Making room for bigots

Anna Pha

The government is attempting to rush through Parliament with amendments to Section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act 1975 that would legalise race hate speech. It is doing so in the name of promoting “free speech” while curbing the rights of organisations and people to speak out.

“The current racial vilification laws play an important role in protecting vulnerable minority groups from racism and abuse,” the Human Rights Law Centre said in arguing against any changes to the Racial Discrimination Act.

Section 18C of the Anti-Discrimination Act makes it unlawful to “offend, insult, humiliate or intimidate” a person because of their race, colour or national or ethnic origin. The proposed amendments would replace “offend, insult, humiliate or intimidate” with the words “harass and intimidate.”

At present courts take into consideration the relevant context, namely that racial vilification is directed towards people of a particular race, in assessing whether it is reasonably likely that another person or group would be offended, insulted, humiliated or intimidated.

The bill adds a qualification to Section 18C whereby the court assesses whether the act complained of was reasonably likely that another person or group would be offended, insulted, humiliated or intimidated.

The bill adds a qualification to Section 18C whereby the court assesses whether the act complained of was reasonably likely in all the circumstances, to offend, insult, humiliate or intimidate another person or group of people. This is “to be determined by the standards of a reasonable member of the Australian community.”

Race Discrimination Commissioner, Dr Soutphommasane, said he believed the changes to section 18C represented a weakening of the protections against racial hate speech. “You may well have situations where someone has experienced serious racial vilification … which would not be captured by a new law,” he said.

Australian Human Rights Commission president Gillian Triggs warned that the bill’s inclusion of a “mandatory accept/reject” phase in the Commission’s process for dealing with complaints of unlawful discrimination was counterproductive.

“This runs contrary to the aims of the Commission and would only result in more people going directly to court without any attempt at reconciliation.”

“Very little can stop them ultimately going to court, but we provide a free, efficient (and) fair system for conciliation of matters before they need to go to court. To place a chilling effect on that … is very worrying.”

One of the key functions of the Commission is to establish “a voluntary process in which the parties come together to hopefully conciliate the matter” and remove the prospect of further legal action. It has had a 76 percent success rate in resolving cases.

High jump for justice

The former Liberal Howard government fostered a climate of racism and xenophobia in an attempt to win over potential One Nation voters. This changed the political climate, and set the scene for the bigots to come out openly against immigrants, Indigenous Australians and multiculturalism. The Murdoch media gave them all the space and time they wanted to spew their divisive hatred.

The Abbott/Turnbull government took up where Howard left off, with the extreme right and the likes of Andrew Bolt and the Murdoch media in the driving seat.

The fascist-minded individuals within the Liberal Party and the media claim that the bar for an offence under the Racial Discrimination Act has been set too low, resulting in frivolous and vexatious cases. Their aim is to raise that bar, to make it harder to access justice.

They continuously harp on about the case regarding the late Bill Leak’s cartoon that appeared in The Australian newspaper. They also refer to the outcomes of a case against right-wing commentator Andrew Bolt who broke the law in 2009 when he wrote about light-skinned people who identify as Aboriginal.

These examples are pretexts to legalise bigotry, to enable the extreme right to come out openly with their racism and xenophobia. Attorney General George Brandis made this aim very clear when he said: “In a free country people do have rights to say things that other people find offensive or insulting or bigoted.”

In parliament he called for the right of people to be bigots, which is the aim of this legislation. He did not call for the right to be free of bigotry or racism.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull is the personification of hypocrisy. Following the recent violent street incident in London, Turnbull responded to One Nation leader Pauline Hanson’s call for a ban on Muslim immigration by warning that “inciting hatred against any part of the Australian community is always dangerous. It undermines the mutual respect that we have in our community,” which underpins social cohesion.

Almost in the same breath Turnbull hypocritically supported amendments to the Racial Discrimination Act to legalise racial hatred and bigotry.

His hypocrisy does not stop there. With one eye on the large Jewish community in his electorate and their strong opposition to a weakening of the legislation, Turnbull said, “Racism and racial hatred have killed millions, wounded and marginalised many more and destroyed societies and nations. They have no place in Australia.”

But the government is making a place for them.

See Editorial page 2.
**Freedom from speech**

The proposed amendments to Section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act are part of a wider picture of an attack on democratic rights. They have little to do with genuine freedom of speech, which carries with it responsibilities. Genuine freedom of speech, however, is being curbed in a gradual and insidious process.

Secrecy laws and an increasingly aggressive stand towards whistle-blowers mean that people who dare to expose the most serious cases of human rights abuses, corruption and other wrong-doings, face the loss of their job or jail. Journalists and others risk up to 16 years’ jail if they reveal information about operations that the Attorney-General deems “special intelligence operations.” This includes information about the harm being done to asylum seekers and drownings at sea when boats are turned back.

Special legislation was introduced to silence journalists, medical staff, teachers and other staff in detention centres with “off-enders” facing punishment of two years’ jail. Later the government exempted doctors but for others the legislation still remains in place.

Metadata laws, ostensibly put in place to combat terrorism, threaten the ability of journalists to maintain confidentiality on matters of public importance. This is another way of silencing the freedom of speech.

The freedom to criticise governments is a basic democratic right, but one that is increasingly being eroded. The government is including gag clauses in funding agreements with non-government organisations to prevent them from taking a public stand on issues such as the environment, housing, social issues and community services. The government’s funding cuts target environmental organisations and groups that represent the most disadvantaged and vulnerable. The government has threatened some organisations with the loss of tax deductibility for gifts to these organisations – a tax status that is important to many of them. It would like to restrict funding to organisations that work in the area of advocacy or policy.

The Department of Immigration and Border Protection is reported to have required organisations working in offshore centres to pay bonds of up to $2 million that might be forfeited if they spoke against the government’s policy and actions. The Save the Children group refused, seeing it as a gag clause, and paid the price – they lost their contract. It is reaching a situation where any organisation or individual who is critical of the government’s activities is threatened and vilified. This has led to self-censoring by some organisations and creates a chilling climate of fear.

In the case of the Australian Human Rights Commissioner Gillian Triggs, the government turned on her with a vengeance and attempted to force her resignation following her damning but honest report, *The Forgotten Children: National Inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention* (2014). Instead of acting on the report’s findings and ending its inhumane and cruel detention of children, the government retaliated by cutting the Commission’s funding by 30 percent. In relation to the Human Rights Commission’s opposition to the government’s amendments to 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act, former Prime Minister Tony Abbott described the Commission as a “lecturing, hectoring, bullying bureaucracy.” He should look in the mirror!

Some state governments have also attached gag provisions to funding agreements and contracts.

By keeping people in the dark and fanning hatred and intolerance, the government seeks to divide the working class and divert attention from the government’s policies which are hurting low paid workers and the most vulnerable.

It is impossible to talk about freedom of speech when people can go to jail for revealing the systemic abuse of children, women and men who come to our cities and states seeking our assistance. Or when bigots feed at the trough of hatred and fear.

**CFMEU and WA**

**Unions rally**

Vinnie Molina

On Tuesday March 21, as part of CFMEU national rallies organised against the attack on workers, the CFMEU WA rallied in Perth with the support of all unions in the state. Close to 3,000 people attended the rally, defying these attacks from government and the raid. The 11am rally started at Solidarity Park, behind WA Parliament in West Perth.

