

RED FLAG

A WORLD TO WIN

\$5

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**What is Red Flag
about?**

Telling the truth

The capitalist press is full of lies, distortions and right wing bias. We need an alternative press, free from corporate interests and government spin, to provide news and analysis of major developments in our world.

Supporting resistance

Those who own and control the corporate media are hostile to people fighting for their rights. They make money out of the exploitation and oppression of workers and the poor. Red Flag is a paper on the side of the oppressed, telling the story from our side and giving solidarity to those in struggle.

Fighting for socialism

Red Flag is about more than just highlighting problems with the system, or supporting individual struggles. It campaigns to win people to socialism, to convince them that the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism is the solution to the problems of society.

**Intervening in
struggles**

Red Flag is an interventionist paper, bringing socialist arguments to the debates of today about how we can best mount a fightback. And while Red Flag will argue for the views of Socialist Alternative, the paper is also a forum in which questions on the left can be debated.

A balance sheet on the ALP government

Josh Lees

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has repeatedly promised to lead an “unashamedly pro-business, but also unashamedly pro-worker” Labor government. In his election night speech last May, he pledged: “Together, we can work in common interests with business and unions to drive productivity, lift wages and profits”.

Eight months into this government, we can say that Albanese has kept half of his promises: all those that were about being pro-business and boosting profits. But on every important question facing the working class, this government has been utterly hostile.

Real wages continue to fall at record levels as the cost of living rises. Inflation is running at 7.8 percent, while average wage growth is only 3.1 percent. The government has made clear that it does not want wage rises to keep up with inflation, Treasurer Jim Chalmers declaring, “We don’t believe that there should be an automatic, mechanical minimum wage rise on every occasion that perfectly matches the headline inflation rate”.

In the lead-up to October’s budget, Chalmers told workers struggling to pay the bills, “Don’t expect cheques in the mail”, and instead promised years of falling wages and rising unemployment. Meanwhile, his government has raised taxes on workers earning less than \$90,000 by scrapping the low- and middle-income tax offset.

On election night, Albanese teared up about his own upbringing, saying: “I hope there are families in public housing watching this tonight. Because I want every parent to be able to tell their child, no matter where you live or where you come from, in Australia the doors of opportunity are open to us all”. But under his government, doors are closing in the faces of people who can’t find or afford a house to live in.

A huge rental crisis is gripping the country, with rents up 18.6 percent in Sydney and 20 percent in Melbourne in the last year. Mortgage repayments are rising dramatically for homeowners, while the major banks are making massive profits from \$2 trillion in household debt. Public and so-called social housing spending (when governments form partnerships with private developers) is abysmally low, and the Albanese government’s announcements to build 20-30,000 new affordable dwellings will not even scratch the surface.

On election night, Albanese proclaimed: “To-

Eight months into this government, we can say that Albanese has kept half of his promises: all those that were about being pro-business and boosting profits.

gether, we can strengthen universal health care through Medicare”. Instead, he is presiding over the worst crisis of bulk billing in more than a decade: 57 percent of Australians are paying a minimum average of \$40 per doctor’s visit, according to a report by Cleanbill, a website that helps people find more affordable health practitioners. This in turn is putting even more pressure on the chronically underfunded hospital system, for which the Labor government outrageously cut funding by \$2.4 billion over the next four years in its October budget.

It’s a very different story for the rich. Oxfam reports that, from March 2020 to November 2022, the number of billionaires in Australia rose by 11, to 42, their collective wealth increasing by 61 percent. Since November, three more billionaires have been added. This bonanza for billionaires explains why the ruling class has largely backed the ALP government so far, ensuring it extended favourable media coverage and popularity. Labor has also offered the capitalists something that the Liberals couldn’t—a progressive gloss on their regime of class war and widening inequality.

Unlike the Liberals, with their divisive culture wars and mean rhetoric, Labor speaks of inclusivity, and of building “an economy that works for people, and not the other way around”. Take the issue of climate change. Labor has supposedly “ended the climate wars”. In reality, it has adopted the Business Council of Australia’s climate policy. This includes a so-called safeguard mechanism for industry, which will allow companies actually to increase their total carbon emissions while pretending that they are becoming greener through greater efficiencies and, especially, buying sham carbon offsets that represent no real decrease in



Prime Minister
Anthony Albanese
PHOTO: Jaimi
Joy/Reuters

emissions. The government will even foot the bill for the latter, to the tune of \$600 million.

On top of this, Labor is allowing the non-stop expansion of the fossil fuel industry. If all of the country's 114 planned coal mines and gas extraction facilities are approved, the combined carbon emissions from them will be nearly 67 times greater than the 180 megatonnes of carbon dioxide to be cut from power generation by 2030. What does "ending the climate wars" mean, then? For Labor, it means trying to cover up Australian capitalism's climate crimes, not through old-school climate denialism, but through industrial-scale greenwashing, clever accounting and, where possible, the incorporation of climate NGOs and the Greens, who have put up very little opposition to Labor's agenda. This is the "modern" approach to getting away with climate murder, and brings Australia into line with Joe Biden's America, the UK and most of Europe.

We see a similar approach with Labor's support for an Indigenous Voice to parliament. The Albanese government is not taking any genuine steps to address the appalling racist inequalities faced by Aboriginal people, including mass incarceration, racist policing and a massive gap in socioeconomic and health standards. As Jordan Humphreys has written in *Red Flag*, "the Voice is an almost entirely symbolic gesture. The proposed model of the Voice will be an advisory body only, with no actual power over government policy".

Internationally, the Labor government is rapidly expanding Australia's military and striving to ensure the ongoing predominance of US imperialism in Asia. Its recent rhetorical de-escalation in the war of words with China—prompted by the desire to shore up profitable export markets for

as long as possible—does not translate into any de-escalation in the ALP's actual preparation for war. Albanese has reaffirmed Scott Morrison's signing of the AUKUS treaty with the US and the UK, and the hundreds of billions of dollars devoted to obtaining nuclear submarines.

In a speech to a business summit, Albanese said he wanted to revive the "spirit of consensus that former Labor Prime Minister Bob Hawke used to bring together governments, trade unions, businesses and civil society around their shared aims of growth and job creation". Bob Hawke was Labor prime minister from 1983 to 1991, and this is a fitting comparison in all the worst ways.

Hawke's government is viewed very favourably by the ruling class because it presided over the introduction of a host of policies to boost profits at the expense of the working class, including privatisations, deregulation of the financial system, wage restraint and clamping down on strikes, including government strikebreaking. The Hawke years resulted in a big redistribution of national income from wages to profits, not surpassed until today. Tragically, Hawke was able to carry out these attacks with little opposition, as he coopted the leading officials of the trade union movement, in a way the Liberals never could.

The Australian Labor Party has always put the interests of the capitalist class ahead of workers, the poor and the oppressed, while trying to cover up this agenda with talk of our supposed "common" or "national" interests. We have no common interests with the billionaires who exploit and oppress. Our goal must be to build a fightback against them wherever possible, on the streets and in the workplaces, and to build a socialist party that can lead this struggle.

Acknowledgement

Red Flag is produced on the land of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. We acknowledge the Elders, families and forebears – the traditional owners and custodians. Their land was stolen, never ceded.

It always was and always will be Aboriginal land.

Oxfam report reveals staggering inequality

Kim Stern

The luxury hotel suites in Davos, a ski resort nestled in the Swiss Alps, filled with the world's corporate and political elite for the 53rd annual World Economic Forum (WEF) in late January.

A certain air of unease was reported among the billionaires, executives, politicians, managers of international financial institutions, economists and academics in attendance. Klaus Schwab, the founder of the WEF, told reporters ahead of

the conference that “economic, environmental, social and geopolitical crises are converging and conflating, creating an extremely versatile and uncertain future”.

Running the system might be a little more complicated than in previous years. But as is made clear by a recent Oxfam International report on world inequality, published ahead of the Davos summit, life for those at the top is nevertheless positively breezy compared to life for the rest of us.

In fact, the discrepancy between fortunes of the rich and poor has never been starker. Even for seasoned critics of capitalism, the headline statistic published by Oxfam makes the jaw drop in amazement. Of all the new wealth produced

globally since 2020, two-thirds has gone into the pockets of the wealthiest 1 percent. And the powerful and privileged are amassing more wealth by the day—on average an extra US\$2.7 billion is added to the fortunes of the world's billionaires with each rotation of the Earth.

The inflationary pressures driving down living standards of workers last year resulted in ballooning profits for big businesses. This turned into record-breaking payments to shareholders and bonuses for executives, which were then converted into private jets and super-yachts for the rich. It's hard to get a sense of what this amount of wealth looks like with references to statistics and figures alone. Take a walk around the wealthiest

FIGURES:

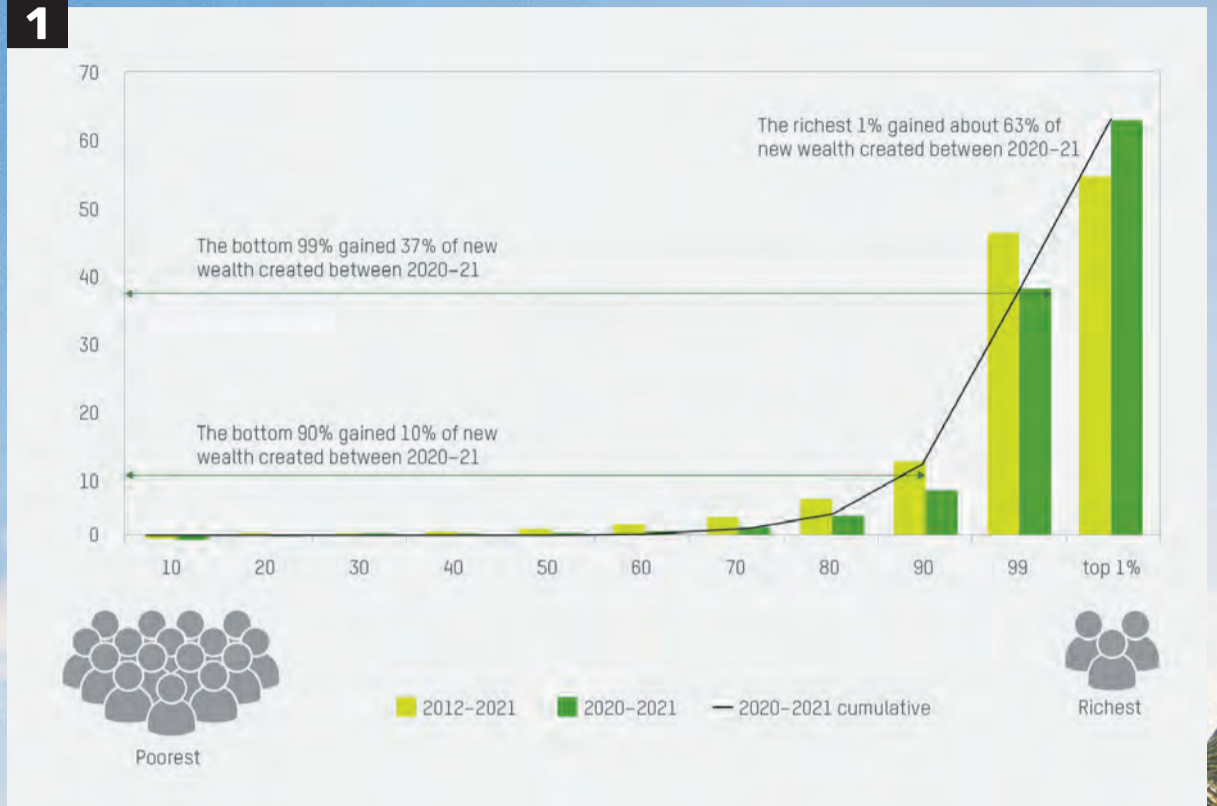
1. SHARE OF NEW WEALTH GAINED (% OF TOTAL NEW WEALTH)

