

# Workers' Liberty



*The emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself*

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## **2004 Federal elections**

# **Education, Health, Industrial relations, Refugees: Howard promises class war on workers**

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## Where We Stand

**SOCIALISM** to us means not the police state of Stalinism, but its polar opposite, the self-organised power of the working class breaking the entrenched power of the billionaires and their bureaucratic state machine.

**Socialism** means a society restructured according to the working-class principle of solidarity. It means an economy of democratic planning, based on common ownership of the means of production, a high level of technology, education, culture and leisure, economic equality, no material privileges for officials, and accountability. Beyond the work necessary to ensure secure material comfort for all, it means the maximum of individual liberty and autonomy.

The trade unions are the product of long struggles by the working class for the right to build their own organisations to protect them from the arrogant power of the bosses. They remain the major organisations of the working class, the major vehicles of class struggle. There is no short-term prospect of them being replaced by new organisations. Since we believe only the working class liberating itself can achieve socialism, we must focus on the trade union movement, rather than on "radical" movements without a working class or socialist perspective.

Yet the unions represent the working class incompletely, unsatisfactorily, binding the class to capitalism. We must develop the unions, transform them, reinvigorate them with socialist purpose. To do that, the radical activist minority must organise itself and equip itself with clear ideas. That is our aim: to spread ideas of unfalsified socialism, to educate ourselves in socialist theory and history, to assist every battle for working-class self-liberation, and to organise socialists into a decisive force, able to revolutionise the labour movement so that it, in turn, can revolutionise society.

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# Howard's attack on public education: What does it really mean?

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Janet Burstall

Howard incites parents to take their children out of the public school system, because he alleges amoral 'political correctness' is eliminating moral values from public education. In doing so he provoked a deep vein of anger in parents, citizens and teachers who have been part of the public education system.

Nonetheless over the last 30 years there has been a significant shift from public to private school enrolments, from 77.4% in 1970 down to 68.4% nationally in 2002 (ABS).

What are parents buying that public schools lack, when they pay for private schools? Parents say they choose private schools for discipline, values, safety and responsiveness to their concerns. (SMH 24 Jan 04, p. 21). This supports what Bob Connell\* sees as private schools selling solutions to problems of social anxiety. This anxiety comes from three trends - educational failure seeming to have high economic costs, "globalisation" and associated economic turbulence, and personal insecurity, including a dimension of racial fear. "The private school system responds to the growing culture of fear in contemporary market society. The private schools tacitly offer fee-paying parents a gated community for their children, in which turbulence, diversity and threat are held at a distance. Outside the gated community is mess, disorder and impurity."

And Connell wrote this before Howard and Ruddock heightened the fear of Australia as under threat from foreigners, before the "war on terror", and before the Tampa. Howard's school education policy is another wedge of his policies and his monocultural view of what Australia should be.

The argument against public funding of elite private schools is easily understood. But private schooling is not just for the children of the business class. Howard's 1996 legislation allowing for easy start-up of new private schools means there is a growing number of relatively low-fee charging Christian schools. Private schools (of the non-elite kind) are affordable to better-off working class parents, through Federal Government funding. And the Catholic systemic schools have educated around 20% of school children for decades.

These families will be exploited by Howard to identify as the precarious end of the private school wedge, and therefore to support transfer of resources from free and secular public education, and to oppose its advocates in the teachers' unions, and to reject the children and young people with the greatest need for support from the education system.

Supporters of public education are ardent and committed. Adults often feel strongly about the rights and needs of their children, more so than their own

rights. A movement for public education possibly provides the best chance of building a movement committed and active, that could turn the tide on market ideology to an understanding of public good as a better principle for society. In order to win a well-resourced, free, universal and secular public education system in Australia, we need to create a prospect of a public education system that is better than the current one, better than its ever been, not just in terms of money and resources.

Bob Connell argues that the "triumph of the privatisers" of education "has been helped by the state of ideas about 'public' and 'private'" flowing from the context of economic rationalism/neo-liberalism. Connell advocates, in addition to a critique of the market agenda in education, a positive agenda which reconsiders "what is 'public' in public education, drawing on the democratic elements embedded (though often hidden) in state-provided mass education, and on the democratic critiques of mass education." (p. 8)

There are many suggestions made by supporters of public schools, for revitalising public education by building community support and involvement. But the decision-makers in the public education system are driven from the top down, not the bottom up. Absolute authority is held by State and Territory Education Ministers who care as much about State Government budgets as they do about schools. Their authority flows down through education departments to principles and into schools. How can schools be convincingly "responsive" to their grass roots in such an authoritarian, hierarchical system?

Teachers unions and Parents & Citizens Associations act as pressure groups on the system. Students rarely have access to influencing schools, SRCs where they exist are usually token fund-raising bodies. But it is teachers, parents and students who need public schools to provide the best education for young people. Teachers, parents and students in the public education system know their own schools, their own communities, and are best placed to decide what needs to be done for young people in their own areas. IF teachers, parents and students can generate commitment to comprehensive plans for their own schools and districts, demand local, public resources to implement their plans, against the authority of the Minister and Department if necessary, they can demonstrate the potential of a truly public, i.e. thoroughly democratic, school system to meet all the needs of its community.

These plans should be the result of open, and searching discussion of the needs and problems of all the members of each school community, conducted in a democratic process, that demonstrates what real public control of schools could produce. All the rich

variety of proposals for revitalising public education should be put before teachers, parents and students, where they are more likely to receive serious consideration than from Education Departments and governments. A strong alliance with deep roots in the community could be built in this way. It would face challenges, and not be a simple, easy process. The most effective initiatives to make it happen should come from teachers in schools, opening up educational practices, curriculum and school decision-making for the consideration of parents and students, possibly via P&Cs and SRCs. Parents and students could take initiatives themselves to consider matters normally seen as outside their scope. But if teachers are willing to open up all aspects of their schools, including their professional practices to community discussion then teachers, students and parents could experience a profoundly democratic and inclusive process that could cement strong allegiances and alliances for public education.

At least in school all children would come first, no children would be last, and the politics of fear of turbulence, diversity and threat that Howard exploits would sink like a people smugglers' boat.

Connell, Bob Renovating the 'public': the future of public education IN Education links: the radical education dossier. No. 63, summer 2001/02 p. 7-12.

## Secular education threatened

Bob Treasure

In its clamour to privatise education throughout Australia, the Howard coalition government is threatening the very basis of social justice and equality on which our schools are supposedly built.

When public schools were first set up in the 1880s, its founders were concerned to provide two things:

- 1) equal access for all children, irrespective of wealth and
- 2) an education system that avoided the divisiveness of sectarianism, a dangerous and vindictive trend developing between colonial Catholics and protestants at that time.

Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century Australia has absorbed an amazing range of cultures and ideologies. The fact that this has happened with minimal racist violence is testament to the success of our secular Public Education system. Mixing students from varied backgrounds has provided the very best social education, avoiding what ex-P&C President Bev Baker once described as "the spectre of North Shore private schoolies on an excursion to Cabramatta, armed with clipboards and researching the mysteries of 'ethnic differences'.."

Or has it?

### Rapidly changing

The funding policies of both State and Federal governments are rapidly changing the reality of our schools, however according to Professor Tony

Vinson, "Over the period 195-96 to 2005-6[there will be] ... an increase in funding for non-government schools by the Commonwealth of 128% in real terms, compared to an increase in Commonwealth funding to schools [overall] of 50%."

Part of the reason for the massive increase in private school subsidies is the mushrooming of tiny faith-based schools of varying religious persuasions, setting up in competition to perfectly effective and successful Public Schools. The cost in wasteful duplication alone are obscene, but both state and Federal governments are content to encourage it by removing any obstacles to the establishment of brand new sectarian, inward-looking "faith cells" (there are no size limits -- they even get special "establishment grants" and interest free construction loans!) all in the name of "freedom of choice".

How much is this "choice" being encouraged? A quick scan of the Canterbury-Bankstown area's private school outlays for the financial year 2001-2002 gives a fair idea: the fundamentalist Christian Community High School received a combination State/Commonwealth handout of \$2.9m, easily matched by the All Saints Greek Orthodox College(\$2.9m) but nowhere near the host of Catholic school recipients, headed by Holy Spirit who reaped 6.3 million taxpayer dollars over a single year. Even this pales by comparison to Malek Fahd Islamic School who scored a cool \$8,602,176.11.

This is but the nationwide tip of a growing sectarian iceberg. Canterbury-Bankstown area alone contains no less than 32 separate faith-based schools, each 80% subsidised by government funds last year totaling more than \$73m. It is the height of hypocrisy for Premier Carr, while spending more on police surveillance of the area, to deplore "ethnic violence" when his own education policy fans the very embers of ignorance, misunderstanding, suspicion and intolerance.

### Justifying the white-anting of public schools

Howard, Kemp, Nelson and Co actually turn the sectarian argument on its head. Supporting religious schools that segregate students on the basis of belief is in the great Australian tradition of "democracy", "tolerance" and "empowerment". Dick Shearman, head of the Independent Education Union (which covers the poorly unionised private school sector) one berated delegates at an Australian Education Union conference (covering Public School teachers nationally) for being "racist" in their opposition to government funding of "poor religious schools".

In fact recent figures released from Canberra reveal the ALL private schools, in terms of total income (fees, Commonwealth, State funding) are better off than Public Schools. Catholic systemic schools receive 15.2% more, and other non-government schools such as independent and fundamentalist ones have an income up to 52.2% higher. <b><i>There is no longer any such thing as a "poor" private schools.

Economic rationalist and pro-privatising media-jocks are keen on creating "crises" in public schools, where students are less prone to intimidation from authority, and where teachers are more solidly unionised and critical of social and political injustice. According to the media hounds, we must have "choice" and a free market place where individual economic decisions do away with social divisions. Besides, private schools will ultimately pay more in promotional advertising.

Look around. Feel it. In effect the "free choice" market place actually widens social divisions and creates an atmosphere of exclusion, competition, insecurity, blame, envy.

#### **What to do?**

Clearly the aim of the political right is to undermine the proudly secular, free and inclusive Public Education system across Australia. Why? In the short term, simply to smash strong unions such as the NSW Teachers Federation which act as obstacles to an unfettered, profit-oriented educational market place. In the long term to create a docile yet bitterly divided working class, incapable of mounting seriously organised or united opposition to ongoing global exploitation.

Remarkable the Howard/Kemp/ Nelson agenda has only achieved limited success over the past decade. Despite more than doubling private school funding and opening up hundreds of new religiously-based schools; despite massive media hype promoting the virtues of exclusive, elitist, single-sex, sectarian schools; despite the two-party indifference to Public School impoverishment and widespread squalor, despite all this there has been an enrolment shift of a mere 1.7% over the past 10 years.

Yet that percentage still amounts to tens of thousands of students nationwide. Pressure continues to mount as private schools emerge resource rich compared to their struggling public school counterparts. If the Coalition agenda continues for another term, it is entirely feasible that Public Education in Australia could be swamped and residualised. Therefore, the Howard government must be thrown out if a truly free and justly secular education system is to survive.

A non-aligned teacher-student-parent coalition called POPE (Promotion of Public Education) has called upon all who care about public education to hold a massive "Stop Work to Save Public Education" national Day of Action in the lead up to the next Federal election in 2004. Some state-based education unions have already committed themselves to such an action, but it is imperative that national unions (eg the AEU, NTEU, NUS) and all stakeholders unite to play a part: teachers, parents, students, academics suffering cutback assaults; post and undergraduates suffering HECS debt; unionists and apprentices paying exorbitant TAFE fees - it is time to make a stand that cannot be ignored.

Push for it to happen. Make it happen, or live with the consequences.

## **Industrial**

# **Vic Public Service pay fight**

Bryan Sketchley

The Victorian state Labour government has offered public servants a pay cut and a reduction in working conditions in the current round of enterprise bargaining. On the table is a 2.25% pay rise, the last quarter of 2003 saw the CPI rise over 3% due to interest rate rises. They have refused the union claim of 6% and rejected backdating any claim to the beginning of the bargaining period. The state government politicians awarded itself a 4% pay rise back dated to July 1. Various hard won conditions are under threat from the government including the unions right to consultation on a range of issues and the limiting of overtime payments. Its through such scrimping on wages and conditions that the state government no doubt believes it can fund its 2006 commonwealth games commitments and provide investment breaks for industry.

The union for state government employees (CPSU) has rejected the counter claim, and in a large and lively delegates and activist meeting in the city just before xmas members spoke from the floor of the need to prepare for a protracted industrial campaign if improvements in wages and conditions are to be won. For the duration of the enterprise bargaining negotiations notified industrial action is legal and protected, however there is a significant concern that the government may attempt to terminate the EB period by taking the dispute to the Industrial Relations Commission. By doing this, any industrial action taken will be considered illegal, and importantly, the opportunity for public servants to influence the outcome will be significantly hindered.

There are already 2000 public servants involved in work bans across the state, however support amongst public servants for the campaign is patchy at the moment. As people return from holidays the union will need to adopt a systematic approach to developing the campaign. The Labour government has indicated that it is going to play hardball, and that they consider this round of negotiations to be the stalking horse for future outcomes with teachers and nurses. Public sector conditions are only going to be maintained by a determined fight, expecting the good will of a Labour government to look after workers will be as useful as trying to nail water to a wall.



# NSW Public Service jobs campaign

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Leon Parissi

Public Service union delegates in the NSW Dept of Education and Training and TAFE have been conducting a determined campaign to oppose a 20% cut in educational support jobs. The loss of over 1,100 jobs was announced on 17 June last year by the Carr ALP government and confirmed on 20 January in letters sent to over 4,200 affected employees. The jobs to go include a wide variety of public servant based support to schools and TAFE colleges. These areas include finance, payroll, library services, property maintenance and many others.

