

Workers' Liberty

The emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself
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US marines confront Iraqi unemployed workers, Najaf March 2004

Photo: UUI

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The workers' movement and the resistance



There is a growing workers movement in Iraq, and the "armed resistance" is its mortal enemy.

There are 3 union groups in Iraq - the Federation of Workers Councils and Unions in Iraq (FWCUI) - including the Unemployed Union of Iraq (UUI); the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU) and the General Federation of Unions in Iraq (GFUI).

The General Federation is the reconstructed Ba'athist state union body, anti-working class, and a fake "yellow union".

The FWCUI is led by the Worker-Communist Party of Iraq. It does not recognise the Interim Governing Council (IGC). It has organised many demonstrations of unemployed workers, and other campaigns, and has quite a developed set of demands and policies, including a draft Labor law.

The IFTU is led by, but includes currents other than, the Communist Party of Iraq. It recognises the IGC, and in turn is recognised by the IGC.

Relations between the IFTU and the FWCUI are poor, with considerable antagonism on the part of the WCPI, on the basis of the CPI connection and the CPI's membership of the IGC.

There is an urgent need for a unifying set of demands for the interests of workers in both union federations, including around ending the occupation, and a sincere effort by the leaders of the FWCUI to make common cause with the ranks of the IFTU.

Mobilising solidarity with Iraqi workers is complicated by this split. The main discussions and attempts at resolution have been on the part of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, at meetings in Jordan late in 2003, early 2004. The unfortunate presence of the Iraqi General Federation of Trade Unions complicated matters. The GFTU is not a genuine union body, but its presence was required by the International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions, especially the Syrian union body, which is itself state run. The FWCUI sees the IGC recognition of the IFTU in the same light, as state endorsement, making it not being a real union.

However left union delegates from Britain, the Fire Brigades Union and the RMT, have toured Iraq, and visited IFTU affiliated factories and workplaces, and have been convinced that these are independent unions. Further, the large and significant Southern Oil Company union considered affiliation to both Federations and chose the IFTU.

US Labor Against the War is conducting an energetic solidarity campaign in the USA and deals with this split between the Iraqi unions by sharing its fund-raising results 50:50 between the 2 federations.

The picture is not entirely clear, but in the face of the 2 main forces in Iraq, the US Occupation and the Islamist/Ba'athist reactionary armed resistance, a third way is desperately needed for the people of Iraq, and by the workers in particular. Tariq Ali said in [the Socialist Alliance magazine] *Seeing Red*, there are no signs of hope in any movements developing in the Middle East. Reaction abounds he says, and a secular movement is needed.

In Nasariyah workers in aluminum and sanitary supply factories recently defended their factories from being commandeered by the Islamist militia, as well as preventing occupying forces from remaining in residential areas. The role of the Mahdi army and al-Sadr have been explained in detail by WCPI authors (*A week of war of terrorists* - <http://www.workersliberty.org/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=2084>)

...
Iraqi independence after the US occupation could see the replacement of one murderous dictatorship – Ba'athist, by another – Islamist. Socialists around the world have a responsibility to do all we can to strengthen working class forces and supporters of secularism and freedom in Iraq. Or else they could end up jailed, tortured and murdered. Such a tragedy happened in Iran after the fall of the US backed Shah, when the Islamists took power.

It is inexcusable for working class internationalists to say that these things do not matter, with reasoning such as "sorting out the political ideologies among those in the struggle (against the occupation) has to be decided by the people. This is after all what it means to support the right of nations to self-determination." (Pip Hinman, in *Seeing Red*, March 2004, p. 15)

Self-determination means that the people of a country should be free to choose their own government without coercion or intervention from other governments, armies or states. It is very surprising that a socialist could claim that support for working class interests in internal struggles in other countries represents a violation of the rights of national self-determination.

There are other arguments for ignoring the reactionary nature of the "armed resistance" and consequently neglecting to provide real solidarity to the Iraqi workers' movement.

The main argument is that the USA is so much greater an evil that all mobilisation must be directed against the USA and its allies. The USA may be a greater evil in the sense that it has such vast military power and potential to intervene almost anywhere on the planet,

supporting any kind of hideous dictators that will accommodate their interests. But the Islamists are a greater evil in a different sense. For workers, socialists and any oppositionists, every moment of public life is potentially dangerous if they do not submit. For women every moment of public and private life is potentially dangerous with the added power of men in the family backed by Sharia law. It is not only pointless, it is not moral to rate the evil that we will choose as greater or lesser amongst these two. To choose the "armed resistance" as the lesser evil, is to say that if the people of Iraq must suffer the risk of Islamist rule, then that is the price they pay for thwarting US imperialism in Iraq to the benefit of anyone else threatened by the USA.

Another argument is that to condemn the Islamists is to logically have to support the occupation. This is again the logic of "lesser evilism" and "two camps". If we recognise that the Iraqi working class and other secular forces are struggling to assert themselves in Iraq, then there is a third way, that is neither the "armed resistance" nor the US occupation.

The beginnings of working class organisation in Iraq are fragile because of the dangerous opponents they face, but the WCPI is hundreds of times bigger and more influential in the Iraqi working class, than the SA is in Australia, in a roughly similar size population. The secular movement which is needed in order to develop the basis for a socialist future is struggling to assert itself, and it needs international working class solidarity.

It does matter who ends the occupation. If the Islamists end it, they will triumph over the people of Iraq. If the workers movement can play a strong role in ending the occupation and can struggle for their demands in the creation of a new Iraqi government, then they can at least win rights and freedoms that will allow them to maintain their organisations and develop their struggles. They could be a beacon and an inspiration to the masses of the Middle East that there is a way out of the reactionary mess.

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Iraq - "against the Governing Council, the terrorists and US policy"

Janet Burstall

The Occupation combined with lack of general lack of security in civil society are central problems facing Iraqi women and workers, according to Iraqi speakers at a forum in Sydney on 20 March.

Layla Mohammed (Organisation of Women's Freedom in Iraq) and Jalal Mohamad (Australian representative of the Unemployed Union of Iraq) both argued that the Interim Governing Council (IGC) had been set up by the US based on a view of Iraq as a tribal, ethnic and nationally divided country. Because representation on the IGC is according to these loyalties, disagreements on the IGC are along these lines, fuelling social conflict on a reactionary basis. Political representation in Iraq should be according to class interests, social interests, women's interests and so on, as in a modern civil society. This is the view of the Worker Communist Party of Iraq (WCPI), which they both support.

Senator Kerry Nettle, also on the panel, was about to visit Iraq as part of an international delegation of MPs (since delayed). She described the relationship between the US and the IGC as "an example of the way in which the Occupation is feeding and fuelling disagreements between Iraqi groups. In a contradictory way it is both a common enemy and it fuels dissension."

Kassim Abood, a member of the Communist Party of Iraq which holds one seat on the IGC rejected criticisms leveled at the IGC. He said that the USA had wanted the IGC to be a rubber stamp, but that the "interim Council is a compromise between a rubber stamp and full governing authority. We see it as a platform of struggle, we can use it." But according to Layla "no one in Iraq sees the IGC as a power that can solve problems" such as the "hundreds of thousands of Iraqis living in camps" following the destruction of housing by the invasion. Neither is the IGC protecting women from honour killings, fatwahs, rape, abduction and family violence.