2. INCREASE IN BILLIONAIRE WEALTH 1987-2022 IN US\$ TRILLION (REAL TERMS)

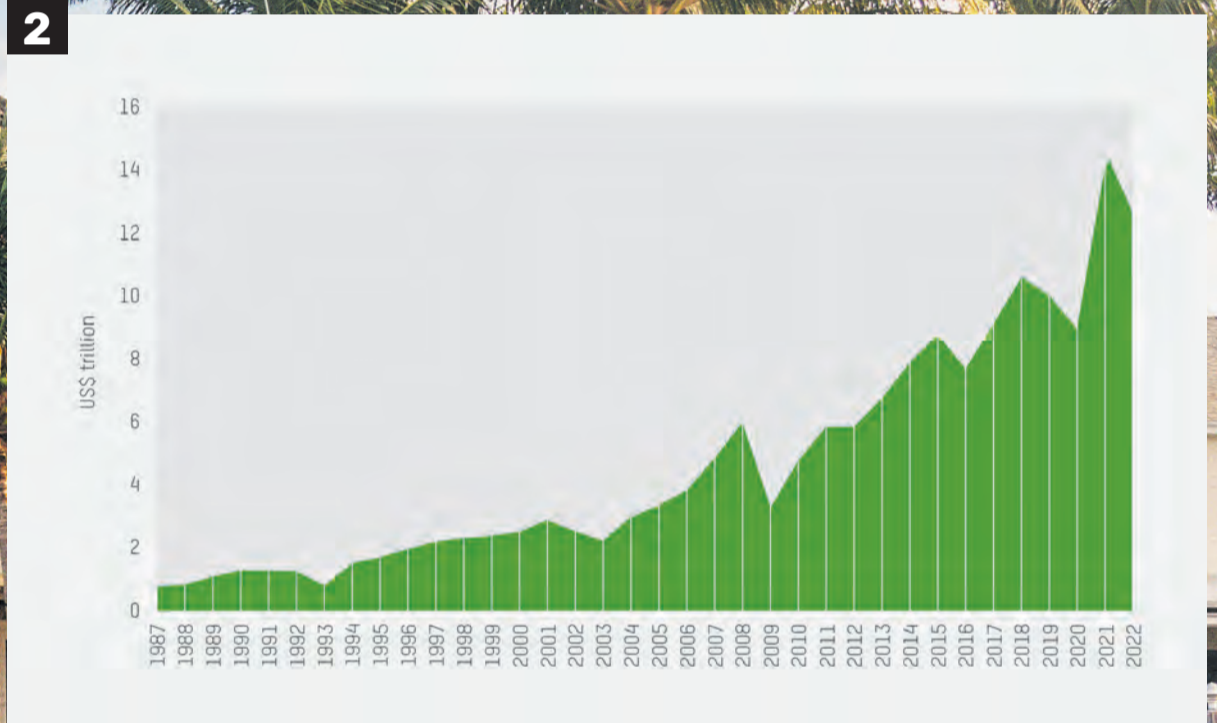
3. TWO SCENARIOS FOR BILLIONAIRE WEALTH BETWEEN NOW AND 2030

SOURCE: Oxfam, *Survival of the Richest: How we must tax the super-rich now to fight inequality*

1



2



3



postcodes of your city to view the sparkling new sports cars parked outside of mansions. Sales in luxury goods like designer handbags and Rolex watches are through the roof.

How is this possible? How can a few people accumulate such staggering amounts of wealth while the majority struggle to make ends meet? Marx had a simple term to explain this: exploitation. By this he meant the process of value extraction by bosses from workers. The wealth generated by those who perform essential labour to make the world run is controlled by the owners of industry—the capitalist class. Once that value is realised by the products of labour being sold, only a fraction of the wealth goes to those who did the work.



Who benefits from Australia's Pacific labour scheme?

Vinil Kumar

Days after winning office, Foreign Minister Penny Wong pledged to the Pacific Islands Forum that the Labor government would expand the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme (PALM). In January, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese backed the Papua New Guinea government's ambition to have 8,000 workers participate.

The scheme allows Australian bosses in agriculture, meat processing, fisheries, hospitality and aged care to recruit workers from nine Pacific countries and Timor-Leste for seasonal work or long-term engagements up to four years. Workers are recruited in their home countries, with employers covering their relocation costs. These costs, as well as employer-provided accommodation, transport and other living expenses, are then paid off by workers through payroll deductions. The scheme is promoted as helping 35,000 participants send money back home while also benefiting the Australian economy.

But scandals in recent years have exposed the cruel reality of the scheme—even the conservative National party Senator Matt Canavan described it as a form of indentured labour.

The scheme ties workers to the employer who sponsors them. Their ability to remain in the country depends on their ongoing employment in that workplace, giving bosses enormous power to compel them to accept degrading conditions.

In early 2022, the *Sydney Morning Herald* re-

ported that a number of workers had their visas cancelled by the Department of Home Affairs after they left Regional Workforce Management, a supplier of Pacific labour to employers in agriculture and the meat industry. Workers had complained that they were denied medical treatment, were forced into unsafe workplaces and accommodation, and that employer deductions left some with pay rates as little as \$9 an hour. In a 2016 *ABC News* investigation, one Tongan worker farm worker said he made just \$9.96 in a week.

There have been many complaints of compromised workplace safety. In one instance, an abattoir worker lost an eye, according to a report from the Australian Meat Industry Employees union. In November 2021, the *Guardian* reported that 30 workers engaged through Pacific labour schemes had died in the last decade.

The Labor government recently announced that PALM workers on one- to four-year placements will be able to bring their families with them. While this offers some comfort to workers, it will be organised through the same restrictive mechanisms of the labour scheme. Family relocation will be at the discretion of the employer, their ability to remain in the country will depend on the worker's continued employment, and workers will be responsible for their family's relocation and living expenses. This includes private health insurance because their families will not be able to access Medicare. One Fijian couple employed under the scheme was left with \$6,000 in medical bills after they had a child. The rising cost of living and the housing crisis will make it practically impossible for large families to move here.

The extension of the scheme has been marketed as a contribution to easing current labour shortages, particularly in agriculture. But it does so by providing Australian businesses with a pool of cheap and highly exploited labour.

It also helps put the Australian government on a better footing in its regional imperial competition with China. The Morrison government was criticised by foreign policy commentators for neglecting relationships with Pacific governments. Since coming to office, Labor has made efforts to rebuild them. Pacific governments support the scheme and have lobbied for its extension. They get to present themselves as having secured a path to employment that can offer their poor constituencies some hope for a better life.

The exploitative and restrictive nature of the PALM scheme is no accident or oversight, but the entire point of it. The more workers are worried that being sacked means uprooting their families and not being able to support family back home, the easier it will be for bosses to force them to work longer and harder for less pay. Fear of reprisals can also discourage workers from unionising to challenge these conditions.

In industries (like fruit-picking) that are particularly reliant on this form of labour, the wages and conditions of all workers in the industry can be driven down if unions are weak. Standards set in these industries can have knock-on effects to similar sections of the economy.

Expanding the current Pacific labour scheme will allow bosses to reap larger profits, while exposing more workers to dangerous conditions and a precarious existence.

Alice Springs: renewed racism in the NT

Diane Fieldes

The national media have been full of reports of a crime wave in Alice Springs. Northern Territory police statistics have been widely publicised, showing reported property offences up almost 60 percent over the past twelve months, assaults up by 38 percent and a doubling of domestic violence. Almost universally, this has been attributed to the ending, last July, of a fifteen-year ban on alcohol in many Indigenous communities.

To further demonise Indigenous people, sections of the media have sought out “outback nurse” Rachel Hale after she posted footage of a street fight between Indigenous teens and a couple of white men. Promoted by various media outlets for her expertise (she’s actually a cosmetic nurse doing Botox and fillers), her views on the vileness of Aboriginal family life have been widely treated as good coin rather than racist prejudice.

As well as the media latching on to anyone who can add fuel to the fire, there has been an intensification of white supremacy in Alice Springs, shown by a big public meeting with the air of a lynch mob, organised by local businesses, and calls for vigilante violence against Aboriginal people openly made outside the meeting to the ABC. For those who can stomach it, Facebook page “Action for Alice 2020” gives full voice to this mentality.

So the racist dynamics are pretty clear. If some further state intervention doesn’t take away Indigenous people’s rights, there will be hell to pay.

In line with this, the response from both Labor and Liberal has been punitive. Opposition leader Peter Dutton called for federal police to be brought in to restore order. Even the NT police rejected this, if only for the reason that they had “already filled the jails”.

PM Anthony Albanese offered only another form of punitive response—new, partial alcohol restrictions, with the prospect of more to come. He also promised \$48.8 million over two years for a range of measures, including liquor licence compliance.

A breakdown of this spending reveals the government’s priorities. While \$14.2 million will be used to increase the number of police, the extra \$25 million allocated for community services merely continues existing inadequate funding arrangements that would otherwise have expired. Despite the rhetoric of “saving” Aboriginal women and children, only \$2 million will go to domestic violence services.

Having systematically destroyed Aboriginal people’s lives for more than two centuries, Australian capitalism is none too keen on compensation for any of that harm.

Instead, the current focus on alcohol bans is not a solution but an excuse to ignore the real issues Aboriginal people face: underlying poverty and trauma, compounded by over-policing.

What is happening in Alice Springs now follows a pattern of media outcry about supposed Aborigi-



PHOTO: Michael Franchi/
ABC News

The current focus on alcohol bans is not a solution but an excuse to ignore the real issues Aboriginal people face: underlying poverty and trauma, compounded by over-policing.

nal criminality, followed by punitive measures.

In 2020, a widely reported crime wave in Tennant Creek was used to justify the repeal of youth bail rights, making it harder for young people to get bail. This contributed to a 94 percent increase in the youth detention population in 2021-22—almost all of them Aboriginal children.

But the biggest recent example of this pattern is the Howard government’s 2007 NT Intervention, rebadged and continued by the subsequent Labor government in 2012 as Stronger Futures.

In 2007, claims of endemic Aboriginal crime precipitated the military invasion of more than 70 Aboriginal communities and town camps in the NT. It lasted fifteen years, until expiring last July. While the discriminatory alcohol bans may have ended, many of its punitive aspects, such as extended police powers in remote communities and restrictions on welfare rights, remain.

The situation at the moment is not a surprise but a direct consequence of these racist policies, and the demonisation of Aboriginal people that they both drew on and legitimised.

There is no evidence over all that time that communities or Aboriginal children were safer as a result of the military intervention. Instead, increasing numbers of Aboriginal children and

adults were locked up for minor offences such as driving unlicensed or driving uninsured or unregistered vehicles. And Aboriginal children were taken from their families.

Indigenous people’s contact with police and courts is horrendous. Figures released in November showed 99.3 percent of NT youth detainees were Indigenous, six times the already appalling national average. Despite changes to come in at the end of this year, the age of criminal responsibility remains 10 years old in the NT.

The notorious but not exceptional Don Dale Youth Detention Centre—site of the use of spit hoods and other physical restraints, brutal beatings and ongoing isolation in prison cells—remains open despite a royal commission recommendation in 2017 that it be closed.

Rather than a crisis of “law and order” (of which there has been too much), what is happening in Alice Springs reveals an ongoing crisis for Indigenous people. Kirra Voller, youth advocate and trainee teacher, understands the hurt these kids feel. “A lot of these kids don’t care if they live or die, because nobody else does”, she told the ABC last year.

Arrernte women Elaine Peckham, Doreen Carroll and Brenda Shields of the Strong Grandmothers of the Central Desert group said much of the trouble in Alice Springs stems from ongoing trauma and dispossession, from the disempowerment brought by the NT Intervention and from the poverty and lack of services and investment, which force people out of communities and into the town. Almost 45 percent of Indigenous people in the NT live below the poverty line.

Despite the federal government spending well over a billion dollars on the Intervention, there is a pittance to address any of this. Better (and much cheaper) to demonise and blame Indigenous people.

Much has been made of events in Alice Springs by right-wing opponents of the Voice as well as by its proponents in government. Regardless of the “Black faces in high places” on both sides, they have united on victim-blaming solutions.

Labor safeguards fossil fuels

Cormac Mills Ritchard

HOW DO YOU DESIGN a climate policy that the largest polluters will back? The Albanese government could write a book on the subject.

Last month it released details of its climate legislation, a set of reforms to the “safeguard mechanism” brought in by the Coalition in 2016. It claims the proposed changes to the mechanism will take us most of the way towards its target of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 43 percent by 2030, and it has been backed by the Business Council of Australia, the Minerals Council and two of the world’s largest mining companies, Rio Tinto and BHP.

Chapter one in the government’s book could be titled “Take a cue from the Liberals”. Labor’s proposal is merely to adjust the dial, rather than significantly alter the safeguard mechanism as it operated under the previous, Coalition government.