During the 8 months since the announcement Public Service Association (PSA) delegates have been organising a defence of jobs and services with some small successes. So far 63 positions have been clawed back, with a long way to go.

On 20 January over 2,200 employees got letters telling them they no longer have a position. Among these are several hundred employees whose jobs are slated to be terminated and others who must now compete among themselves for the reduced number of jobs in a restructured Department. A further 1,900 were placed in positions but many of these are unhappy because they have not been told exactly where the jobs are or even exactly what the job is. Delegates fear that many of the functions carried out in the previous organisation will now be dumped onto the reduced number of employees making worse an already existing work overload nightmare.

In November delegates organised a series of well supported wildcat work bans which forced the issue into the Industrial Relations Commission. Union members felt this action was necessary as the PSA leadership was unwilling to support strong industrial action in defence of jobs. After winning a delay in the implementation of the Department's plans over the xmas/New Year period the union is now faced with the problem of organising an industrial campaign with members who are fearing that they will be terminated and others who are preoccupied with applying for the reduced number of jobs.

# NSW TAFE anti-fees campaign

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Leon Parissi

Thousands of NSW TAFE students faced a massive fees hike this year. A union and student based campaign to oppose the new fees has built up a head of steam since the middle of last year. Unionists oppose the fees on the basis that public education should in principle be government funded and also because they fear that higher fees means students

will drift to commercial providers and that will impact on the employment of teachers and support staff.

The new fees regime represents a high handed treatment by the Carr Labor government of both standing NSW ALP policy and a resolution from ALP State Annual Conference last year which oppose fees for mainstream courses. The NSW Labor Council, the Teachers' Federation and other unions also oppose the fees.

The NSW Teachers Federation has banned the collection of fees and the NSW Public Service Association has agreed not to undertake any extra work designed to undermine the other union's industrial action. In the face of a direction from the Industrial Relations Commission to lift its work ban a few days before the January enrolment period the Teachers' Federation decided to not comply with the Commission's ruling. Teachers enrolled students so they can attend classes but not to the point of issuing paperwork for collecting fees. Management responded by hiring casual staff to undermine both the teachers ban and the Public Service Association's position of not scabbing on the teachers' industrial action.

The opposition to fees has also spurred the usually quiet TAFE student body into action. While there is no official student union for NSW TAFE a Labor Council sponsored TAFE Students Network has grown in the Sydney metropolitan area in a number of colleges and has undertaken a variety of actions to build the campaign. This year the focus is on encouraging students for whom the increased fees cause hardship to apply for special exemptions. Teachers are assisting to distribute the student designed form with which to make the special exemption applications as TAFE management has refused to distribute any officially approved form.

January 31 also saw a demonstration outside the ALP National Conference in Sydney as part of the campaign. About 40 protestors from a variety of trade unions, the National Union of Students and TAFE students chanted "Free TAFE for all" as they handed out leaflets to largely sympathetic ALP delegates, staffers and observers entering the Conference venue.

TAFE Student leader George Samuel said "Not only is the NSW ALP defying their own policy as well as last year's Conference resolution against TAFE fees but to add insult to injury they are slashing support staff and cutting library budgets." Samuel's case for a special exemption from TAFE fees is being taken up by the NSW Teachers' Federation. He was refused permission by TAFE management as he tried to submit one of the student devised exemption application forms.

The combined action of union and students has the potential to reverse the government's TAFE budget cuts, jobs slashing and increased fees. So far the concessions by government on the fees campaign have been minimal but encouraging.

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# Alliance for Workers' Liberty meeting

*Brief overview of the history of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty, as presented to International co-thinkers on 10 November, 2003 in Paris. This report was compiled by Melissa White, the WL Australia delegate.*

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Workers' Liberty originated in 1966 within the Cannonite (as in James P. Cannon) current of the Trotskyist movement. We thought of ourselves then as holding a distinctive attitude to Stalinism, although we had no special theoretical position on it at the time. Nevertheless, we thought of ourselves as more critical and more insistent on anti-Stalinist political views. We held discussions with others abroad. We first started discussions with Lutte Ouvrier (Workers' Struggle) in 1967, but the first assertion of our different political positions did not occur until 1987. By then, the positions we took on Afghanistan and Poland were markedly different from other groups in the same basic current as us and we tried to codify these emergent differences.

In 1987, we called a meeting and we presented a document similar to the one before us today (see below). At that meeting was Workers' Liberty Australia, an Iranian group and a Polish comrade. After that, nothing organisational came of our contacts with the Eastern Europeans, but we believe this is due more to the condition of the left in the 1990s than anything else i.e. the Eastern European left collapsed and the Iranian group were engaged in a very low level of activity. The contact with the Australian comrades continued.

Since then, our ideas have changed. In 1989, we formally changed our position on the USSR, definitively abandoning the Cannonite definition of a "workers' state". We undertook research on the history of the movement and discovered that our ideas had been developed earlier and better by the international current of the Workers' Party of the USA of 1940, but we also found that that tradition had largely been lost. Nevertheless, our conclusions had led us back to that tradition.

The other issue we tried to sum up at that time in order to orient ourselves was that of attempting to define a Marxist policy in relation to the new round of wars: Kuwait in 1991; Kosova in 1999; Afghanistan in 2001. Our positions on these were based on the position we had devised in 1982 during the South Atlantic war (over the Falkland Islands), but we had thought that 1982 was an historical freak. Now we think there is something common to them all: that is, the Marxist critique of imperialism at the present stage of capitalist development.

We hope that out of this movement there will be a more positive development than that of 1987, coming from the feeling that the left is beginning to revive after the politically dreadful 1990s. This is not a meeting to set up a Fourth, Fifth or Sixth International! Why not? Firstly, we know our limitations and, secondly, tremendous work needs to be done to re-develop the intellectual and political culture of the left. The purpose, rather, is to get a joint statement between us and others with like minds, as the basis for further discussion.

## The main political points in the document

Where are we in history? For a long time, the basic idea of the Trotskyist left was that the world was in an epoch that had opened in 1917 and, essentially, we were still in that same epoch. Nobody thinks that since 1989 or 1991 (depending on where you date things precisely), but was it in fact that case that we were in the same "epoch" since 1917 — Hobsbawm's "short twentieth century" — or not? We think not. It seems to us that there have been four major turning points between 1917 and now:

1927-1933: the defeat of the Left Opposition and the victory of Hitler closed off the immediate period opened by the 1917 workers' state in the USSR and the Communist Parties of the world were destroyed as a revolutionary factor.

After World War Two: the old pattern of the world as constituted by rival colonial empires, centred in Europe, separated by tariff blocks and currency controls, breaks down and is replaced, essentially, by an imperialism of free trade, comprised of politically independent states on the one side and the Stalinist bloc on the other.