Mick Buchan, CFMEU state secretary opened proceedings by thanking all the courageous workers for attending despite threats and intimidation from the ABCC and employers.

The rally endorsed by UnionsWA saw several unions putting their support behind the CFMEU against the war on jobs, for safety in the workplace and in defence of penalty rates. High on the agenda was the campaign to abolish the Australia Building and Construction Commission (ABCC).

Speakers included Bill Johnston, MLA Minister for Industrial Relations, Alison Xamon, Greens member-elect of the Legislative Council, Gary Woods, CFMEU Mining Division state secretary and Steve McCartney, AMWU state secretary.

The speakers passionately addressed the need for better industrial laws in the country, for more safety on the job and the need for industrial manslaughter legislation in the state.

The rally then marched to the office of Liberal Senator Michaelia Cash, Federal Minister for Employment, Minister for Women and Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Public Service.

Outside the Minister’s office Mick Buchan again addressed rally introducing further speakers, Kara Keys the ACTU Indigenous officer and Christy Cain, MUA state secretary who called for the war on workers to end.

Two ABCC inspectors looked lost on Hay Street as thousands marched past heading to Cash’s office on Outram Street. After the rally the two ABC inspectors were seen with a Federal Police escort entering the Minister’s office. Overall the rally was a great success demonstrating workers’ resolve that bad laws have to be defied.

**PRESS FUND**

Some US Republican MPs recently voted to defeat the move by president Trump to repeal the so-called Obamacare health insurance legislation. The Republicans knew that repealing Obamacare would be political suicide because it would leave 24 million US citizens without health care. In Australia, because of the coalition’s cunning tactic of weakening Medicare gradually, for example by freezing GP rebates, the private sector stands a good chance of events taking over public health care. The Guardian is committed to raising public awareness of that danger, but we really need your help by way of Press Fund contributions, so please send in something for the next edition if you possibly can. Many thanks to this week’s contributors, as follows:

June Ayres $30, G Dittura $5, Mark Mannion $10, AP and LK $50, “Round Figure” $40.

This week’s total: $110 Progressive total: $1,670.

**QUOTE OF THE WEEK**

I address, above all, the modest woman of our land, the campesina who believed in us, the worker who labourled more, the mother who knew our concern for children. I address professionals of Chile, patriotic professionals, those who days ago continued working against the sedition sponsored by professional associations, class-based associations that also defended the advantages which a capitalist society grants to a few.

I address the youth, those who sang and gave us their joy and their spirit of struggle. I address the man of Chile, the worker, the farmer, the intellectual, those who will be persecuted, because in our country fascism has been already present for many hours – in terrorist attacks, blowing up the bridges, cutting the railroad tracks, destroying the oil and gas pipelines, in the face of the silence of those who had the obligation to protect them. They were committed. History will judge them.

Surely Radio Magallanes will be silenced, and the calm metal instrument of my voice will no longer reach you. It does not matter. You will continue hearing it. I will always be next to you. At least my memory will be that of a man of dignity who was loyal to [inaudible] the workers.

President Salvador Allende 1973 (last message to Chile before coup)
UN expert concerns over Australian violence

Women locked up for unpaid fines and red tape stopping others from escaping domestic violence were among issues that left a United Nations expert unimpressed during an inaugural visit to Australia.

UN special rapporteur on violence against women Dubravka Simonovic has been on a 15-day fact-finding mission to Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Cherbourg (Queensland) and Alice Springs.

Simonovic urged Australia to lift its game on providing crisis services and shelters for women facing domestic violence which is a key cause of homelessness.

Adequate funding for community legal services was also important, she said in Canberra while delivering her preliminary findings from her visit.

She was particularly concerned about the plight of Indigenous women who are 34 times more likely to require hospital treatment as a result of domestic violence and up to 3.7 times likely to experience sexual abuse.

She criticised the inflexibility of the Basics Card – a cashless debit card used to income-manage welfare payments – not being able to cover expenses related to domestic violence victims’ escapes from danger.

The cards are used in some remote communities in an attempt to curb spending on alcohol or gambling.

During a trip to a Brisbane jail, Simonovic spoke directly with women prisoners. She has called for better mental health care access and alternatives to custodial sentences for those with dependent children. Indigenous women are the fastest growing prison population in Australia.

“I would urge the government to review a policy of incarceration for unpaid fines, which has a disproportionate effect on the rates of incarceration of Aboriginal women because of the economic and social disadvantage that they face,” Simonovic said.

She also expressed concern about lax investigations into allegations of rape and sexual abuse of women refugees and asylum seekers in immigration detention on Nauru.

From the archives

Why Kerr should sack Fraser – A Christmas message to the Queen – The Socialist, December 1976

Guardian

Australia

March 29, 2017

3

Bring Them Here – Palm Sunday Rally for Refugees 2017

Conditions for the refugees and asylum seekers dumped on Nauru and Manus Island remain intolerable. Manus has claimed the lives of Reza Barati, Hamid Khazaei, Kamil Hussain and Faysal Ishak Ahmeds, who died on Christmas Eve, following the failure to provide him with proper medical care. Last year Omid Masoumali died after losing hope on Nauru.

Malcolm Turnbull’s claim that Donald Trump will honour his US resettlement deal for refugees on Manus and Nauru is looking more and more doubtful. Refugees on Manus and Nauru are potentially caught by Trump’s extreme executive order banning Muslims and refugees from entering the US, as they face now “extreme vetting” procedures before being considered.

If the deal goes ahead, it is clear that hundreds of refugees will miss out, with a cap of 1,250 people. Asylum seekers whose claims have not been fairly processed and anyone the US will not accept will remain stuck on Manus and Nauru. We still need to demand that the Australian government “Bring Them Here”.

There are also around 30,000 people seeking asylum in the community waiting for their claims to be processed, many unable to work and with only minimal income support. At most they will receive only Temporary Protection Visas, leaving them with the continuing threat of forced return and unable to reunite with their families.

Trump’s election and his hatred against Muslims, refugees and immigrants is encouraging some parliamentarians in Australia to follow suit. Trump’s belligerent language has disturbed governments and people across the planet and can only help induce more people into fleeing for safety. Australia should speak out to counter this effect.

But Trump’s actions have also produced big protests in the US as well as here in Sydney and around the world. Support for refugees is growing here too. Last year’s #LetThemStay protests stopped the government sending 276 refugees and asylum seekers back to Nauru and Manus Island. A majority of people now say detention of refugees on Manus and Nauru should end. Join us to step up the pressure for change. We can do better, Bring Them Here.

Donate: Make a direct deposit (BSB: 082-024 Acc#: 561401082) or send a cheque to: Sydney Peace & Justice Coalition, PO Box KB24, HAYMARKET NSW 1240.

Protest erupts on Manus

 Guards hastily withdrew from Mike Compound in the Manus Island detention centre on March 18 after a protest erupted in the mess area following Border Force renovations that made the serving area more like a prison.

“It was a provocation,” one detainee told the Refugee Action Coalition. “They treat us like we are in Guantanamo Bay.” Detainees had already objected to new arrangement which required detainees to reach over a small fence in front of the serving window for a single tray. But the final straw came when detainees asked security how one of the very short detainees could be expected to reach the tray. “You can lift him up,” said the guards.

