip, Hoppers Crossing in Victoria, have joined the Australian Manufacturing Workers’ Union (AMWU) and knock off AWAs being championed by Prime Minister, John Howard.

AMWU organiser, Fergal Eiffe, says proposed earnings fall between $5.00 and $6.00 an hour below enterprise bargaining rates being paid in the region; that the 2.5 percent annual increase over red would see workers fall below the CPI; and that leave loadings appear to have vanished all together.

“This is the trouble with AWAs. They are an opportunity for employers to tear down wages, conditions and basic human rights with the government’s blessing”, Mr Eiffe said.

“These ones look like they were drafted in the 1800s.”

The documents bar radios, computers, mobile phones, slacks, shorts, coarse or blasphemous language from Civiquip’s premises, on pain of dismissal, and allow the company to work employees on public holidays without paying them.

A holiday.

Victoria’s Melbourne Cup public holiday.

They give the thumbs-up to religious discrimination and legitimize employer discrimination, as long as he has less than six full-time employees.

The AWAs read, “Nothing in these provisions prohibits any discrimination conduct by: “(A) a person (against another person) if the discrimination is necessary for the first party to comply with the person’s genuine religious beliefs or principles.”

“B) the Employer … if the Employer employs no more than the equivalent employee people on a full-time basis.”

Civiquip AWAs call on workers to sign away rights to union representation.

The AWAs, prepared by IR Australia of Pitt St, Sydney, were handed to employees just prior to Christmas.

Fergal Eiffe says, goes to the core of what AWAs are all about.

“These people didn’t even know IR Australia existed until they found out they were writing their new terms of employment.

“This has got nothing to do with flexibility or bargaining in the workplace. It is about loading the dice in the employer’s favour so he can cut living standards and, in this case, impose his own value system on everyone who works for him.”

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For Sale – privatisation of Goulburn Railway Workshop

Evidence of a secret plan to sell the Goulburn Railway workshop, in southern NSW, has been uncovered by a rail worker.

The secret was uncovered when a man at the workshop let the cat out of the bag to an Australian Manufacturing Workers’ Union (AMWU) member, according to the union’s state secretary, Paul Bastian.

The decision to sell Goulburn comes as the state government finalises plans to privatise maintenance across the rail network.

Mr Bastian said privatisation and contracting out had been behind many of the problems besieging the NSW rail network in recent months.

He said public safety could not be guaranteed when trains are operated by franchisees and components, right up to entire rail cars are imported from overseas.

“When you’re hurting down the tracks on a crowded peak hour train, it’s not much comfort to know that you’re riding on the cheapest possible tender price.”

“If we’ve allowed the CIE to load up our entitlements, and caps redundancy at eight weeks, we don’t have a major skills crisis.”

From the horse’s mouth

The family of a building industry boss has come face to face with the reality of John Howard’s GEERS (General Employment Entitlements and Redundancy Scheme). It “doesn’t work”, former corporate services manager of the collapsed Walter Construction, Mike Walsh, said. “Nobody gets anything for 16 weeks and they still have to put food on the table and pay the mortgage. People are terrified until the first payments come through.”

Walsh, who managed to secure the entitlements of some white collar workers.

We can’t start to compete on exports if we’ve exported all our skills!”

Mr Bastian said that the problems in rail were compounded by the state government’s lack of action to keep ship building contracts in NSW.

The AMWU and Australian Workers’ Union have both accused the Carr government of “welshing” on long-standing rail infrastructure assurances.

The state’s Rail Infrastructure Corporation (RIC) is considering two private expressions of interest, one from a US consortium, to buy the 30-year-old Goulburn Rail Workshop.

Meanwhile, state politicians are tippy-tapped about plans to knock-off the design, construction and maintenance of 500 electrical passenger cars, under the guise of Public Private Partnership (PPP).

Only 20 percent of the $1.8 billion contract has been earmarked for NSW with the rest open to international tender.

AMWU attempts to get confirmation the work will remain in the state have drawn a blank.

The union estimates 2400 skilled jobs could be lost if the tender goes offshore – 800 existing rail employees, 800 more at private contractors, doesn’t cover super and caps redundancy at eight weeks.

The scheme also gives the government complete discretion on any payouts.

The majority of Walter’s blue collar workforce will be paid tens of millions of dollars of entitlements in full and have new jobs after two weeks of pickets and negotiations.

Construction Division CFMEU members were protected from losing their long service, redundancy and superannuation as money is placed in industry from the sale of Telstra.

“White collar workers are envied of our blue collar colleagues after the way the CFMEU has looked after them”, Walsh said.

Walsh was speaking at last week’s Unions NSW meeting as delegates voted to back his non-union colleagues. The CFMEU has managed to secure the entitlements of some white collar workers.

The union is sponsoring the Walter Staff Employees Group, composed of former Walter staff, and wants the scheme to guarantee 100 percent of worker entitlements.

A bus load of white collar workers will travel to Canberra on March 9 to deliver a petition with more than 5000 signatures calling for GEERS reform.

The union is also planning a mobile billboard calling for the GEERS scheme to be beefed up will be launched at Kirribilli. The $20,000 cost of the billboard is being paid for with donations from blue collar and white collar workers.

Federal Workplace Relations Minister Kevin Andrews has signed up to the Business Council of Australia’s assault on workers’ rights and their trade unions. As state Labor ministers vowed to oppose the Howard government’s plan to take over state industrial relations systems using corporation laws, Andrews let fly at awards, the independent umpire and the minimum wage.

In a major speech in Melbourne last week outlining the government’s plans to reorient enterprise industrial relations, Andrews claimed that ideas of "fairness" in workplaces were "misconceived" and that "... an emphasis on fairness only leads to regulatory excess and inefficiency".

Andrews’ vision of the workplace in five years time would have no place for “third parties” meaning trade unions and industrial relations commissions.

"Decisions as to the type of employment arrangements entered into, be they part-time, full-time, permanent or casual, or contractually based, would be left to the parties themselves at the workplace level”, Andrews said.

He went on to endorse the big business plan to write more out of working families by:

• Undertaking a hostile take-over of all other employees systems that currently cover about half the Australian workforce.

• Eliminating basic award protections, including long service leave, jury service leave, notice of termination, and superannuation provisions.

• Scrapping unfair dismissal laws, and

• Abolishing the role of the independent Australian Industrial Relations Commission in setting minimum wages and conditions and settling industrial disputes.