Australia’s 215 most polluting facilities—those emitting more than 100,000 tonnes of carbon a year—have since 2016 been required to limit their emissions to a facility-specific “baseline”. The Liberals set it up to be more or less completely toothless. The baselines didn’t reduce and were too high to make any difference. With Labor’s reforms, facilities will now be fined \$275 for every tonne of carbon over their baseline, and the baselines will decline by 4.9 percent each year—supposedly compelling emissions reductions of the same amount.

This might sound good in theory, but when you look at the fine print, you see Labor’s proposed reforms keep in place all the features that have allowed emissions at facilities covered by the safeguard mechanism to increase by 7 percent since it launched.

Chapter 2 could be headed “Cooking the books”. There are two aspects to this. First, facilities covered by the mechanism under Labor’s proposal will continue to be able to meet their emissions reductions obligations by purchasing carbon offsets in the form of Australian Carbon Credit Units (ACCUs). The credits are meant to be generated by things that remove carbon from the air. So a business or NGO that plants enough trees to remove a thousand tonnes of carbon will be assigned 1,000 ACCUs, which can then be sold to polluters wishing to strike 1,000 tonnes of emissions from their balance sheets.

If such offsets were genuine, it would be one thing. But, as Professor Andrew Macintosh—a whistleblower who formerly was head of the Emissions Reduction Assurance Committee under the Coalition—revealed last year, the market for carbon offsets is “largely a sham”. In one example, the federal government had paid \$300 million for ACCUs they’d assigned to farmers in western NSW to *not clear* forest they claimed they would have otherwise cleared. This is like declaring you are going to kill someone, getting paid not to and instead selling someone else the right to commit a murder, thereby bringing everyone’s “net murders” to zero.

After coming to government, Labor commissioned an independent review of the offsets market—attempting to restore faith in the system that Macintosh’s revelations had tainted. A final report from the review was released in December. It found the Liberals’ system to have been “funda-



A train loaded with coal destined for export
PHOTO: CSIRO

Labor’s proposed reforms keep in place all the features that have allowed emissions at facilities covered by the safeguard mechanism to increase by 7 percent since it launched.

mentally well designed”. It recommended that the offset category of “avoided deforestations” (as in the example above) be dropped, but that the bulk of the dodgy offsets could continue.

Second, the reformed safeguard mechanism will still be concerned only with facilities’ scope 1 emissions—emissions that facilities are directly responsible for, such as from factories or mines burning fuel. The glaring omission here is scope 3 or “downstream” emissions—those created when a facility’s products are used. This amounts, as I wrote in a previous *Red Flag* article, to “measuring the emissions created to keep [a mine’s] shafts lit and the machines on, while turning a blind eye to the trains departing with the coal it produces”.

Considering that Australia exports 74 percent of its gas as LNG and 85 percent of its coal, scope 3 emissions make up the vast bulk of its carbon footprint.

Chapter 3 could be “Break it by design”. This is where we learn the safeguard mechanism as proposed by Labor *does not require absolute reductions in emissions*. Because Labor has retained the “production-adjusted” baseline framework, baselines

are set and adjusted to match a facility’s production, which means that if a facility increases its output, its limit on emissions rises by the same amount. So, for instance, a company could double its production and double its emissions, as long as it reduced its *new* total emissions by 4.9 percent compared to what they would have been if production had increased on the *old* basis.

Finally, in addition to these major problems, there is the more straightforward one of cost, or more accurately, the lack of it. The federal parliamentary library found that buying credits to comply with Labor’s reformed mechanism could cost Australia’s large mining and gas corporations less than 0.1 percent of their profits.

It’s hardly surprising, then, that businesses and major emitters have shown such enthusiasm for Labor’s plan. In fact it has received support even from companies like BHP (owner of thirteen safeguard facilities), Rio Tinto (six) and Woodside (three), that will be most impacted by the changes.

It’s likely Labor will require support from the Greens to get its safeguard mechanism through the Senate. In January Greens leader Adam Bandt threatened to vote it down if Labor doesn’t concede to amendments such as a climate trigger aimed at stopping new fossil fuel developments or a limit to the use of offsets. Bandt has also, however, highlighted the Greens’ willingness to “compromise and pass laws that help us take even the smallest step on the road to tackling the climate emergency”. How it plays out will be seen in coming weeks.

There is no amendment, though, that could make Labor’s reformed safeguard mechanism anything but a greenwash over the expansion of fossil fuels. If the mechanism gets the support it needs to become law, it won’t be a step forward for climate action, but another mark on the road of the Australian government’s bipartisan policy of delaying, denying and (literally and metaphorically) gaslighting while fossil fuel industry profits pile up and the planet burns.



Invasion Day in Melbourne
PHOTO: Matt Hrkac (Flickr)

Tens of thousands protest on Invasion Day

Emma Black

Across the country, tens of thousands took to the streets to protest on Invasion Day. Five thousand in Adelaide, 10,000 in Brisbane, 15,000 in Sydney and an unprecedented 20,000 protesters in Melbourne turned out to mark 26 January as the bloody anniversary of colonial invasion, expropriation and genocide.

In Melbourne, the official Australia Day parade was abolished. After years of mass protests, Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews was finally compelled to “shelve” the decrepit event, which has been triumphantly commandeered by protesters ever since they first broke through police lines in 2015.

According to City of Melbourne statistics, attendance at Australia Day celebrations has plummeted in recent years—from 72,000 in 2018 to 12,000 in 2019 and a measly 2,000 in 2020—reflecting a dramatic shift in public attitudes.

Elsewhere around the country, parades, citizenship ceremonies and fireworks displays were either relocated, postponed or cancelled altogether

to make way for massive rallies in support of Indigenous rights.

“Australia Day is dead, just like Queen Lizzie”, announced activist and Dunghutti, Gumbaynggirr, Bundjalung woman Lizzie Jarrett, speaking at the Sydney demonstration.

Key demands raised at this year’s rallies included the immediate initiation of treaty negotiations, an end to Aboriginal deaths in custody, the implementation of all recommendations of the Bringing Them Home report, reparations for members of the stolen generations and raising the age of criminal responsibility.

“It is disgusting that we are the most incarcerated people on Earth”, said young Mununjali man Will Simzy, speaking at the Brisbane rally. “It is disgusting that over half of youth in detention are Indigenous ... Youth detention centres are child torture chambers. This was shown at the infamous Don Dale detention centre, where children were subjected to spit hoods, the banned fold-up restraint and solitary confinement for over 24 hours. How the fuck is Don Dale still open?”

In Melbourne, activists painted their hands blood red—a symbolic accusation of murder against the Australian state. Crowds could be heard

chanting: “Too many coppers, not enough justice!” and “No justice, no peace, no racist police!”

This year’s Invasion Day rallies took place during a moment of significant media coverage and social commentary around Indigenous politics. The prospect of a renewed, punitive state intervention into Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory fuelled cynicism towards Labor’s proposed referendum on an Indigenous Voice to parliament.

Speaking at the Melbourne rally, a veteran Black Power activist and stalwart of the 1972 Aboriginal Tent Embassy, Gary Foley, called out the Voice for being purely cosmetic: “Like lipstick on a pig. It will not address the deep underlying issues that still pervade Australian society.”

In Brisbane, Will Simzy called on protesters to see beyond the empty symbolism of the referendum and carry on the grassroots struggle against Indigenous oppression:

“I think we deserve so much more than a voice. I think we deserve liberation. And to get there, we’ll need to fight!”

Australia Day might be dying, but Indigenous oppression is alive and kicking. So is the struggle against it.

What future for Myanmar?

Perspectives from the left

Robert Narai

Two years after seizing power in a coup, Min Aung Hlaing's junta in Myanmar continues to be ensnared in a civil war that shows no signs of abating. Since the military crushed the mass strikes that emerged in opposition to the coup, tens of thousands of armed youth, small farmers and workers (people's defence forces, or PDFs), alongside ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) have clashed with the Tatmadaw, Myanmar's military, in parts of Chin, Shan, Karen and Kachin states, across the Sagaing region and throughout the Irrawaddy delta.

The Tatmadaw is reportedly suffering from a lack of resources and morale problems that are undermining its ability to fight. As many as 8,000 soldiers and police are thought to have been killed by opposition groups, while an estimated 10,000 have defected to the opposition. By contrast, EAO and PDF forces in Chin, Karen and Kachin states are now advancing into previously junta-controlled territory and setting up interim local governments as they secure control over the newly won territories.

The junta has waged an ongoing campaign of terror against its opponents. More than 16,500 people have been arrested since the coup and more than 13,000 of them remain in prison, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners. The AAPP estimates that more than 2,500 people have been killed since the junta took power.

Junta-run courts have imposed the death penalty on 138 people, including 41 in absentia. In July, four political prisoners accused of carrying out "terror acts" against the military government were hanged. The executions are the first to be carried out in Myanmar since the late 1980s. In November, seven Dagon University students were sentenced to death on similar charges. It is unclear when the students will be executed.

"The junta is targeting students and young people because we have been at the forefront of resistance to the regime", Min,* a student activist and member of the University of Yangon Students' Union, tells *Red Flag* from Myanmar. "The purpose of the trials and executions is to strike fear in the hearts of those who wish to resist the regime."

But Min says it is the regime that lives in fear. "The junta is terrified by the prospect of young people leading a revolution against the regime.

The junta is despised and hated by the majority of people in Myanmar. The junta may be in power, but they are not in control."

Min has been on the run from the Tatmadaw since early April 2021, after arrest warrants were issued for him and other student activists on the charge of inciting mutiny in the armed forces. Since then, Min has been based in the "liberated areas"—territory in the borderlands that is controlled by EAOs and no longer under the control of the Tatmadaw. He has recently returned to the central lowlands but remains in hiding.

"Because of the terror, student activist networks are scattered and isolated all throughout the countryside", Min says. "And the situation in the major cities makes it impossible to organise protests that won't be violently crushed by the security forces."

It is a similar story in Yangon's industrial zones. "The factory managers attempt to rule through fear and terror", Ko Maung,* an independent researcher and labour activist, tells *Red Flag*. "If workers have grievances, there is the threat that if they protest, the managers will call in the military. The fear has a huge impact on the confidence of workers to organise and resist."

Ko Maung and many labour activists were forced to flee to the Thailand-Myanmar border after the junta outlawed a number of trade unions and issued arrest warrants for trade union leaders associated with the illegal unions. But in an attempt to legitimise the post-coup arrangement, the junta maintains that unions, unionisation and collective bargaining remain legal, which means that a number of trade unions remain legal. It has provided limited space through which workers have continued to organise collectively for improved wages and conditions.

In garment factories across Yangon's industrial zones, where factory-level unions maintain strength and cohesion, Ko Maung says that the threat of strike action is enough to ward off attacks from factory managers and force concessions. "The bosses don't dare force these workers to do overtime", he says. "Because workers respond by saying: 'If you call overtime, we will go on strike!'"

The residual class confidence that Ko Maung points to is the legacy of more than a decade of union organising that took place under civilian-military rule. The expansion of the rights to strike and form a trade union created space for activists to create hundreds of new unions during this period. And unlike countries in which trade unions are well established, with entrenched

The junta has waged an ongoing campaign of terror against its opponents. More than 16,500 people have been arrested since the coup and more than 13,000 of them remain in prison, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners.

bureaucracies and passive leaders, many of these unions were established through wildcat strikes and riots.

The period of civilian-military rule also created a combative environment among students, who fought to re-establish student unions, which had been banned under the previous junta. This activism led to the creation of political associations in which students could discuss and debate political topics openly for the first time in more than five decades.

A number of more explicitly radical forums also flourished, including Marxist discussion circles. These groups have become the main organisations on the far left in Myanmar today: the Stalinist-Maoist Leftist Youth Organisation, the Trotskyist group Revolutionary Marxism and the Social Democratic United Front (SDUF). Alongside the militant sections of student and trade unions, these groups were crucial to calling the early demonstrations in opposition to the coup, which in turn acted as the social detonator for the mass strikes that followed.

Aung Maung,* a member of the SDUF, says that political experience meant that the radical left was able to seize the possibilities opened up by the coup. "We knew that if we provide a lead, mass resistance will follow", he explains. "And if



A protest in Yangon against the Myanmar military coup on 7 July 2021 PHOTO: AFP

there was mass resistance, we knew there would be a revolution to stop the coup, a revolution to completely abolish the junta, the military clique and the military-bureaucratic capitalism.”

