REDFLAG

A WORLD TO WIN

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Still here

Still fighting

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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.

Cover art by Tia Kass.
Back cover photo by Sean Stebbings

Support the Christmas Island rioters

Simone White

In the first week of 2021, detainees at the Christmas Island Immigration Detention Centre began setting it alight. A peaceful protest, which started on the afternoon of 5 January, had by evening escalated into a riot over the treatment of hundreds of men there by Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton and his Australian Border Force. Four days later, facing down reinforced numbers of masked, armed Serco security thugs and Australian Federal Police, the detainees rose again in a second riot—a further act of resistance that demands our solidarity.

The men currently detained on Christmas Island are hostages of the Australian government. The people who started the riot are among the roughly 240 people recently transported to the island from the Australian mainland—people facing the possibility of indefinite detention.

They are not refugees. They belong to another category created by the Australian government within the broader framework of its barbaric immigration and refugee policies. They are men being persecuted by an increasingly draconian section of the Migration Act—Section 501—that gives Dutton the power to cancel visas on "character grounds". It is a legal instrument created to divide people between "desirables" and "undesirables" and categorise foreigners as suspicious and a potential risk to Australian society.

A large number of the men are New Zealanders, Maoris and Pacific Islanders. Alongside them are Sri Lankans, Rohingya, Iranians, Italians, Irish and Malaysians. These are people who have been building lives in Australia—some for decades, some since they were children. Many are long-term or permanent residents—people who have no family or connections in the countries to which the Australian government is attempting to deport them.

According to Section 501 of the act, visa holders who have been sentenced to twelve months or more in prison, and are considered by the Minister for Home Affairs to be of unsound character, can be placed in Australia's immigration detention regime while awaiting deportation. Sometimes they are left there for years.

The criteria by which a visa holder is determined to have failed the character test are unknowable. People's lives can be destroyed at the whim of the racist authoritarians in the Department of Home Affairs and Border Force, with Dutton having the final say on all decisions.

Among the men transported to Christmas Island are people who have committed drink-driving offences, drugs offences, assaults—some crimes considered small and some larger. There are men there who have completed their prison sentences only to be abducted by Border Force agents upon their release. There are men who have been compelled to undertake independent assessments by psychologists and psychiatrists who concluded that they are not a risk but whose appeals against their deportation on character grounds fail nonetheless. Some are forced to complete rehabilitation programs and told that when they do so their appeals will be strengthened. They do it. They fail.

These are men with families in Australia. They are workers who were raising children. They are men who were sending money to impoverished family members in other countries. Now, with their visas cancelled, they have no incomes at all. This has rendered partners and children homeless.

Before their transportation from immigration facilities and prisons on the Australian mainland, some of these men could receive visits from loved ones. Now they can barely, if at all, get internet access to speak to them. Without incomes, few of these men can access legal support. Some of them have lived lives scarred by trauma, poverty, childhood sexual abuse and racism—systemic injustices compounded now by the system of state-sanctioned torture that is Australia's immigration detention regime.

There are men on Christmas Island who have never been charged with any crime, but who nevertheless have been deemed to be of unsound character and a risk to the Australian community. There are some who have signed agreements to be deported back to countries they've barely set foot in—people who have run out of hope and are just desperate to escape the situation they've been forced into.

Some have been waiting for six months or more, but now cannot leave, either because of COVID-19 restrictions or because the Australian government is intent on prolonging their torture. And there are men who are stuck in a horrifying catch-22—weighing up the prospect of returning to continents and countries ravaged by COVID-19 against the alternative of enduring endless detention.

When the first riot started on 5 January, men from two separate compounds within the detention centre began a peaceful protest that escalated into a collective attempt to fight their way out of their trap. They fashioned battering rams and other devices to get themselves onto the roofs of the buildings meant to lock down their collective rage—to break down the barriers and walls meant to silence them and keep them from telling us what is happening to them. They went to the roofs to shout into the night, demanding their basic human rights—demanding their freedom.

By the evening of 9 January, after reinforcements from the AFP and Serco arrived, a second riot began, engulfing more of the detention facility in flames. Some incredibly brave detainees had managed to release footage and statements via social media about what was happening inside the compounds they had by then broken out of, into other compounds that usually separate groups of detainees.

The detainees and sources within the detention centre told us they were protesting against their transportation, against their incarceration, against racism, against the lack of access to legal representation, against their treatment at the hands of the hired thugs from Serco who police their lives, against their forced separation from family and friends, and against the psychological and physical torture that fills each moment they struggle to survive.

Footage posted online shows a fire burning inside the Christmas Island detention centre in early January SOURCE: 1 NEWS (New Zealand)

In response to the second riot, AFP and Serco guards used tear gas. It was windy on Christmas Island, so the gas drifted throughout the compounds, causing men to vomit and retch, some of course with pre-existing medical conditions inflamed by the attack. With already grossly under-resourced medical and psychological support on the ground, detainees were and continue to be unable to access adequate help for physical and mental health injuries and essential medications, support staff being restricted from the compounds while the AFP and Serco allegedly went on a rampage.