When Jalal repeated criticisms of the Governing Council, Kassim Abood walked out.

According to Jalal "Handing over power is not the main issue. Afghanistan is a clear example of what the US intends to do in Iraq, it is like the "Vietnamisation" of Iraq. It does not equal democracy in Iraq. We need a secular, non-religious, non-nationalist regime. The

power of creating such a regime is against the US backed Governing Council, against the terrorists and against US policy. It is in the hands of the workers movement, the union movement, the secular movement."

Jarvis Ryan, from ISO and Socialist Worker asked comrades of the WCPI whether they gave in principle support to the armed resistance, which he understood had widespread support and could be an ally of the civil struggle. Jalal replied that "the resistance" had killed many more Iraqis than occupying troops. (The numbers Jalal had to hand were 530 troops to 30,000 Iraqis - Bodycount Iraq records the total since the US invasion as a direct result of armed conflict at 600 occupying troops and up to 11,000 Iraqis.) "What is the Resistance going to achieve in Iraq?" Jalal asked. "We are against the armed resistance". Layla added that much needed aid was not being provided because suicide bombers have frightened away aid workers.

The question that Kerry Nettle will be grappling with on the delegation to Iraq is "Should we recommend that the June 30 handover is a reflection of a democratic voice in Iraq?" Another member of the Greens pointed out that the US has indicated its plans to rotate its troops till 2007 so that there are 100,000 US troops at any one time. It is difficult to see how she could have recommended that the handover reflects a "democratic voice".

Jalal outlined some of the work of the Federation of Workers Councils and Unions in Iraq (FWCUI) which includes the Unemployed Union of Iraq, and Layla outlined that of the Organisation of Women's Freedom in Iraq. These are the forces who have the capacity and interest to fight for workers rights, women's rights and freedom, against the occupation, religious persecution and terror against civilians.

Karen Iles, a CFMEU organiser suggested some possibilities for solidarity by Australian unions, but also stated the need for a "reality check" thinking about which unions are in a position to offer support, and all the other issues which unions have to deal with. She said that rank and file members are best placed to invite speakers to workplace meetings. Women in Iraq need support, particularly in a war zone, but there are few organisations in Sydney that could offer much practically. AidWatch may be able to help monitor where aid is going in Iraq.

MUA member Jake Haub said that it would be easier to build union solidarity in Australia if it were clearer who represents workers in Iraq, because "if Iraqi unions are at each others necks, the trade unions in this country would not be involved". He proposed a trade union sponsored seminar to look at practical activities for solidarity.



Eyewitness: Iraq's new trade unions. The workers are organising

*Ewa Jasiewicz spent eight months in Iraq, mainly in Baghdad and Basra, working for Occupation Watch. She worked with the trade union movement in Basra, especially the Southern Oil Company Union. From Basra she used to post regular reports at the anarchist website infoshop (www.infoshop.org), and via other web resources (for example, *Voices in the Wilderness*), about workers' struggles in Iraq. Clive Bradley talked to her.*

Ewa went to Iraq from Palestine, because while many activists from around the world were working to help the Palestinians, few were supporting Iraqis. It's an impressive degree of commitment, balanced with a concern genuinely to listen to Iraqi workers and respond to their needs. She lived for a while with the family of the leader of the Southern Oil Company (SOC) union, Hassan Jum'a, and then with the union's vice president.

I know from my own experience trying to do research on the workers' movement in Egypt — when I was a student — that winning the trust of such militants is not easy. I never managed it. That she was invited to stay in their homes tells you a great deal about how much trust Ewa was able to earn.

The SOC union, while affiliated to the Communist Party-led Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU), is an independent workplace based organisation, which recently won a battle over pay).

Under the dictatorship, independent trade union organisation was illegal and difficult. The regime had its own "yellow union" federation, which still notionally exists; but anything outside it was ruthlessly repressed. In 1987, the Ba'ath passed a law which transformed all workers into civil servants and outlawed all trade union activity. "Some activists survived that," Ewa explains, "and managed to continue organising at a very low level. It was mainly activists watching each other's backs. It wasn't possible to do much. But a lot of these activists are now involved in the trade unions. There's a lot of workers in the SOC who were against the Ba'ath, or were affiliated to the Da'wa Party [the oldest of the Islamist parties in Iraq, which dates back to the 1950s]; they formed the base of the SOC union."

"Hassan Jum'a was elected at a meeting attended by around 150 people," she tells me. "I've seen the film of him, coming up to the stand, and all he said was 'I'm Hassan Jum'a; I'm running for the head of the Southern Oil Company union.' And he got elected. He's actively anti-Ba'athist, and people respect him."

Jum'a has "good links" with some of the religious parties. "On a number of occasions I've seen people

from different religious parties in his office. I'd call it an Islamic union, because Hassan is not a Communist Party member. Most of the other unions are headed by CP members, and he's got a very strong religious influence, and religious people in his union are very active. So it's a mixture. Really it just came from the grass roots."

The SOC union, then, doesn't fit easily into preconceived patterns. It is, clearly, a genuine working class body. "I didn't see much evidence of the religious groups trying to recruit; they are organising the unions on a trade-union basis."

I ask how the unions are organised. "They have regular meetings, and they have a lot of events — like cultural events, which often have a religious flavour to them; Koran readings awards, etc. But they always have a big celebration whenever they've reconstructed a particular worksite — bring all the workers together, etc. They are very proud of their worker identity. And they're very active in autonomous reconstruction." ("Reconstruction" is where the workers, through their own initiative, get factories which have ground to a halt, working again — sometimes creatively improvising with broken machinery.)

Threat from Ba'athist managers remains

"Most workers are part of the union," Ewa goes on. "The union leaderships, and many workers, said they were prepared to go on strike in support of higher wages; union reps had told workers to start saving money in preparation for strike action. And they talk quite freely. When I first got there I was really suspicious of everybody, as I'm sure they were of me. I felt like the SOC union was all Da'wa controlled. But that's not really the case. I wanted to see workers alone, without union officials around — and they saw that as suspicious. But then I did get to meet workers pretty much alone. I talked to them about the Ba'athists, and they were able to say that Ba'athists are still in power, still in the management."

I comment that it must be strange, after all the years of dictatorship, to be able to talk freely. But Ewa tells me it still isn't always so free. "I went to this caravan park where SOC workers lived — state housing, provided by the company. I was speaking to this guy who'd been working in the oil industry for over 30 years and was still living in this shitty little caravan.

"He was saying that they'd thrown all the Ba'athist managers out, but then the oil industry, supported by the occupation, brought them back. Some were permanently excluded — and if they came back they'd probably get killed. Some people that they brought back did get killed. "But then this guy came round, and the whole atmosphere changed. He was from the accounts department, which is notoriously where the Ba'ath often recruited (and money would get stolen and that kind of thing). And the whole tone changed, and everyone started saying that everything was really great now — that you can buy satellite dishes now — which is shit — they cost about \$100, and most families couldn't possibly afford it.