Min Aung Hlaing’s junta represents a wing of the Burmese ruling class: the leading personnel of the Tatmadaw, military-controlled conglomerates, Burmese state capitalists, cronies subservient to state patronage networks and the most reactionary sections of the Buddhist clergy and the far right.

The dominant perspective on the left in Myanmar is that armed struggle can act as a substitute for the social power of the working class in overthrowing the junta. It is partly informed by the conclusion drawn by many after the collapse of the February and March strike wave: the working class does not have the power to defeat Min Aung Hlaing’s regime; only armed struggle can win.

The important exception is the Trotskyist group Revolutionary Marxism. They argue that the inability of the February and March strike wave to topple the junta was due to the absence of a political leadership that could extend the strike movement into broader sections of the working class, transform the movement into a fight for control over production and promote widespread mutinies within the armed forces.

The key task for revolutionaries in Myanmar, they argue, must be to build a revolutionary Marxist party that can organise the most advanced workers to lead the mass of workers and draw behind them the broader masses (small farmers

and ethnic minorities) in a revolution that not just overturns military rule but smashes the entire Burmese ruling class.

In a polemic with the Trotskyists written for the SDUF’s publication *Social Democrat*, Lin Htal Aung* argues that, to be successful, the struggle against the junta needs a cross-class alliance:

“The movement is a national liberation struggle in which the emerging bourgeoisie and some of the revolutionary national bourgeoisie joined forces [with the working class and small farmers] ... It is true that the revolution needs to build working-class leadership. But at the same time, the practical conditions demand that we fight for a form of democracy that is lower than workers’ democracy. Therefore, we are trying to build a revolutionary front that includes all classes.”

Marxists argue that social class divisions are irreconcilable and that political programs that express a desire for unity between workers and capitalists can only strengthen the hand of the ruling class while hamstringing the workers’ movement. But Lin Htal Aung argues that the movement against the junta “cannot have a political view that represents only one class”. This is precisely what he is proposing when he says that elements of the “revolutionary bourgeoisie” (the leading personnel of EAOs and associated parties) have the same interests as the classes that they oppress and exploit.

Only one class can become dominant in such a movement: either the capitalists, who want a form of democracy in which they can exploit and

oppress the other classes, or the working class—leading other oppressed groups—which aims not only to establish democracy, but to overthrow the entire ruling class.

In an article for the publication *The Struggle*, Jack,* a member of Revolutionary Marxism, argues that in practice this perspective means abandoning the political independence of the working class: “Presenting reactionary elements to the public as the revolutionary class is a betrayal of the revolution. In other words, the interests of the working class are subsumed under the interests of a section of the bourgeoisie”.

Fighting for a perspective that maintains the political independence of the working class does not mean that an organisation will be able to gain a mass audience. Indeed, the government’s terror makes opposition in urban centres increasingly difficult and dangerous. But the ongoing resistance by workers—combined with ongoing flash mob demonstrations organised by young people—illustrates that there is still space for underground organising in the cities.

This is because the brutality that characterises Min Aung Hlaing’s junta is not only producing misery—it is also producing widespread anger and a desire for an alternative. If the situation shifts, a renewed mass movement in urban centres could develop.

Rahul Kyaw Ko Ko contributed to this article.

* Names changed.

75 years of Tamil oppression in Sri Lanka

The Sri Lankan government this month celebrated 75 years of independence from British colonial rule. Yet in the north of the island, members of the Tamil population were protesting against 75 years of discrimination and state violence against their people. With thousands of Tamil refugees in Australia still denied permanent protection visas, **Ben Hillier** explains the roots of Tamil oppression.

From the moment Sri Lanka gained independence from British colonial rule in 1948, Tamils in the country faced increasing marginalisation. Successive governments, dominated by the Sinhalese-Buddhist ethnic majority (about 80 percent of the population), passed discriminatory laws targeting higher education, government hiring and language and voting rights—a systematic attempt to erode the foundations of Tamils' national life through colonisation, economic strangulation and, more recently, one of the most intense military occupations in the world.

Although they are an overall minority, Tamils are the majority in the north and the east of the island. Mirjam Weiberg-Salzmann, from the University of Münster in Germany, has explained the growing chauvinism of the Buddhist clerical order after the country's independence, and an increasingly reactionary bond of religion, ethnicity and state power directed against Tamils:

"Whereas in the 1940s only a small minority of monks had been politically active, in the 1950s monks from all the Nikayas (sects of the order) became involved ... In the new history of Sri Lanka, the Tamils constituted a permanent and existential threat ... The sangha [Buddhist clerical order] demanded active steps for the protection of Buddhism and attempted to institutionalise the traditional connection between religion and politics ... The parliamentary elections of 1956 provided a large forum for the monks, which helped them spread their ideas.

"In the election campaign Tamils were branded parasites and the 'death knell' of the Buddhist Sinhalese, and hence a limited use of violence was supported ... Sinhalese was declared the sole national language. From the 1960s 'Sinhalese' and 'Buddhist' became synonymous terms, and religious activities became a necessary criterion for qualification to a political post and an indispensable element of election propaganda. State and nation were henceforth defined by (1) Buddhism, and (2) Sinhala-ness."

The point is that religious extremism in Sri Lanka is not confined to marginal sects; it very early became a feature of government and a defining element of mainstream politics. The radical form of Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism was codified in the 1972 republican constitution, which declared the country a "unitary state", one in which only the Sinhalese could claim the right to self-determination.

"Sri Lanka means 'Holy Ceylon' and designates precisely the messianic chauvinism that is inseparable from Buddhism in the island", the



Tamils protest outside the Sri Lankan High Commission in Canberra to mark the anniversary PHOTO: Tamil Refugee Council

late international relations scholar Fred Halliday wrote in 1973. "For religiosity and racism cannot be dissociated in Ceylon: the local brand of Theravada Buddhism claims ... that the Sinhalese are a 'chosen people' and that Ceylon is their sacred island, divinely elected to its unique historical and spiritual destiny by Buddha himself. This wretched mystification naturally excludes the Tamils and other minorities from any equal role in national life."

Successive Sri Lankan governments have adhered to this vision not only in theory, but in practice. Anti-Tamil pogroms in 1956, 1958, 1961, 1974, 1977, 1979, 1981 and 1983 resulted in thousands of Tamils murdered, raped, tortured and burned alive, all with the collusion of the Sri Lankan police, military and security forces. Tamil businesses were destroyed in the south and east of the island. Hundreds of thousands were displaced in their own country or made refugees internationally.

From the mid-1980s, the Tamil Tigers, an organisation built by radicalising Tamil youth, led a war for national liberation. The organisation was supported by an overwhelming majority of Tamils desperate for self-determination in their traditional homelands. The Tigers built a de facto state and were the de facto government in the north and the east of the island.

In 2008-09, after nearly 30 years of armed resistance to the Sinhala-Buddhist state's project to destroy the Tamil nation, the Tigers were militarily defeated. Tens of thousands of civilians were murdered indiscriminately in a genocidal offensive by the Sri Lankan military. Thousands were disappeared on suspicion of being involved in the national liberation movement or for being members of the Tigers. These included social workers, teachers, police officers and more, as well as soldiers in the war.

More than ten years later, not one officer or political leader involved in ordering or carrying out the genocide has faced justice. They walk freely as national heroes. In fact, some are members of the

current government. And the Sri Lankan state's hostility remains. Tamils in traditional homelands are under surveillance and risk harassment or worse when they stand up for their rights. Importantly, the longstanding project of the Sinhalisation of Tamil areas continues—the process of demographically destroying the Tamil people's claim to a geographically contiguous homeland that could be politically recognised.

The military is now deeply embedded in civilian and economic life in the north and east of the island. It even has a hand in running kindergartens for Tamil children. This is the greatest threat to most Tamils in their homelands: the disappearance of a nation under the boot of a chauvinist state. In this regard, their plight is analogous to other oppressed nations suffering at the hands of reactionary ruling classes that have developed chauvinist states within world imperialism—Palestinians at the hands of Israel, for example, or Kashmiris under the gun of Narendra Modi's India.

The Australian and Sri Lankan governments claim that the country has moved on—that there are no longer valid reasons for most Tamils to claim asylum elsewhere. But the idea that genocide can be put to bed is both cruel and laughable.

There was no "settlement" between the Tamil Tigers and the Sri Lankan government, just a rout that wiped out the leadership, the leading cadres and tens of thousands of civilians. The military occupation since has been a consolidation of the Sri Lankan state's gains.

A chauvinistic fervour continues to mark sections of the Sinhalese security forces. Mob violence has continued to blight the island. Torture, disappearance, rape and harassment continue to be weapons in an ongoing war against Tamil resistance to oppression. And Tamils still want self-determination.

Ben Hillier is a member of the Tamil Refugee Council.

Palestinians resist amid Israel's West Bank crackdown

Nick Everett

Israeli occupation forces carried out a four-hour killing spree in the Jenin refugee camp in late January that left ten dead, including a 61-year-old woman, Majda Obaid, and two teenagers. Their killers arrived in a cheese truck. Before departing, they fired tear gas at a nearby hospital, leaving children choking and coughing.

Israeli state violence has killed 36 Palestinians in the first month of 2023 and at least 220 last year, 48 of whom were children. The latest attack is part of a nine-month military campaign that has targeted Palestinian militants in the West Bank cities of Jenin and Nablus.

US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken visited Jerusalem just four days after the attack and reaffirmed Washington's role as the number one sponsor of Israeli state terrorism.

In a speech given alongside Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Blinken declared his government's "ironclad" commitment to Israel. The US funds Israel's military to the tune of US\$3.8 billion each year.

Blinken expressed his "condolences" to the families of seven Israelis killed in what he described as a "horrific terrorist attack" outside a synagogue on the outskirts of East Jerusalem. The attack was carried out by 21-year-old Alqam Khayri, a lone Palestinian gunman, in reprisal for the Jenin massacre the previous day.

Blinken made no mention in his speech of the Palestinians killed in Jenin. Nor did he mention the many more killed over the preceding year, including Shireen Abu Akleh, an Al Jazeera journalist shot dead by Israeli snipers, and Omar Assad, an 80-year-old Palestinian-American who suffered a heart attack in Israeli custody.

Since 2020, under US sponsorship, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco have signed agreements to normalise relations with Israel. Such normalisation, Blinken insisted, "helps chip away at enduring biases and mistrust" and paves the way for "Palestinians and Israelis enjoying equal measures of freedom, security, opportunity, justice, and dignity" in two states.

Palestinians see things differently. Netanyahu and his ministers avowedly oppose a Palestinian state, and the normalisation of their colonial apartheid regime only entrenches Palestinian inequality, injustice and dispossession.

Blinken declared that Israel and the US shared "support for core democratic principles and institutions, including respect for human rights, the equal administration of justice for all, the equal rights of minority groups, the rule of law, free press, a robust civil society".

Again, Palestinians have many reasons to disagree. Among the "democratic principles" currently on display in Israel are the besieging of Palestinian neighbourhoods in East Jerusalem, the sealing and demolition of Palestinian militants' family homes and the issuing of gun permits to Israeli settlers to enable them to carry



Palestinians throw rocks at an Israeli army bulldozer during a raid in the occupied West Bank city of Jenin on 26 January
PHOTO: Zain Jaafar/Getty Images

A renewed resistance is emerging among Palestinians, centred in East Jerusalem and the northern West Bank.

out vigilante attacks.

Since Israel's most right-wing government in its 75-year history came to power in December, National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir has directed police to ban the display of Palestinian flags and initiated a purge of public sector employees with sympathy for the Palestinian cause. Ben-Gvir has also launched a crackdown on the rights of Palestinian prisoners. They will no longer be able to occupy cells adjacent to comrades from the same faction, sing Palestinian anthems or bake traditional flat bread.

Israel is "the national state, not of all its citizens, but only of the Jewish people," proclaimed Netanyahu in 2019. Now he leads a government determined to put this Jewish-supremacist policy into effect. Netanyahu's cabinet colleagues include not only Ben-Gvir, a convicted terrorist, but also Bezalel Smotrich, an open homophobe and leader of the Religious Zionism bloc in the Israeli Knesset.