But Andrews was sent a clear message that any take-over would have to be a messly constitutional fight, with state industrial relations ministers meeting in Sydney to coordinate their response.

The document also reintroducting special legislation covering the building and construction industry which was knocked back by the Senate last year.

In this case there will be a third party – an Australian Building and Construction Commission to police workers.

The legislation requires unions to hold secret ballots prior to industrial action; outlaw pattern bargaining; a mandatory three- week “cooling off period” after industrial action; and penalties of $110,000 for unions and $22,000 for individual workers for engaging in unlawful industrial action.

It will be retrospective, possibly dating back to last year, with a view of making it enforceable prior to the government’s gaining a majority in the Senate in July.
Coal blights the Hunter

Peter Mac

Residents of NSW Hunter Valley coal mining districts are complaining of the disastrous impact mining operations are having on their lives. The mines have caused river and air pollution, loss of soil fertility, noise disturbance, property damage, and the ruin of the formerly beautiful landscape by massive excavations. No one believes the area will ever be able to be returned to its former condition. However, residents point out that reforestation and rehabilitation work has been carried out, much of it has been unsuccessful, and compensation to local communities has been woefully inadequate.

One resident of the little village of Camberwell claimed last week that the local creek water had become undrinkable. “You could stand on the bridge and watch the fish swimming over the stones. Now it’s all silt and the water is often milky, with a greenish tinge”, she commented bitterly.

Dust from mining blasting has been known to endanger local houses. One resident collected a 60 cm rock that landed near her home, and took it in a wheelbarrow to her house. One resident collected a 60 cm rock that landed near her home.

Almost 16 percent of the area has been known to endanger local residents. “Coal discussion day” at Singleton was not too happy to see it, she recalled.

Another resident claimed that the blasts sometimes create an nosious, orange-coloured gas. “I was in the paddock one day and I saw

I thought I was on the Somme... When it hits you can't breathe and it stings your eyes.

it rolling down the hill. I thought I was on the Somme... When it hits you can’t breathe and it stings your eyes.

Open cut mines in the Hunter have proliferated in the last few years. In 1995, 16 percent of the land between Singleton and Muswellbrook, a total of 222 square kilometres, has now been excavated. That is an increase of some 95 sq km, or about 75 percent, since 1996. Of this area, some 164 sq kms is still being mined, the rest is either covered in water or has been the subject of attempts at vegetation.

The biggest single concentration of open-cut mines is in the western part of Singleton Shire. Mining expert Dr Glenn Albrecht has predicted an exponential rise in coal mining, but he also says that mining in the Hunter will be finished in a few decades. After this, local communities will be left with what Singleton Shire mayor, Fred Harvison, recently referred to as “a lunar landscape.”

At certain times, much of this area will become man-made lakes, but these will be of little use for drinking water or farming, as they will be laden with salt and minerals.

And the mines dwarf other evidence of human activity. The Mount Arthur North mine, for example, is about ten times the size of the adjacent picturesque town of Muswellbrook.

Local environment group Minewatch is now mounting a campaign to protect the eastern half of Singleton Shire from open-cut mining.

Meanwhile, the state government and the mining companies have been having a slanging match about how little the other has done for the Hunter.

Residents would doubtless agree with both protagonists. According to a mining company representative, the state government’s coal mining royalties represent some 50 percent of the expected profits, so the companies are raking in about $600 million in profits. Apart from the compulsory rehabilitation programs, the companies return relatively little to the area. They point out that they provide employment in the region, but they constantly work to minimise numbers, increase working hours, and casualise their workforce.

On the other hand, the government recently changed the royalty requirements, and because of increased demand for coal, what was originally anticipated to be a payment of $44 million this financial year is now expected to rise to some $400 million. Of this sum, $300 million will come from the Hunter mines, but relatively little will be returned to the area by the government.

The minister responsible for the Hunter, Michael Costa, last week claimed that the government had “strong and detailed plans for the Hunter that build on the billions of dollars spent in the region since 1985.”

However, he could only cite as examples “seven new country fire engines, a new school in Ashtonfield and 32 million in wages and salaries for more than 200 staff of the Cessnock Correctional Centre” – in short, cases where the new spending was not directly related to the particular problems facing residents of coal mining districts.

And the fact that Mr Costa is handling this portfolio does not help. “It makes you wonder how much the Hunter is worth”, according to a mining company representative.

NSW Greens MP Lee Rhiannon has called on the state government to quickly introduce its bill on workplace deaths and not get sucked into the scare campaign being run by big business and the Liberals. The Carr Labor government was due to introduce the Workplace Fatalities Bill into the Legislative Council last week but after a bashing over the head from some of its corporate donors it has stalled the legislation. In the last seven weeks there has being six fatalities on building sites around NSW. “The Government has accepted the need for change, consulted on it and now they should just get on and do it”, Ms Rhiannon said.

A group of 21 Victorian Indigenous groups met in Melbourne last week to call on the Bracks government to stop stalling on land justice for traditional owners. “Traditional owners are concerned that the process is not moving faster”, Native Title Services Victoria Chairperson Graham Atkinson said. “Among other things, land justice for traditional owners must mean the return of ownership of land and resources, control of their cultural heritage and a real say in the management of state lands, water and resources. Attorney General Rob Hollis is blaming the state government’s native title process. There are 11 rural claims that have been waiting to be settled. Most have been before the Federal Court for six years. Federal Court Judge Tony North noted that Victoria lags behind the other states in the processing of native title applications. The Bracks government announced two years ago the in principle agreement of the Wotjobaluk claim which is still to be finalised.

Meanwhile, the traditional owners of Kakadu National Park have agreed to talks with French National Power Plant owner AREVA which wants to mine uranium three kilometres from Nourlangie Rock. Five years ago the traditional owners, the Mirrar people, through the Northern Land Council, imposed a moratorium on mining Kadadu’s Koongara high-grade uranium deposit, in the park’s central catchment area. The Northern Territory government has played down the chances of AREVA getting approval for the second uranium mine, near the Ranger mine where there has been more than 120 toxic spills.

HOG OF THE WEEK: Kerry Packer. A Senate Estimates Committee hearing has revealed that Australia’s richest man, Kerry Packer, received a $660,000 grant from the Howard government’s Regional Partnership Program to reopen his Queensland meat works at Lakes Creek. The parlia-

TORCHING THE SPIDER

Dust. We didn’t fall into it – it ate at me in the horror of uncovering an activity.