1968-1975: another major chance with the reappearance of the revolutionary left as a political factor. The emergence of ex-colonial countries as centres of capitalist accumulation and the end of colonial liberation struggles (occurring ever since the end of WWII). The period of the colonies of Portugal achieving independence is ending. Exhaustion of the dynamic of "revolutionary Stalinism" can be dated: Cambodia in 1976, Afghanistan in 1979, and perhaps Vietnam can be included in this equation, since the Vietnam Liberation Front (VLF) starts to get into deals with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). During this period, "revolutionary Stalinism" finds it can not hegemonise the left any longer or carry out social transformations any more.

1989-1991: An "imperialism of free trade" is able to extend itself and integrate regions of the Stalinist bloc. Some institutions from that bloc are integrated. The world is dominated by the free market for the first time in history.

## 'Third camp' politics

This picture of the development of capitalism is linked to a number of political points:

The Stalinist states were not post-capitalist. They were not more highly developed than capitalism. Socialism has to define itself more radically differently from Stalinism than from the capitalism of present-day France, Britain or Australia.

All Trotskyist strands agree that democratic demands are important, but it seems to us that

between WWII and the 1970s, the movement's understanding of this became severely skewed. For example, in the debate of 1940s, the left was in favour in principle of democratic demands in post-war Europe. But since they thought the "revolutionary crisis was imminent", the dominant ideas is that there would be "much more radical demands" put. In hindsight, those who argued for the centrality of democratic demands were correct. The main democratic demands that the revolutionary left took up — for colonial liberation and anti-imperialism — became confused. In some cases that equation is not a problem (the struggle for national liberation from a big colonial power, for example), but this approach is being carried forward into a world where colonial imperialism is no longer dominant e.g. support for Saddam Hussein "against" the US, for the Taliban, for Milosevic etc. is erroneous.

It follows that capitalism has not ceased to develop, but that capitalism is in a long final crisis. It is senseless to say that socialists should try to prevent the development of capitalist integration. Rather, we

should base ourselves on the subversive possibilities that development opens up.

A reinstatement of the idea of the "third camp" — coined by Trotsky in the late 1930s, being a continuation of an idea of Engels, who wrote that of the five great powers of Europe, the task was to assert against them the sixth great power of the working class — is necessary. The third camp is considered as a "petit-bourgeois deviation" and the orthodoxy is to "choose a camp" (the Soviet state vs. capitalism, the third world vs. colonial power). That stock criticism of the idea of the third camp may be all right if it is a question of supporting a national people against a colonial power. But there are a large number of struggles where there is no human liberation at stake and there are a number of cases where capitalist forces may be better in the long term of history.

In summary, the Alliance for Workers' Liberty is trying to reaffirm the lost tradition of the third camp on an analysis of the world as it has changed since 1945 and, particularly, since 1991. The draft document we seek agreement on follows.

The logo for Socialist Alliance features the word "Socialist" in a purple, sans-serif font with a small red star above the letter 'i'. Below it, the word "Alliance" is written in a green, sans-serif font.

*'For the millions,  
not the millionaires'*

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### **Draft political agreement**

There are openings for the growth of the revolutionary left such as we have not had for two decades. The rise of the global anti-capitalist movements, the tremendous upsurge of opposition to Bush's and Blair's war on Iraq, the growth of new workers' movements in the ex-colonial world, and the limited revival of real trade unionism in some older industrialised countries, have combined to create this situation.

Unfortunately the united left organisation the working class needs does not exist. Nor does a politically adequate Marxist left. What exists is a sizeable number of organisations which have roots in the Trotskyist tradition - the tradition of those communists who, from the early 1920s, fought the

Stalinist ruling class which seized power in Soviet Russia and control of the Communist Parties - but have evolved and mutated in different ways over decades.

Typically these groups are organised as more or less authoritarian sects. For many, many years the groups and groupuscules in the neo-Trotskyist archipelago had little contact with each other, almost no collaboration even on things on which they agreed, and no dialogue at all over the political issues that divided them.

What can be done to mend this? To know that we must know how we got into the present situation. Revolutionary politics is a process of grouping and again regrouping around answers to the day's all-



shaping political issues. Eighty years ago, the Communist Parties were differentiated from the Social Democrats and organised around a response to the Russian Revolution, the foundation of a new working-class International (the Communist International), and a determination to learn the lessons that had led to working-class victory in Russia in 1917 and apply them elsewhere.

The Trotskyist movement, which stood on the foundations of the Communist International, was also the product of a world-reshaping event, but a negative one for the working class - the Stalinist counter-revolution in the USSR. The big Communist Parties and the Communist International fell under the control of the Stalinist autocracy that had seized power in Russia. During the world crises of the 1920s, 30s and 40s, those, led by Leon Trotsky, who stood on the founding politics of the Communist International were reduced to tiny groups, persecuted and often jailed or murdered by fascists, Stalinists and bourgeois democrats alike.

After 1945, the world changed in many ways. The old division of the world into rival Europe-centred colonial empires, fenced off from each other by tariff barriers, gradually gave way to a new division between a Stalinist empire on one side and an "imperialism of free trade" dominated by a cartel of big capitalist powers led by the USA.

The USSR, which had already degenerated under Stalinism into a new system of class exploitation, became after 1939-40 a new imperialist centre. It would retain political domination over Eastern Europe until 1989. Elsewhere, liberation struggles in the colonies won political independence, or the colonial powers decided to grant independence without a fight. From the 1960s, a number of the new independent states became significant, though secondary, centres of capitalist accumulation.

In the mass labour movements, the language of "socialism" and "communism" was dominated by the Communist Parties and social-democratic parties which had become politically rotten decades before.

After 1968 a new revolutionary left emerged, but it did not distinguish clearly enough between working-class socialism and the revolutionary strands of Stalinism. As a result, it tended to disperse and dwindle after the mid-1970s.

After 1989-91 the world changed again. The collapse of Stalinism showed that the Stalinist model of "socialism" had been essentially an utopian attempt to supersede capitalism by way of forced-march competition from its periphery. It had been a doomed detour within the world-historic epoch of capitalism.

The ensuing expansion of world-market capitalism, to cover the whole world for the first time ever, has brought an expansion also of the objective numerical strength and international interconnectedness of the gravediggers of capitalism, the working class. But it came after the defeats and setbacks of the left in the late 1970s and the 1980s, and the profound shock to

the culture of the actually-existing left caused by the collapse of Stalinism. It has been shaped by, and has shaped, the political ascendancy of the neo-liberal right and growing economic inequality between rich and poor.