Both riots extensively destroyed compounds within the Christmas Island gulag. In response, Dutton's hired Serco thugs and the AFP have begun a campaign of persecution against those who led the riot, and against detainees who weren't involved. Sources inside the detention centre report that the reinforced Serco ERT (emergency response team) now patrols the compounds armed and masked, intimidating and threatening detainees. Serco staff wearing full balaclavas reportedly parade the grounds threatening detainees and goading them.

Detainees who have spoken out on social media about the crimes being committed against them are being targeted. One man, Ace Salu, a Maori man who has also accused the New Zealand government of abandoning "us Tangata Whenua" reported on social media:

"SERCO, ERT came in to get me, elbowing me while I was on the ground with zip lock ties around my wrist. They were taunting and yelling at me things like 'You're the tough guy with the big mouth talking to the media, say something now'."

Approximately fourteen men accused of starting the riot have been sent to solitary confinement. They're locked all day in tiny cells with nothing other than a bed, a basin and a toilet. They, like most of the other detainees, now have even less access to internet and telephone contact with family, advocates and supporters. The internet has been shut down so only intermittent telephone access to wi-fi is available. Men are sleeping in the charred remains of burnt-out compounds, on concrete floors without blankets or basic sanitary items.

Sources inside the detention centre report that some detainees welcome the prospect of being charged with crimes associated with the riot. Then they will be transported to prisons on the Australian mainland, where they will have more rights and freedoms than they do now. If anything concretely conveys both the hellish barbarism of Australia's immigration detention system and the point of resistance to it, surely it is this.

To the extent that the Australian government is allowed to treat people like this, it affects us all. Their immigration detention program, and particularly Section 501 of the Migration Act, are designed to encourage the belief that we're under attack from within and without. Out of the fear of the "others" locked in Australia's offshore gulags, the government expects to generate consent, and stifle opposition to its authoritarian, anti-poor, and anti-worker agenda at home.

The more riots and protests there are against this, the better off we are. The more detention centres are burnt to the ground, the more strongly will flare those flames of dissent that keep alive the hope for a society built on solidarity rather than division, on justice and equality rather than the barbaric reality of capitalism today. The detainees on Christmas Island have struck a blow for the freedom of everyone. They deserve our full support.

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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.

Australia's hotel prisons are just the latest atrocity for refugees

Oscar Sterner

For nearly two years, hotels in the middle of Melbourne have been converted into prisons for refugees. Sixty-five men were locked in the Mantra Hotel, in Preston, having fled danger and persecution from across the world: the legacy of imperialist war in Afghanistan, the Sri Lankan government's genocidal persecution of Tamils, the theocracy in Iran and more.

After they had spent years languishing in Australia's offshore concentration camps, doctors determined they needed urgent medical care. The so-called Medevac bill had been passed by parliament against the wishes of the government, but it was repealed less than a year later. Instead of being cared for, the refugees were locked away in squalid conditions, constantly under guard—the hotel corridors were patrolled by armed private contractors—and unable even to open their windows more than a crack.

"It's more difficult than what we experienced in Manus Island. Maybe one hour of gym—that's the only time that I am not in my room", one of the detainees told the *Guardian*. "The rest of the day, I'm lying on my bed or sitting on the chair."

The opening of a prison in the middle of a Melbourne suburb did not go unchallenged. For months, local supporters organised daily protests outside the Mantra to show solidarity with the refugees inside and to let them know they were not forgotten. As Melbourne's lockdown eased, larger demonstrations were organised by campaign groups such as the Campaign Against Racism and Fascism and the Refugee Action Collective.

Protesters could see the imprisoned men through the hotel's windows. The detainees waved, hung blankets out the windows like flags, shone lights and held up their arms, crossed at the wrist, in a gesture of resistance; we copied the gestures back and spoke to them through our megaphones.

In December, rumours began to circulate that the men were going to be moved. Nobody knew where. We organised protests, some lasting all night, to show we wouldn't let them be spirited away: we would follow where they were going and continue to show our solidarity.

Eventually, police vans—backed by cops on horses and in riot gear—took the men to the Park Hotel near Melbourne's CBD. You might know Park under its previous brand, Rydges: it was a COVID-19 quarantine facility that contributed to Melbourne's second wave of coronavirus. Now it has picked up a new contract: imprisoning refugees.

Mostafa Azimitabar, a prominent leader among refugees in detention, reported that the conditions there are even worse than the Mantra. "I had a window and I could see people outside smiling at us, waving at us. Now I have no window", he told SBS. "I think this is one of their plans ... They want people in Australia not to see our faces."

The windows the men have access to at the Park have been tinted, so that those of us outside are unable

Left page: Illustration by Maddie Hah of Iranian refugee Moz Azimi who is currently imprisoned with 60 others in the Park Hotel in Carlton; This page: Protesters block the road outside the Mantra Hotel in Preston in December PHOTO: Sean Stebbings

The potential for solidarity exists between refugees and the broader population. The Australian government's refugee policy is designed to crush this possibility at every turn.

to see them. But protests have continued, with the refugees using the lights on their phones to illuminate themselves through the windows and tearing off the tinted coating from the inside.

The men are only one section of a wider refugee population. There are more like them in hotels such as Brisbane's Kangaroo Point, as well as hundreds in onshore detention centres around the country. That's not to mention those still on Nauru, or the thousands of refugees in "community detention" or on temporary protection visas who are left impoverished; or the unknown number who have simply been deported and never heard from again.