With pleading at me in the horror of uncovering an activity and in the mind.

The ritual takes place each year at the shearing shed’s hole-in-the-ground to where in the off season the black and crimson hearts spin their deathly Waltz.

You roll up a newspaper and set it alight and run the flame slowly under the seat and down as far as you can reach into the barrel of the pit, and the webs catch and plummet into the cool darkness.

Tom Pearson

Meats in the lead up to the federal election. When the Lakes Creek abattoir closed in 2002 Consolidated Meat was al-

located 40,000 tonnes of US beef quotas, worth around $20 million, under a Howard government deal with the US.
Trading away women’s rights

Oxfam International, the non-governmental development and relief organisation recently published a scathing indictment of the global exploitation of women. Trading Away Our Rights: Working in Global Supply Chains uses research from case studies in many countries and interviews with over 1000 workers, factory owners, government officials and others to put together a comprehensive overview of this issue. We reprint here some excerpts from the summary of this important new study.

Globalisation has drawn millions of women into paid employment across the developing world. Today, supermarkets and clothing stores source the products that they sell from farms and factories worldwide. At the end of their supply chains, the majority of workers – picking and packing fruit, sewing garments, cutting flowers – are women.

Their work is fuelling valuable national export growth. And their jobs could be providing the income, security, and support needed to lift them and their families out of poverty. Instead, women workers are systematically being denied their fair share of the benefits brought by globalisation.

Commonly hired on short-term contracts – or with no contract at all – women are working at high speed for low wages in unhealthy conditions. They are forced to put in long hours to earn enough to get by. Most have no sick leave or maternity leave, few are enrolled in health or unemployment schemes, and fewer still have savings for the future. Instead of supporting long-term development, trade is reinforcing insecurity and vulnerability for millions of women workers.

The lives of women workers are also being shaped by women workers highlights one of the glaring failures of the current model of globalisation. Over the past 20 years, the legal rights of powerful corporate entities have been strengthened and extended. Through the World Trade Organisation and regional and bilateral trade agreements, corporations now enjoy global protection for many newly introduced rights.

As investors, the same companies are legally protected against a wide range of governments’ actions.

Workers’ rights have moved in the opposite direction. And it is no coincidence that the rise of this “flexible” worker has been accompanied by the rise of the female, often young, often short-term worker. The result is that corporate rights are becoming ever stronger, while poor people’s rights and protections at work are being weakened, and women are paying the social cost...

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IWD 2005 – resist the onslaught!

Sexism, along with racism, is deeply rooted in capitalism. And while women now enjoy many rights that were won over years of struggle by both women and men, today we are experiencing a new onslaught against women’s rights. This is coming from the mass media, employers, governments and sections of the church hierarchy. Whether it be abortion, wages, employment, education, politics, or other areas of society, any gains – and there have been many – are now under attack.

As soon as the extreme Right, the religious fundamentalists, employers or conservative governments see an opportunity to roll back women’s rights they take it.

That is what we are witnessing today. When Tony Abbott’s push to criminalise abortion and remove it from Medicare, single mothers were one of the prime targets for the government’s social security reforms. Employers, for example, use and even foster racism and sexism to divide workers, to prevent them uniting as single, powerful force in defence of their own interests. By picketing worker against worker on the basis of sex, race or some other difference, employers can drive down wages and working conditions.

On International Women’s Day it is appropriate to salute the work of the many women and men who have progressed the struggle for women’s rights in various historic times.

**Slavery**

Looking back two centuries, African American women slaves were chattels – not people – to their owners. They were slave labour, generating profits for their owners. They were slave labour, generating profits for their own owners. They were slave labour, not people – to their owners. African American women slaves were a revelation of the inhumanity of slavery.

When British Prime Minister John Paul II was first to speak in the public before a mixed assembly of men and women in the United States in 1828. In calling for women’s equality, she said: “We are here on the earth, and they tell us of heaven; we are human beings, and they tell us of angels and devils; we are matter, and they tell us of spirit; we have five senses to admit truths, and a reasoning faculty by which to build our belief upon them, and they tell us of dreams dreamed thousands of years ago, which all our experience flatly contradicts.”

In 1848, Elizabeth Cady Stanton first called for the right to vote in the United States. She never enjoyed the right herself but her followers did. In 1885 she addressed the Women’s Suffrage Association: “You may go the world over and you will find that every form of religion which has breathed upon this earth has degraded woman. There is not one which has not made her subject to man. Men may rejoice in them because they make man the head of the woman. I have been travelling this old world during the last few years and have found new food for women in the movement.”

“Man, of himself, could not do this; but when he declares, ‘Thus saith the Lord’, of course he can do it. So long as ministers stand up and tell us that as Christ is the head of the church, so is man the head of the woman, how are we to break the chains that hold women down through the ages?…”

“Now I ask you if our religion teaches the dignity of women?”

Organised religion has played and, in some cases, still plays an important role in the oppression of women and in attacking secularism (witness the numerous interventions of the Vatican under Pope John Paul II).”

In 1885 the American suffragist and writer Helen H Gardener wrote in The Nation: “I do not know the needs of a god or of another world… I do know that women make shirts for seventy cents a dozen in this one. I do know that the needs of humanity and this world are infinite, unending, constant and immediate. They will take all our time, our strength, our love, and our thoughts; and our work here will be only then begun.”

Of course, many progressive believers have come to reject the traditional view of religion in suppressing the rights of women and justifying exploitative societies. For some time, conservative forces within religious organisations have targeted these advocates of social progress. The papacy of John Paul II has been marked, among other things, by its assault on church leaders who have sided with the cause of the advancement of women and other oppressed people. The campaign against Liberation Theology in Latin America is notable in this regard.

The greatest unity of purpose must be built between these believers and the rest of the progressive movement in order to defeat the latest attacks on the rights of women.


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**Slavery**

When British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher took on the National Union of Miners (NUM) in 1983, little did she know she would be taking on the union members’ partners as well.

According to Arthur Scargill, the NUM President at the time, the women’s groups were a revelation to him.

“I remember having this meeting with a woman who was a lecturer in a nearby college,” Scargill says. “And we were talking about agriculture. She was very active and she said: ‘Well we could have a meeting and drum up support’. And I said that if we have a meeting, we might as well have a march. So we set off on the march, followed by a meeting in Barnsley public hall.