The new anti-capitalist groups of the last several years signify the emergence of a new generation of radicals. Their "alternative" cultural forms have been central to their ability to indict the pathologies of capitalism, to begin to project a vision of another world, and to form global networks

To refuse to accept today's capitalist world, and to insist that another world is possible, is the necessary beginning of any new revolutionary movement. In view of the meanings given to "socialism" and "communism" in mass discourse over the last half-century, that the new anti-capitalist groups generally also refuse that old language is also promising for the future. But this implies also a certain "anti-politics", a preference for the symbolic, the expressive, the gestural, the theatre of confrontation, among the new groups.

It is the job of the organised Marxist left, the forces striving to establish and take forward some continuity of revolutionary thought, to learn from the new groups but also to help them move from that "anti-politics" to positive political strategies.

Yet since the death of Trotsky, the surviving Trotskyist groups were beleaguered and isolated for decades. Many of their most experienced and competent activists were killed during or after World War 2. They suffered a catastrophic decline in political culture. Most of them adopted variants of the seemingly "successful" Stalinist party style of organising themselves. They were unable to deal with the big changes in the world.

Since 1989-91, they have increasingly suffered a disorientation, a loss of positive political strategies and standards, and a collapse into a purely negative and reactive "anti-capitalism" and "anti-imperialism". For example, some would-be Marxists have sought alliances with Islamic fundamentalism on the grounds that since it is "anti-imperialist". But the paleo-imperialism of Islamic fundamentalism, or of states bent on regional conquest like Milosevic's Serbia or Saddam Hussein's Iraq, is reactionary. Politics which fail to recognise that fact will also fail to assist the expansion of today's anti-capitalist protest into a new, potentially hegemonic, radical political culture.

To create a framework for a new and united international revolutionary movement requires two things the reinstatement of positive working-class politics by way of a renovation and renewal of ideas; and democratic, rational, anti-authoritarian ways of organising ourselves.

The two things are inextricably linked. There can not be political self-renewal and living political development in response to an always-changing world without free discussion. There can not be free discussion unless the organisation is free alike from dogma-worship, from indifference to the great real tradition of Lenin and Trotsky, from the distorting

power of high priests and self-designated prophets and colleges of cardinals, and from the suppression of minority opinion practised in most of the would-be Marxist groups (with the consequence that sub-groups fight to make themselves dictator, or, if they lose, easily choose to split and found a new group).

The way forward from where we are is to sketch out the minimum organisational and political basis for an

### **As the main political planks WL proposed the following**

- Workers of the world unite! For global solidarity against global capital. Against all wars, except those of national or working-class liberation.
- \* Socialism, meaning not the Stalinist model but its opposite, a society reshaped on the principles of working-class solidarity and consistent democracy. Neither the Stalinist USSR, nor the surviving states modelled on it such as Cuba and North Korea, represent the socialism we want. On the contrary, they represent systems of class exploitation in no way post-capitalist, combined with autocratic regimes preventing any independent working-class political life.
- \* Working-class self-liberation as the means to socialism; and, therefore, a fight for the political independence of the working class and opposition to "popular fronts".
- \* Workers' control and democratic planning as the only means to stop the despoiling of the Earth's environment by the capitalist drive to maximise sales and profits.
- \* An orientation to the working class and the labour movement as they are, while fighting to transform the movement. Active support for and involvement in working-class struggles at every level, including the smallest trade-union battles and battles to retain and expand social provision. Democracy and open debate in the labour movement; for rank-and-file movements in the unions. The promotion of working-class representation in politics, which in many countries signifies a fight to create a new broad workers' party.
- \* For a workers' government - a government based on and accountable to bedrock working-class organisations, which will push through working-class policies against capitalist resistance - trade union rights, rebuilding public services under renewed public ownership and workers' and community control, taxation of the rich and expropriation of the great magnates of capital, etc.
- \* Consistent democracy, as a basis of socialism, and as something to be fought for in partial battles now, under capitalism; and internationally. The workers of every nationality must appeal to the workers of other nationalities with the assurance that they tolerate no imposition upon themselves, but equally seek no privilege over the others. Solidarity with the Palestinians, while also upholding Israel's rights two nations, two states. For a free united Ireland, with autonomy for the Protestant-majority areas in the north-east.
- \* Global solidarity against global capital, seeking not to stop or reverse globalisation but to push through it and to mobilise for liberation the new

initially loose but organic unity that would have the possibility of growing into a new working-class socialist international. We, groupings and activists from different countries, propose to assist this process by agreeing an international platform, which we offer as a draft for discussion with other groups and activists, and by agreeing some arrangements for coordination among ourselves of activities and discussions on the basis of that platform.

forces and passions generated by the global development of capitalism.

- \* The "Third Camp" an independent working-class stance against both the US-led "imperialism of free trade" (or "empire of capital") and regional-imperialist forces coming into conflict with it.
  - \* For women's liberation; against racism and immigration controls; equality for lesbians, gays and bisexuals.
  - \* The building of a revolutionary party not as a self-sufficient sect but according to the logic and needs of the class struggle on its three fronts, economic, political and ideological.
- And the minimum organisational basis?**
- To organise in the workplaces and in all mass working-class organisations on the basis of majority discipline in action;
  - \* Democratic structures, allowing free discussion and rights of self-expression in committees and in the public press to minorities;
  - \* At least for a transitional phase, the right for minorities to have their own subsidiary publications alongside the party's main press.

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## **Boss watch**

By Lynn Smith

### **BANK CEO'S SCORE GROTESQUE SALARY CHEQUES**

The National Australia Bank's CEO Frank Cicutto has just landed a three-year contract which will see him pocket \$30 million in cash and shares should he meet performance targets.

But don't CEO's have short life spans? What if big Frank has fallen out of favour with the board by 2007?

Don't worry. He's thought of that. Frank's new deal has a three year "consultancy fee" bolted onto the end of it. Which in plain English means the NAB top gun will get truckloads of money for doing bugger all i.e. basically, not working for another bank in that time.

What about his mates?

Westpac CEO David Morgan earns \$7.37 million p.a. CBA's David Murray earns a mere \$2.52 million, but this bitter pill will be sweetened with 110,000 shares should he meet performance targets. ANZ's John McFarlane is hoping for a medal after announcing a pay cut from \$2.9 million to \$2.5 million p.a. But wait. There's more. The clever Mr. Mac will bulk this up to \$7 million with "options and amortised options" (whatever they are).

And what have they done to deserve all this?

Earnings growth across the banking sector has slowed. The banks have not developed or leveraged any key technology. And they have a poor track record in developing business overseas.

The secrets of their success are cost cutting through sacking thousands of bank workers and closing down hundreds of bank branches and increasing fees without increasing their performance

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#### THE BANKS' CREDO: THE LESS YOU EARN THE MORE YOU PAY

Consumer organisations believe that the bulk of fees that have led to obscene levels of profits for Australia's big banks are coming out of the pockets of those who can least afford it: low to middle wage earners and people with small businesses.