Refugees who arrive by boat have been targeted for especially brutal treatment. Liberal Prime Minister John Howard introduced offshore detention for such "boat people", opening camps on Manus Island, Nauru and Christmas Island. The Liberals also began removing Australia's island territories from Australia's legally defined "migration zone", the area in which arrivals could apply for refugee status under Australian law. This essentially allowed the government to do what it liked with boat arrivals, without the possibility of being challenged in the courts.

Kevin Rudd's first ALP government feinted towards winding back mandatory offshore detention, but Labor eventually reopened the island centres under Julia Gillard. Rudd then returned in 2013 and went a step further than the Liberals: he excised the entire Australian mainland from the migration zone, declaring outright that no-one arriving by boat would ever be allowed to settle in Australia—a policy Howard had tried and failed to implement in 2006.

The subsequent Liberal government of Tony Abbott implemented Labor's policies with vigour, as did Malcolm Turnbull and Scott Morrison after him. Abbot militarised the border, and the dreaded temporary protection visas were reintroduced. Under that system, even those who gain refugee status were denied the right to stay permanently in Australia. Instead, they live with the constant threat of having their residency revoked, of having their life upended at any moment by the stroke of a bureaucrat's pen, so that they could be returned to the country they had fled.

The offshore camps on Manus and Nauru became infamous for physical and psychological torture. In 2016, the *Guardian* published a set of leaks known as the "Nauru files", detailing more than 2,000 cases of "assaults, sexual abuse, self-harm attempts, child abuse and living conditions endured by asylum seekers", calling it "a picture of routine dysfunction and cruelty". Facilities were squalid. Refugees often faced violence from guards or local residents. Years of their lives were stolen. Families were separated. Many were driven to suicide. Others died after being denied life-saving medical care. Some children spent most of their childhoods locked away. Teenagers grew into adults without ever seeing the outside world.

This kind of treatment has been designed to discourage anyone from attempting to get to Australia. And politicians have used refugees to distract from their own crimes by whipping up racist hatred, to promote the idea that foreign people arriving by boat are dangerous and threatening, and to argue that their political rivals are putting Australia's "sovereignty" and "security" in danger.

Scott Morrison attacked Labor's support for the Medevac bill because it allegedly undermined the quest to "make Australia stronger". According to Morrison's government, offering some medical treatment to imprisoned refugees risked an influx of "rapists and murderers". The bill made little real change to a system that Labor has backed from the beginning, of course. It merely tossed refugees some humanitarian crumbs, while retaining the horrific system of imprisonment. But even this was enough to provoke a major debate within Australia's political establishment.

The ALP works hard to prove its commitment to "national security" by championing offshore detention. In 2018, it voted with the government to ensure offshore detainees would continue to be denied the right to seek asylum. Labor politicians actually watered down the original version of the Medevac bill to give Peter Dutton veto power over bringing sick refugees to the mainland. And Labor politicians often make statements to the right of the Liberals on the question of borders. Shadow minister for home affairs Kristina Keneally went on the attack in 2020 to accuse the government of not being strict enough on refugees who arrived by air: it was no longer just boat people we have to worry about, but plane people, too!

The brutalisation of migrants and refugees is intimately connected to the basic logic of capitalist politics. Capitalism is a system driven by competition among a wealthy minority who accumulate profits by exploiting workers, discouraging resistance. The world is covered by a patchwork of national states that help capitalists organise their businesses and compete internationally. Economic competition between capitalists combines with political and military competition between states to form imperialism.

To make this system seem legitimate, capitalist states cultivate nationalism, convincing ordinary people that we share a common interest with the ruling class of our own country. National borders help to foster the idea that there are those of us who belong, and those who do not.

Imperialist competition creates violent conflict and wars that leave millions without their homes, as rival states fight for resources, markets or influence. The drive to cultivate nationalism, to create a more homogeneous population that identifies more strongly with its own rulers, leads to atrocities against national and political minorities. Iran persecutes the Kurds; the Sri Lankan state wages a genocidal campaign against the Tamil population. Those targeted are often leftists or those who don't fit into the dominant form of nationalism.

Australia, as a powerful imperialist state, has itself played a role in creating refugees. As well as having participated in the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, Australia is a major ally of the genocidal Sri Lankan government, for example.

Refugees experience some of the worst horrors of capitalism. First, the system creates the conditions that force people to flee their homes. Then, the choice to provide refuge is left in the hands of a ruling class that depends on exploitation and oppression. If refugees do arrive here, they find a hostile regime, led by politicians determined to demonise them and a media ready to scapegoat them.

Yet there has been inspiring resistance on the part of refugees and their supporters in Australia. One shining example was the 2002 protest at the Woomera detention centre in South Australia. A thousand protesters arrived to show solidarity with those inside the camp. Many inside scaled the fences and escaped. Such events partly explain why the government established the offshore camps, far out of reach. The potential for solidarity exists between refugees and the broader population. The Australian government's refugee policy is designed to crush this possibility at every turn.

We need to join refugees in struggle, to fight to free them and to create a world that no longer creates them. But to free them all, we need to build a movement that can ultimately tear down the capitalist state, in Australia and throughout the world, and replace this system with a world based on principles of justice, freedom and equality.