“The organisers were expecting a couple of hundred women and they even made sandwiches to give them when they arrived. ‘Well, when I arrived in Barnsley I saw a sight that will stay with me for the rest of my life. I’ve never seen so many bloody women standing with thousands and they all had placards and banners. Jean, the lecturer, said to me, ‘I don’t believe it; what are we going to do?’ And I said, ‘Well, we are going ahead’.

“So we set off on the march, and a police officer came up to me and said it was too big to go down the main thoroughfare. It’s not my march, it’s the women’s march and they’ve told me that’s exactly where they’re going.’

“Host were completely nonplussed, and we carried on straight to the centre of town, stopping traffic and everything. When we got back to the public hall, they were still leaving the starting point.

“Now there’s a by-law in England that says you can’t take banners into the public hall. I knew this and union members usually took their banners down. But the women didn’t know this and they marched straight towards the meeting hall, banners up.

“So the police stopped me and said ‘They can’t come in here with them’. I said, ‘You’ll have to tell them’. Well he shouted it out and the women just surged forward, hitting the police out of the way with their banners as they went.

“There were four floors in this hall and when we got inside every single floor was packed to capacity. This chap from the fire brigade came up to me and said, ‘Mr Scargill, can I point out that you’re breaking fire regulations by having all these people in here. You can’t hold this meeting’.

“I said, ‘You go to the centre of the stage and tell them they can’t hold their meeting’. With that he looked around, folded his arms and said, ‘Well, as long as it doesn’t go too bloody long’.

“These women, many of whom had never been outside their villages in their lives, would have stayed there debating politics all day. By the end of it, a massive vote’s movement had been established.

“They went all over the world, from Australia to Canada, asking people for support and they got it. Ireland, of course, was the greatest supporter we ever had, financially and vocally. They always said to us that it was in return for the support we gave them during the 1913 Lockout. And we’ll never forget what they gave us.”

The strike continued for a full 12 months, a magnificent struggle on the part of the miners, their union, women and other supporters.

During that period miners were killed, others received long jail sentences for picket line activity, unions were fined, the NUM sequestered, and the miners condemned as “terrorists” by the government.

Finally, members voted for a return to work by a narrow majority as the TUC joined with the media and Thatcher in pressing a return to work.

Now the mines are all closed. But we should not underestimate the importance of that heroic struggle, the solidarity of the women who supported their partners and international solidarity, including from Australia.
Tim Wheeler

WASHINGTON: The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) released new Pentagon documents on February 18 exposing an even wider net of torture and abuse of detainees in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Among this new batch of 1000 pages* obtained under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) were photocopies of reports by the Army’s Criminal Investigation Division (CID) on dozens of cases of torture and abuse. Many pages were heavily redacted to remove the names of detainees, thus obfuscating the abuses and those bringing the complaints.

"The torture of detainees is too widespread and systemic to be dismissed as the rogue actions of a few misguided individuals."

In one file, an Iraqi detainee charged that Americans in civilian clothing beat him in the head and stomach, dislocated his arms, "stepped on [his] nose until it [broke]," stuck an unloaded pistol in his mouth and "shocked" him with a rope; and, be his legs with a baseball bat. The CID report claims its investigation "failed to prove or disprove" the offenses.

Yet medical reports corroborated that the victim’s nose and leg had been broken, and that he had laid scars on his pelvic bones. The Associated Press noted that interrogators in civilian clothes had interrogated the individual. After initially reporting the abuse, the detainee said he was forced to sign a statement recanting his charges or face indefinite detention.

Another file reports that US soldiers in Afghanistan posed for photographs of mock executions with hooded and bound detainees and that some of the images were destroyed to avoid "another public outrage" such as swept the nation after photos of the abuses at Iraq’s Abu Ghraib prison were released. "These files provide more evidence, if any were needed, that abuse was not limited to Abu Ghraiab," said ACLU staff attorney Jameel Jaffer.

The ACLU appeared in court in New York, February 22, to press its lawsuit for release of other documents withheld by the Pentagon. The Defense Department continues to stonewall and to withhold thousands of documents inappropriately, Jaffer said.

The ACLU is demanding that Attorney General Alberto Gonzales name a special counsel to investigate and prosecute those charged with torture and abuse. Gonzales wrote memos for President George W Bush authorising torture and created special units to conduct interrogations.

Voters for Peace (VFP) was one of several groups that responded to the ACLU’s FOIA request. "Our treatment of detainees can only be seen as part of a larger problem," said VFP President David Cline. "We support the General Accounting Office because they are right and just, but also because they protect our own soldiers, not merely as a matter of legality."

He accused the Bush administration of "manipulating this issue to cover up criminal activity by top officials of the US government."

When they get caught with blood on their hands," Cline continued, "they always find a lower-ranking scapegoat. We’re in very deep trouble here. We need an attorney general, perhaps not as attorney general and John Negroponte as head of the new super-spy agency set up by President Bush, to oversee the CIA and take a closer look at the torture in Afghanistan.

The Bush Administration's interest in cloaking its torture practices in secrecy, he said, is obvious: "Emile Schepers was dismissed as the rogue actions of a few."

He doubts that the new super-spy agency will do much good. "We all believe the torture is going on," he said, "and will continue to do so as long as the practice is considered to be of "administrative necessity.""

Debt repayments hamper fight against HIV/AIDS

A United Nations envoy to some of the world’s poorest countries said recently that these least developed countries (LDCs) are cut off from the health and education programs in order to service their foreign debt. He called for urgent action to help these countries combat the devastating effects of the HIV/AIDS pandemic which is worsening as a result of these economic woes.

Stephen Lewis, Secretary-General and High Representative for the LDCs, Anwarul K Chowdhury, made the comments at the UN Headquarters in New York during the launch of a publication about how women in poor countries cope with HIV/AIDS.

He added that "an unsustainable debt burden" meant some nations — such as Senegal, Malawi, and Sao Tome and Principe — must commit 30 percent of their public health budget to interest payments each year.

"It is a critical challenge for those countries as they are forced to choose between servicing their debts and investing in health and education and tackling poverty and HIV/AIDS, which are essential for building and developing their human and institutional capacities," Mr. Chowdhury said at the launch of the Geneva Conventions banning torture as “quaint”.

The world’s 50 LDCs now pay an estimated US$5.1 billion simply to service their debt. The lack of services in these countries often forces women to choose between nursing sick family members and earning a living for their households.

AIDS, Mr. Chowdhury's office and the UN Development Program (UNDP) and is entitled Hope: Building Capacity: to Meet the HIV/AIDS Challenge.