Another elected on the Religious Zionism list is Avi Maoz, who leads the ultranationalist Noam party. In December, Israeli news site *Ynet* published two blacklists reportedly drawn up by Noam staff. One list identifies prominent LGBTQ and feminist journalists, researchers and public educators. The other names officials, academics and even interns who were involved in a civil society workshop that

Maoz describes as "deep-state actors" or a "shadow government". According to Maoz, the workshop's support for integrating Arab citizens and fighting racism is part of an extreme left conspiracy.

Netanyahu's program is confronting resistance on two fronts.

In Tel Aviv, liberal and centrist Zionists, backed by former generals, are marching in the streets. They insist Netanyahu's sixth government is going too far in thumbing its nose at the rule of law. Among their grievances are the "religiosity" of the state and its "politicising of the judiciary". Netanyahu himself is still the subject of corruption charges, but he cannot be prosecuted while he is prime minister.

Yet these demonstrations, which have attracted hundreds of thousands of Israelis, represent a loyal Zionist opposition. They are accompanied by a sea of Israeli flags without a single Palestinian flag, or a placard expressing support for Palestinian liberation.

At the same time, a renewed resistance is emerging among Palestinians, centred in East Jerusalem and the northern West Bank. This is taking shape in street demonstrations opposing evictions and the outpouring of thousands on the streets paying homage to martyred resistance fighters. A new armed resistance bridges historical factional divisions.

The deep oppression Palestinians face, manifested in a daily struggle for survival, cannot be overcome by the bleating of politicians who call for calm on both sides. As commentator Ubai Aboudi told *Mondoweiss*: "When the US draws an equivalence between the butcher and the butchered, then it is necessarily on the side of the butcher".

We must stand firmly on the side of the Palestinians and, like them, take to the streets and demand our government end its support for the butchers in Tel Aviv.

A short and dirty history of US imperialism

Priya De

The United States has invaded more countries, launched more coups, armed more dictators and trained more terrorists than any empire in history. The Congressional Budget Office predicts that the country's military spending will hit US\$1 trillion per year in the next decade. And the US controls at least 750 overseas military bases in 80 countries—it can put troops on the ground almost anywhere at the drop of a dollar. It remains the only state to have ever exploded an atomic bomb over a city.

The US began to develop as an imperial power from the mid-nineteenth century, undergoing rapid economic growth while other world powers such as Britain and Spain began to decline.

Early US expansionism involved annexing the western states from Mexico and occupying guano islands and then Hawaii in the Pacific. In 1898, the Spanish-American war marked the entrance of the United States as a true imperial power. Spain faced a war of national independence in the Philippines, led by Emilio Aguinaldo. The Filipino independence movement initially accepted tactical assistance from the United States, expecting to govern an independent state after the Spanish were ousted.

Instead, the US cut a deal with Spain, allowing it to purchase the Philippines for \$20 million and take the territories of Puerto Rico, Guam and Cuba. The star-spangled banner was raised in Manila and a bloody three-year war to occupy all the Philippines ensued, killing potentially 1 million people to put down the nationalist movement.

In April the following year, US General William Shafter, who was responsible for maintaining supplies to the army in the first phase of the invasion, told the *Chicago News*: "It may be necessary to kill half of the Filipinos in order that the remaining half of the population be advanced to a higher plane of life than their present semi-barbarous state affords".

In the first decades of the twentieth century, the US economy continued an unprecedented industrial expansion, and the government began using its financial clout, backed by growing military might, to structure international trade to most suit its capitalist class. Future President

The United States has invaded more countries, launched more coups, armed more dictators and trained more terrorists than any empire in history.

Woodrow Wilson explained in a 1907 Columbia University speech:

"Since trade ignores national boundaries, and the manufacturer insists on having the world as a market, the flag of his nation must follow him, and the doors of the nations which are closed against him must be battered down."

The US dominated the lucrative sugar and tobacco export trades in Cuba and invaded the country three times between 1906 and 1922 to maintain unequal arrangements. This involved lending political support to the dictator Fulgencio Batista from 1934 until his overthrow in the 1959 Cuban Revolution.

The US entered World War Two not as a champion of anti-fascism, but more than two years into the conflict, when the German Nazi regime had already taken control of much of continental Europe. In this supposed "war for democracy", the US came into its own as a utiliser of unchecked brutality in both Europe and Asia. In 1946, Edgar L. Jones, a former war correspondent in the Pacific, described US conduct in the *Atlantic Monthly*:

"We shot prisoners in cold blood, wiped out hospitals, strafed lifeboats, killed or mistreated enemy civilians, finished off the enemy wounded, tossed the dying into a hole with the dead, and in the Pacific boiled the flesh off enemy skulls to make table ornaments for sweethearts, or carved their bones for letter openers."

By 1945, when Axis defeat was imminent, the US began exercising cutting-edge war technologies as a warning for what it was prepared to do if challenged in future. In March, the American-British firebombing levelled Dresden, and the US military firebombed the Japanese cities of Tokyo, Nagoya, Osaka and Kobe until all its weaponry was



US troops walk past a burning oil well during the invasion of Iraq in 2003
PHOTO: US Navy

exhausted, causing a more concentrated loss of life, it is estimated, than any other time in human history until that point.

Hiroshima and Nagasaki had escaped fire-bombing only because the US wanted to experiment with a new type of weapon. In August, the US dropped atomic bombs on the cities, killing at least 150,000 people instantly, or gruesomely in the days and weeks to follow. The surrender of Japan had already been guaranteed; the US engineered this enormous loss of life to test its new nuclear technologies and prove its willingness to use extreme force.

When the Cold War with the Soviet Union began, US imperialism acquired an increasingly political dimension. The country repeatedly provided support to right-wing movements and dictators to prevent the success of left-wing struggles that could have challenged US economic supremacy or diplomatically allied with the Soviet Union. A nuclear arms race brought the world close to annihilation in several tense movements, leaving tens of thousands of warheads scattered across continents.

In 1948, the US director of policy planning, George F. Kennan, wrote an influential Cold War policy paper, in which he argued:

“We have about 50 percent of the world’s wealth, but only 6.3 percent of its population ... Our real task is to devise a pattern of relationships, which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity ... We should cease to talk about vague objectives such as human rights, the raising of living standards, and democratization.”

In the wake of World War Two, the US established the School of the Americas—dubbed the “School of Assassins” or “School of Coups” by its

opponents—in Panama. Here, the US trained police and military personnel of dictatorships and the extreme right across Latin America.

In 1954, President Eisenhower launched “Operation Success” against the democratically elected government in Guatemala, which challenged the landholdings of the dominant US United Fruit Company. The US orchestrated a successful coup, led by School of the Americas-trained Guatemalan forces, which banned independent trade unions and plunged the country into four decades of Central America’s bloodiest civil war.

The US subsequently invaded Honduras and Panama four times, the Dominican Republic, Haiti and Nicaragua twice, and Grenada once, as well as propping up almost every Latin American dictator, from Brazil to El Salvador to Argentina.

In 1953, the Central Intelligence Agency supported the overthrow of elected Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh, who had nationalised the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, threatening British and American profits. In the 1960s, the US supported the dictatorial regime of Indonesia’s General Suharto, who murdered up to 1 million people in an anti-communist pogrom. These methods were repeated in 1973, when the CIA supported the military coup of Augusto Pinochet against social-democratic leader Salvador Allende in Chile, which resulted in the establishment of a brutal military dictatorship.

The US also invaded Korea in the 1950s. Up to 4 million Koreans were killed or disappeared in the conflict, and the country was divided. The war was a precursor to the Vietnam War, launched the following decade, which followed a different course due to the enormous resistance of Vietnamese

national liberation fighters and a rebellion of US soldiers. Nonetheless, the US deployment of chemical weapons such as napalm and Agent Orange permanently poisoned widespread environments and led to birth defects occurring among the Vietnamese even decades later.

After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989, the US sought to establish itself as an unchallengeable global superpower. Often dubbing its imperialist invasions as “humanitarian interventions”, the US launched the brutal Gulf War in Iraq in the early 1990s. In 2001, the US invaded and began a decades-long occupation of Afghanistan, and in 2003 again invaded Iraq.

The US had desired a short and sharp victory in Iraq, and hinted that it would then move on to regime-change wars in Syria and Iran to install political leaders pliant to US interests in the oil-rich and strategically important Middle East. Iraqi resistance stalled this expansionist dream, and instead the US was bogged down in a bloody occupation that resulted in at least 1 million deaths.

Alongside these invasions and coups, the US has carried out innumerable war crimes, operated facilities of torture and “disappeared” untold thousands of people. It has experimented with ecological, biological and psychological warfare. It has politically excused and militarily supported murderous governments on every continent.

The number of people dead at the hands of US militarism—from warfare, injuries, disease or poverty—is perhaps incalculable, but stands certainly in the tens of millions. The United States, capitalism’s “greatest democracy”, is the most terrible purveyor of violence the world has known.

The new frontier of global competition: Review of *Chip War* by Chris Miller

Omar Hassan

For centuries, wars have been fought to gain control over vital resources like gunpowder, saltpetre, coal and oil. Possessing these kinds of strategic commodities gives competing states industrial and military advantages over their rivals. The coming conflict between the US and China won't be decided by oil, gas, finance or even nuclear weapons. Instead, the winner will be the country that controls one essential resource: advanced microchips.

That is the compelling premise of a new book by US professor of history Chris Miller. The product of extensive research and first-hand interviews, *Chip War: The Fight for the World's Most Critical Technology* dives deep into a commodity used to produce many of capitalism's most valuable and valued products. Its most important use, from the perspective of the major states and corporations, is in the production of advanced military equipment.

The book starts by tracing the history of microchips, right back to the early years of the Cold War. Computer processing began as a solution to the growing complexity of data management, mathematics and state bureaucracies. The invention of vacuum tubes made relatively instantaneous complex calculations possible. The problem with vacuum tubes, however, is that they were huge, unstable and prone to being attacked by moths (hence "debugging").

Eventually, some cutting-edge scientists developed a way to replace these tubes with a switch called a transistor. These were placed on a base of either silicon or some other material, on which a circuit was etched. They were far smaller than the old tubes, and much less subject to mechanical or bug-related failures. Thus, the microchip was born.

Early chip companies struggled to find a market that could afford to pay for these expensive new devices. The US military quickly identified the potential of this new technology and became a vital source of funding and technical support for the fledgling industry. At the time, the US was locked in competition with the USSR, which achieved early victories, sending the first satellite to space in 1957, followed by astronaut Yuri Gagarin in 1961. Soviet exploits shocked the US establishment. It responded by directing enormous funds to research institutes and creating NASA in 1958. This had nothing to do with exploring the wonders of space; instead it reflected the consensus that rockets were the future of war.

The first chips were overwhelmingly directed towards the military-industrial complex. But it was NASA's Apollo missions that became the biggest purchaser of chips, seen as necessary to get

a man on the moon. Despite being primitive by today's standards, these new chips were far more powerful and efficient than anything that had been seen before.

Around the same time, the US was seeking to update its first cruise missile, which had used reels of hole-punched tapes and a heavy onboard mechanical system for guidance. The chip-based system would be twice as powerful and half as heavy. Within a year, this one missile program alone absorbed 60 percent of all chip sales in the US.

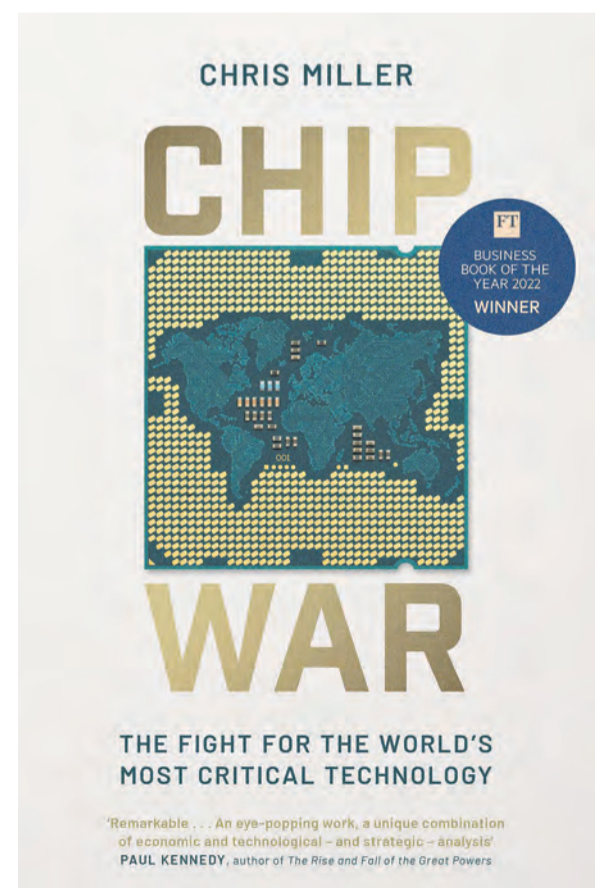
Miller makes a compelling case that modern warfare is inseparable from the advances made in chip technology. The impact of US chip-making prowess was demonstrated in the First Gulf War, in which the most modern Soviet weapons were powerless in the face of America's guided missiles and bombs. He cites a *New York Times* headline that captures the euphoria: "War Hero Status Possible for the Computer Chip".