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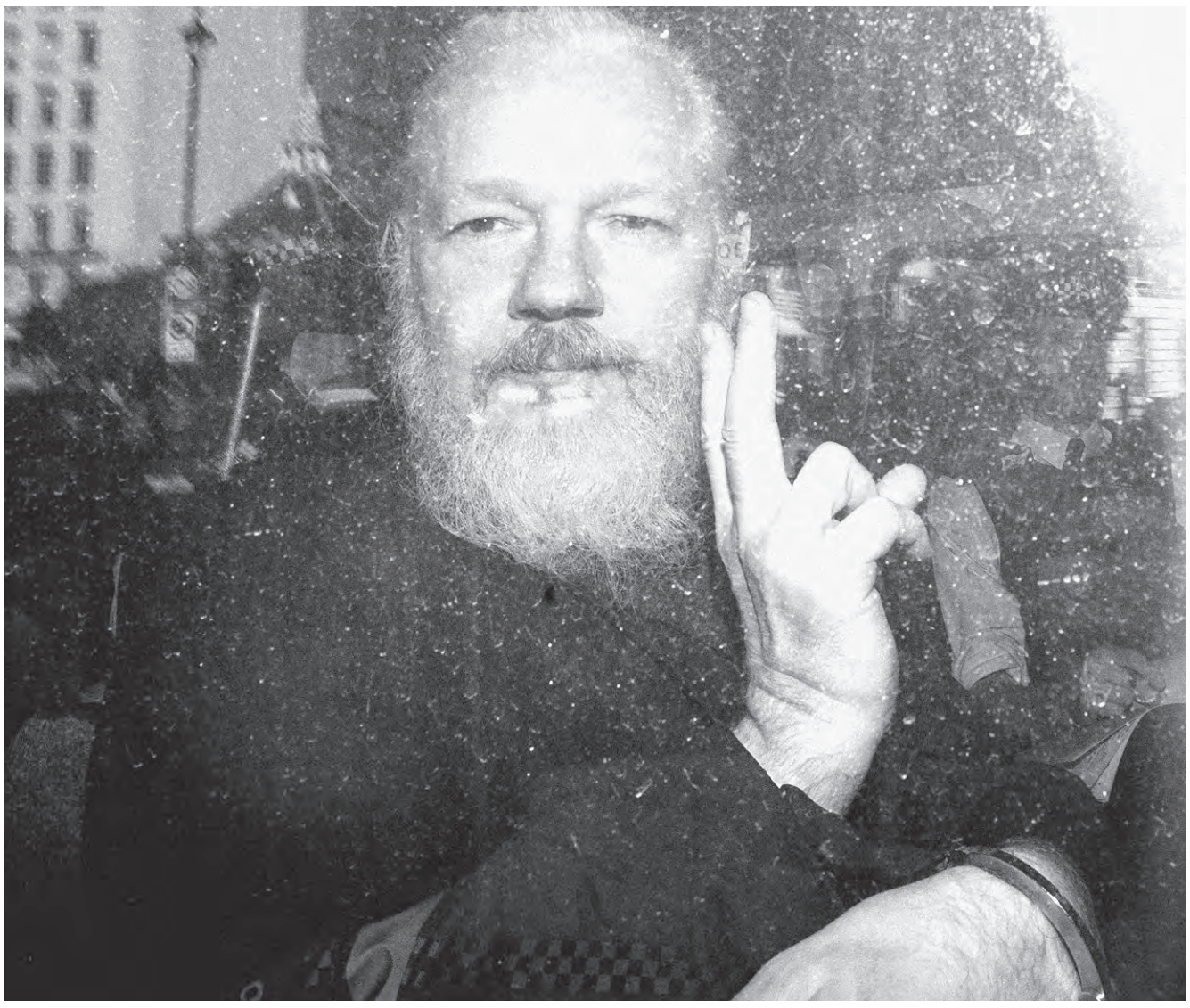
Respite for Julian Assange, but UK court sets dangerous precedent

Ben Hillier



In a stunning turn of events, a British judge in early January ruled that Julian Assange cannot be extradited to the United States to face charges under that country's Espionage Act. The WikiLeaks founder in 2019 was indicted on seventeen counts, after a charge relating to computer hacking, made public earlier in the year, first led to the extradition fight.

Speaking at London's Old Bailey, Judge Vanessa Baraitser discharged Assange, saying that his mental state "is such that it would be oppressive to extradite him to the United States of America". Close followers of the case were both shocked and relieved—the relentless pursuit by the US, the appalling conditions under which Assange has been held and the conduct of the judge during the case all seemed to point to extradition being a fait accompli. Indeed, the judge conceded every argument of the prosecution.

"As Baraitser intoned her summary judgement, the atmosphere deteriorated. She dismissed the defence case unequivocally, point by point", wrote Tim Dawson, UK National Union of Journalists national executive council member, who was present at the court. "The protection of those accused of political offences implied by the US/UK Extradition Treaty was worthless in this case. Assange is accused of actions that would be offences in the UK, she told the court. His actions could not be compared to those of an investigative journalist and by dumping data he had adversely affected scores of US contacts.