* The documents are available to the public on the ACLU web site at www.aclu.org/torturefile/released/021605.html.

The Guardian

1000 new pages document torture and abuse in Iraq and Afghanistan

Negroponte’s bloody baggage

Emile Schepers

John Negroponte, the US ambassador to Iraq, has been nominated by President Bush to head the new super-spy agency set up by the Intelligence Reform legislation. Negroponte’s baggage contains a shocking amount of dirt and blood.

Negroponte was US ambassador to Honduras from 1981 to 1985, during a time when the Reagan administration was secretly arming right-wing “Contra” forces with the aim of ousting the progressive, Sandinista-led government in neighboring Nicaragua.

Since Congress had expressly forbidden the administration from using taxpayer dollars for this purpose, funding was obtained from an arrangement that involved the secret sale of US arms to Iran (illegal at the time) and drug sales (illegal at any time).

The Contras were ruthless killers. Their methods included terrorist attacks on unarmored, rural Nicaraguan schoolteachers and health care workers. The US used facilities in Honduras, including the Aguacate airfield, to mount and support the Contra attacks in Nicaragua, and thus the US ambassador — Negroponte — must have known about many of these crimes.

Though Nicaragua was the main target, the Honduran people did not remain unscathed. To carry out the Contra support mission, Negroponte associated himself with some of the most brutal elements in the Honduran military, especially General Gustavo Alvarez Martinez, who set up a death squad opera tion (“Battalion 3-16”) within the country.

Honduran human rights groups say that Negroponte was complicit in numerous atrocities committed by Martinez and others, including massacres of Honduran and Salvadoran leftists and the disappearance of 184 Honduran oppositionists. These charges were supported by a detailed investigative series in the Baltimore Sun newspaper in 1995.

That same year, a Honduran court charged 14 officers with human rights violations. The Honduran Commissioner for Human Rights asked the US government to make information it possessed available to him about Negroponte and others in connection with Battalion 3-16, but Washington refused to cooperate.

Some have wondered aloud why a career diplomat who’s whole experience has been in the diplomatic corps is being put in charge of an agency whose over-riders are law enforcement, drug enforcement and other interior officials.

On the contrary, he will consider himself to be in charge of minimising accountability to Congress and the public, and using whatever lies and dirty tricks serve their cause.

In 2001, Negroponte was appointed US ambassador to the United Nations by George W Bush, and thus played a key role in organising the barrage of lies laid down to justify the Iraq war. When the Mexican and Chilean ambassadors to the UN would not be swayed by the lies, Negroponte organised a campaign to get them fired by their home governments.
While an Islamic Shia coalition won a slim majority in the January 30th elections in Iraq, the results indicate that no single group can control the country’s political process.

One prominent Islamic “moderate,” Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, has become the most likely to become prime minister in the new transitional government. The head of one of the two large Kurdish parties, Jalal Talabani, may be named president. Several Sunni groups who boycotted the vote now say they will participate in the new government in some form, and in different capacities.

Key struggles in the coming period will be over ending the US occupation, the role of Islam in the post-occupation period, and the new transitional government’s influence over the oil industry to private investment. Iraqi Communist Party spokes-

person Salam Ali says these and other Islamic moderates “will not in any substantial way challenge US influence unless a political mass movement challenges the occupation,” he said.

Meanwhile, President Bush asked the US Congress for an additional $90 billion in aid for the US occupation. That is on top of some $150 billion already spent on the war. And this will not be the end of it.

Brookings Institution analyst Mohsen Mahboby said the likelihood of hitting $300 billion, a near-certainty it will reach $250 billion and a distinct possibility we’ll reach $400 billion.”

Many Americans are saying, “Enough is enough.” Peace Action is urging voters to tell their congressional representatives, “Not one more cent of the occupation.” Instead, the US must end the occupation, bring our troops home, and support Iraqi sovereignty.

The group said it is time to “stop perpetuating the cycle of violence in Iraq, stop sending so many soldiers and civilians to their graves, and stop diverting precious resources that could be used to rebuild Iraq and fund critical domestic needs.”

In the January 30th elections, the United Iraqi Alliance, a coalition of Shia groups, drew about 48 percent of the vote. The alliance of Kurdish parties got 26 percent, and current interim Prime Minister Ayad Allawi’s bloc drew 14 percent. Of the remaining 100 slates, only nine received enough valid votes to gain seats in the national assembly.

 retreat from key international obligations or be shut down.

The People’s Unity slate, initiated by the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP), won about 70,000 votes, just under 2 percent, which will likely give it two seats. That was smaller than what both the ICP and other Iraqi analysts had expected. The Kurdistan Communist Party was part of the Kurdish slate and will likely also have two seats.

All called the ICP national results a “victory,” but said they “do not reflect the weight and influence of our party in the political life” of Iraq.

In response to international pressure, including from the Arabic Union, the recall of ambassadors, and a travel ban on Iraqi leaders, the US has agreed to terminate its handover of power to the Iraqi government.

The possibility of military intervention by Nigeria, whose leader, President Olusegun Obasanjo, is 53 years.

The sub-regional Economical Community of West African States has frequently imposed sanctions on Togo, including suspension from its activities, the recall of ambassadors, an arms embargo and a travel ban on Togolese leaders. It demanded the immediate handover of power to the right-wing, opposition par-


ties to industrial espionage, from including the African Union’s Peace and Security Council, Faure Gnassingbe announced that a presidential election would be held within 60 days. He has refused to step down in the interim, however.

A demonstration of nearly 10,000 angry citizens in Lome, the nation’s capital, on February 19 reflected growing opposition to the power grab. A week earlier at least 14 people were killed in clashes with police. Union leaders have encouraged general strikes against the government, and protests show no sign of abating.

Since the former president’s demise, a media crackdown has occurred. Two television stations and seven privately owned radio stations have been closed. The organisation that regulates national media, ARTVPA, abruptly stated that it would be able to shut down.

About 21 ethnic groups com-

prise a total population of about 5.5 million people in Togo. The economy is mainly agricultural, with coffee, cocoa and cotton among its most important crops. Its biggest money maker is the mining and export of phosphates.

A French colony until its inde-

pendence was granted in 1960, Togo remained closely aligned with France throughout Gnassingbe Eyadeama’s four decades of rule.

The French government often came to the defence of the Togolese government in international forums for violating democratic and human rights, and the French military still has troops, air bases, and naval bases in the capital.