"I'd never been in a situation like that, where people had to police themselves. And then the guy I'd been talking to — I felt a lot of kinship with him, because it seemed like he'd been active against the Ba'ath — he was led away. Later I was told we couldn't go back there."

The successful struggle at the beginning of this year was over a government-imposed wage table which in practice was a blow to workers' living standards. The SOC union worked out its own wage table. "They worked out the average size of a family, the prices of essential goods, water, rents — which have shot up a lot; fixed government rents have all gone out the window. Also subsidies that workers survived on have been cut by the occupation. For instance you used to be paid more if you were working in a remote location like the desert. Some workers were given public housing, family bonus payments — that's all axed. So the wage table took into consideration all those losses."

Is this wage table to be used in national pay negotiations? "Not nationally. But I was told that it had been applied to the oil sector," Ewa remembers. "It will soon be applied to other sectors, because they can use it as a bargaining tool for their own struggles. That's what will be demanded by electricity sector workers, who were quite volatile when I was there and had had a wildcat one day strike in protest..."

The emerging trade unions tend to be divided along lines of political affiliation. The IFTU is almost completely dominated by the Communist Party. "The IFTU, the CP, and the CP-run Women's League all share a building, along with these homeless families who have to pay rent. The CP see themselves as the heir to the history of workers' struggles. When Adnan Pachachi declared the IFTU the official rep, that was exactly what they wanted to hear." On the other hand, there are the initiatives of the Worker-Communist Party — the Union of the Unemployed, the Workers' Councils and Unions in Iraq (WCUI) (and also the Organisation of Women's Freedom in Iraq, OWFI).

Ewa was impressed by the WCPI. "I attended a WCUI election at a textile factory," she recalls. "There's a Worker-Communist Party activist there who organised the election, and I asked people what they thought of him. And people said, 'well, we don't really like the WCPI, but we really like him.' He's democratic and energetic, with a lot of knowledge, and they really admire that. The WCPI were judged on their commitment to working class struggle."

Ewa is an anarchist, critical of all political parties. "They co-opt people's creativity," she thinks. But she reports a discussion with a member of the WCPI: "In the 1991 intifada, they set up these popular councils, in Suleimaniyah. And he told me that because they didn't have any central command, didn't have a leadership, who could say 'now we need to take up arms', they got picked off, they got massacred. And he said, 'that's why we can't have that problem again, which is why we need a party'."

Tensions between the WCPI and the CP run very high. The WCPI opposes the occupation as well as the “resistance”; the CP “don’t call the occupation an occupation; they refer to it as the Coalition Provisional Authority.” So far, there seems little basis for united front-type organisation. The WCPI go so far as to deny that the IFTU is a genuine working class organisation at all. On this, Ewa comments: “Yes and no. They tend to organise in quite an authoritarian way. But there are unions, like the SOC, which are real workers’ organisations.”

There are also workers’ networks and initiatives outside either of these orbits. “Al Khorafi is a huge company, probably bigger than Halliburton, made up entirely of ex-pat American managers, New Zealanders, and so on. They say they’re a Kuwaiti company, but I saw no Kuwaitis there. They bring in their own labour, because they’re used to working with particular engineers. For them it was just easier and in some cases they were paying them more — there was an issue of trust. They denied that it happened, but everyone spoke about it. The [Iraqi] workers threatened to bomb the offices if they didn’t reverse the ratio of Iraqi to for workers, and they did so.”

That it was a victory for the workers seems clear. “Al Khorafi has given computers to the SOC union, etc, really trying to appease the union, because they know how powerful they are, and if they’re going to survive in Basra, they’re going to have show they’re a caring company with the interests of the Iraqi people at heart... they’re going to build a hospital, as well. They’ve even changed their name to al-Iraqi. But everyone still hates them.”

Workers suspicious of Islamic influence

Another aspect of party domination of the unions concerns Ewa. “Any Islamic individuals who are doing good work are somehow second class, not quite conscious enough. There’s a perception they just pray all day. I really want to stress the myth of ‘Islamic’ unions organising. There’s a lot of Islamophobia, which sees these people as incapable of understanding working class struggle, the ideas of communism or internationalism, but they’re just as conscious as any kind of Marxist or communist. Hassan Jum’a said to me ‘when you go back give our regards to all the workers you meet, because we’re all the same..., one struggle, all working class people around the world’.”

This led us onto the whole question of Islamism. Everyone Ewa knew in the unions in Basra attended the demonstrations in January calling for direct elections, organised by Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani. “Everyone supports Sistani,” she reports. Does this mean there is the possibility of an Islamist take-over in Iraq?

“I don’t know how many people are part of these Islamist organisations. Obviously they have followers, but I never met anyone who really supported them. I met a lot of people who didn’t like Muqtada al-Sadr [the radical Shia leader with a base in Baghdad and other cities] and criticised him — Sadr and SCIRI have got five thousand tops armed supporters.”

I wasn’t so sure about this. Weren’t there battle-lines forming about the role of Islam in a future Iraq?

“People want an Iraqi government, across the board,” Ewa tells me. “It doesn’t have to be a religious government. Everyone I spoke to, even from Da’wa or SCIRI [the Iranian-backed Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution], said that everyone wants a government which represents Iraqi people, and we don’t care if that’s religious or not. There are going to be differences of opinion, but the experience of the regime, the wars, has given people a real instinct for community, a hunger for community, for social relationships, for control over their own industries.”

“The religious parties are seen by a lot of people as illegitimate,” she goes on. “Sistani doesn’t support any of them. He’s said secularism can be part of it, women can have a right to choose their husbands, whether to wear the veil.”

Sistani

I still wasn’t convinced. Ewa seemed to me too sanguine about Sistani and his potential role. She was impressed by his threat to call an intifada if the occupation doesn’t hand over power to an elected government. But here we had our sharpest disagreement. A united uprising against the occupation is the US’s biggest fear, she thinks. The day before we met, the terrible explosions in Baghdad and Karbala had taken place. “The word on the street in Baghdad is that the Americans might be responsible,” she tells me. I find it hard to see how this would be in US interests. The gameplan, I argue, is to stabilise the Middle East so that they can make profits, and immediately in Iraq they don’t want the security situation to deteriorate further. “They’ll never make any money if they’re defeated and thrown out of the country,” Ewa retorts. “They’re willing to have two years of civil war if they are able to continue controlling the country... The whole country is unstable, it’s on fire. They conduct bombing raids, the war is still continuing. It’s not like the conditions have been created for investment. And the military bases are going ahead.” We will agree to differ on this. For now, the priority is to focus on how we can work together to build support for the workers’ movement.

What do workers need? “Computer training lessons, computers, internet navigation skills, so they can make their own links and don’t have to rely on foreign activists. To get different unions connected to each other. Iraqi workers want to learn new skills. Iraq has a highly advanced pool of engineers, it’s like a nation of engineers, and some of them are selling peanuts...”

There have been a number of union delegations, from Britain and the US — “fact finding missions”. Does she think these serve a purpose? “They have to bring useful things with them. Go with the unions, buy a computer, install it, train people — see the process through. The US Labour Against the War delegation brought a translation into Arabic of their pamphlet about the union-busting of the US companies now getting contracts in Iraq. That was really useful.”