"She declined to consider the uncontested evidence that CIA contacts bugged the Ecuadorian Embassy to snoop on Assange's meetings with lawyers. And she found ample evidence that a fair trial would be available, once the Wikileaks founder arrived in Virginia ... Baraitser's cautious delivery continued as she reached her conclusion, providing no prompt of a change in her direction of travel."

Only at the last minute did she change course to deny the extradition request on health grounds. The decision gives some respite for Assange, but the court has ruled that there is no public interest defence for revealing state secrets. Ultimately, this is what the whole trial is about—not Assange the person, but the act of disclosing war crimes. As Barry Pollack, a lawyer for Assange, told the *New York Times* when the first indictment was unveiled: "The factual allegations ... boil down to encouraging a source to provide him information and taking efforts to protect the identity of that source".

The source was Chelsea Manning, who also endured almost seven years in prison before her sentence was commuted in 2017. She was again imprisoned for a year in 2019-20 for refusing to testify to a grand jury against Assange. It was Manning's heroism that gave the world, through WikiLeaks, the *Collateral Murder* video, the Iraq war logs and the Afghan war diary, among other things. The subsequent charges amount to a political trial to punish Assange for the United States' loss of face in the wake of those disclosures.

Reactions to Judge Baraitser's ruling were swift. The US Department of Justice, which brought the espionage charges, said after the verdict:

"While we are extremely disappointed in the court's ultimate decision, we are gratified that the United States prevailed on every point of law raised. In particular, the court rejected all of Mr Assange's arguments regarding political motivation, political offense, fair trial, and freedom of speech. We will continue to seek Mr Assange's extradition to the United States."

Amnesty International's Europe director, Nils Muižnieks, said:

"We welcome the fact that Julian Assange will not be sent to the USA and that the court acknowledged that due to his health concerns, he would be at risk of ill-treatment in the US prison system. But the charges against him should never have been brought in the first place. The charges were politically motivated, and the UK government should never have so willingly assisted the US in its unrelenting pursuit of Assange."

Michelle Stanistreet, UK National Union of Journalists general secretary, said:

"This decision will be welcomed by all who value journalists' ability to report on national security issues. However, whilst the outcome is the right one, Judge Vanessa Baraitser's judgement contains much that is troubling ... The judge rejected the defence case that the charges against Assange related to actions identical to those undertaken daily by most investigative journalists. In doing so, she leaves open the door for a future US administration to confect a similar indictment against a journalist."

The relief brought by the judge's ruling soon turned into more tribulation, Assange being denied bail. Already physically and mentally depleted by his confinement in London's Belmarsh prison, after years in Ecuador's embassy, Assange will, unless his legal team can get the ruling overturned, remain locked up while the US government continues to pursue him through the appeals process.

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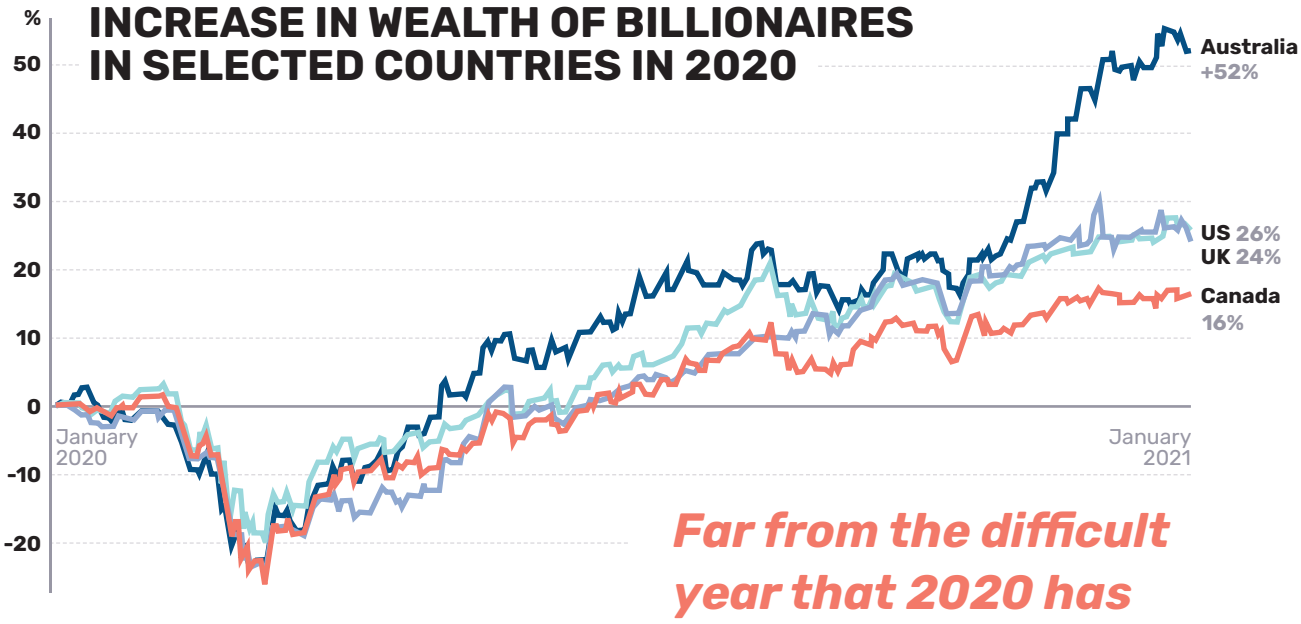
Amid death and human suffering, 2020 brought a windfall to the rich

Diane Fieldes



The Bloomberg Billionaires Index reported cheering news—for some—at the end of 2020. Far from the difficult year that 2020 has been for the majority of humanity, with a deadly pandemic and economic crisis adding to the existing woes of capitalism, the richest have streaked ahead.