It was a provocation too far. The protest erupted and detainees tore down the fence in front of the serving window, and overturned tables and chairs in the mess area.

Wilson Security guards brought food next morning and set up tables inside the perimeter fence. But no guards or Broadpectrum officers were in the compound. The protest is just the latest as tensions simmer inside the detention centre. It is a year since the PNG Supreme Court ordered that the detention centre be closed.

But moves to deport so-called double negative asylum seekers have started again after an application for injunctions to prevent the removals was strangely dismissed by the Supreme Court.

Just days after the court dismissed the injunction application a Lebanese asylum seeker was forcibly removed after refusing $30,000 to return “voluntarily.”
The Perth branch of CPA organised a public event on International Women’s Day on March 8. Four women members of the branch made brief presentations, which were followed by a lively discussion between the audience and presenters. As one attendee remarked afterwards: “It was so good to be able to engage in feminist debate with an audience that included men with progressive ideas”.

The first speaker of the night was Dr Eileen Whitehead, who gave an overview of the history of the western women’s movements in the last few centuries. She provided a good historical backdrop to the following discussions and showed how the fight for women’s equality progressed over the years.

She highlighted notable figures in the movement and their achievements, dividing the movement into three phases: pre-1800, when women played a role in the world war and post-war, second-wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s, which saw married women’s rights abolished and the right of women to work for issue such as voting rights and equal pay was mentioned. She also highlighted the role of the Russian revolution in 1917 that brought about many firsts for women anywhere in the world. Post-revolutionary Russia saw full legal and political equality for women in law and in practice. Meanwhile, the rest of the western world, women still had to deal with regressive laws such as those preventing married women from working in Australia. These were abolished after the 1960s rise of the feminist movement.

Ashlyn Antulov was the second presenter and discussed women’s ability and rights to create their lives in contemporary western society. She highlighted the lack of support for working mothers that negatively impacts their incomes, careers and overall well-being. Her second focus was on the sexualisation of women in the media. She discussed how rampant consumerism in a capitalist society has preyed upon women, first by selling ideas around body image and then capitalising on it to sell needless products and services.

She pointed out the irony that women are also punished for conforming to the standards set by the media. A lose-lose situation, Adhy provided suggestions for what practical steps can be taken to counter these issues. The conclusion was that we must continue to fight for and defend our rights, and we must recognise capitalism as an enemy of personal empowerment.

Fayza Khan was the third speaker who spoke of women as workers in a capitalist society. Her focus was on the social base of workers’ interests and the interests of the capitalist class, and how women’s issues are a part of that bigger problem. So, while the gender pay gap remains, what also remains, but has in fact increased, is the income inequality in society at large. Therefore, she said, overcoming the gender pay gap, while not addressing the injustices of the capitalist system, would mean working women will be less vulnerable, but equally vulnerable as men to exploitation, poverty, homelessness and poor quality of life.

She concluded that a working woman’s issues are those of the working man’s, which include in today’s Australia the fight to protect workers’ unions, penalty rates and other rights, in order to bring about a new economic and political system.

The final speaker for the night, Lorena Trigo, presented the view from Cuba, a socialist country. She presented some facts and figures from the small Caribbean nation that showed how big the society was in terms of achieving gender equality. Lorena contrasted pre- and post-revolution Cuban society, highlighting gender equality as an achievement of the socialist revolution. For example, before 1959, under the Batista regime, Cuba had one female in parliament, and today Cuba has 48.9 percent women parliamentarians. Cuba is ahead of Australia and USA on the World Economic Forum’s Gender Gap Report: Cuba ranks 27, USA 45 and Australia 46. In Lorena’s own words, “How is this possible?” At roughly $50 billion, Cuba has a tiny economy. It isn’t capitalist. It isn’t rich. So, by US standards, it isn’t “free”. These results are especially hard for some in the United States to accept because they reject the legitimacy of Cuba’s government and its socialist system.

Then Lorena went on to highlight the full participation of women in the socialist revolution of Cuba which was necessary for the success of the revolution itself, and the successes made in overcoming gender inequalities. Some of the interesting facts she related included the now four million-strong Federation of Cuban Women, 96.7 percent adult female literacy, one of the world’s highest doctor-patient ratios with many health system programs directed at women, first country to eliminate mother-to-child HIV transmission, generous paid maternity leaves, and lowest death rate from cervical cancer, and 43.3 percent women labour force with equal pay.

What followed the talks was a lively and frank discussion with both men and women participating in giving their views. The first point raised was the need to highlight the importance of an egalitarian society for both women and men. Everyone agreed that patriarchal values that still persist, while affecting women the most, in turn also take from men an important part of their social role as fathers and partners.

Those who have seen the gains made for women from post-60s movements, lamented how society seems to have gone backwards over women’s issues since then. Another participant posed that the neo-liberal economic policies that have broken down progressive movements and workers’ unions are to blame for this regression. There was discussion on the various threads of feminism, and participants and presenters were in agreement that men and women both have and need to continue working on feminist issues together.

The Communist Party of Australi campaign for women’s equality and full rights for both working men and women.

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**Politics in the Pub, Perth: IWD STRONGHOLD URBANITY**

We’re all aware of the ridiculous double standard that lauds strong-willed bosses when they’re men, but call women in the same roles “bitches”. Mary Streep’s portrayal in *The Devil Wears Prada* of the ultimate “bitch” boss, humanised this stereotype in an arguably unprecedented way. Streep’s character, editor-in-chief of a fictional fashion magazine, refuses to apologise for her vision and power, but also often pays great personal costs for doing so. This nuanced portrayal undoubtedly inspired many to question the impossible standards we continue to place on women even after we’ve overcome substantial barriers to attain “success”.

Remote communities in capitalist societies have preyed upon women, first creating insecurities around body image and then capitalising on it to sell needless products and services.
Dehumanising Human Services

Part 2: “Fix the system”

Earlier this month the Community and Public Sector Union’s national secretary Nadine Flood and deputy president Lisa Newman addressed the Senate Inquiry into the Centrelink robo-debt debacle. Their analysis of developments in the Department of Human Services gives insight into the profound human effects of the government’s cuts. Last week we ran Ms Flood’s address. Below is the address by Ms Newman

The introduction of the automated debt processing system has been done without any consultation affecting staff or their union. We have watched with horror the design of the system or its potential impact on staff. We have watched the introduction of the system rolled out with increasing levels of alarm and distress. In January we started to have contact from members who were reporting that average incomes could lead to incorrect debt calculations and customers could end up paying money that they did not owe before a debt was proven to exist.

A mismatch in employer information could also lead to double counting of income and therefore generate false debt statistics. Customers would be unable to get the documentation they required to prove that the debt did not exist, and customers would not be advised of their appeal rights.

We have also been told by our members, as Nadine said, that the customary oversight has been removed from the system before contact with customers has been initiated and, instead, that oversight has been limited to queries and requests for reassessments once notices have been issued and received by customers. Members have been particularly disturbed by reports of managers instructing frontline staff not to correct errors that they find and instead push customers onto self-service mechanisms and/or refer them to a different part of the department – namely, the OCI (Online Compliance Intervention) teams.