A balance sheet

Riki Lane and Janet Burstall

The Socialist Alliance (SA) began as an electoral alliance in early 2001 and has developed work in other areas, especially trade unions and anti-war campaigning. In local areas specific campaigns have also been taken up. Membership has grown, but the active membership core has not grown in proportion. The Alliance is changing as an organisation too, with a publication program, and organisational structures to include the affiliates and non-aligned members in Alliance decision making. There are contentious issues here, with the Democratic Socialist Party (DSP) being the largest group in the Alliance, and having more than half the active membership. The DSP and a section of the "Non Aligned Caucus" (which includes many ex-DSPers with DSP politics) will have a clear majority at the 2004 SA Conference in Melbourne in May.

The task of creating an effective socialist organisation with several political traditions and a diverse range of individuals could be at a turning point at this conference. It will depend largely on whether the DSP and its allies among the non-aligned maintain a sufficient willingness to ensure genuine inclusion of all points of view in publications and decision making bodies. The Alliance is accumulating some collective experiences of campaigning. The longer term health of the Alliance project depends on expanding this experience and critically evaluating it, incorporating insights from not only Alliance members but non-Alliance activists in broader campaigns. The Alliance's task is nothing short of generating a new body of socialist and working class campaigning knowledge that can inspire and attract honest activists in daily struggles to connect those struggles with a longer term socialist project.

Elections

Socialist Alliance continues to grow albeit slowly and unevenly. Votes in some electorate areas have shown a slow but steady increase. Some of the best results have been at particular council elections where local issues are seriously addressed as well as broader ones. There is generally a problem with an overbalance of "BIG" political issues, especially in local and state level elections where national and international politics tend to be the most prominent aspects of campaigning. This may attract an ideological protest vote, and distinguish the Alliance very clearly from other parties and candidates. But the price is that it does not relate to people who are voting and campaigning on issues particular to that level of government. The message taken by many working class people in the electorate is that the Alliance is not a serious voice for their practical or daily concerns, and by implication that socialism is more concerned with other remote people, than them.

Unions

Some progress on union activity has been made. In the teachers, NTEU and NSW PSA, SA caucuses

have been increasing their influence and understanding. This should not be overstated, and the resignation by Michael Thomson – the most prominent SA member in the NTEU is a blow. Michael disagreed with a common assessment in SA that the result of the NTEU dispute was a defeat. I think he was right in this – the very successful national strike resulted in the government backing off on the anti-union provision of the Nelson agenda. This was a victory, and should be recognised as such by SA. The government did not back off on the anti-student provisions. However, there was no great support amongst NTEU members for further industrial action over the remaining issues.

The debate about priorities in trade union work has been interesting and useful. There are two different emphases in motions for the 2004 conference. Sue Bolton's draft motion puts the stress on "defending the militant union current" as the central political guideline. Our grassroots union work is then seen as aiming to extend that current. The alternative draft puts the stress the other way around – we have to build up the unions through grassroots activism, thus creating the basis for solidarity, militant challenges for leadership etc.

In this view, we also stress the need for union "unity in struggle" as a guiding principle. Socialist activists should not allow themselves to be portrayed as splitters. It is the sell-out leaderships who undermine the unity and strength of the members by doing deals with the boss behind their backs etc.

Publications

Seeing Red (SR) has appeared and shows considerable promise for attracting a wider readership and being a vehicle for debate and discussion. Having its own publication is a vital step for developing SA's profile and voice.

The long awaited *Book on Socialism* has yet to appear even in draft. An inclusive process of discussion is needed for it to help SA develop a clear conception (or conceptions) of what we mean by socialism. The inclusion of diverse Alliance opinions (e.g. about whether the USSR was socialist, relations between unions and social movements, unions and the ALP) will be a strong point, in both giving genuine meaning to the multi-tendency nature of the Alliance, and in making the book more educational internally and externally by providing a fair representation of the choices and issues engaging socialists.

The debate about SA's relationship with *Green Left Weekly* appears through a fog of smoke and mirrors. It is hard to see what is real and what is imaginary. The actual National Executive resolution merely says that we will continue a trial that aims to get more SA input into GLW. It is hard to see many objections to that. However, the discussion and the practice in many branches are quite different.

At one and the same time, Workers' Liberty members: hear in branches that GLW is the 'paper of SA' and

should be sold by all members; hear that some branches are being asked to take bundles of GLW to sell; read in *Alliance Voices* (AV) that GLW has to remain an independent paper so that it will retain its broad readership; and read in AV that SA will gradually take over the DSP's relationship with GLW.

What this all really seems to mean is that the DSP will retain control of GLW, but that SA will start to take responsibility for it. There cannot be genuine SA responsibility, with commitment amongst the whole membership, without a sense of ownership of editorial and decision making resting with the whole of the SA, without one affiliate having a more powerful role.

Workers' Liberty would prefer that SA worked towards launching a new weekly paper, utilising the resources of all affiliate publications and non-aligned members, full of debate and discussion, broad and open to the working class and social movements. This should take into account the broadsheet experiences which have had limited success. This would require a very different set of proposals to conference which could be worked towards for the 2005 conference if it is not too late.

The best course for SA in 2004 - 2005 is to focus on building Seeing Red – building a good distribution base, ensuring lively debate, and increasing its frequency.

Iraq War

SA activists have played an important role in building the demonstrations against the US coalition occupation of Iraq. However, this has tended to slide into uncritical support for the military "resistance", without recognition of the reactionary nature of its main Ba'athist and Islamist components. Instead of supporting an independent working class alternative, SA has supported "our enemy's enemy".

Only lip service has been paid to giving support to independent unemployed, trade union and women's organisations. A resolution from Workers Liberty was carried at the NE to raise money for the Unemployed Union of Iraq. This has never been implemented, because the DSP and ISO do not like the politics of the UUI – which opposes both the Occupation and the Ba'athists and Islamists.

This points out a broader problem in SA – you can get motions passed, but they will not be carried out if they do not meet the priorities of the main forces.

Decision making structures

No consensus has emerged about the best way to go with SA leadership bodies. Current structures are workable, but have some problems. The National Executive (NE) has sometimes been a rubber stamp for the National Convenors (NC) and Working Groups (WG). The unelected WGs are really running SA. The NC is overloaded with work. The non-aligned NE members have not had a regular report back role in their states.

The current organisational proposals seem to have two main aims:

- i) to reduce the influence of pesky small affiliates who raise difficult questions;
- ii) to give the DSP more representation, because they represent perhaps 25% of SA's membership and a larger proportion of the active members, both in branches and in the National WGs

Unsurprisingly, the DSP has supported these proposals. There is some validity to the idea that the national bodies should more accurately reflect the composition of the membership. However, if it is based on Dick Nichol's idea that "those who work should lead", we may have a rather small representation from non-aligned members – certainly not 50% as is proposed. There is a problem with the definition of "work" - some people's political work is focused around specifically Alliance building tasks, running Alliance stalls, making placards, organising branch meetings, being on an Alliance committee. These tasks are definitely necessary. But what about other SA members whose main political work could be as a union delegate, as a community activist, or writing? They may not be seen at Alliance meetings or stalls very often. But does the Alliance value and recognise their work?