As in many other African nations, Togo’s people have suffered under economic austerity measures imposed by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

An estimated 70 percent of Togo’s population lives on less than a dollar a day. The average life expectancy is 53 years.

People’s Weekly World

EUROPE: Up to 480 US short-range nuclear weapons — about double previous estimates — are stationed under US control at air bases in Germany, Britain, Italy, Belgium, Turkey and the Netherlands, US-based environment group the Natural Resources Defense Council said. A new report said nearly a third of them are earmarked for use by air forces of non-nuclear NATO countries. NRDC pointed out that this violates the Non-Proliferation Treaty and “expresses a double standard that conflicts with US and European nuclear non-proliferation objectives to persuade countries such as Iran and North Korea from developing nuclear weapons.”

HAITI: At an emergency forum in Port-au-Prince, leaders of the Inter American Press Society, Rafael Molina and Sergio Muñoz, warned that freedom of the press is in great danger in Haiti, and sharply criticised the attitude of the US-backed interim government. The Haitian news agency AHP said the forum was organised in the midst of widespread protest over the January 14 murder of journalist Abdias Jean while he was covering a police action in a working-class neighbourhood of Port-au-Prince. Among other incidents: Guyler Delva, Reuters correspondent and head of the Association of Haitian Journalists, has received repeated death threats, and has been sharply criticised by Prime Minister La Torture’s press office. On Janu-

ary 14 two journalists from the newspaper Le Nouvelliste were severely beaten and police threatened and seized film from a team of reporters for a private TV station. The Aristide Foundation for Democracy’s radio and television facilities have been closed for eight months without official government explanation.

CANADA: Supermarket giant Wal-Mart has announced it plans to close its first unionised store in Jonquiere, Quebec, since it could not reach a first contract with its 190 workers that would allow it to be profitable. United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) National Director Michael Fraser called the closing “clearly a violation of the workers’ rights to join a union” and said the union will file unfair labour practices charges. The UFCW won certifi-

cation at the Jonquiere store last August. Early this month the union requested binding arbitration after talks had broken down.

GUATEMALA: The country’s constitutional court has halted the trial of 16 soldiers charged in one of the worst massacres during the country’s civil war. The court broke legal precedent to declare that a 1996 amnesty law covers massacre cases. Human rights groups called the decision disastrous. Appeals are expected, and other courts are considering similar issues.

Over 200 people died in 1982 when a Guatemalan army com-

mando unit burst into the village of Dos Erres, searching for guerrilla supporters. A UN report said the commandos raped local women and used hammers for some killings. Over 200,000 people are estimated to have died during the 36-

year civil war, in which the US backed the Guatemalan army.

Global briefs

Sectarian divisions will play into the hands of the US
The Guardian
March 2 2009

Open Letter to President Katsav

We are Jewish Australians who feel great concern for Israel, and welcome the recent reduction in violence. We urge you to take action:

1. I hope you saw it.
2. Leave such a bitter legacy of hatred.
3. Long may the Barrier be built through.
4. A sincere and urgent call.
5. The Barrier is unspeakable.
6. The Barrier is inhuman.
7. The Barrier is against peace.

Letter signed by
more than 40 individuals
Presidents of the Union of Jewish Students in Australia

President of the Union of Jewish Students in Australia

Australian Troops Face
depleted Uranium

Hundreds of thousands of Gulf War veterans are now suffering from a syndrome which eminent scientists like Doug Rooke, former head of the Pentagon’s Depleted Uranium Project, attribute to exposure to depleted uranium.

DU is found in the blood and urine of civilians and military personnel in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Pentagon itself warns that all exposed person-

nel must be medically monitored for years to come.

The Defence Department said it would “conduct reparation before the deployment” (Sydney Morning Herald, Feb 24).

If Beazley is sincere about sup-
porting Australian troops going to
Iraq he should immediately chal-
lege the government on this issue.

Soldiers were barred from going to
Iraq because they refused vac-
cination will those who refuse medical exposure be similarly treated?

Gareth Smith
Byron Bay, NSW

Missing feelings

So Tony Abbott has found some feeling for his own flesh and blood. When will he find some feelings for the Australians who will suffer under Howard’s new Penal Provisions against Trade Unions and Trade Unions? Denis Kevans Wentworth Falls, NSW

One only way out of Iraq

The discussion of how many Australian troops should have been or should be sent to Iraq to “protect” the Japanese contingent there is flawed. First of all we should ask a question: “Should there be any troops there at all?”

Never mind all those motherhood statements of “We should be there”.

There are jobs and jobs. It’s like a bank robber saying “I can’t leave this bank at the moment as I haven’t finished the job yet.”

We have never been a reason for Australia to invade a country which presented no danger to Australia and was in effect a good trading partner. It should be clear to even those with cement blocks for brains that the invasion of Iraq was illegal, that the US manipu-

lated the “willing” into a pack rape of the country for its own interests.

Hearing said that, what I am inter-
ested to know is why, when access to information about Iraq should be possible we do not know anything about what really is happening in the country.

How do ordinary people live?

How do farmers grow their pro-
duce?

What is the food situation?

All those civilian structures that had been trashed by the “willing” – have they been rebuilt?

What does a nor-

moral family do on a normal day?

We know that wars are profit-
able only for those death merchants who supply arms, ammunition and everything else they can overcharge for. Civilians are usually the ones to suffer.

Soldiers as a rule are better fed, equipped and paid. Nevertheless, they also pay a high price for some-

body else’s military adventures. I’m not even talking about depleted ura-
nium and what it’s doing to them, the civilians and the kids yet (if) to be born.

Last Saturday’s Herald had an article about a very high rate of suicides among the Japanese sol-

diers – highest ever. Seventy-eight soldiers have killed themselves in the past 11 months according to the Japan Defence Agency. The death rate among soldiers is higher than the national average in Japan. I’d like to quote the Herald: “The acting director of Tokyo Lifeline, Yumiko Misaki, said soldiers who had been sent to Iraq were particularly sus-

ceptible to stress and depression. They found it difficult to adjust when they returned to Japan, she said.”

We bear nothing about those Australian soldiers who are back from Iraq. Are they left damaged and depressed with only their fami-

lies to look after them?

Whichever way you look at it, it’s time to leave Iraq.

A Sampson
Fairfield, NSW

Culture
by Rob Gowland

The toad war

On February 12 Richard Morecroft presented a nature documentary on the ABC called Goannas And The Rubbish Frogs. I hope you saw it. It was very good.