This week I was contacted by a member with over 20 years experience in the department and extensive knowledge of debt management processes. She described the distress she felt at seeing the integrity of the debt management process that she worked for, was now being sacrificed to the point where staff know that customers are going to incur needless debt.

As she described it, the department has an obligation to pay the right person the right payment at the right rate at the right time. She told me of the complexity, with messy lives. The department has moved the burden of proof of a debt to customers, who in many cases struggle to find the required evidence to prove that they do not owe the alleged debt.

The system has had a significant impact on staff working with it. People have reported increased stress levels, increased absences from work, lack of sleep and increased customer aggression. And I would just note to the committee that in our previous survey on client aggression directed towards DHS staff, financial stress was one of the primary triggers to incidents of aggression. Staff are also very concerned and very angry about what they see being done to some of the most vulnerable members of the community, and many feel morally conflicted in their role in this process.

In January we contacted the department to raise the concerns our members had contacted us to relay and also asked for a meeting with the department. We were given the advice that has generally been given to other organisations, which was that the system was working as it was designed to work and that there was no need to meet and talk about any issues about the system in detail.

DHS staff – our members – want to help customers, and that is why they find it so distressing to see their department putting customers at an increased risk of depression, decreased motivation, self-harm and even suicide. There have been anecdotal reports about increased levels of customer aggression directed at Centrelink workers that includes physical threats, physical aggression and spitting.

We would make the case that the Turnbull government needs to suspend this system. It needs to fix the system so that before it contacts a person over an alleged debt it has skilled and experienced staff assessing that person’s records holistically, because automated systems cannot read customer records and see the details that experienced officers can.

The department should also undertake an urgent risk assessment of the process to ensure that the risks to both the physical and mental health of both customers and staff are taken into consideration in the design of the system. And there needs to be immediate action to reverse the damage done by cutting 5,000 permanent jobs from DHS. Any new approach has to ensure that properly resourced human oversight in this agency occurs so that the government and the community can be confident that overpayments are identified and are correct.

DHS must also immediately convert current casual workers to permanent roles through a merit selection process so that they can be properly trained and provide the full range of services to support the communities in which they live.

As Nadine mentioned, the culture in DHS is one of the most significant barriers to our members’ voice and input into systems like this. There are many things that should have been taken into consideration in the design of this system that we believe constitute a current risk to our members’ health and safety as well as the health and safety of the community that uses that system.

Staff have reported increased stress levels, increased absences from work, lack of sleep and increased customer aggression.

David Manne, Executive Director and Principal Solicitor at Refugee Legal put in an appeal in the *The Saturday Paper* asking for donations to help refugees. The urgency of the situation is dictated by recent government changes which means that refugees are being rushed to complete complex and onerous legal paperwork (all in English) without the legal assistance they desperately need. As the appeal says: “Having been left in legal limbo for years, they’ve now been set an arbitrary and unfair deadline of a matter of days to submit their visa applications under the ‘Fast Track’ system. The government is now threatening to strip people of their bridging visas, subsistence living allowance, and their right to work – or even worse, to permanently ban them from applying for protection . . . At Refugee Legal we need help the thousands of people on our waiting list. As a specialist free legal centre, we’re positioned to meet this need. . . . Extra funding is needed to scale up Refugee Legal resources for additional legal capacity and professional interpreting.

Christine Carlisle of the Environment Council of Central Queensland is extremely critical of the behaviour of the Queensland Premier and the mayors of Gladstone, Mackay, Townsville and Rockhampton who went to India to seek special favours from Adani Group, notorious for its violation of the environment and abuse and exploitation of workers. The Adani coal mine project in the Galilee Basin in Queensland will be an act of vandalism which will cost Australian taxpayers billions. The Turnbull government is planning to give $1 billion to Adani for infrastructure for its coal mine. As Christine Carlisle pointed out, “Neither parliamentarians nor the Northern Australia Infrastructure Facility committee are able to answer questions as to which of the 26 Adani companies the loan will be made to. Thirteen of the 26 Adani subsidiaries registered in Australia have their head office in the Cayman Islands tax haven. We will never get that money back”. The Adani coal mine project is also being sold as a job creation opportunity. An Adani adviser confirmed (in a court of law) that there will be only 1,464 jobs – that is a total number for both the mine and rail, including construction, both direct and indirect, for the life of the mine. So where is the common sense when the Australian government is subsidising a billionaire and paying the equivalent of $683,060 per job? So much for “jobs and growth” the electioneering catchphrase of the last budget. No money for training and re-training workers for tomorrow’s jobs – millions to polluters and destroyers of our environment.

Find out more about the Communist Party of Australia
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Guardian

Australia

March 29, 2017

5
We are living in momentous times. Global capitalism is in its deepest crisis and has no way of resolving it except by war, which it uses to feed the global machine. The unequal distribution of power, monopoly, and its very existence is predicated on a ceaseless search for increased profits at any cost. At the same time, the world’s political leaders take place in boardrooms, in secret conclaves and in deepest privacy. They have the plans and policies to take over, subvert, destroy, plunder and colonise other countries and their resources. They are aided and protected by a corrupt media and what we shall call the state apparatus: the armed forces, the police (both security and police), the national security states, the courts and parliaments, regardless of who is currently misrepresenting us in power.

To keep it from spreading, legislation is introduced to limit democratic rights, purportedly to protect the community from terrorism, a situation that grew from their imperialist policies.

At the same time there is a concerted campaign to misrepresent the tangible, visible enemy. Yesterday Jews, today Muslims. Both major parties promise “law and order” while propagating the politics of fear. At the same time, trade unions are under savage attack and the programs and services that they achieved are either cut back or under-funded. Jobs are disappearing, unemployment is growing and austerity is savagely promoted. Yet no link is drawn between disappearing democratic rights and growing poverty, between the lack of hope and destruction of community and the withholding of resources. They are aided and protected by a plunder and colonise other countries and their plans and policies to take over, subvert, destroy, and in deepest privacy. There they hatch the insatiable need for more of both.

What makes all this even worse is the country’s ever rising racist level of inequality. An international survey of CEOs’ pay by Bloomberg revealed that South African CEOs are who are already incredibly white and black working class is far better off than in SA.

This shows that South Africa is now by far the most unequal society in the world. CEOs’ pay exceeded that of the average person by a greater ratio than in any of the 25 countries Bloomberg measured. The income of the average CEO is 541 times more than the income of an average South African, as measured by the gross domestic product per person. Only second-placed India with a differential of 483 times comes anywhere close.

What is the dearness of a product of Mussolini’s Italy. Fascism is a form of radical authoritarian nationalism that came to prominence in Italy in early 20th century Europe, influenced by national syndicalism (the Italian equivalent of national socialism). Both used the language of genuine socialism to mislead the people. I have mentioned fascism many times in my addresses and described some of its tenets. The 14 steps to fascism have been described and hang on the wall in our foyer.

What happened in Germany in the 1930s and what is happening here was the gradual habituation of the people little by little to being governed by surprise; to receiving decisions deliberated in secret; to believing that the situation was so complicated that the government had to act on information that the people could not understand, or so dangerous that even if the people could understand it, it could not be released because of national security. A scapegoat was required and found, fear needed to be instilled, and it was. Legislation gradually introduced to deal with the “scapegoat” extends to the curtailing of everyone’s freedoms, but we convince ourselves it is needed for our safety and security. Laws are introduced that traduce democratic rights but we accept them because we are told they are necessary for our protection. Trade union rights are curtailed, leaving workers unprotected and less able to organise but these are supposedly necessary to deal with corruption. Slowly the net tightens but lives go on as before because as yet we are not all afraid.