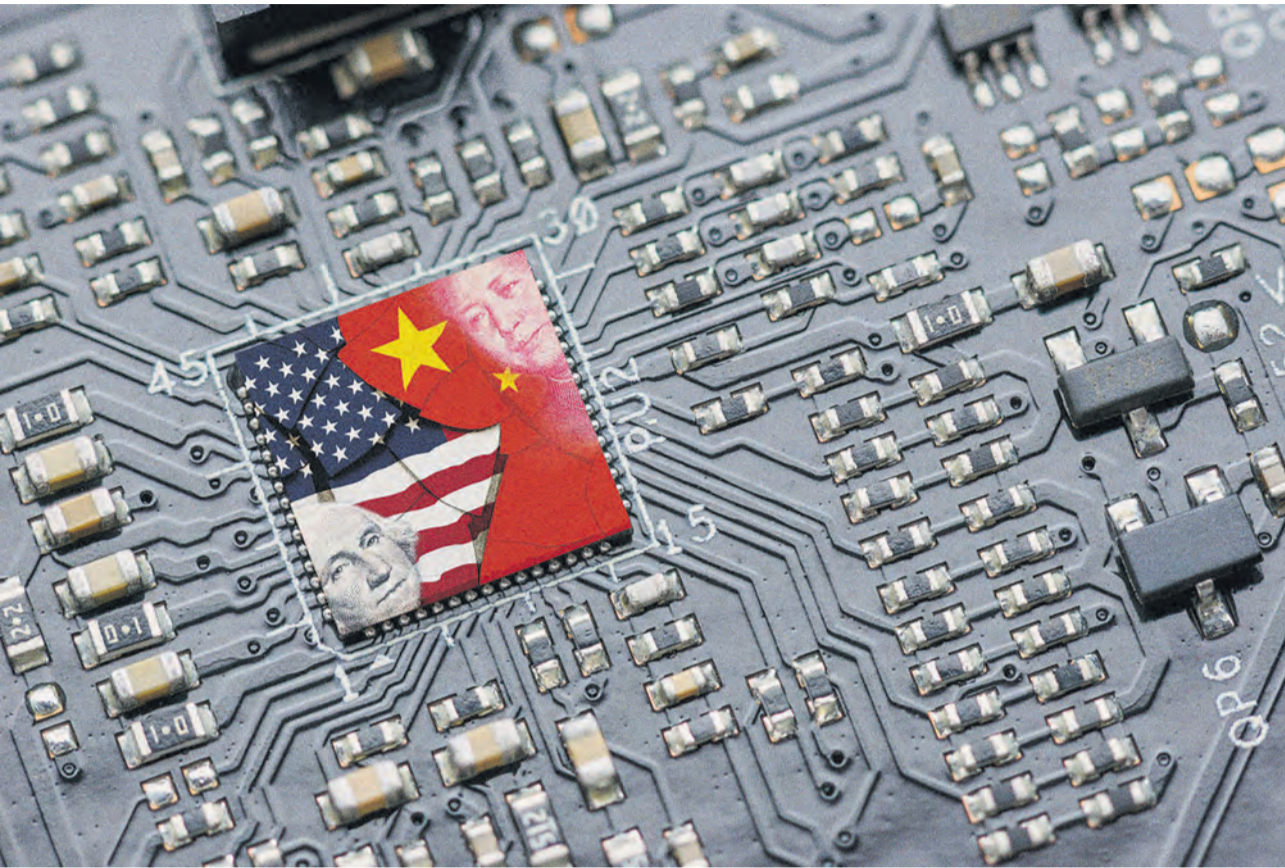
While this origin story makes for fascinating reading, it is served with a huge side of capitalist propaganda. Chris Miller is an ardent champion of US capitalism. Every chapter is infused with this right-wing perspective, to the point of blinding the author to the conclusions that emerge from his own work. For instance, Miller repeatedly insists that the US chip industry is an example of the superiority of America's supposed free market system. This is despite the industry's dependence on NASA and the US military for its very existence. In later chapters, he attacks the attempts by South Korea, Japan and China to replicate America's success as state-centric, inefficient and somehow unfair. The USSR's approach, which relied on the duplication of previous generations of US chips, is dismissed in even harsher terms and explained away as a product of the inherent limits of "communism".

Miller also praises the ruthless drive for efficiency that has characterised the chip industry. He celebrates the anti-union measures implemented by US companies in their domestic fabrication processes and the zest with which they sought out cheap labour via globalised production chains. Never mind that these were deliberately established in countries run by dictatorships that banned unions.

Less objectionable is the author's appreciation for the feats of science and engineering involved in establishing and refining the chip production process. One memorable section describes the technology involved in the modern Extreme Ultraviolet (EUV) printing process, which requires a specially designed laser to pulverise 50,000 microscopic balls of tin per second. These explosions emit light that is captured by a complicated system of unimaginably perfect mirrors, which direct the light to imprint circuits on a silicon wafer. This incomprehensible technology allows

The coming conflict between the US and China won't be decided by oil, gas, finance or even nuclear weapons. Instead, the winner will be the country that controls one essential resource: advanced microchips. That is the compelling premise of a new book by US professor of history Chris Miller.





for the etching of 114 billion transistors on the M1 chip designed by Apple for its latest smartphones. Chips produced in 1965 had just 64.

The technological advancement required to get to this point had significant economic implications. Marxists long ago identified that capitalist competition tends towards the concentration and centralisation of capital in larger and larger conglomerates, which can take advantage of economies of scale and pricing power to eliminate their rivals. While pure monopolies are rare, the domination of industries by a handful of companies is the norm. Nowhere has this been seen more than in the chip industry.

The Dutch company ASML is the only company worldwide that can produce EUV lithography machines. The most advanced microchips can be made by only two companies, Samsung and Taiwan-based TSMC. This extraordinary situation, where the most vital instruments of modern society are so tightly controlled, can be explained by simple economics. It costs more than \$14 billion to research and commercialise EUV technology. The lithography machines are hugely expensive, costing around \$200 million each. Building a chip factory—called a fab—costs about \$20 billion and requires highly specialised staff to operate. Very few companies can afford to invest these sums in the speculative hope of gaining market share. Each new round of research costs more to initiate, forcing more companies out of the market. Today, most major companies rely on TSMC to produce their high-end products. Some, such as NVIDIA and Apple, never made chips themselves, focusing instead on creating effective new designs for chips that are then subcontracted to TSMC. Things are absurdly concentrated here too, with just three US software companies responsible for 75 percent of the designs generated. So much for the free market.

Miller belongs to the realist school of international relations, which (rightly) asserts that world politics is a zero-sum competition between rivals. He is an open supporter of US imperialism. Everything is seen through this lens. For instance, his chapters on Japan's partially successful attempts at creating a chip industry are tinged with hostility—a legacy of the Reagan-era fear that Japan would supplant the US as the world's economic powerhouse.

But China is subjected to the most sustained critique. It was interesting to learn that China was an early leader in the semiconductor field until its

research programs were destroyed in the 1960s by Mao's Cultural Revolution. Later, China adopted the USSR's approach of stealing and copying US designs, which doomed it to lagging generations behind the cutting edge.

China has only recently developed a proper chip industry after state planners identified the problem of relying on the US and its allies for microchips. It now lavishes funding on the sector, from the research and development phase through to subsidising the establishment of fabs, usually at a cost far higher than commercial rates. In doing so, it has attempted to recruit industry experts to work for Chinese businesses and lure offshore companies to establish local fabs with the promise of tax breaks and other benefits.

Miller denounces China's supposed systematic theft of intellectual property and attempts to "bully" corporations into building factories in China. (The US, of course, would never use its economic or military power to bully anyone.) The real reason for Miller is that some Chinese companies were using US tools to design and deploy advanced chips beyond what most US companies could. The most significant example of this was Huawei, which turned itself into one of the world's largest and most profitable suppliers of 5G infrastructure.

In contrast to the hostility with which Miller treats the Chinese industry, he lavishes praise on Taiwan. Its success was based on an early decision not to worry about chip design or computer software but to focus entirely on fabrication, allowing Taiwanese companies to offer their services to every company on the planet without fear of intellectual property theft. This unique approach was brilliantly successful but relied entirely on state subsidies and contracts to get off the ground. It was made possible only by recruiting US scientists and companies to Taiwan. A cynical reader might think this double standard has something to do with Taiwan being a key US ally in the region.

The imperialist doublespeak makes sense only if we consider the context of the book's publication. Towards its end, Miller effectively describes the strategic threat posed by a rising China and the concentration of chip production in nearby Taiwan. He lambasts the Obama administration for its failure to challenge China's ascendancy. It is unsurprising, therefore, that Miller strongly supports the aggressive restrictions that the Trump administration placed on the sale of chips and chip-making equipment to China. These policies turned Huawei from one of the world's largest sellers of technology to a

business "fighting for its survival", according to a recent memo by CEO Ren Zhengfei.

The Biden administration has taken Trump's protectionism to a new level. Biden has expanded sanctions substantially, banning not only the sale of chips made by American companies but any chips made by companies that used technology produced by an American company. These sanctions are no longer justified by the allegedly bad behaviour of specific companies but by the very nature of China as a geopolitical threat to US supremacy.

The recent decision to ban ASML from selling its advanced chip-manufacturing machines to China is the most devastating yet. Not only does it foreclose the possibility of China producing cutting-edge chips using EUV processes, but it also bans the most advanced technology from a generation earlier. This condemns China to a future in which it lags decades behind the US. ASML protested initially (the ban will cost it billions) but has little option but to comply, given that the US controls its San Diego subsidiary—the sole intellectual property owner of the EUV process.

These punitive sanctions are a declaration of economic war on China. Yet not everyone in the US is happy about it. Apple and NVIDIA have decided to make chips with the explicit goal of bypassing export bans, and plenty of tech companies are still investing in China. Miller points out that while the US military was central to establishing the chip industry, it is now a bit player in the global market for chips, which has long been dominated by consumer goods. China, of course, is the world's largest consumer goods market.

Miller is smart enough to identify the implications this has for any decoupling between the US and China. "The entire chip industry depended on sales to China", he writes, before quoting a US chip executive: "Our fundamental problem is that our number one customer is our number one competitor". This fact does not mean war is out of the question: Germany and Russia were among each other's largest trading partners before World Wars 1 and 2.

Another challenge to the sanctions and decoupling narrative is that it is impossible to track the location of every chip: they can be sold for one purpose and then used for another. For instance, a recent report found that advanced NVIDIA graphics cards that had long been banned from China because of their potential use in nuclear research have been found in Chinese nuclear research labs.

Chip War is not an objective study of the microchip; it is a dangerous intervention into US politics in favour of a policy of total economic and political war against China. But precisely because it seeks to make a persuasive and rigorous case, there is much to be learned from its systematic account of some of the world's most important geopolitical and industrial fault lines.

‘A triumph of the human spirit’ The Mt Isa industrial battle of 1964–65

Sandra Bloodworth

“**T**he ‘60s”. What images this conjures up: youth rebellion; drugs, sex and rock ‘n’ roll; radicalism that helped to stop the Vietnam War. But actually, some of the most important events of this decade and the next were workers’ industrial struggles.

Two million people migrated to Australia from Europe between 1945 and 1965. They usually filled dirty, dangerous and soul-destroying jobs for sub-standard wages and conditions. Disillusionment replaced hope, reviving traditions of class struggle from their homelands. Seventy percent of the 4,000-strong Mt Isa Mines workforce in western Queensland were migrants—47 nationalities in all.