The latest Non Aligned Caucus NE WG proposal has a number of problems. It increases the power of the unelected WGs. It increases the load on the NC. It reduces the input from affiliates and states to bimonthly. It means that there will be no election at the national conference at all. A quite unrepresentative NE could result if state conference elections of NE delegates are by slate, as majority votes could result in all non-aligned delegates being of a similar viewpoint.

The best options at this point are: to continue the current structure with improvements – an increased working role for NE members, formal report back requirements to state conferences, etc; or elect a working NE by proportional representation.

Proportional representation

Whatever structures are decided upon, we need to entrench the principle of proportional representation (PR) at all levels of SA. A slate system has the advantage that everyone knows whom he or she is voting for, and there is an obligation on all proposers to appear to be relatively inclusive. However there is equally the prospect that significant unpopular minorities could be deliberately excluded and squeezed out, which would be an undesirable development. A slate system gives no guarantee of minority representation – 50%+1 decides and can exclude all other voices.

Proportional Representation can be messy and unpredictable – but that is the point! That is what democratic votes are all about – people deciding who they support and the result is the collective expression of those choices. It puts the onus on everyone to be open to discussion and persuasion in order to try to create a cohesive whole, a spirit which is needed in the class struggle as a whole, and which SA should on principle model.

This is particularly important if the latest NAC NEWG proposal is adopted – otherwise the larger affiliates will have complete control over which non-aligned members represent the states on the NE.

Where to now?

The last year has seen increasing dissatisfaction amongst many non-aligned members and members of the smaller affiliates, including Workers' Liberty. This has been reflected in a shift in voting patterns on the NE – with the Non-Aligned Caucus no longer voting as

a block. Many SA members feel that, slowly but inexorably, the DSP is increasing its influence over SA. This raises questions – do we want to sell a basically unchanged GLW? Are we happy to be marginalised minorities in an SA that adopts the DSP world view? Can the DSP restrain themselves from pushing for organisational domination?

The SA is a long-term project still in its early stages. There are achievements being made in establishing connections with working class communities. The work in trade unions has been valuable in itself and debates on union issues have been extremely valuable in educating the SA membership – affiliate and non-aligned alike.

This points up one of the best things about SA – the joint campaigning work and discussions are forcing affiliate members to relate seriously to other conceptions.

We will not be selling GLW any time soon, but we are very happy to sell Seeing Red. The DSP's and ISO's different worldviews will continue to dominate SA in the medium term. However, SA remains the best possibility of developing towards a working class party that can be a voice of and for working class struggle at all levels of politics, elections, industrial campaigns, street campaigns and community campaigns. An outward focus by the SA on what we can offer working class people in struggle is what will enable the SA to unite in making progress towards being such a party.

UK AWL Greetings to the Aus SA Conference

The Alliance for Workers' Liberty in Britain sends its best wishes to the Australian Socialist Alliance conference for further progress towards the development of an open, pluralist, multi-tendency socialist party.

In England and Wales that project has had a setback with the effective liquidation of the majority of the Socialist Alliance into the Respect coalition, a narrower, non-socialist, electoralist enterprise built around the dubious personality of George Galloway MP.

We continue, however, to maintain some local Socialist Alliance groups, collaborating with a range of other comrades in the Socialist Alliance Democracy Platform to try to continue what the SA started out to do.

In Scotland we participate in the Scottish Socialist Party. The SSP's results in the 2003 elections - 7.7% of the list vote and 7% of the first-past-the-post vote across Scotland, and 15% in Glasgow - are evidence of what can be achieved by consistent electoral work with a clear message of socialism and independent working-class representation, and linked to ongoing non-electoral work on basic working-class issues like the SSP's free school meals campaign.

We are involved in initiatives and discussions towards setting up a campaign in solidarity with the new workers', unemployed, and women's organisations in Iraq, on lines similar to US Labor Against the War's Iraq Labor Solidarity Fund. We hope that this campaigning can be coordinated and extended on an international scale.

Martin Thomas
For Alliance for Workers' Liberty

Women's peace march - West Bank and Israel

Janet Burstall



Palestinian, Israeli, Jewish and international women marched for peace through Israel and the West Bank in January 2004.

Sydney activist Vivienne Porzsolt from Jews Against the Occupation was the only Australian on the march. She presented a slide show and spoke about the march at a meeting in Sydney on 22 April. Vivienne told stories of the obstacles faced by the marchers. Checkpoints operate not only at the borders between the West Bank and Israel. Vivienne had photos of checkpoints all through the West Bank, blocking or delaying internal movements. Some are permanent, others are mobile and temporary checkpoints. Some are bulldozed piles of dirt and rubble making vehicle

passage impossible. Some are erected next to stinking rubbish dumps where people must queue in the stench. Vivienne acknowledged that the marchers were experiencing only briefly the constant daily problems of the Palestinians - "The checkpoints are an exercise in humiliation, they are the daily essence of the Occupation".

Photos of Sharon's wall where it has been constructed show what a land grab it is, and how much more impossible it makes life for Palestinians. One photo is of a home cut off from its farm lands, with a gate open at unpredictable occasional intervals for 30 minute periods. Palestinian land that is unfarmed for a length of time can be legally claimed and occupied by Israeli "settlers". So the army and would-be "settlers" try to make Palestinian land unfarmable, for example by ripping up olive groves.

Vivienne also had photos and stories of hope and struggle. Israeli peace activists join with Palestinians in replanting olive groves to save the farmland. Murals, plays, and sculptures and artistic expression provide ways to tell stories and build Palestinian morale. A Palestinian teacher organised the "Windows" project for Palestinian and Israeli children to tell stories looking forward to a positive future.

One of the challenges for building a movement for justice for the Palestinians that came through in Vivienne's stories is the obstacles to unity between Palestinian activists and their Israeli supporters. The Windows project had to be organised from Italy, it could not be done in Israel or Palestine. For the Palestinian women who helped to host the international Peace March "it was not possible to be seen to be working with Israelis" - so the Israeli women on the march could only join the sections that were in Israel, and could not cross into the West Bank.

The 40 or so people who attended Vivienne's talk were stimulated to discussion about what could be done. Ideas included identifying and targeting suppliers of military hardware to the Israeli army. Workers Liberty supporters at the meeting asked Vivienne about what unity actually exists between Palestinian and Israeli activists and organisations, and whether acceptance of a 2 states solution would be necessary to achieve that unity. Vivienne gave an open answer, saying that there are links developing, and it is through these links that solutions that can be supported by everyone must be developed. Vivienne expressed hope that more Israelis would reject the Occupation because of the austerity program due to the social and economic costs within Israel of maintaining that level of militarisation, if not out of recognition of Palestinian rights. The Israeli peace movement and the Palestinians are too weak by themselves.

Vivienne lamented the media's preference for covering suicide bombings which offer no hope. She advocated more coverage of the courageous acts and joint work by Palestinians and Israeli peace activists in standing against the Occupation.



*'For the millions,
not the millionaires'*

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Victorian times under Bracks.