Listening to the following by German historian Irene Guenther

Germany appeared to be on the brink of civil war. The young Weimar Republic was wracked by armed street fighting waged mainly between Communists and Nazis. Foreclosures, bankruptcies, suicides and malnutrition all skyrocketed. Six million Germans, 40 percent of the working population was unemployed and thousands found themselves without a place to live ... By 1932 German industrial production was at 58 percent of 1928 levels. The effect of this decline was spiralling unemployment.

By the end of 1929 around 1.5 million Germans were out of work; within a year this figure had more than doubled. By early 1933 unemployment in Germany had reached a staggering six million.

The effects this unemployment had on German society were devastating. While there were few shortages of food, millions found themselves without the means to obtain it. The children suffered worst, thousands dying from malnutrition and hunger-related diseases. Millions of industrial workers – who in 1928 had become the best-paid blue-collar workers in Europe – spent a year or more in idleness. But the Great Depression affected all classes in Germany, not just the factory workers. Unemployment was high among white-collar workers and the professional classes. A Chicago news correspondent in Berlin reported that “60 percent of each new university graduating class was out of work”. Here?

The real beneficiary of the Great Depression was Adolf Hitler. With public discontent soaring, membership of the NSDAP (Nazi Party) grew to record levels. In September 1930 the NSDAP increased its representation in the Reichstag almost tenfold, winning 187 seats. Two years later they won 236 seats, the most won by any single party during the entire Weimar period. Revolution was avoided by fascism.

Could it happen again? Could it happen here?

Think about what is occurring in Australia today. Could you have imagined our country locking up innocent men, women and children in concentration camps simply because they wanted to live a decent, free life? Could you have imagined Aboriginal children being tortured in white jails? Could you have imagined that we would go to war without parliamentary decision or that we would wipe out the 6 million Jews? Could you have imagined people being denied the pension, university students incurring huge debts simply to be educated, people working until 70, trade unions under threat, legal services denied, growing job losses, hungry children, homelessness and hopelessness? Surely these were relics

Marion Harper

The headquarters of Mussolini’s Italian Fascist Party, 1934.
of the 1930s? No, they are characteristic of the 21st century!

Today we must choose either to seek the truth or bury our heads in the sand. The truth of course is a difficult path to follow. To seek the truth is to open a Pandora’s Box, because once one examines the truths, you are confronted with choices. Do I believe this? What impact will it have on my life? How do I know it is true? Can I ignore it? What are the implications? What can I do?

Fifty years ago, even 20 years ago, it was easy to bury your head in the sand and ignore the signs, but today it is no longer possible. Changes are occurring so rapidly, with crisis after crisis erupting across the world. Terrible wars of aggression for profit and power; the appalling displacement and death of so many innocent people; the Trump disaster in the US; Brexit; the growth of ultra-right fascist forces emerging around Europe, the US, Britain, and Australia; the displacement of millions from their homes and destruction of their cities; the environmental disasters and the huge loss of so many animal species. Here at home there are aggressive wars, increasing government and private corruption, growing job losses and rising poverty, homelessness and despair.

Dialectics or the dialectical method is a discourse between two or more people holding different points of view about a subject but wishing to establish the truth through reasoned arguments. Melbourne Unitarians (where this address was delivered – Ed) have always practised this kind of dialectics. That is one of our basic purposes, wishing to establish the truth through reasoned argument.

So let us provide the opportunities to have such reasoned argument about the state of the world and to determine possible solutions without fear or favour. We do all share concerns about the world and its crises and we do all recognise that we need to provide solutions.

What I have said today represents not just my deeply felt views. Ten years or more ago I did not want to be true. But now it is irrefutable. Fifty years ago, even 20 years ago, it was easy to bury your head in the sand and ignore the signs, but today it is no longer possible. Changes are occurring so rapidly, with crisis after crisis erupting across the world.
Hidden hits

Nick Dilworth & Ruth Hunt

BRITAIN: This month’s Budget brings absolutely no hope for sick and disabled people who are unfortunate enough to have to rely on benefits from the state. It’s with twisted irony that the Tories, the purported patrons of aspiration, had wanted to hit the self employed as all too often self-employment provides the only hope for work for many disabled people. This is due to the increasing pressure the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) applies on those who don’t fit in to traditional labour markets and also partly due to the continued failure by employers to recognise the many talents of people with physical and mental health limitations.

This hasn’t been helped by the many years of hostility and the hate campaigns directed towards disabled people meted out by the vile right-wing media.

However, the real problems faced by sick, disabled and some of the poorest people in Britain can be found in the Budget speech. The plan of attack has long since been drawn up and only relies upon Tory ministers to indulge in a little exaggeration.

The clues are to be found in the documents that accompany the Budget. The most eye-catching is the Office for Budget Responsibility’s latest “Welfare Trends Report” (WTR) drawn up last September.

Successive WTRs provide a running record of the DWP’s catastrophic failure to forecast savings with any degree of accuracy from the plans for Personal Independence Payment (PIP) to replace working age Disability Living Allowance (DLA) now result in admissions that claims are “reducing spending by far less than was originally intended.”

Equally it is revealed that “changes to incapacity benefits yielded far smaller savings than originally expected.”

The truth is the Tories know that “between 2010-11 and 2015-16, welfare spending increased by £24.4 billion to £316.6 billion, despite the substantial cuts announced by the coalition government in that period.”

The consequence of these rises in expenditure. They hate it all down to their incompetence that has remained a difficult cost of basing estimated savings on an ideological fantasy rather than a sound evidence base.

They completely underestimated how many people would properly qualify, despite their tough regimes. More people are claiming, endless numbers have reclaimed and the numbers who successfully appealed still have Tory welfare ministers reeling in pain.

What makes this all the worse is the disgraceful impact these sickness and disability reforms have had upon the lives of those who’ve had to wait months for gruesomely assessing assessments, often to be told: “Sorry, you are not entitled.”

It’s driven thousands to the depths of despair and sadly some to their deaths. It’s no wonder Iain Duncan Smith did a runner. His welfare reforms are without doubt the Tories’ most toxic legacy.

This degree of toxicity hasn’t gone unnoticed. That’s what drove the Tories to a U-turn on the last round of PIP cuts. Similarly they had to backtrack on unwelcome cuts to tax credits.

The Tories have no room to move on further welfare cuts. They don’t want to go hard on pensioners; it would be an electoral disaster, especially given the possibility of a snap election.

Let’s not kid ourselves; the casualties are just around the corner. In April 2017, new families with more than two children will only get payments for two children. In time that could affect up to 870,000 families claiming child tax credit (a loss of up to £2,780 per child per year).

Again, in time, up to 500,000 claimants in the Employment & Support Allowance (ESA) Work Related Activity Group will receive £1,500 a year less than they do now.

Cuts to housing benefit for those aged between 18 and 21 are being rolled out, not to mention the continued freezing of most working-age welfare benefits.