While banks often waive account and transaction fees for people with home loans, the more than 70 per cent of households without a mortgage are bearing the brunt of rising bank fees

Chris Connolly, director of the Financial Services Consumer Policy Centre says "these other consumer are not getting the benefits of low interest rate margins, they are not getting money (i.e. interest) at all on deposits and they are paying record levels of bank fees".

Chris Field, executive director of the Consumer Law Centre adds that banks only value customers with significant wealth. "Unfortunately those with little accumulated assets or low incomes are being made to pay a significant burden of fees and therefore (supply) an unfair part of the banks' revenue".

The banking practice that has created the greatest hardship for low income earners and small business people is the charging of huge fees for dishonoured cheques and direct debits where insufficient funds exist.

Fees like a \$40 penalty for a direct debit of \$25 bear absolutely no relationship to any service the bank may provide.

In fact "penalty fees are literally designed to punish consumers" says Chris Field. "It's people close to the line who are more likely to keep incurring these fees".

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#### NO "MEA CULPA" FOR JODEE RICH!

It would appear that failed entrepreneur Jodee Rich, ex boss of One.Tel, is attempting to shift the blame for the multi-million collapse of the telco onto his former mates (and leading One.Tel stakeholders) Lachlan Murdoch and James Packer. Packer and Murdoch are due to be called before investigator Paul Weston of Horwath Chartered Accountants to answer questions about why they cancelled a

\$312 million rights issue immediately before One.Tel imploded.

Weston's appointment follows intense lobbying by a group of creditors with "connections to" Jodee Rich to have a "special-purpose" liquidator appointed. Weston is to investigate whether, in cancelling the rights issue, Murdoch jnr. and Packer jnr. were responsible for an "uncommercial transaction" which caused the company One.Tel collapse.

Because, as everyone knows... One.Tel's spectacular fall from its dizzy heights had nothing to do with Mr. Rich's level of competence.

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#### CORPORATE DISCLOSURE DOCUMENTS FULL OF HOLES

The Australian Securities and Investments Commission (ASIC) has singled out 46 companies since July 1 last in relation to potential conflicts of interest uncovered in documents sent to shareholders.

Nova Health, Tranzact Financial Services, IT&e and Consolidated Broken Hill were among those named as having been asked by the so-called corporate watchdog to provide better, clearer explanations to shareholders.

Most of the case where ASIC has instructed a business to amend a document involved third-party transactions i.e. deals involving people linked to the company e.g. directors. The remainder was in connection with tricky-dicky stuff like buybacks, takeovers and "schemes of arrangement" (whatever they are).

"By and large... we look at ones... where the personal interests of directors are frequently at odds, or potentially at odds, with the interests of telling shareholders the full story" says SIC director of corporate finance Richard Cockburn.

So... can Joe Citizen look forward to a ruthless crackdown by ASIC on corporate high jinks? No such luck. ASIC's approach (as one would expect from an institution that exists to make capitalism look good) is gentle, to say the least.

Instructing people to amend a document is not the same thing as ordering them to cancel a deal. And... ASIC only checks half of all documents sent to shareholders. Which half of the corporate world is left unscathed? That, as they say on chat shows, is a very good question.

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#### BUSINESS BODIES TRY TO DO A SNOW JOB ON LURKS & PERKS FOR FINANCIAL COWBOYS

Three organizations with an interest in making the big end of town seem respectable jumped after Choice magazine exposed a range of corrupt practices in the financial services sector. These include payment of "soft dollars" (what the rest of us call bribes or kickbacks) to advisers and managers for using various institutions' products (for "product" read home mortgage, personal loan etc.). The bribes and kickbacks range from small beer like free office software to "luxury overseas trips which take in major sporting events" (this presumably refers to the Athens Olympics, in which case we're talking about tens of thousands of dollars.)

ASIC (see story above), the Financial Planning Association and the Investment and Financial Services Association have issued guidelines to advisers on accepting potentially compromising "incentives". Trying to put a tough face on things, gifts and conferences linked to product sales will be banned. There's to be a public register of "appropriate" transactions worth more than \$300. And disclosure of remuneration in regulatory documents "will be strengthened" (whatever that means).

With megabucks floating around, it's not surprising that a lot were caught with their snouts in the trough. Fund management in Australia is a \$630 billion industry. There are 16,000 financial planners and licensed security dealers operating in the sector.

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## Ideas to Make a Difference, Number 3: Class.

R.F. Price.

*The Communist Manifesto*, written by Marx & Engels in 1848, began with the words: 'The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles'. It went on to speak of 'oppressor and oppressed' and to name various classes and other 'gradation[s] of social rank' from the time of Rome to the 19th.C. 'bourgeois and proletarians'. In all cases these polar classes were linked by the performing of surplus labour by one class and its appropriation by the other, the oppressor class. I shall return to this question in subsequent months.

Unlike earlier socialists, Marx and Engels concentrated on organising the proletariat to take power, rather than dreaming up plans for a future society. All around them in Europe the bourgeoisie was making revolution against the ruling Establishment classes. Marx's genius was to recognise that in spite of its then depressed state the proletariat held the key to the future. Draper discusses the reasons for Marx's choice of 'revolutionary agent', pointing that this was because of their social position as a class, and not because of any mysterious virtue of individuals. Their conditions of life lead them to organise. Their interests as a group organised by capital lead them to struggle. These struggles tend to push beyond bourgeois institutions and ideas and conditions push them towards militancy. Finally, this class, alone, has the social weight and power to abolish the old order and build a new society. Draper summarises Marx's theory of proletarian revolution [47]: his 'theory asserts that 'only the proletariat, by the conditions of its existence, embodies a social program pointing to an alternative to capitalism'.

Marx was aware of some of the problems with this identification of an agent of revolutionary social change. He spoke of the need for 'fifteen, twenty, fifty years of civil wars and people's struggles to go through, not only to change the conditions but in order to change yourselves'. However, István Mészáros, in our time, has pointed out that Marx did not take into consideration the divisions within the proletariat. These 'fragmentations and hierarchies' exist within particular sections of labour within a particular nation, and between bodies of labour divided by international capitalist competition. They may also divide workers in the advanced industrialised nations from those in the 'Third World'.

While the contradiction between Capital and Labour increasingly defines the two major classes other classes continue to exist. In all countries there persists what is confusingly called a petty-bourgeoisie. They may own small productive property ("bourgeois") but they do not live off the

employment of wage-labour. They include self-employed crafts-people, shopkeepers and small merchants. In many countries, particularly in Asia and Africa, the peasantry is still an important class, as it was in Europe in Marx's time, and any hope of major change depends on winning its support.

In a 1998 interview with the Persian quarterly, *Naghd*, Mészáros reminds readers that Marx was describing a process of "proletarianisation" in which 'the overwhelming majority of individuals ... lose all control possibilities of their life and in that sense become proletarianised'. With the increasing penetration of capital ('privatisation' and monetary values) into all aspects of life and the increasing gulf between rich and poor this affects the so-called "middle classes" and is an important aspect of class today.