From July 1964 to April 1965, their iconic battle reached into homes around the country. It was one of the most controversial industrial upheavals of the decade. The arch-conservative *Courier Mail* described the place like this:

“[A] smoke stack and slag heap dominating a township of shabby houses, unspeakable hotels, and inordinately expensive shops. Toss in ... a wretched summer climate, fearsome insect plagues, and great isolation—and it stands forth as a black prince among mining towns.”

It all began over showers. Company-owned homes had no running hot water. Mine showers were assumed to be sufficient, but they were notoriously unreliable. Pat Mackie, the best-known leader of the coming struggle, said that there was nothing worse than cleaning off “coated grease and the dust of the black earth” in a cold shower.

In May 1964, on the third day of hot water running out while they showered, Mackie reportedly stormed into the superintendent’s office dripping with soap. This one angry act stirred the other miners to action. After two threats of strikes by angry unionists, management finally fixed the plumbing.

In July, a large meeting discussed the issues workers were fuming about. Undemocratic control by their union officials in the Brisbane office rankled. And they needed higher wages plus an increased bonus for working in the dangerous lead dust.

In the struggle that unfolded, the shenanigans of Mount Isa Mines, the do-nothing, right-wing Australian Workers Union (AWU), the Industrial Commission, the Industrial Court and the High Court read like a Kafka novel.

The AWU secretly changed the union rules so that delegates couldn’t claim paid leave for union business. Consequently, Mackie was sacked for union activity in work time, which to his knowledge was his right. The union also refused



to recognise delegates elected at large members’ meetings, declaring the gatherings illegal. And it joined the press attack on Mackie and other activists as “Reds” (communists) trying to destroy the Australian way of life.

But all the miners wanted was the “fair go” they’d been promised.

On 4 August, the Industrial Commission ruled that a wage increase would be “merely a camouflaged bonus payment”, something that was beyond its power to grant. But five years earlier, the Commission had used the opposite argument! Mackie, in his account of the conflict, *Mt Isa, the story of a dispute*, noted:

“No bonus because it was a wage increase, no wage increase because it was a bonus. It was clear to every man ... that on whatever basis they made their just claims to a fairer share of the wealth they created, they would get nowhere ... This was, perhaps, the strongest single factor in precipitating the dispute.”

A mass meeting after this “bombshell” decision elected a negotiating team that the union members trusted. They invited members of craft unions, all affiliated to the local Trades and Labour Council (TLC), to the next meeting to discuss action around their common demands. And the miners voted to affiliate to the TLC in defiance of their Brisbane officials, who persistently refused to cooperate with the other unions.

When the company refused to discuss a pay rise, the negotiating team presented it with the meeting’s decision: men working on contract would exercise their legal right to move onto wages.

The gist of it was this: the men, now earning about half what a contractor could, maintained production at the level expected for wages. Inevitably, output fell—contract work pushes workers to speed up and work longer for better pay, thereby increasing profits for the bosses.

For months, they became, in Mackie’s words, “bogged down in tortuous, fruitless legal ar-

gumentation”. The company argued in the commission that the workers’ wage move was tantamount to a strike. Legally, it was no such thing.

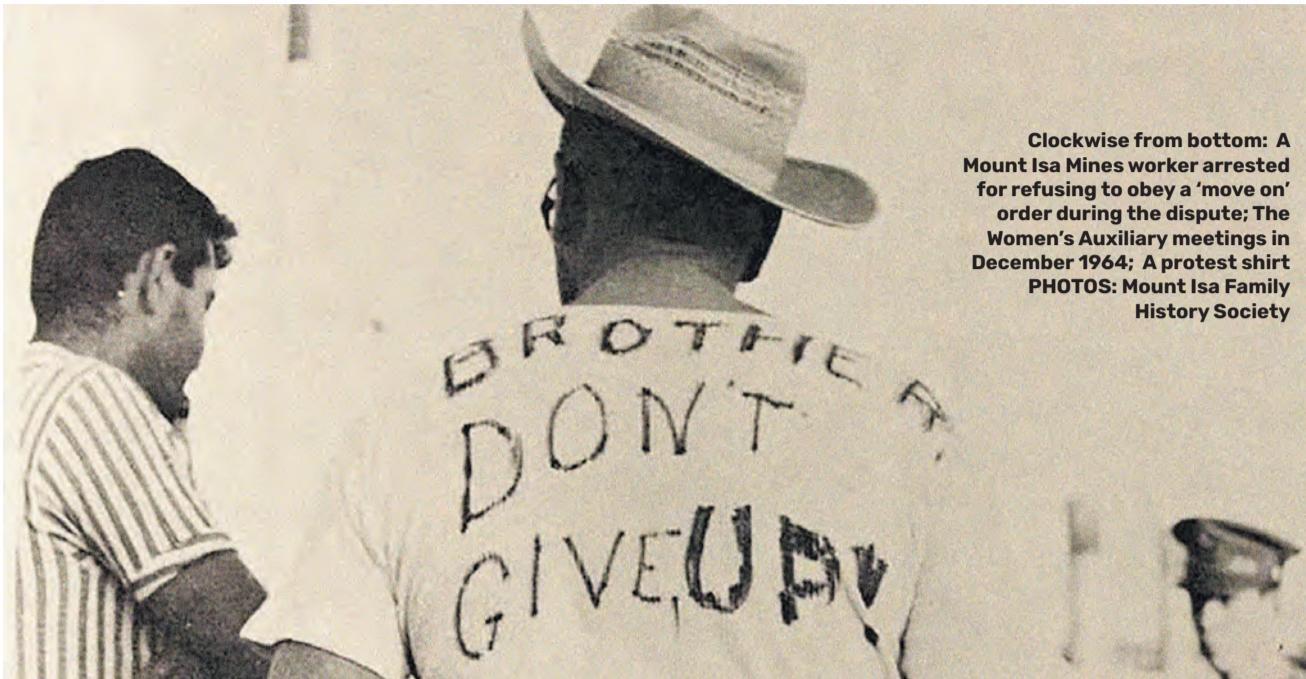
The union expelled Mackie, but the workers continued to regard him as their leader. On 21 November, frustrated by the AWU officials’ treachery, they set up a Council for Membership Control of the AWU

(CMC). Union meetings became by default CMC assemblies. Mackie wrote that, in doing this, the workers had “got the bit between their teeth for the first time”. They would not surrender lightly.

Two days later, for the third time, the Industrial Commission ruled in the workers’ favour on the contract issue, noting that what they were doing could not be considered a strike. Even the one dissenting commissioner admitted that they could not order the men to work on contract because the award allowed them to choose contract or wages.

The company immediately appealed to the Industrial Court. Presiding Justice Hanger virtually instructed the commissioners to overturn their ruling. They dutifully did what they had ruled impossible days before and instructed union members to stop “taking part in an unauthorised strike”.





Clockwise from bottom: A Mount Isa Mines worker arrested for refusing to obey a 'move on' order during the dispute; The Women's Auxiliary meetings in December 1964; A protest shirt
PHOTOS: Mount Isa Family History Society

Near the end of 1964, the Nicklin Country-Liberal Party government declared a state of emergency. Anyone refusing to work on contract faced a £100 fine or six months in jail. Gordon Sheldon, the company's public relations officer, wrote that, at the next union mass meeting, AWU officials could not make themselves heard over the "jeering, yelling, catcalling". They left "looking angry and perplexed".

Mackie was confirmed as the chair and order reigned, making redundant the huge contingent of cops assembled to suppress the expected mayhem. The workers voted overwhelmingly to refuse to work on contract without the wage rise, Mackie's reinstatement and improved contract conditions.

The meeting, and all future ones, became a public affair—including women and children, journalists, company staff and even some businesspeople.

Women formed a support organisation that at times had 100 attendees at its meetings. They voted in union meetings, holding up the children's hands to participate, and affiliated to the Mt Isa TLC, to which they sent delegates.

The defiance and unity, plus the expectation that the company would have to negotiate, created a carnival atmosphere. But two days later, 2,700 were locked out and the company closed the mine.

The biggest meeting ever seen in the town, about 4,000, ensued. All 14 unions in the town established relief committees. And support from around Australia poured in—messages, union donations, some voting to levy all members a percentage of their wages, money immediately collected at work. The women recorded and dis-

tributed all money.

There were some sympathy strikes and union actions, but nowhere near enough, minimising the pressure that could have been put on the government.

A second state of emergency was declared on 27 January 1965, following the company's announcement that it would open the gates to workers who agreed to the old conditions. Anyone in the Mt Isa-Cloncurry area could be arrested without warrant if, "in the opinion of a police officer" they were a threat to law and order. No appeal was allowed.

Political squads of police descended on the city, turning it into a mini police state.

Mackie and John McMahon, the president of the local TLC, who were away building support for the miners, were barred from returning to their homes in Mt Isa! This provoked an incredible outpouring of anger and bitterness around the country. It was on the front pages of every newspaper, dominating radio and TV broadcasts. Mackie became a household hero, at least in working-class households.

The Queensland TLC called for a statewide general strike, and the response was massive. Widespread union actions looked like they could become a national workers' mobilisation.

Rather than forcing men back on contract, the draconian provocation had hardened their determination.

Some of the press turned against Premier Nicklin. But the ABC was the most strident purveyor of company lies to the end. Only later was it revealed that its "correspondent" was Sheldon, the company PR officer!

Mt Isa Mines threatened to sack the 800 men working above ground if insufficient numbers turned up to work on contract. Police, in effect acting against the government's state of emergency, negotiated with unionists to allow a mass meeting. Fred Thompson, the popular north Queensland organiser of the Amalgamated Engineering Union, seemed to sense the need for a positive note:

"If nothing else emerges from this dispute other than the wonderful spirit of understanding and brotherhood between the different nationalities which comprise our community, then we will still have made a tremendous gain."

Enthusiastic clapping and cheering indicated the pride workers took in this.

With police having undermined the government, and with growing unrest about the dispute, a secret cabinet meeting suspended the state of emergency. Pete Thomas, author of a pamphlet titled *Storm in the Tropics* gloated: "The Nicklin government wilted and cracked. It had set out to be a Napoleon—only to find itself within a week, a

Humpty Dumpty instead".

Two Sydney wharfies drove Mackie 3,220 km through arid lands into Mt Isa, evading police blockades. Two Italian militants hid him until he could attend a mass meeting, causing a sensation.

Picketing became necessary. From 17 February, every morning for two months, hundreds of men and women turned up to confront hundreds of cops.

Endless hearings and appeals in the Industrial Commission and Court, from which the Mt Isa delegates were excluded, dragged on.

Then on 17 March, at the urging of the AWU, the government banned picketing. Printed material urging workers not to return to work was banned. But a Finnish language news sheet continued to appear. Police raided homes, without warrants, day after day looking for their printing machine. Women and children took the brunt of their brutality. But the cops could never break their nerve and never found the "criminal" equipment.

With the courts openly supporting the company, the police given police-state powers and the AWU conniving to get scabs from out of town, strikes and bans on the movement of copper were the minimum needed to win.

But this was 1965; the upsurge of working-class radicalism was still to come. Unions were intimidated by threats of fines under the Penal Powers (which would be smashed by a general strike in 1969).

Mackie was committed to nonviolence and avoiding arrests, so he argued that the ban on picketing meant there was no alternative but to return to work. If they didn't, scabs would undermine their traditions of solid trade unionism.

At a subdued meeting on 7 April, craft unionists voted, "with grim resignation", 200 to 70, to accept the Queensland TLC's recommendation to return to work. A narrow majority at the AWU meeting followed suit in a mood of "deep smouldering disgust and indignation".

Dozens, including Mackie, could never again work in Mt Isa. But there were gains.

Management did not dare treat the workers with the contempt of the past. The contract system was overhauled, making it transparent and on better terms. Workers did get a pay rise, though less than they wanted. And the women's committee continued campaigning for improved conditions in the city.

Other less tangible gains were of supreme importance. The unity they achieved demonstrated the transformative role of workers' struggle. And their stand contributed to a growing tide of industrial struggles. At its peak in the early to mid-1970s, workers' share of national income reached the highest in Australian history.

It stands as part of a proud history of migrant organisation and leadership of both migrants and Australian-born workers.

Struggles such as this build confidence and pride, reflected in the words from two of the participants. Sylvia Viani said 25 years later:

"I do not regret a thing ... If you cannot stand up for your rights, you may as well never have been born."

And Pat Mackie concluded:

"The spontaneity of the Isa people's rebellion ... the spontaneous organising of the wives, in taking the matter of their own freedom into their own hands ... was a living lesson in the constructive social potentialities of rank-and-file working people. It was a triumph of the human spirit."