Bryan Sketchley

If any Victorian trade unionist had an inkling that Bracks and the state ALP would deliver up a half way decent deal for workers, they would, by now be sadly disappointed.

With the current round of enterprise bargaining recently concluded for public servants some unionists have been heard to say that 'at least under Kennett

you could expect to get a kicking, and prepare accordingly.' The deal stitched up between CPSU officials and the government has seen pay outcomes that will stay marginally ahead of inflation and a handful of minor improvements in conditions. Every pissant condition wrung out of the government was akin to squeezing blood from a stone, the wage component is dependant on there being no significant interest rate rises over the next 43 months, that will potentially blow away any tiny gain that has been won.

Victorian teachers are facing a similar battle, with Bracks giving no indication of even half way meeting union demands. The state Labor government wants to increase nurse patient ratios before they will concede any pay rise for nurses. This miserly approach by a Labor government to its employees is taking place at the same time that millions of dollars are being poured into Commonwealth games preparations (\$26 million on a footbridge that will be used for 10 days) and \$1 billion dollar handout over five years to maintain Kennett's vision of a privatised public transport system. That is corporate welfare at the expense of putting more beds in hospitals, more teachers in schools and the provision of decent services for taxpayers.

The Victorian government is in the strongest fiscal position it has been for many years, mostly due to the huge boom in real estate prices and the associated tax windfall. Very little of that unexpected money has found its way into providing increased services for workers or unemployed folks. On the contrary, the Bracks government has been waging a sustained campaign on services to the disabled, state housing tenants, aged care and rural health services. Happily for the corporate sector, tax breaks and investment incentives have been a growth industry under the current state government. Inner city property developers particularly have done very well from the public purse, with little or no transparency where public funds have been handed over. The historic Flinders street station is a case in point. When Kennett privatised the public transport system, the station was thrown in a sweetener with grand promises of renovations and public use of facilities. Five years later, the new owners have let the building run down and Bracks has promised to throw even more money at the company to 'assist' them in maintaining their original promise.

None of this should come as much of a surprise however. What we need to remind ourselves of is that Bracks in opposition five years ago was little different to Latham in opposition now. Rhetorical flourishes about the need for 'an inclusive society', 'new opportunities' and the chance to rid ourselves of a radical right wing extremist seemed to be sufficient reason to believe that Bracks then, as Latham today, might just be different. At the end of the day, Bracks, like Latham, are all about managing capitalism, satisfying 'the markets' and ensuring investment and development proceed unhindered. Any consideration of economic stability over growth, or funding services ahead of credit rating considerations will not be part of any ALP government in power, despite the promises so earnestly given in opposition.

*"Oh, the shark has pretty teeth, dear -
And he shows them pearly white -"
Bertolt Brecht (1898 - 1956)*

Lynn Smith

CULTURE OF VIOLENCE AT COKE

Determined to make his point at Coca-Cola's AGM in Wilmington Delaware a few weeks ago, Ray Rogers of New York's "Corporate Campaign" took the microphone. He complained about the practices of the soft drink giant, especially its anti-union violence in Columbia. When chairman and chief executive Doug Daft had had enough of this he told Rogers "you have exceeded your speaking time". Rogers refused to relinquish the mic, security guards moved in and surrounded him, a scuffle began and Rogers fell to the floor. He was then hustled outside the hotel where 20 other protesters with placards were voicing their anger on the same issue. Spokesperson Jana Silverman (a graduate of Columbia University where she studied human rights) said nine union organizers had been killed over the past 10 years in Columbia, mostly in connection with negotiations at Coke bottling plants.

THE RICH GET RICHER WHILE THE POOR....

On April 23, Frank Lowy announced that he was merging his three listed company trusts (Westfield Trust, Westfield America Trust and Carindale Trust) into one. Lowy's new Westfield Group is the largest shopping centre operator on planet earth with combined assets of \$34 billion. Westfield owns and operates 123 shopping complexes housing 19,500 retailers in Australia, the USA, the UK and New Zealand. Said big Frank "there comes a time when you need to examine yourself and need to be in touch with the needs of the market". It's a pity big Frank (one of the three richest people in Australia) did not "examine himself" in relation to the wages and conditions of cleaners working overnight to make his US centres look nice when shoppers start coming in the mornings. These workers (called janitors in the US) are paid wages that are below the poverty line.
"Justice for Janitors" campaign: details on the web.

DID YOU GET PAID 85% MORE LAST YEAR? THESE GUYS DID.

The average fees paid to non-executive directors on the boards of miscellaneous industrial companies and those in the transport industry rose 85% between 2003 and 2004, according to a recent report by executive remuneration specialists RPC (a non-executive director is someone not employed by the company full time such as CEOs, general managers etc. who may also be on the board. Non-executive directors can on the board of any number of corporations at one time). The fees for non-executive directors doing bugger all in alcohol, tobacco, paper and packaging industries also rose... but by a mere 63%. You'd think this lot would be happy campers... flitting by jet from boardroom to boardroom across the country, enjoying free banquets and top wines supplied by the finest restaurants in the land. Not so.

Boss Watch

"Remuneration is going to increase due to the increased risk" said Owen Thomas of RPC. "In my discussions with non-executive directors over the last 18 months, there are a lot saying it's not worth it". Increased risk? Does he mean falling from a building under construction... having to take stress leave because of a bullying boss... or getting the sack i.e. the kinds of risks workers have to take? No way. The "increased risk" according to Thomas is "increased responsibility due to increasing corporate governance requirements". In other words, doing your job.

PRODUCE MORE AND YOUR WAGES GO UP, RIGHT?

Not If You're Nick Bowen, Boss Of Heavy Engineering Contractor McMahon Holdings
Last year Nick's bank account swelled by \$803,415 which includes a bonus of \$150,000. His just reward for a sterling performance by the company he runs? During the year the contract miner boosted revenue by a shattering one per cent. Profits? Up from \$7.1 million to \$8.5 million.
Ha ha. But McMahon's chairman and the board are onto him, right? Surely, next year we can look forward to a leaner, meaner Mr. Bowen.
Surprise, surprise... big Nick has just wangled a new package to run until 2006 which will see him take home anything up to \$2.5 million per year.
His base salary will be \$735,000. On top of this he could earn a cash bonus of up to \$750,000 and be given four million McMahon shares if performance hurdles are met (worth \$1.1 million at the current sharemarket valuation). When you realise Bowen already owns \$621,000 worth of shares and has options valued at \$576,000 you'll see he's onto a good thing.

WHERE'S YOUR SYMPATHY?

THE WORLD'S SECOND RICHEST MAN IS IN PAIN

Super speculator Warren Buffet announced at the AGM of Berkshire Hathaway in Omaha Nebraska on May 1 that he was in a "painful position". Buffet's problem? Hemorrhoids? Impending bankruptcy? Nope. The man known as the Oracle of Omaha announced to the 15,000 wannabes jammed into Omaha's Qwest centre who were hanging on his every word that Berkshire Hathaway has got US\$36billion in cash and "was having difficulty investing it". In further remarks (that should see him rebadged as the Icon of Irony) Buffet said:
George Bush Jnr's tax cuts were "tilted towards the rich" (surprise, surprise) and "I've got more money in my pocket because of the tax change and I don't think it is a good idea".
Ever thought of giving it back, Warren?