I will return to the topic of class when I discuss class consciousness and ideology. But next I will consider some of the economic concepts which help us make sense of our world.

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István Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, London, Merlin/New York, Monthly Review, 1995, pp.926-30.

István Mészáros, *Socialism or Barbarism: From the "American Century" to the Crossroads* - Part 2 is the *Naghd* interview.

## Book review

### *Fortunate Son: George W. Bush & the Making of an American President*, J.H. Hatfield, 2001, New York, Soft Skull Press. Reviewed by Marie Hampton

The Bush election team considered this such an important book that it exerted pressure on the original publishers, St. Martin's Press, causing them to withdraw the book from booksellers and promise to pulp it. They were not wrong in fearing it might damage the image they were creating. It an invaluable guide, not only to the character and activities of Bush himself, and the conduct of American elections, but also to the relation between the political and the economic spheres.

Bush comes from a long line of "the haves". Prescott Bush, George W.'s grandfather, with his father-in-law, George Herbert Walker, working through the Union Banking Corporation, were major financial supporters of Hitler in the United States in the years leading up to WW2. G.W.'s father, George Herbert Walker Bush, a pilot in WW2, made his money through oil in W. Texas. It was the usual combination of borrowed money to finance the business and luck in drilling in the right place. He

went on to become head of the CIA and later US President.

Schooled at Andover, Yale, and later Harvard Business School, George W. had his share of "youthful irresponsibilities". But these have left him intolerant and unforgiving rather than understanding, as demonstrated by his record when, as Governor of Texas, he had to sign pardons and legislation on adolescent crime (e.g. case of repentant Karla Faye Tucker for whom Pope John Paul II, officials of the European Community and United Nations, and many other individuals worldwide, called for mercy).

Of particular interest in showing the relation of the economic and political levels are those sections describing G.W.'s business career. This also epitomises the old saying, "it is not what you know, but who you know that counts". He began with help from an old friend and was soon hiring himself out to research land titles and mineral rights for independent oilmen and large companies. In June 1977 he formed his own drilling company, but this had ill luck and failed to make a profit. By 1986 it had become absorbed by Harken Energy Corp. G.W. was on the Board of Directors, its audit committee and a panel considering restructuring. In 1987 G.W. was able to use family friends, the investment banking and brokerage firm, Stephens, Inc., to help find the needed funds. As a result Sheikh Abdullah Bakhsh, a Saudi real estate magnate and financier, joined Harken's board of directors. Later, when his father was President, the company was mysteriously invited to prospect for oil in Bahrain. Incidents like this led to suspicions that the company was profiting from

G.W.'s family connections, suspicions which he strongly combatted.

Another business venture which is informative on the personal and wider levels is G.W.'s role in the purchase of the baseball team and stadium, the Texas Rangers in 1989. Again his name was instrumental in assembling 70 investors. \$606,000 of his own money out of \$86 million secured him the post of managing general partner at \$200,000/year as well as an 11.8% interest in the business. Particularly interesting in the light of his subsequent opposition to all state funding is his subsequent deal with the Mayor of Arlington under which a half-cent increase in sales tax provided \$135 million to build G.W.'s dream-stadium for his baseball team.

The blow-by-blow accounts of George W's campaigns for election as Governor of Texas and then President of the USA reveal his talent for raising money (\$37 million in the first six months of 1999) and his remarkable "common touch" which enables him to speak to Hispanics and African-Americans as well as the red-necked Whites whom one could expect such a right-wing Republican to appeal to. Then there is the fundamentalist Christian constituency (the Reverend Billy Graham was a family friend and converted GW, who was his special favourite, having a similar wild youth to the evangelist's own son, Franklin).

To conclude, a picture emerges from this book of G.W. as an astute politician, highly skilled in the use of the US political machine. His deeply held Right Republican convictions, together with fundamental Christianity, make him highly dangerous, not only for the USA, but for the whole world.

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## Can the US allow free elections?

**Clive Bradley**

George W Bush's plans to take a back seat in Iraq before the US presidential election in November 2004, leaving it in safe Iraqi hands, are coming unstuck. There were mass demonstrations in Basra on 15 January supporting the call of Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani for direct elections; 100,000 later marched in Baghdad.

The US plan was to transfer sovereignty to a Parliament elected not by universal suffrage, but from local "notables" (tribal chiefs and others) by the end of June this year. This would draft a constitution, and then full elections would be held in 2005. Sistani opposed this from the outset - issuing a "fatwa" (religious ruling) that any government formed without direct elections would be illegitimate. US civil administrator Paul Bremer flew back to Washington for talks, and one US official commented that they would be "crazy" to make an enemy of Sistani. The US and UK are seeking a compromise with Sistani.

The US-led occupation faces an increasingly difficult squeeze. The capture of Saddam did not lead, as they hoped, to a decline in insurgency (mainly in the "Sunni triangle" in central Iraq) - on the contrary, "resistance" activities have increased. The total number of deaths of US soldiers hit 500 recently. This is bad for Bush in an election year. The Interim Governing Council established by Bremer last summer has very little legitimacy or mandate, and the occupying forces are anxious to establish something with more weight - allowing them to formally end the occupation and begin the withdrawal of troops. From their point of view, a delicate balancing act has to be performed to make this possible - that is, to construct a stable order which will be friendly to US interests.

Iraq is divided, crudely, into an oil-rich north which is heavily Kurdish, an oil-rich south which is heavily Shia, and a central area with few resources, which is mainly Sunni. It is this Sunni community which has always been politically dominant - partly thanks to British colonial policy. The Ba'ath regime was also based among Sunnis.

Calls for a federal Iraq have come from a number of directions. The Kurds themselves, who enjoyed a high degree of self-rule over the past decade under American protection, but whose claims over the largest oil fields are regarded with suspicion and fear by the Arabs (and by neighbouring Turkey, anxious not to see its own recalcitrant Kurds given too much encouragement), have managed to win American agreement for effective local autonomy. Some American experts have been advising "cantonisation" of Iraq.

But one of the more dangerous scenarios, from Washington's point of view, is the break-up of Iraq into warring ethnic and religious groups. It was to avoid it that Bush Sr abandoned the 1991 uprising to its fate. The 2003 war was designed to secure the stability of one of the world's largest oil centres, not plunge it into civil war.

Free elections, as demanded by Ayatollah Sistani, would likely bring Shia parties to power, since the Shia are probably 60% or more of the population. This is why Sistani and his followers want them. But the best organised parties among the Shia are Islamists of one sort or another. The White House views a possible Iran-style government in Baghdad with trepidation. The Sunnis even more so: it seems that an element in the "resistance" - which is heavily (perhaps entirely) Sunni in composition - is Sunni fear of Shia rule. So a Shia majority government, also, might plunge the country into civil war.