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Remembering the Egyptian revolution

WITH HOSSAM EL-HAMALAWY

Hossam el-Hamalawy is an Egyptian journalist, blogger and member of the Egyptian Revolutionary Socialists who has been an active participant in key struggles for three decades.

Hossam will be a featured speaker at the Marxism 2023 conference in Melbourne. In this interview, he speaks with **Simone White** about events that led to the 2011 Egyptian revolution, his radicalisation as a student in Egypt, and key lessons from the Egyptian revolution and counter-revolution.

Hossam, you were born in Egypt during the rule of Anwar Sadat, who initiated a neoliberal economic turn, cut ties with the USSR—Egypt’s main backer under Gamal Abdel Nasser—and signed a peace treaty with Israel. Can you talk about that period, what opposition there was to Sadat and how his rule shaped the terrain on which Hosni Mubarak became Egypt’s decades-long dictator?

When people talk about 1968, they are quick to point to the anti-Vietnam War movement in the US or the student occupations in Europe. But they forget that the Arab world had its own 1968. In Egypt, we had the first serious mass protests against Nasser since he consolidated his rule in 1954. These events revived the communist movement, which went on a trajectory that culminated with the 1977 “bread uprising”.

Egypt started its neoliberal reforms in 1974. The 1977 uprising signalled the beginning of the end of Sadat’s regime; he was assassinated by members of the Islamic Jihad in 1981.

Sadat was succeeded by Hosni Mubarak, who implemented the neoliberal “Economic Reforms and Structural Adjustment Program” under the sponsorship of the IMF and World Bank in the 1990s.

The neoliberal reforms went hand in hand with Egypt’s first “war on terror”—the militarisation of society and the securitisation of the social sphere. Basically, the state withdrew social supports, which left a vacuum then filled with repression, right throughout the 1990s. This was when I first joined university.

The regime initially targeted armed militants, but gradually shifted to the reformist Islamists, the professional syndicates and then to the left-

wing activists. Egypt was going through a dirty war, almost Latin American-style. As student activists, we could not mobilise protests that went off campus without risking being shot at. There was a general state of fear.

You could not whisper Mubarak’s name. You could not talk about Mubarak in phone conversations. If you talked politics in general, you always had to look behind your back in case there were informers or people who would snitch on you. It was a horrific environment.

Could you talk a little more about Egypt in the 1990s and 2000s and the kind of activism the left was involved in?

I belong to the second generation of Egyptian Revolutionary Socialists, who joined the organisation in the second half of the 1990s. And it’s my generation that started to revive and rebuild the left on the campuses. The turning point came in 2000 with the outbreak of the second Palestinian intifada. The Palestinian cause has long been a radicalising factor for Egyptian youth. For example, the 1968 movement in Egypt was triggered by the catastrophic defeat in front of Israel in 1967.

In September 2000, Egypt exploded with mass protests that started at the major universities, but soon spilled out to school students. There was a revival of street politics across the professional syndicates. The government responded with brute force; it rounded up student organisers on a mass scale. This was the first time I was detained and tortured at the hands of state security police. But I was luckier than others: I stayed for only four days in the interrogation centre in Lazuli, Cairo. The protests were crushed in about a week.

But they revived in 2002 with Operation Defensive Shield, when Israeli tanks were sent into the West Bank. This triggered the so-called Cairo University intifada, which culminated in two days of fighting across the Giza neighbourhood, which surrounds the university. We saw scenes that



became familiar a decade later of police armoured vehicles trying to run over protesters, and tear gas and birdshots fired at us.

After these protests subsided, they were reignited with the invasion of Iraq in March 2003. The Palestine solidarity movement metamorphosed into the anti-Iraq war movement. At one point we had 40,000 protesters in running battles from old Islamic Cairo all the way to Tahrir Square. We took over Tahrir Square for a couple of days in what could be considered a dress rehearsal for the revolution a decade later.

Mubarak was a huge taboo at the time—you could not whisper his name. I recall during pro-Palestine protests on the campus in the 1990s, student organisers from Arab nationalist or Islamist backgrounds would tell me: “You Marxists, do not open your mouth about Mubarak. We don’t want trouble. We are here just to talk about Palestine”.

But this started to break with the intifada protests. In 2002, during the Cairo University intifada, I first heard explicit anti-Mubarak slogans. In 2003, Mubarak’s posters were burnt down in Tahrir Square.

The “Kefaya” movement, meaning “Enough”, came into existence in 2004. It was outright anti-Mubarak, and against the succession scheme for his son Gamal. Kefaya organised a series of anti-Mubarak protests in 2004, 2005 and 2006, but despite the heroism of activists, we must be clear about the base of support that Kefaya attracted. It was mainly middle-class activists, doctors, engineers, students, graduates, journalists like myself, pharmacists and even businessmen.

There was only one exceptional protest where we managed to pull together more than 5,000 people. But most of the time our protests were only about two dozen, 100 on a good day. But Kefaya managed to destroy the taboo of Hosni Mubarak via a media strategy. We contacted a wide variety of local and international journalists to show up to the protests. Through their cameras, they managed to disseminate those visuals to a wider audience.

Could you tell us about the growing struggle from 2006 onwards?

The December 2006 strikes, which were called the winter of labour discontent, started with 3,000

female government workers in the textile mill of Ghazel el-Mahalla, located in the heart of the Nile delta. It’s the biggest textile mill in the Middle East. They went on strike and started marching in the factory, demanding the two-month bonuses that were promised earlier by Prime Minister Ahmed Nhasif. The women workers were using a football chant that they had modified. “Where are the men? Here we are the women”, basically shaming their male colleagues into action. “You call yourself men? Here we are the women who are striking. Where are you?”

Their male colleagues joined them, the entire mill went on strike for three or four days, scoring a victory. As soon as they won, there were domino effects: the strike spread throughout the whole textile sector, especially in the north. And the industrial militancy started spinning over to other sectors, like the railways, the cement workers; everyone was going on strike.

These mobilisations were largely spontaneous. The Federation of Trade Unions was not a proper trade union, but resembled those that existed in the Soviet Union, of state-friendly bureaucrats who would act as the regime’s arm when it comes to controlling the workers and ensuring discipline in workplaces. The federation officials tried to sabotage the strikes, and the workers responded in some places by locking up their officials in the factory to force them to join the occupation.

In April 2008, when the Mahalla workers announced that they were launching a strike to demand raising the national minimum wage, the strike leadership was rounded up and the factory occupied, aborting the strike. However, the town of Mahalla erupted in a two-day uprising that was brutally put down by the central security forces. They killed three people, rounded up hundreds, torturing many of them, including children. But the Mahalla uprising signalled the beginning of the end of Mubarak’s dictatorship.

How was Mubarak overthrown?

Mubarak was exposed to be weak, with almost zero legitimacy. Every single sector in Egypt, except for the army and the police, were going on strike. It even reflected itself in pop culture. This Egyptian proverb “If you need something

from the dog, you tell him you’re my master” was changed to “If you need something from the dog, tell him I’m staging a sit-in”.

Around this time, there was a growing movement against police brutality. Egyptian police are notorious for being horrible torturers. Torture is systematic; it is not only used against political dissidents, but even by the criminal police to solve crime.

There were protests against torture in the decade before the revolution, but the movement picked up when the police in Alexandria murdered Khaled Said, a young middle-class man, and photos of his body deformed by torture went viral over the internet, triggering an uproar at the time and an escalating movement that eventually ended up with the revolution a few months later. This was the summer of 2010.

The media at the time dubbed the revolution as the social media revolution. But we didn’t just bring people together because of social media. There was an entire decade of struggles, of small battles building up and dissent accumulating, before 25 January 2011.

The last point to mention is how Mubarak fell, because this has created so much confusion.

The eighteen-day occupation of Tahrir Square was brave and heroic. I was part of it, and I cherish every single moment that I lived in the square during that time. The square played a central role in bringing together revolutionaries with the mass of Egyptian people. We fought the regime, we fought the thugs that the regime sent us, we fought the police. But if it was *only* the occupation in the square, Mubarak would have survived.

Mass strikes started in the last week of the eighteen days. That’s when the regime was about to collapse. The army had to intervene to force Mubarak out of office to try to subdue this exploding mass of social protests and strikes. It’s very telling that the first law enacted after the fall of



Far-left: Protesters march through Cairo during the Egyptian revolution of January 2011; Left: The Revolutionary Socialists' contingent at a May Day rally in Cairo in 2011
PHOTOS: Hossam el-Hamalawy

I've learned hundreds of things throughout the revolt, but I would say that this is what would make or break it: whether you're organised enough or not.

The kind of left that we were arguing for was a break away from the tradition of Stalinism, which meant we didn't really have a tradition to build on, because in the past Trotskyist organisations in Egypt were small, not very effective, and had gone extinct long ago. We had to do so much trial and error. We did many stupid things, we did immature things, but we were learning at that time.

The reality of the counter-revolution in Egypt is obviously terrible. As we know, things are worse now than they were under Mubarak's dictatorship. Can you talk about the most important lessons from the revolutionary uprising and the counter-revolution?

The first lesson would be never to trust the military. This might sound obvious, but we had to argue fiercely with others that the military is not on our side. Even though it's dependent on conscription, and it might have my brother and your cousin, it's still not on our side.

The second lesson is that you must organise in advance. There is no shortcut. Spontaneity is not enough. In the beginning of the revolution, anyone can call for mass mobilisations. Anyone could have jumped on Facebook and written "Let's have a protest now", and they would get people. But this cannot be sustained for a long time. The revolution taught me that even a small organisation like ours (when we started the revolt, we were dozens of cadres surrounded by hundreds of members) can punch above its weight if it is properly organised.

No matter how small you are, you can always punch above your weight in a revolt. Imagine if you were entering this uprising already a big organisation. I've learned hundreds of things throughout the revolt, but I would say that this is what would make or break it: whether you're organised enough or not.

Mubarak was an anti-strike law by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, which took power after Mubarak was deposed. We need to stress the role of the working class in bringing down Mubarak, because this has implications for when the next revolution happens. We have to take Tahrir to the factories.

Hossam, what radicalised you? I'm assuming it was living under Mubarak's rule?

Actually, no. I grew up in a middle-class family, so I was sheltered from the poverty that the majority of Egyptians live under. It was only when I became politically active that I experienced the brutality of the state. What radicalised me, and from a very early age, was the Palestinian cause.

You start watching and reading and hearing about what's going on in Palestine. You start asking questions like: Why isn't our government doing enough to help the Palestinians? Why is our government exporting cement to the Israelis that is used in building settlements? Why is our government allowing the Israelis to have an embassy in the heart of Cairo? Why is our government so submissive to the US and Israel?

The other source of radicalisation for me came from my father, who was raised as a staunch supporter of Nasser until the 1967 defeat. After this, he was radicalised further to the left and became very close to the communists. I used to have long chats with my dad, which opened my political horizon.

If we go back to when you were politically active at university, can you talk a bit more about what rebuilding a left on the campuses looked like in your youth? And what

was the dominant politics on the campuses in the 1990s?

When I started university, the left had collapsed on all the campuses. There were the remnants of some of the old Stalinist organisations, but they were going extinct at the time, and they were going extinct for the same reasons that were making it difficult for us, as Trotskyists, to try to revive the left. The fall of the Soviet Union unleashed a tornado of right-wing ideas and discourses. This was the heyday of the end of history, the clash of civilisations and all these intellectual productions by Francis Fukuyama and Huntington and others, where socialism and class struggle were a thing of the past.

These discourses had an impact in Egypt. If you spoke about socialism, people were very quick to say things like "Oh, like what happened under Nasser? Do you see the public sector and how it is performing? You know, the economy is in shambles".

In the West, people fantasise about the Global South, that it's easier to have a revolution there. But we have our own problems, and not just state repression. I lost count of how many times when we were doing a stall on campus and trying to argue with students, they would ask: "When was the last time this country witnessed a revolution? You know, the Egyptian people, they will never rebel. They love to be ruled by the whip. Look at the pyramids. We have always been glorifying our pharaohs and our leaders. This country never saw any revolts".

The dominant forces on the campuses at the time were the Islamists. This includes the reformist wing of the Islamists, the Muslim Brotherhood, who were very hostile to the left. The first time I was physically assaulted on campus for political reasons was not by campus security; it was by Muslim Brotherhood activists.

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