But not all billionaires are created equal. Australian billionaires in particular have profited. Their combined wealth has risen by 52 percent over the past year, while their US and British counterparts have struggled with only a 25 percent increase.

If you were lucky enough to invest your millions in healthcare businesses, times were particularly good. In December, business magazine *Forbes* revealed that 50 capitalists in the healthcare industry had entered the ranks of the world's billionaires. The worldwide pandemic, with a death toll now more than 2 million, has been good for some people.

According to the *Australian Financial Review* Rich List of 2020, 104 Australians are billionaires. These are the real beneficiaries of the JobKeeper wage subsidy, which has saved corporations millions over the year. No wonder critics have dubbed it "DividendKeeper": firms have paid out big dividends while receiving it. Billionaire Solomon Lew, number 24 on the Rich List with $3.72 billion to his name, got a dividend of $24.25 million after his retail empire Premier Investments pocketed almost $70 million from JobKeeper.

Compare this to Australian workers, for whom the economic markers of the year were all getting worse, whether measured in increased levels of household debt, increased unemployment, the lowest home ownership rate in 60 years or the previous stagnation of wages turning into a decline. The Wage Price Index (WPI) rose only 1.8 per cent through the year. According to Andrew Tomadini, the head of price statistics at the Australian Bureau of Statistics, this was the lowest annual growth in the 22-year history of the WPI.

And for those dependent on JobSeeker, already reduced in September, the new year brought a further $100 a fortnight cut in income.

A day before Bloomberg's Billionaires Index was published on 29 December, Treasurer Josh Frydenberg claimed success for the Australian government's measures "to cushion the blow of the COVID-19 pandemic", which he claimed had sparked "a faster-than-anticipated economic recovery".

That's success under capitalism. It's all about profits, no matter the level of human misery that might help to produce them. It's hardly the first time that human tragedy has fuelled great fortunes. Writing of the First World War, Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky described exactly the same class divide the pandemic has shown. Every crisis is an opportunity for the ruling class:

"Speculation of all kinds and gambling on the market went to the point of paroxysm. Enormous fortunes arose out of the bloody foam. The lack of bread and fuel in the capital did not prevent the court jeweller Faberge from boasting that he had never before done such a flourishing business ... in no other season were such gowns to be seen as in the winter of 1915-16, and never were so many diamonds purchased ... The grand dukes were not among the last to enjoy this feast in times of plague. Nobody had any fear of spending too much. A continual shower of gold fell from above."

Fast forward to 2020, when the business section of the *Sydney Morning Herald* has no qualms about ending the year with an article titled, "'The best, the worst, and most extreme': The ASX winners and losers in a year like no other", which celebrates those companies that made money out of such opportunities as "the surging need for ventilators and hospital equipment".

Far from the difficult year that 2020 has been for the majority of humanity, with a deadly pandemic and economic crisis adding to the existing woes of capitalism, the richest have streaked ahead.

The ballooning wealth of the very richest is just one indication of the stark incompatibility between the capitalist priorities of profit and the human needs that will remain unmet while this system continues.

Extremism in the centre

Allen Myers

AMERICANS ARE BEING TOLD that the riot in the national Capitol building promoted by Donald Trump was the work of "extremists". To some, the term may seem a handy catch-all to refer to the crowd of white supremacists, proto-fascists, misogynists, climate denialists, QAnon delusionists, evangelical terrorists and brain-damaged Twitterholics involved, but its vagueness makes it easily susceptible to misuse.

People who are the opposition to those various categories are, respectively, BLM supporters, anti-fascists, feminists, environmental activists etcetera. But what is the opposite of "extremist"? It can only be something like "centrist", "moderate", "middle of the roader", "liberal" or "conservative", or perhaps "Joe Biden". None of these offer any serious and consistent support for the political forces fighting the ultra-right.

And if it's a dangerous fault to differ from the centre, then it follows that BLM activists, anti-fascists and so on should be suppressed as much as (in practice, more than) the Capitol rioters. Both "left" and "right" varieties of centrism in the US (and in Australia and probably elsewhere) are already pushing the line that there is an equivalence between the Capitol racists and the millions who protested to demand an end to police murder of Black people. Australian Deputy PM Michael McCormack explicitly stated that the two "demonstrations" were the same, because both supposedly involved "violence".

If there's going to be a campaign against extremism, the term needs to be defined more precisely. Surely, a willingness to let others suffer and/or die when one has the means to prevent it has to count as extremism. But the centrist politicians defend a system that allows it to happen every day, every hour.