15 years since the Cockatoo Island occupation

Claude Sandaljian

A speech given to a meeting sponsored by Solidarity, Socialist Democracy and the Workers League on 24 April 2004

Claude Sandaljian worked as a boilermaker at Cockatoo Island Dockyard for 17 years. At the time of the occupation he was the Convenor of the Amalgamated Metal Workers Union (AMWU) and Chairman of the Cockatoo Island Shop Committee, which represented all the workers on the island.

It's very hard to put 14 weeks of industrial struggle into a ten-minute talk, but I'll give a resume.

In 1987 there was a White Paper on defence and the Hawke government decided that they should have their submarines and ships built in WA because they launched the two oceans policy.

Through the ACTU they advised us that the government would no longer provide work to Cockatoo Dockyard. At that time the dockyard was run by Australian National Industries (ANI) was not interested in commercial work. All they were interested in was naval work because they are lucrative contracts.

We went to see the ACTU and there was a blunt message by ACTU secretary Bill Keltly that the decision had been made and that was the end of it. We didn't have any agreement for severance money because the practice in the industry was that we would get ships for six or seven months and there would be sackings every 18 months or so.

We were always concentrating on saving jobs and there was a policy not to accept severance money, and sometimes not even superannuation, so we could keep up the work.

So if the dockyard was going to shut down we decided to ask for some severance money and after we went into dispute for a couple of weeks they came up with a maximum of 26 weeks.

So the Shop Committee said: "We've won something when we had nothing and a lot can happen between 1987 and 1992 in terms of the closure so we'll leave it at that for the moment."

Things went alright until 1989 when it was suddenly announced the dockyard was up for sale. We didn't know what was going on - we just discovered the ad in the Sydney Morning Herald. The island was advertised as the jewel in the crown for real estate in Sydney Harbour.

The Shop Committee met straight away and we took the ferries and marched to Parliament House to protest the proposed sale. At that time the Greiner Coalition government was in power.

There were 13 unions represented in the Shop Committee and we got into consultation with them.

They told us we should go and have more negotiations with the federal Minister of Defence, Kim Beazley.

Then we realized that we had to do something about the situation. So the Shop Committee Executive came up with the idea that we should start an industrial dispute to preserve the jobs on the island and that the dockyard should not be closed.

That dispute was going to be a long one and we had to have 100% support because we were not going to muck around and have picket lines because someone was going to come to work. So the idea was to occupy the island because in the past there had been a sort of class distinction on the island. The white collar workers up the hill never joined the Shop Committee and never joined the strikes.

The foremen and the quality controllers kept on operating the island. We had that experience in 1981 when we went for shorter hours. So we said the decision would apply to everybody.

It was my job to convince the white collar workers that they should join us because we didn't want picket lines because we were going to make sure that nobody would work in the dockyard.

After some discussion they saw wisdom and they joined us. The foremen didn't join the strike but they agreed not to cross the picket line. If the foremen stayed home then the problem of the apprentices would be resolved. The apprentices were under contract and couldn't strike, but if there is no supervision then they can't work.

So we had 100% support and we mobilised the troops. On 10 May at 9.00 in the morning we called a mass meeting and we announced the occupation of the island. We hadn't told the union but went straight to management.

I said: "Your island is under occupation." He said: "But that's illegal, this is Commonwealth land." I said: "Well, we'll see what's going to happen."

There were nearly 2000 people on the island and everybody stopped work. We knew we couldn't keep that many on the island so we had contingents ready so that at least one to two hundred would remain on the island at any one time on rotation.

I had a phone call from Pat Johnston, who was a national organiser for the Amalgamated Metal Workers Union, a shipwright and an ex-member of the Cockatoo Shop Committee.

He didn't know anything about what had happened and I told him to come down straight away and bring the support of the AMWU because the occupation was on.

Johnston came across to the island and was against the occupation but by that time it was a fait accompli and all the television channels were coming to the island. In union struggles the leadership may be reluctant but they will support the dispute if it is on.

A dispute like that is tremendously hard to organize. You've got 2000 people and you have to organise hardship money for them, you've got to organise people to go to different sites to collect money and speak about the dispute. At the same time you try to build up support from other unions and that is the most difficult thing to do.

We had an office at the AMWU and another office in Balmain at the Painters and Dockers Union. The Painters and Dockers Union was very, very supportive because if the dockyard closed the union was finished. In particular they supported us with food.

On the day the occupation began there was no food on the island and we had feed about 400 people that night. We had to bring food across from Balmain.

We knew that the media would come and talk to any body so we made it a rule that the media could only speak to approved spokespeople. We did it that way because sometimes the media will put words into your mouth.

The dispute went on for 14 weeks. In the tenth week of the dispute I had a call from the miners union in Queensland saying that they had heard about the dispute and they wanted us to go up and speak to them and collect a lot of money they had raised. In 1975 the miners in central Queensland went on a big dispute for housing and Cockatoo workers helped financially. We had a reputation for always helping people in trouble and so we had a lot of support.

We needed \$20,000 a week to support the occupation. It was a nightmare to raise this amount of money.

We tried to lobby the Labor Council to call a general stoppage in Sydney but to no avail. The only thing that happened was that twice the whole of the waterfront stopped for 48 hours in support of the occupation.

We realized then that the tactic of the trade union leadership was to isolate us so we would eventually bleed to death and eventually go back to work. So we began to negotiate with management. They said we would have to restructure but we never gave away any working conditions.

We got the redundancy money increased to 52 weeks plus another four weeks if you were over 55. Nobody would retire and everyone would be retrenched so they could get the retrenchment money. The apprentices also got retrenchment money. That's not common because the apprentices work on contracts. We also won a \$3000 bonus on completion of the two submarines.

Finally, when the dockyard eventually closed there was a pool of money in the superannuation fund and we insisted that it be shared by everyone in the dockyard, rather than just to the executives.

We lost our jobs but we learned a lesson. You've got to force your union into dispute. They will never endorse a dispute of this magnitude without pressure.

Every week I had a meeting with the AMWU National Executive. George Campbell, now an ALP Senator, was the national secretary. Every week it was the same: "Call it off Claude, call it off." He didn't want to be seen calling it off, he wanted me to do it, but we wanted to keep going.

For young trade unionists here I say that the union is the body that you've got to work through. Don't attack it, but try to pressure the leadership into supporting disputes.

Film Review

Barbarian Invasions

Leon Parissi

The *Barbarian Invasions* is an intelligent, curious and complex film which revolves around two emotional and social poles. Set in Montreal it explores the last days of a 50-something history lecturer, a civilized and self indulgent womaniser, a self professed "sensual socialist" who is dying of cancer. Directed by Denys Arcand, who made *The Decline of the American Empire* (1986) and *Jesus of Montreal* (1989), the film meticulously reveals the

life and times of Remy. This is Remy, who we met in *The Decline...* Who at first seems oddly resigned to his death perhaps because he expects nobody to care much. But under the influence of those who love him; and coincidentally those from whom he has grown most distant, divorced wife, past lovers, son and daughter, these relationships are rekindled. This is the emotional core of the story.