Alongside all of this, there is an illegitimate slashing of the Universal Credit work-income threshold (from £6,450 to £3,850) reducing in-work benefit help much more sharply. The damage list is immense and also includes dangerous moves to place fewer people in the ESA support groups, putting more severely disabled people at substantial risk.

It is policy policing at its worst. What makes it particularly cruel is the surreptitious way they’ve introduced these wretched measures, without them appearing in the Budget statement.

They’ve been in place since the summer Budget of 2015 and now the Tories have no alternative other than to pull the lever and hope no-one notices the punitive impact upon the most disadvantaged in our society.

They will be relying on the media to continue to distract us with tales of Trump-tweets, Brexit-bargaining and the continued character assassination of Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn.

Japan follows Trump lead

TOKYO: Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on March 2 in a committee meeting of the Diet (Japanese parliament) said that he will expand the country’s defence budget to above 1 percent of GDP, pushing past what has previously been seen as the de facto upper limit allowed for military spending.

Abe’s remark is in line with policies of the Trump administration’s policy of isolating allies to increase military spending.

The prime minister made the announcement in response to questions by a supporter, Katayama Toranosuke, co-president of the right-wing Japan Restoration Party, in a House of Councillors Budget Committee meeting. In 1976, the cabinet headed by Prime Minister Miki Takio made a decision to set a ceiling on Japan’s defence expenditure at 1 percent of GNP, which had been used to calculate the size of the economy until the mid-1990s. Even after this cabinet decision was revoked in 1987, however, the country’s pacific constitution. As shown in the joint statement issued after his meeting with Trump at the February Japan-US summit, Abe promised that “Japan will assume larger roles and responsibilities in the alliance.”

PM Abe in the Diet meeting claimed ever-expanding defence expenditures were justified despite the fiscal difficulties they impose. He pointed to the deteriorating security environment in the Asia-Pacific region as a pretext. Abe boasted that the US looks highly upon the ever-increasing expenditures in Japan’s military spending.

Scores of tanks, self-propelled artillery guns and other military hardware have started to arrive in Estonia last week, delivered by a ferry from ports in Britain and Germany, in what the UK defence minister has called the largest deployment in Eastern Europe since the Cold War.

The first of hundreds of UK military vehicles have arrived in Estonia last week, delivered by a ferry from ports in Britain and Germany, in what the UK Ministry of Defence reported.

The heavy military equipment – Challenger 2 tanks, Terminator, Titan and Trojan armoured battlefield engineer vehicles as well as Warrior infantry fighting vehicles – will be moved from an Estonian port to a military base in Tapa, the ministry statement said.

The delivery is aimed to support a British battle group in the eastern European country, it added, emphasising that it’s “one of the largest ever NATO deployments” to the region.

“This is the start of one of the biggest deployments in Eastern Europe since the Cold War,” UK Defence Secretary Michael Fallon has said, adding that by the end of April there will be “800 British troops, with armour, with tanks” in Estonia, close to Russia’s borders.

NATO has justified the arrival of the vehicles, which follow a deployment of over a hundred British military personnel to Estonia, by boosting security in the region against hypothetical “Russian aggression.”

American, French and German troops have already arrived to Estonia within NATO’s international battalions, Interfax reported, citing the local Postimees newspaper. By the end of next month, some 1,650 international troops are expected to be present at the Tapa and Amari military bases, with the latter to host NATO’s air forces from Germany.

The build-up is part of a large NATO mission to deploy four military headquarters in Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Poland. A group of 3,000 troops has already crossed the border, agreed by the military alliance last year. Moscow has repeatedly denounced the move, saying NATO’s eastward expansion on the Russian border with the expected 4,000 troops plus tanks, armoured vehicles, air support and high-tech intelligence centres in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland will only undermine the security balance on the continent.
US$54 billion war preparations

John Feffer

So, let me see if I’ve got this right. North Korea has been pushing its ally China to rein in the United States. Pyongyang is worried that Washington is about to launch a pre-emptive attack, so it has tried to use whatever minimal amount of influence it has to persuade China to use its considerable economic leverage with the United States to get those knuckleheads inside the Beltway to listen.

But on the military side, Trump has, if anything, underbilled. Congressional hawks are complaining that Trump is not throwing enough money at the Pentagon. They say that he’s only offering a 3 percent increase over what the Obama administration estimated for 2018, whereas Congress and cities and major constituencies like the over-65 set. Some of his own voters might finally come to their senses when they realise that Trump is going to waste his magic hand in the air to distract them from seeing the other hand pick their pockets.

In some ways, Trump is merely continuing Obama-era practices. But it promises to be a no-holds-barred version of the last administration’s counter-terrorism program.

Even our allies in the region are getting concerned. Trump met this week with Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, pledging to stand side-by-side with Iraq in the campaign to defeat ISIS. But after the meeting, Abadi apparently had second thoughts. “Committing troops is one thing. Fighting terrorism is another thing,” he said at the US Institute of Peace. “You don’t defeat terrorism by fighting it militarily. There are better ways.” Perhaps Abadi was thinking of the Trump administration’s initial inclusion of Iraq among the seven countries on the “Muslim travel ban” list. Or maybe he was thinking of Trump’s alarming pledge to seize Iraqi oil now under ISIS control.

Or perhaps the “better ways” simply referred to all the non-military arms of US foreign policy—diplomacy, food aid, cooperation with international organisations— which Trump wants to axe from the federal budget. Even stalwart Trump supporters like Bob Dole are up in arms about humanitarian programs— like the Dole-McGovern initiative that provides school meals to 40 million children around the world— that are now on the chopping block.

What better way of creating the next generation of America haters?

Next: North Korea

Rex Tillerson, the empty suit that Trump wants to add an enormous cherry on top of the Pentagon’s over-rich sundae will translate into even more conflicts around the world.

The numbers

If Trump’s proposed Pentagon increase of US$54 billion were the military budget of a distinct country, it would come in fifth on the list of global military expenditures. Basically, Trump wants to add an entire annual British military budget on top of what the United States already spends—which already towers above any imaginary coalition of potential rivals.

With the rest of his deplorable budget request, Trump will encounter pushback from Congress and cities and major constituencies like the over-65 set. Some of his own voters might finally come to their senses when they realise that Trump is going to waste his magic hand in the air to distract them from seeing the other hand pick their pockets.

But all of this is just skirting the real issue. Donald Trump wants to spend more money on the military because he wants to go to war.

First: Islamic State

As a candidate, Donald Trump focused most of his martial fury on the Islamic State. He promised to “bomb the hell” out of ISIS and, within 30 days in office, come up with a plan to defeat the entity. When he was elected, radical jihadist predictors predictably rejoiced: Bring it on.

Within 30 days, Trump indeed published a memorandum on defeating ISIS. Bottom line: We need to come up with a plan.

In the absence of a strategy, what Trump has done is chilling enough. He has unleashed the CIA to conduct drone strikes, reversing an Obama administration order. He has hinted at pulling out of the New START treaty with Russia so that he could build more nukes. There would be more soldiers, including as many as 60,000 more in the Army.

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It's the air we all breathe

My name's Michelle and I run Port Augusta's community cinema.