In rich countries, there is more than enough wealth to support the entire population through a lockdown sufficient to wipe out the coronavirus, for example. But it doesn't happen because that would reduce profits, and even involve extra taxes on the rich. In Australia last year, the combined wealth of billionaires grew by more than 50 percent, according to Bloomberg. In the US during less than a year of the pandemic, the total wealth of the country's billionaires increased by more than US$1 trillion. With the US death total approaching 400,000, every time an American has died, the wealth of billionaires has increased, on average, by $2.5 million.

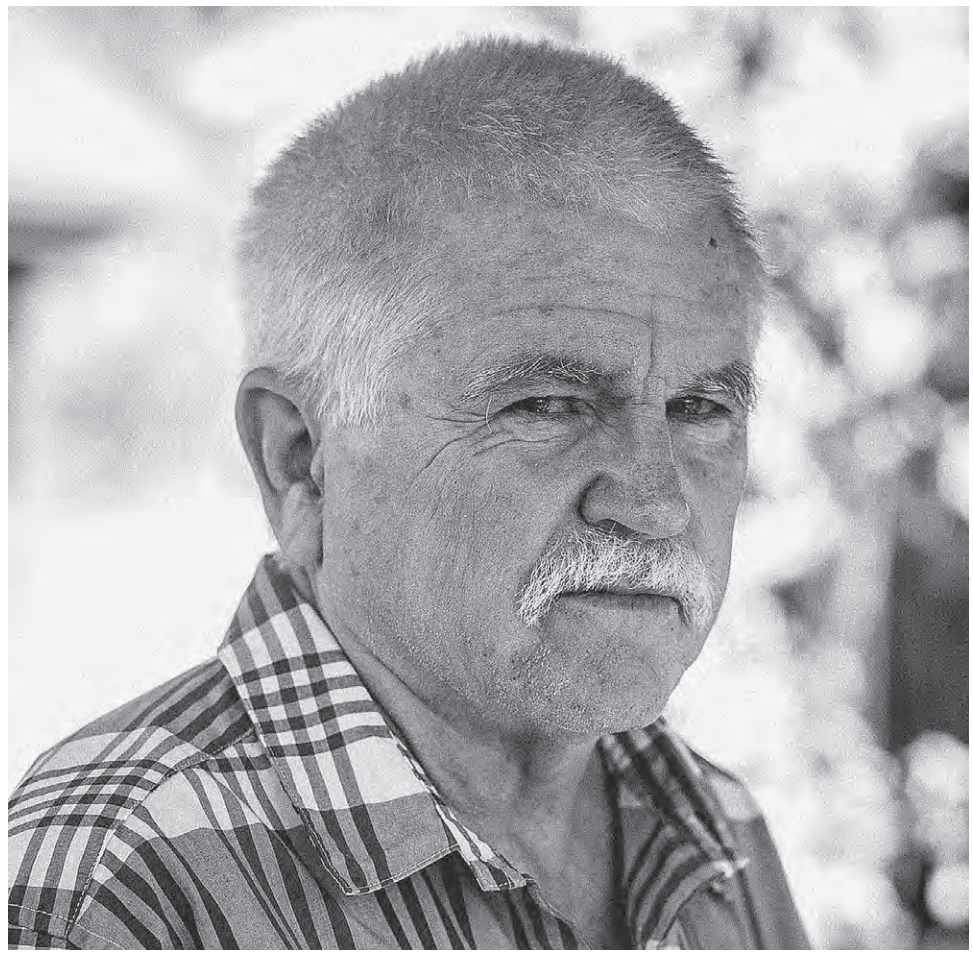
Michael McCormack repeats the racist slogan "all lives matter". The real position of the billionaires and their politicians is, "Only our lives matter".

So who are the worst extremists?

'We're witnessing a fundamental political realignment':

Mike Davis on the crisis in the United States

In the wake of the deadly riot in Washington, DC, and with the presidential inauguration of Joe Biden just days away, **Ben Hillier** spoke to **Mike Davis**, author of *Prisoners of the American Dream* and *Old Gods, New Enigmas: Marx's Lost Theory*, about the crises and transformations of US politics.



Mike Davis

The House has voted to impeach Donald Trump for "incitement of insurrection". What do you make of the choice to impeach on this ground?

We need to be very careful in analysing this. "Insurrection" and "coup" are hyperbole: there was no plan to seize power on 6 January. On the other hand, there may have been a plot to capture or even kill members of the Senate and the House, particularly Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Nancy Pelosi. So "riot with deadly intent" is the most accurate term, and we now know that certain Republicans in the House helped organise the invasion.

In one survey a few years ago, researchers were stunned by the large number of Trump voters who believed that political violence, even the overthrow of what they considered unlawful government, to be totally justified. And we now have polls showing that 70 percent of Republicans still strongly back Trump.

A majority of Republicans in the House, moreover, voted against certifying the election. These Trump diehards now constitute a de facto third party. Since Trump thinks only of revenge, there is little chance of reconciling this group with the majority of Republicans in the Senate who voted in favour of accepting Biden's election. The Republican Party is splitting in two even if both wings retain the same brand name. The Trump movement indeed has become a genuinely neo-fascist force organised around the myth of the "stolen election" and tacitly condoning political violence. Their rage has become even more incandescent after Facebook and Twitter closed down Trump's accounts.