Sistani, in fact, is not pro-Iranian. The "object of emulation", or supreme Shia authority in Iraq, he belongs to a quietist tradition in Shia Islam which sharply opposes the clerical rule which exists in Iran, or which is favoured by other, more militant, Shia groups. Sistani wants an Islamic state, but not achieved through militant action. Sistani has collaborated with the USA so far. It is a serious headache for the occupation that he has gone into open, and uncompromising, opposition.

The British seem to think that a Shia electoral majority could produce something as manageable as the nominally-Islamist government in Turkey; the USA is more cautious although allegedly Bremer is shifting towards support for elections. The CPA claim that elections are impossible for technical reasons, the lack of a census, etc. Sistani's followers counter that existing ration cards would do for polling, and elections are entirely possible by the summer.

Working class and leftist forces are much less well-organised than either Sistani or other Shia movements (and for that matter, perhaps, than Ba'athists - there is already a reformed post-Saddam Ba'ath Party). And an Islamic state, dominated by pro-Sistani groups, or others, is not in working-class interests. But democracy is.

Sistani's championing of the demand for elections gives him even more political weight with a Shia population increasingly opposed to the occupation. The emerging workers' movement can't leave that space uncontested. There is a growing movement outraged at the sudden imposition of Islamic law. Democrats and socialists plainly cannot support rule by the US military or by caucuses of hand-picked notables and ayatollahs. Elections? Yes. But together with a fight for separation of mosque and state; for trade-union and civil rights; for women's equality; for thorough democracy; for rebuilding an independent workers' movement as the main and most urgent task.

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**Interview continued from back page**

In Basra there are two groups that are very similar to groups operating in Afghanistan and Iran: Al-Amr Bilmaarof and Al-Nahi an Al-Munkar. They exist to attack civil rights and women's rights. They beat and threaten women who go out without a veil and who wear makeup. The CPI defends these parties by putting out vague sounding phrases like "defend Iraqi traditions".

WL: Have the political islamists threatened you or your OWF colleagues directly?

LAYLA: Four months ago I was threatened by mullahs in Baghdad. They announced in Shia and other mosques that sex workers, women who do not wear the veil and women who "bring corruption to society" (a way of saying those who defend women's rights and women's equality) should be killed. They named me, Nadia Mahmood, Yannah Mohammed and Nasik Ahmed. When we started a campaign of opposition to these mullahs in our newspaper "Al Musawat" (Equality), they stopped talking about us in the mosques. A strong newspaper is important. Our first issue after the fall of Saddam sold 1000 copies, the third sold 5000 copies.

WL: Have you been able to create a united front of left wing parties on key issues?

LAYLA: Yes. Some small left parties have attended our demonstrations and support our political

programmes. But they say we are too direct in our opposition to political Islam. They say it's dangerous. But we are continuing to campaign for a secular government.

WL: How can Australian trade unionists and political activists help the cause of women in Iraq?

LAYLA: It would be good if an Australian trade union delegation were to visit Iraq to see for themselves what conditions are like for workers and the unemployed. We have had some visits from trade unionists... I think it was the International Labour Federation. There were workers from Britain, the USA and Spain. We gave them addresses and off they went on their own to talk to people. Before they left they promised support for the Unemployed Workers Union.

Financial help is vitally important: we do not have any state or country supporting us. We depend on modern people... trade unionists, human rights activists, women's groups etc. for support. You can also put pressure on the Australian government to call for free elections in Iraq without militia or harassment. There should be a secular government in Iraq: complete separation of church and state. And there must be full equality for men and women. You can also set aside a place in your newspapers to talk about the real situation for the people of Iraq... not just what the US is doing, or the governing council is doing... but what the people of Iraq need. .

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# Workers' Liberty

## Eyewitness Report from Iraq

*Lynn Smith interviewed Layla Mohammed, activist with the Organisation for Women's Freedom (OWF) in Iraq, in solidarity with the Worker Communist Party of Iraq (WCPI). Layla recently returned from visiting Iraq*

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WL: What are the main campaigns you're involved in?

LAYLA: ...Women's issues, that began as problems during the B'aath regime but are becoming worse now because there is no authority in Iraq to protect women. Abduction and rape are common. The Islamic throw acid on women who they say "refuse to obey the family code". Criminal gangs abduct women and girls in order to extort ransoms for their return. Our campaigns centred around demands like "stop the abduction of women" and "respect women's rights". On August 23 a couple of days before I arrived in Baghdad, the Organisation for Women's Freedom staged a demonstration attended by 100 people (mostly women). It was the first time our organization had campaigned publicly and people were afraid.

WL: How does the OWF go about organising?

LAYLA: I began visiting people in the camps: in Baghdad and Mahmoodia. The families who live in these camps are unemployed and do not have money to pay rent. In each camp I met with about 50 women. I asked them about their problems. Their main problems are:

no water... people have to walk a kilometer or more to find running water

no electricity... blackouts that last up to eight hours are common. Sometimes power is cut off for a week

no health services

abductions: mothers cannot go out of the camps to take their daughters to school because the risk of kidnapping is high

domestic violence

divorced women with no means of support...many are not legally married so do not receive any benefit now they've separated. If you were opposed to Saddam's regime, you did not go to the marriage registrar and tell them where you lived.

WL: Which organisations are giving you material support?

LAYLA: We met with NGOs in Baghdad like Care Australia (but their office was hit by an RPG and they closed down), HELP (a German organisation).

American Friends Services Committee (who gave us money to buy shoes for the women and children) and APN a Canadian group (donated school kits). The Middle East Church Council gave us tents to house people in the camps at Al Huda, Al Gazalia, and Al Salam. We also receive support from concerned individuals. We have doctors working without fees in the camps (including a women's doctor). Prescriptions are filled and given to people.

WL: What is the attitude of the authorities to the camps?

LAYLA: The Iraqi police asked people to evacuate without offering them any other accommodation. People expect us to defend them. We organized three demonstrations: the first in mid December attended by 400, the second on December 31 attended by 1000 and another in early January attended by 400. These demonstrations were successful. The US appointed "governing council" has promised the people in the camps that they will not be moved until alternate accommodation is found. But there is terrorism, with dozens of Iraqi civilians killed. There are no elections. There is no water. No petrol. What is the governing council doing about these things? They are just supporting Paul Bremmer's policy. People in Iraq do not trust them.

WL: What role is the Communist Party of Iraq (CCPI) playing in these developments?

LAYLA: They are close to the Islamic parties. The CPI wants to get some benefits for itself out of association with these groups. They defend the Islamic parties' attitudes. They are not fighting for human rights. Not involved in campaigns to defend the people in the camps. Some people refer to the CPI (half jokingly) as the "Islamic Communist Party". They are not direct or clear about the issue of women's rights. Recently, the "governing council" announced family law should be based on sharia law. The CPI were silent for 20 days. They then came out with general statements like "defend women's rights" but did not campaign for full equality for men and women (as the WCPI does) and did not specifically oppose the introduction of sharia law (as we do).  
*Continued on page 15*