Over New Year's Eve, our town was covered in toxic dust from a closed down coal-fired power station. It was unbearable. You couldn't go outside. You couldn't even stand next to doors by your door; your eyes would just burn. People said they were having breathing difficulties. We were only monitoring the dust one day in six. Nobody was prepared for this.

In late August, the power station continues to cause concern for the community. Just last week, a part of the station was demolished, stirring up the dangerous dust yet again. You can imagine how the town felt. We need your help to get it cleaned up.

Port Augusta is an incredible town. It's filled with people who unconditionally support each other day in and day out when times are tough, who give their time, money and skills just to help. Without these people we might not be able to keep up this fight.

That's why we want to make sure this device can be deployed in other coal-affected towns. So other communities facing coal-fired power station closures are armed with their own independent air monitoring.

That way they can make sure the risk to people's health is monitored properly and make sure that coal companies clean up.

Can you help us raise enough money so we can ship and share this device with other coal-affected towns across Australia?

THAAD deployment dangerous

The Foreign Minister's recent call for the US to maintain its power in the Pacific and the news that the Terminal High Altitude Area Defence system (THAAD) is to be installed in South Korea ahead of schedule is extremely alarming.

According to a report in The Korea Times the deployment process has begun even though the necessary administrative steps have yet to be completed, including securing the land for the battery, evaluation of its environmental impact, and basic planning and construction of the base.

The deployment was expected to begin in June or July, but the battery is now expected to be operational before the end of April. This may be because of political developments in South Korea, where President Park has been impeached and where a new government might oppose deployment of THAAD.

Coming as it does during the course of very large military exercises involving USA and South Korean forces, this deployment might very easily be misinterpreted by North Korea as an act of aggression.

The installation of THAAD is ostensibly a response to North Korea's recent simultaneous launch of four ballistic missiles. However, it can be interpreted as a dangerous escalation of the situation in the region.

The installation of THAAD may give Japan and South Korea something of a justified sense of security. However, its impact on both North Korean and Chinese forces must also be considered.

THAAD could well render impotent China's ability to retaliate to an attack. This therefore increases the risk of a pre-emptive attack, should tensions reach an extreme level. So, far from moving the world closer to peace, the installation of THAAD is highly destabilising, highly provocative and dangerous to everyone.

The fact that the installation has commenced even before the necessary land has been acquired indicates the sort of urgency one would only expect during preparations for war. It is very ominous.

Julie Bishop reportedly said on October 22, 2016: "While Australia has benefited enormously from our close relationship with the US, it is fundamental for each sovereign nation to determine its international relationships in their national interest."

We agree with this earlier statement by the Foreign Minister and ask that she recognise that it is not in Australia's interests, nor those of global peace, for Australia to be pushing the US to be more of a bull in the china shop in the region.

More efforts should be directed towards Pacific region assistance in resisting in North Korea.

Nick Deane
IPAN

BRITAIN: The University of Surrey has just published some research on urban air pollution. It urges parents to use pram covers to protect babies and young children from harmful pollution encountered during their daily routine.

The research followed measurements from air monitoring equipment placed inside toddlers' prams being pushed to and from schools, during drop-off and pick-up times.

Bus stops and traffic lights turned out to be the worst places for exposure to the tiny particles that can be found in the air. According to a report in the Times, one quality Britain that is lacking today.

No one can do it alone, and nor should they have to. That's why you need your help to get behind this and help other communities get prompt aid. That way, they can transition away from coal and towards renewables in a way that's fair and right.

Everybody deserves to have clean air.

I want to thank everyone who has donated to help Port Augusta and communities like us as far. With your help, we can make sure communities like ours are treated fairly and not left with someone else's mess to clean up.

Thank you, Michelle

Michelle Community member, cinema manager, Mum

Crisis

Air pollution crisis

It just took longer to grasp that the real price was being paid by our lungs. It took the London smog disaster of 1952 — killing over 12,000 people and blighting the health of hundreds of thousands more — to shake the nation into action. Something had to be done to bring to an end the delusion that soot-filled skies were a sign of economic success. And the answer wasn't to be found in the mass production of pram covers.

The unlikely hero came in the form of Duncan Sandys, the housing minister in Harold Macmillan’s Conservative government. It was Sandys who took on industrial lobbyists who, for decades, had wriggled their way around attempts to force an improvement in Britain’s air quality standards.

The Clean Air Act 1956 is widely regarded as a milestone in environmental protection. The legislation included powers to establish smokeless zones, offered generous subsidies to householders to convert to cleaner fuels (smokeless solid fuel, gas and electricity) and set penalties for those who failed to act.

The story has it that there was such a fierce political battle — between entrenched pollution rights and a societal right to breathe — that Macmillan told Sandys to remain behind the Chamber of the Cabinet Room.

The room was clear, Sandys found himself pressed back by Macmillan who was providing him with the chest and proclaiming “Understand this, Sandys. If it all goes #AT&T up, you’re on your own!”

Fortunately, it didn’t. But the changes took more than a decade (and further clean air acts) to fully and finally nail themselves in place.

What it required was political leadership — the one quality Britain that is lacking today.

Anyone following the Chancellor’s Budget could be forgiven for presuming that air pollution was not a problem. Despite the fact that the courts have twice found Britain in breach of binding air quality standards, none of this was reflected in the Budget; no new “car scrappage” scheme for the oldest, most polluting vehicles; no funding for extensive “clean air zones;” no hike in the pump price of diesel; no motor industry support package tied specifically (and exclusively) to the next generation of clean energy vehicles nor any support for a ban on diesel vehicles in urban areas.

The Chancellor seems to have acquired the nickname of “Spreadsheet Phil,” apparently put down to some forensic attention to detail. If this is true, then he has also managed to find a way of doing so without breathing. The government’s economic plans increasingly look like an energy, climate and environmental crisis.

In throwing money at North Sea oil extraction, the Chancellor continues to feed the addiction to fossil fuels. Taxing non-polluting solar roofs, rather than heavily polluting diesel vehicles, puts him on the side of the problem, not the solution. What it does, however, is throw lifelines to the government’s friends (and financially back the course of very large military exercises involving USA and South Korean forces, this deployment might very easily be misinterpreted by North Korea as an act of aggression.

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You working women

You working women, suffering women,
Women who languish at home and in mills:
Oh, why don’t you help us in building the Temple
Of freedom and joy that will end the world’s ills?

Help us carry the banner of scarlet
Forward through storm and through the dark night.
Help us bring truth to all of the people,
To the unfortunate let us bring light.

Help us lift the world from oppression,
Raising up everything that we hold dear.
Struggle together like powerful lions,
For freedom, equality – principles clear.

More than once women have shown that they’re able,
Made tremble hangmen and throne.
They’ve shown the world that they can be entrusted
The holy banner in bitterest storm.

Dovid Edelshtat
(Translated from Yiddish by Jerry Silverman)

Carry the banner of scarlet

In the concluding cultural portion of the program, the audience sang along to the familiar Mimi Fariña setting of the James Oppenheim poem Bread and Roses, which came out of the 1912 Lawrence textile strike.

In tribute to the early Yiddish-speaking Jewish workers in the trade, a new Spanish translation (by Dulce Ramírez Gómez) was read to accompany an English translation (by Rose Pastor Stokes) of the poem In the Factory by Morris Rosenfeld, one of the famous Jewish “sweatshop poets” of a century ago.