It dealt with an environmental disaster right here in Australia. My write-up of the program in Alcine:

Watching began with an environmental statement:

“While Johnny Howard splurges money on the military, very little is paid to move towards peace. We are heading towards a world of nuclear war. We cannot accept that Israel retaliating for demolishing homes, destroying ancient olive groves, and bombing crowded residential areas in the occupied Palestinian territories should dictate the country’s foreign policy.”

We believe there can never be a military solution to this conflict, as military force will only tip the scales in Israel’s favour. We believe the current Israeli government’s policies have been pursued by the current Israeli government. We condemn all attacks on civilians, but cannot accept that Israel retaliating for demolishing homes, destroying ancient olive groves, and bombing crowded residential areas in the occupied Palestinian territories should dictate the country’s foreign policy.

We write as Jews because Israel claims to act on behalf of Jews world wide, and reject the notion that all criticism of Israel is anti-Semitism. We want to see a viable peace for both Israelis and Palestinians. We urge you to act now to stop Israeli human rights violations in the occupied territories, and to engage with your neighbours to find real security, based on peace and justice for both Israelis and Palestinians.

Letter signed by
more than 40 individuals
Presidents of the Union of Jewish Students in Australia

President of the Union of Jewish Students in Australia

The Barrier being built through the Kimberley and the Red Centre.

“Cane toads are a national problem. The reason for this? “The cane toad is coming. When they reach the Kimberley and the Red Centre, of this year, the ABC documentary revealed that in parts of Kakadu there are already an alarming 20,000 cane toads per square kilometre. Cane toads are not the only foreign animal to be deliberately introduced into this country and then allowed to run wild to the detriment of our wildlife and our pastures. Rabbits and hares, foxes and dingoes, donkeys and camels, buffalo and many more have contributed in a much greater part in this ongoing catastrophe.”

Rabbits at least entered the food chain – and helped to sustain the matchless world heritage area of Kakadu. The Defensive Department said it would tip shells; it is radioactive. Our dump for materiel destroyed by DU tipped shells; it is radioactive. Our dump for materiel destroyed by DU Defence Department said it would “conduct reparation before the deployment” (Sydney Morning Herald, Feb 24).

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The ad called on readers of Nature Australia to take action: “Cane toads are a national problem. Write to the Federal Minister for the Environment and demand that: Cane toad research funding be increased. Research be integrated with on-ground eradication programs. This was – and still is – good advice. The ad was not all gloom and doom. It is not that “there is hope.” In some areas cane toad populations had declined and average toad size had also decreased. Pointing to the importance of research funding, it said: “If we knew why, we could minimise their impact. Sadly, funding for cane toad research has almost disappeared.”

That was in 1999. In February of this year, the ABC documentary Goannas And The Rubbish Frogs, after stressing the urgency of the situation, noted bitterly that “at the present rate of funding, an effective government control is at least a decade away. Meanwhile, wet season floodwaters are carrying the cane toads ever deeper into previously pristine wilderness areas.”

It’s time the Federal government came under real pressure to fund a genuine research and eradication campaign against cane toads – before it is too late.
Dramatised documentary (read “mock doc”) is fast becoming the favoured means of making a study of any historical subject. This week we have two: The Ancient Egyptians and In Search Of The Brontes (ABC 2.90pm Sundays).

Based on letters written by the three sisters and “new research by historian Julie Barker”, the two-part series In Search Of The Brontes allegedly “shatters the myths that have surrounded the sisters since their untimely deaths more than 150 years ago”.

This may be over-stating the case a mite, I think. The series appears to have dropped any idea of a Wesleyan influence on the part of their Aunt Branwell, whom other biographers have credited with encouraging Anne’s tendency to “religious melancholia”.

The program asserts that the harsh regime at the Clergy Daughters’ School, to which four of the daughters were sent, caused the death of two of them from consumption, whereas Charlotte more realistically believed that it merely hastened their deaths. A small but significant inaccuracy.

The series appears to be intent on rehabilitating their “much maligned” father, Reverend Patrick Branwell, and certainly does a good job of it. It also succeeds in present- ing the sisters, and their brother Branwell, as possessed of lively imaginations while being from a young age beset by tragedy, grief and disappointment. These look like people who really could write, which authors in drama very often do not.

Picture Thebes around 1100BC. The poor live in abject poverty, the well-to-do can, as usual, always use more.

Not far away, over the river, in the Valley of the Kings, are tombs housing not only the mortal remains of Egypt’s Pharaohs, but also the fabulous wealth that the royal dead need to see them comfortably through their journey to the afterlife.

Robbing the tombs of the dead is sacrilege, but after 500 years or so, a tomb can become just a familiar part of the landscape, devoid of religious sentiment. And with those of men and in around the Valley of the Kings engaged on building the future tomb for the present Pharaoh, tombs in general hold little mystique for these artisans and labourers.

Tomb Robbers, this week’s episode of the remarkable docudrama Ancient Egyptians (ABC 7.30pm Sundays), tells the true story of an extraordinary trial in October 1111BC, a trial which, despite attempts by local officials to keep a lid on it, revealed that all manner of people - officials, artists, scribes, police - were involved in organised tomb-robbing. It was big business in Thebes.

Three thousand years later, the records of the trial still survive. A stash of ancient papyrus documents, they were discovered around 1850 by Egyptian treasure hunters near Luxor.

To maximise their value, the looters divided up the various texts among themselves, cutting one in half. After being sold to various collectors, four of the papyrii eventually ended up in the British Museum in London.

One half of the torn document landed in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York. Not until 1935 was the other half of this document discovered in the back of a small wooden statue bought by King Leopold II.

Together, the papyri reveal a fascinating true story - a brutal tale of power and poverty, greed and corruption, torture and revenge.

The new four-part series adapted from Agatha Christie’s Miss Marple mysteries is bluntly and somewhat ungraciously titled Marple (ABC 8.30pm Sundays). Geraldine McEwan stars as Jane Marple, the sweet old lady with a razor sharp intuition for solving crimes.

The “golden age” of the puzzle-story detective fiction, the classic “who-dunnit” (and how did he or she do it), was from just before WWI to WW2. After the War came the dominance of the American “hard-boiled” style with its emphasis on suspense and violence.

Agatha Christie’s writing career began in 1920 and spanned 56 years, but she remained a practi- tioner of the “golden age” puzzle story, specialising in murder by the “clueless” (The Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature). Not surprisingly then, The Body In The Library, the first episode of the new series, although set in the 50s has the feel and to some extent the look of a program set in the 30s.