Remy has been invaded by the cancer of ageing and of disease. Remy's world, as he is about to depart it, also has been invaded by careless profit taking motives, corrupt officials and heroin dealers who rule the streets. Another of the invaders could be the perpetrators of senseless acts of terrorism as

portrayed by Arcand using footage of the twin tower attacks.

But the film is also about the decline of the welfare state after years of economic rationalist assault. "I voted for medicare" declares the resigned Remy as it becomes obvious that the outrageously overcrowded and under resourced hospital where we find him is unable to provide the care he needs. His estranged son, a man of the new world, a wealthy London based financial wheeler-dealer, uses his money to buy influence. The son arranges to bring his father to the US for treatment, arranges the opening and furnishing of a ward closed due to budget cuts (while on the floor above the corridors are full of unattended patients), and arranges the supply of heroin when the pain is too much. In making these arrangements the interaction of the son with establishment authorities who have either accepted the grim corruption of civil society or are helpless to stop is the other core of the film which many reviewers miss.

The film, through Remy and his re-united band of friends regrets the failures of the 1960s and 1970s generation to succeed with their affiliation to the various left "isms" (Maoism, Leninism, Trotskyism) but does not call for the regeneration of any of these ideals and ways of organizing. The film fails to leave us with a solution but it does succeed in creating a sense of humanity prevailing over all the invaders. For this and for its depiction of the inhumanity of the economic rationalist world in which we live *Barbarian Invasions* is a film worth watching.

"Capitalism is the absurd belief that the worst of men, for the worst of reasons, will somehow work for the benefit of us all." -- John Maynard Keynes

Ideas to Make a Difference:

No. 4: Capital.

R.F. Price.

Marx devoted his life and health to the study of Capital. Building critically on the work of the classical economists, he aimed to set out a scientific understanding which would help the proletariat to conquer political power and radically transform society. His initial plan included volumes on the State, international trade and the world market and crises, volumes which were never written [Mandel.27-8].

Following the classical economists in recognising labour as the source of all wealth Marx clarified the process by introducing a number of distinctions. He began, in the first chapter of Volume 1 of *Capital*, with a discussion of 'The Commodity', something produced primarily for sale, distinguishing 'the substance of value', its 'use-value', from 'the magnitude of value', or its 'exchange value'. e.g. labour embodied in the substance of a chair, has 'use-value'. It is used for

sitting on. But its exchange value, expressed in money, allows it to be equated with any other commodity on the market.

Another important distinction is that between surplus labour and surplus value, the form it takes only under capitalism. All class-divided societies have been based on the appropriation of surplus labour by the exploiting class. In pre-capitalist societies this has often taken the form of rent or taxes, extracted by political means, essentially by force. Under capitalism this process, now economic, became mysterious and difficult to penetrate. Marx showed that exploitation lay in the difference between the value of the commodity which workers sell to Capital, their ability to work, or 'labour power', and the value of the work they actually perform. The value of the workers' labour power is largely determined by that of the 'socially necessary labour', the labour which enables the labourer to live and reproduce, a value which will vary in different societies and at different times. This difference, or surplus labour, appropriated in capitalist societies in the form of surplus value, forms the basis for the accumulation of Capital. But only workers who directly contribute to the creation of new values produce surplus value. Other workers, essential to the functioning of society, (workers in wholesale and retail business; teachers in government schools; civil servants, etc.) perform surplus labour and are thus also exploited.

While all this defines the actors and sets the stage it does little either to explain past history or to prepare us for the future. In attempting to do this we must move from the more familiar Vol.1 of *Capital* to Vols. 2 & 3. There Marx introduced a number of ideas, among them that the relentless drive to accumulate capital which he noted in the first volume leads to periodic crises of overproduction; and that there is a tendency for the rate of profit to decline over the years. Ernest Mandel has applied Marx's ideas to produce an understanding of the rather different contemporary economic world which Mandel calls *Late Capitalism*. He criticises previous marxists for concentrating on a single variable and argues that Marx's method was to study the interactions of a number of variables. Most important of these, he claims, are: the organic composition of capital; the distribution of constant capital between fixed and circulating capital; the development of the rate of surplus value; the development of the rate of accumulation; the development of the turn-over time of capital; and the development of the relations of exchange between the two Departments.

Finally, two points are important. Marx understood the Capital System as a world system from its beginning in the world market. Capitalism, in which everything, including labour power, is treated as a commodity, and where 'the drive for profit is the fundamental regulatory force of production' he saw as a phase which had come into being and would pass away. But that passing away would be the result of prolonged process of interaction between economic events and class struggle.

READING: Ernest Mandel's Introductions to the Penguin Edition of the 3 vols. of Marx's *Capital*.

Workers' Liberty

How Victorian Nurses battled Bracks

Bryan Sketchley

What was shaping as a significant, and possibly protracted, industrial dispute in Victorian hospitals was settled on 4 May. The state Labour government offered a 2.25% wage increase, over three years, and an additional .75% if nurses agreed to give up nurse – patient ratios. The nurse patient ratios system – 5 nurses rostered for 20 patients – has made intolerable working conditions, in the words of the Nurses Federation, 'barely tolerable.' On top of that Victorian nurses are currently amongst the worst paid in the country. An entry level nurse in Victoria will earn \$55 a week less than a NSW counterpart, and a charge nurse in Victoria can expect to earn \$194 less a week than someone in NSW doing the same work. Since the introduction of ratios almost 4000 nurses have returned to the public health system.

Premier Bracks and the Labour government played hardball with the nurses and wouldn't concede anything beyond the original offer. While Victorian public servants recently accepted a similar offer, the government has argued that the state can't afford a 'wages blow-out.' However, the same week that negotiations between the nurses and the government got bogged down saw Bracks announce a \$1.9 billion package of tax cuts and subsidies to business. The announcement was heralded in the business pages with headlines like 'Bracks govt. wins heart of corporate world.' (The Age, 26 April). The Victorian Employers Chamber of Commerce submission to government earlier in the year requested assistance somewhat more modest than what the government delivered.

As negotiations between the nurses and the government bogged down, nurses voted for bans, that closed over 1000 beds across the state. Predictably, the government attempted to portray the nurses' actions as an assault on patients, yet made no mention of nearly 500 beds across the state being closed on any given day due to funding shortfalls.

The proposed replacement for the ratio system, Trendcare, has been trialled at Monash University School of Nursing, where four out of five nurses believed it rarely, if ever, identified staffing needs. Nurses' rightly feared that the proposed new system would lead to an increase in workloads.

The nurses' campaign to defend and extend the patient ratio is critical for a reasonable level of care for public hospital patients. It's even more critical for nurses working in public health to have their 'barely tolerable' conditions maintained.

On May 4, nurses agreed to accept the package put to them by the ANF executive. Rural and regional nurses expressed dissatisfaction that the union had not been able to extend the 'five-for-twenty' nurse patient ratio system beyond the metropolitan area. In large measure the package can be seen as a victory for nurses, in terms of their defence of the nurse patient ratio system while achieving a moderate pay outcome.

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