Ruth Judkowitz and this writer, two members of the Southern California Arbiter Ring (Workmen’s Circle) — which began in LA in 1908 and soon included a branch of ILGWU workers — sang the classic songs Union Maid and Solidarity Forever. They began with the 1891 song Arbiter Frown (You Working Women) by another sweatshop poet, David Edelshtat, who himself died young of tuberculosis from his hard working life. The trilingual printed program carried the verses of this song, including (perhaps for the first time?) a Spanish translation.

March 30

REBUILDING THE LABOR MOVEMENT’S ELECTORAL APPEAL IN TERMS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE COMPLIANCE

• Emma Maiden, Assistant Secretary Unions NSW
• David Mehon, ALP Member for The Entrance

April 6

DO POLITICAL CARTOONISTS HAVE INFLUENCE?

• Glen de Lievre, Cartoonist/Illustrator, Sydney Morning Herald, The Age, Playboy, The New Yorker, Mad Magazine
• John Shakespeare, Artist, cartoonist/illustrator, Courier Mail, The Sydney Sun, currently working for Fairfax Media

April 20

INCREASING INEQUALITY OR BASIC INCOME FOR ALL?

• Dr Ben Spies-Butcher, senior lecturer in sociology, Macquarie University
• Prof Frank Stilwell, Sydney University

Every Thursday 6:30 pm
GAECLIC CLUB
1/64 Devonshire Street Surry Hills

Joe Nagy 02 9409 0530
jnagy@froggy.com.au
www.politicsinthepub.org.au
Taking on the sand mafia

Sibi Arasu

The latest attack came on December 13, 2016. At a bend in the road a truck blocked the route along which S Mugilan was traveling with an activist colleague and his three children. They were driving back at night from a public meeting against the plundering of sand from the River Cauvery by politically connected contractors and sand-mining agents near the town of Karur in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

A dozen hired thugs fell upon their car. “Managing to open the door, they pulled me out legs first but I clung on desperately. They grabbed my throat and asked me to leave Karur and never come back,” says Mugilan. “Even though it lasted for only about 10 minutes, they managed to hurt me pretty badly. The locals, seeing us being attacked, rushed to the car and the thugs dispersed. The children were traumatised.”

Later that night, they went to the district collector’s house and went on a dharna (sit-in), asking for a case of criminal assault to be registered. It took many hours of persuasion to do so.

The next morning they heard that a counter-charge had been registered, alleging that Mugilan and company were the perpetrators of the violence.

“This is what usually happens. It’s just another day in the life of anyone like me who the powers-that-be are afraid of,” says Mugilan. “At least now we know that we are making a real impact here.”

This incident is the latest in a line of assaults that Mugilan has faced in a lifetime of human rights and environmental activism.

A tradition of protest

“My village, Chernamalai, located in the “textile belt” of Tamil Nadu, has always had a history of protest,” says Mugilan. “Every 200 years ago, when the East India Company was trying to collect taxes here, the king of this region, Chinna Malai, defeated the British army thrice in battle, albeit with the help of the legendary Tipu Sultan.”

“More recently, the people here have executed long-standing protests for labour rights in the textile industry. This inherent celebration of socialism as well as this tradition of protests diligently shaped me.”

“My first exposure to ideas of social justice was when I was 9 or 10. The owner of a barber shop I was often taken to was a great admirer of the then newly formed DMK, or the Dravidian Progressive Party. He was illiterate, though. Every day he would get a copy of the party’s official newspaper Murasoli and my task was to read it out aloud.”

“My father was a farmer and my mother took care of our household. Even though they weren’t actively involved in political agitations, they never discouraged my siblings and me from doing what we thought was right. When I was in college, my father was summoned many times to be informed about my student activism. Not once did he scold or raise his voice against me.”

Activist S Mugilan.

Poongodi, Mugilan’s wife, receives constant threats to her family.

With no graduate college in his district, Mugilan enrolled on a mechanical engineering course in the town of Pollachi, around 100 kilometres away. “The 1980s were turbulent times in Tamil Nadu and, unlike now, students were at the forefront of everything,” he recalls.

“College was the time when I discovered Marxist texts and the socialist philosophies of the self-respect movement, inspired by Periyar, here in Tamil Nadu.”

The only time he was outside the activist fold were the four years (1984-88) he worked as an engineer at the state Public Works Department. “That place was not for me. You were expected to turn a blind eye to a lot of things and I just couldn’t do that.” Discovering the Tamil Nadu Marxist Party, he lost interest in the job.

“How we dealt with things as a party was a great lesson for me which I still hold dear, even though I am out of the official party now. We protested against the rampant availability of alcohol and drugs, the caste system and over-reach of government officials and the police. We always had the people on our side, though, and that is one reason why I’m protected even today. As long as the people you are agitating for protect you, there is relative safety from hired thugs.”

 Destruction

Mugilan first got involved in environmental protest in 2003. “The Noyyal River was excessively polluted by leather factories and dyeing units. We targeted the particularly polluting units and were reasonably successful in shutting them down.” This was not without consequences.

In November 2008, Mugilan and his comrades were attacked by about 70 men armed with kadeparines (crowbars) and aravuds (curved machetes). They were left with injuries which required weeks of hospitalisation.

“Asked about how she deals with constant threats to her family, Mugilan’s wife Poongodi says, “When they call, I just tell them to do what they like. There’s no point in being afraid of these people.”

While involved in a three-year-long agitation against a nuclear power plant in the town of Koondankulam, Mugilan was confront ed with the theft of beach sand by the mining mafia here. The sand mining on Tamil Nadu’s east coast is so rampant that entire stretches of beaches have disappeared. Just one case filed in the Madras High Court alleges that US$14 billion worth of sand was illegally mined by a single mafia boss and his company. “In the village of Idinthakarai, there are many who have been brutally killed for raising their voices against mining.”

In the last decade, Mugilan has been at the forefront of protest against environmental degradation. Sand mining of the 1.076-kilometre coastline and of all the 17 major river-basins that fall within the state’s border is an illegal trade of epic proportions, generating billions in black money. It has led to river basins sinking 10 metres or more below ground level in the past two decades. He has also led protests against a proposed hydraulic fracking project, a natural gas pipeline, air and water pollution by industry, and a project to establish a neutrino observatory in a reserved forest area, among others.

“This state’s natural resources are being destroyed in the name of development. The politicians here, like dogs like to come lick everything, they come and take a lick — that is, get a cut from whatever project is going on, regardless of how badly it will affect their own people,” says Mugilan.

“First, people need to understand that natural resources are their common property. Then, that they have to protect them from those who are trying to exploit them for commercial purposes.”

Mugilan considers the people he organises and works with as the real revolutionaries. “I believe there are three types of people. The first, who only think about themselves, the second, who think they can’t do much but are willing to help those who do. Finally, the third type are those who are determined to change how things work. Having a fundamental care for my society, I belong to this type.”

“I realise the path I have chosen is risky. Every day, the greatest happiness is that I’m alive to see tomorrow. Tamil Nadu, like many other parts of the world, is being swindled and destroyed beyond recognition. The job is for working people all over the world, not just here, to come together against such swindling. We’re up against big capitalists and imperialists. Great strength is needed to defeat them.”

New Internationalist 