The series is marked by high production values (and a decent budget) and a remarkable cast list for all the guest parts. This first episode features Joanna Lumley from Ab Fab in a straight role and doing very nicely, Simon Callow as a stuffy Chief Constable, Jack Davenport, as Walliams, Tara Fitzgerald, Ian Richardson and Australian actor Adam Gilchrist. The actors seem decid edly out of place in the mouth of a British copper.

The USA is awash with pornography, strip joints, topless bars, lap-dancing bars; prostitution is big business; violence is not only considered acceptable entertainment for children, there are innumerable video games that simulate combat with guns, that teach children how to stand, aim and fire to kill.

At the same time, the right wing political establishment is in a crusade to get rid of racy language from the airwaves and images of female breasts from television. This even extends to accidental exposure like Janet Jackson’s “wardrobe mal- function” during the 2004 Super Bowl half-time show – when her right breast and nipple were exposed for a split-second.

Millions of American television viewers claimed to be outraged at this “indecent” event. CBS, which carried the Super Bowl, was slapped with a $500,000 fine for showing Janet Jackson’s nipple. It sounds ridiculous, but it is in fact part of a campaign by the religi- ous Right to impose their author- ity on the mass of Americans, to not only claim the “moral high ground” but to occupy it and keep it.

The social agenda of George Bush and the Republican Right is to make the USA into the kind of country they think it was in the 1950s. But it wasn’t then and they won’t succeed now.

What they are doing to the country in the meantime is on view in Outlawing Indecency (SBS 8.30pm Tuesdays).
When the Latin American and Caribbean group of the UN’s Human Rights Commission (HRC) elected Cuba to the Standing Committee, it was unanimous acknowledgement of Cuba’s immensely prestigious reputation following a decade of work with that organisation.

The news hit the media controlled by the major powers and resulted in commentaries against the Cuban presence on the Committee.

Why such a major reaction? The reasons were explained to Gramma International by Cuban diplomat Juan Antonio Fernández, who was head of the HRC delegation during the 1959-1960 period, and who is now director of multilateral affairs at the Cuba’s Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

What is the Standing Committee?

The Standing Committee is part of what is known as the 1503 committee which is responsible to the HRC and makes reports on individuals, groups or organisations in relation to alleged human rights violations. It is the first step in the process before the reports reach the Commission.

Prior to that, they arrive at the Communications Committee where expert Miguel Alfonso Martín also represents Cuba.

What are its functions?

The Standing Committee reports on recommendations that are first made by the Communications Committee. It analyses and considers each case and then there are several options: to discontinue the reports, put them on a pending status while more information is sought, or submit them to the Commission.

What are the standards that the Committee must follow in carrying out its analysis?

To demonstrate there is a serious, large-scale, and continuous pattern of human rights violations. That is not to say that an isolated incident would not conform to a situation that could be considered serious, large-scale, and systematic. The group makes its decisions and submits its considerations to the HRC, and during its next period of activity.

Who are its members?

It has members from five countries, one for each regional group. At the end of last year and continuing into the beginning of this year, four new members were elected.

The African group elected Zimbabwe; The Western European and Others group elected Holland; The East European group elected Hungary and the Asian and Oceanic group elected Saudi Arabia. Only the Latin American group had failed to elect a candidate.

Our candidate was nominated a year ago and we were just waiting for the endorsement of the Latin American and Caribbean group, which was delayed a little. The delay was not connected to certain behind-the-scenes manoeuvres which we knew about, regarding a certain extra-regional power that was interested in making sure that Cuba was not elected.

Finally, two weeks ago, in response to a proposal by the Group’s coordinator Argentina, the Latin American group unanimously voted to endorse our nomination and fortunately, the elections were completed.

The election provoked different reactions. Could you comment?

After the election, we read press organs controlled by the major power blocs, the Western countries and the United States, could easily manipulate all these mechanisms, whilst the Standing Committee only devoted its time to making recommendations on alleged human rights violations in countries in the south, and we were always condemned by the HRC.

Fortunately, things have changed and the Committee has changed accordingly, and has before it numerous – hundreds, if not thousands – of reports, and so the most serious human rights violations being committed in what President Fidel Castro has referred to as “an international torture centre” in the illegal naval base at Guantánamo on our territory.

In addition to this are reports on the abhorrent torture and mistreatment practiced at the Abu Ghraib prison in occupied Iraq. Also there have been hundreds of reports on our five heroes, reports from all over the world [Cuban Five imprisoned in the US]. It is a cause that numerous sectors and Cuban solidarity groups around the world have taken on.

The committee also has dealt with numerous violations of human rights in industrialised countries associated with racism, growing xenophobia in the developed world, anti-immigration policies that also violate human rights, discrimination against minorities and indigenous people.

Now they are concerned because of Cuba’s presence on this Standing Committee, because they are in the dock and not us. We are going to see the final result of these reports, some of which are in favour and others, against.

Cuba enjoys a certain prestige within the HRC. Not like the United States that was expelled from the Commission and subsequently gave the seat away so that it would not be submitted to a vote. We always have been elected.

How is the HRC’s forthcoming 61st Session taking shape?

A particularly complex situation is going to take place, HRC is going through a serious identity crisis because it has lost credibility because of the lack of human rights. The standards it has practiced. For the last 15 years Cuba has denounced it and it seems that it reached receptive ears.

In a report delivered to the UN Secretary General, the “Threats, Challenges and Change” group stated the following with respect to the HRC: “In the last few years, less credibility and less professionalism have caused a decline in the Commission’s ability to carry out its functions. The Commission cannot be a credible institution when it applies different standards to address human rights questions.”

If they lacked the proof of where the HRC had failed, it was right there. This period will be a litmus test, to see if it can move forward along the road towards rectification, and correct its selective condemnations. For example, during its last session, it could not even meet to discuss the aggression against Iraq. Cuba’s proposal regarding the status of prisoners in Guantánamo where the use of torture is systematic is still pending.

Can you disclose what Cuba’s participation will be?

We are again ready to confront the manoeuvres against our country. Ready to defend what is true and we will also present different motions, covering the right to food, a position against foreign debt, condemnation of the use of mercenaries, the right to peace, and the permanent condemnation of the situation of our five heroes imprisoned in the United States.

I believe that what is most important is that our election is an acknowledgement of the role and prestige that Cuba enjoys on that Commission.