On the other hand, what happened in Washington was also a liberation of sorts for many Republicans on the other side of the certification debate. The Trump cult has stifled the ambitions of younger conservative senators such as Ben Sasse (Nebraska) and Tom Cotton (Arkansas). Now a space has been cleared for them to run in the presidential primaries in 2024. Intra-party polarisation has also emboldened Republican hawks like congresswoman Liz Cheney, daughter of George W. Bush's former vice president, who hate Trump's coddling of Russian President Putin and blame him for undermining American hegemony.

This "post-Trump" wing has been given courage by an extraordinary revolt of the party's traditional business donors against the president. I must confess to astonishment when, on 6 January, the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM), representing the entire spectrum of older industries large and small, called on Mike Pence to invoke the 25th Amendment to depose Trump. For 125 years, NAM has been virtually identical with the Republican Party, so this was a real earthquake, as was the declaration by the Koch network, the superpower coalition of donors on the right, that it would re-evaluate contributions in light of the Capitol riots.

But we shouldn't leap to the conclusion that post-Trumpism is a rebirth of "moderate Republicanism". It is not. The break is with Trump authoritarianism, not with most of his far-right domestic policies. It remains to be seen whether the hard Christian right, which has anointed Trump as the hand of Jesus, will also divide. In any event, we're witnessing a fundamental political realignment occurring in real time.

The new administration will be inaugurated on 20 January. Can you say something about what Joe Biden and the ruling class hope to get out of the next four years of Democratic rule?

His cabinet and advisory appointments are almost entirely Obama regime veterans, and especially members of his vice-presidential staff. Progressives have been scorned, with one notable exception: the nomination of Deb Haaland (a Democrat from New Mexico) as the first Native American cabinet member (Department of the Interior).

His promise to be "the most pro-labour president in history" coexists uncomfortably with his heavy support from Wall Street, Silicon Valley and Hollywood. One of his chief goals, moreover, is the restoration of the North Atlantic alliance, not only as barrier to Russian ambitions, but as a vehicle for synchronising stimulus packages and maintaining the stability of

A crowd of Donald Trump supporters storm the US Capitol building on 6 January PHOTO: Evelyn Hockstein

big finance. Domestically, most of his vaunted "green energy" revolution, if adopted, will subsidise private industry, not expand the public sector.

We should recall how he won the nomination after having lost so many primaries to Bernie Sanders. During the South Carolina primary, there was an incredible rallying to his side of the entire Democratic establishment, the other defeated candidates and the traditional Black leadership in the south. The implicit slogan was "stop Sanders at all cost".

After Bernie conceded defeat, his campaign and Biden's agreed to form a series of working committees to negotiate the content of the Democratic platform. To the horror of millions, in the healthcare group, the Sandernistas conceded universal healthcare—they decided not to make it a make-or-break issue in the election and accepted instead Biden's far weaker modification of Obamacare, which would still keep private insurance companies at the centre of medical provision. This was a huge defeat at a time of the greatest medical crisis since the Spanish flu.

Given the way the impeachment is being carried out—the daily valorisation of and rallying around the sacred institutions of US democracy—is it a distraction for progressives whose tasks soon will be to challenge many of the policies of the incoming administration?

We need to challenge the cant about the Constitution. I personally consider nothing more obnoxious than the unctuous reverence for the Constitution on the part of the Democrats. If you look at it historically, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Woodrow Wilson was a fierce critic of the Constitution. Both Republican progressives and the Socialist Party at the time regarded the Constitution as an obstacle and nothing holy.

But it shows how completely the Democratic leadership has bought in to this almost biblical reverence of a document created by slave owners and wealthy merchants to control demands for democracy and to stabilise slavery in the south. And anointing with holy water the Constitution also precludes the fundamental structural reforms that must take place, starting with the abolition of the electoral college.

So the establishment is just gloating over itself and instrumentalising the events of 6 January to its advantage. This also creates more leverage for the new administration, which is a restoration of the status quo ante—the Obama personnel and regime. It gives them more leverage to try to punish and control the progressive wing of the party.

However, the two Democrats who publicly have been the least enthusiastic about impeachment are the president-elect himself and Bernie Sanders. Biden still drinks the Kool-Aid and subscribes to the myth of bipartisanship in Congress, of a moderate centre in American politics. It's just like Obama's quest to bring us all together and make us nicer and more decent people. It's a real delusion, but clearly one he believes in. Bernie Sanders will probably vote to convict Trump, but he's been very clear that working-class America has to be, always, the major issue in the foreground, has to be the highest priority.

Having said that, the greatest crime of the Trump administration is not what happened on 6 January. It's the fact that from the late spring onward, the administration has been sabotaging and undermining the public health response to the pandemic. Its hands are bloodstained and responsible for the deaths of at least half of the almost 400,000 people who have died. We should be demanding an independent commission to investigate all this, but also to indict those responsible. I doubt this has any purchase in Congress. But, if necessary, it should be conducted independently by medical experts and above all give voice to rank-and-file workers. It would be hideous to allow Trump and his administration to escape any kind of real punishment for the fact that their policies have become the active vector of the coronavirus infections.

Obama gave amnesty, informally, to the Bush administration for its war crimes and use of torture and then turned around and extended the same kind of informal amnesty to the bankers who brought the American economy down. Biden's instinct is to not punish the Trump administration—although he may modify this to some degree because of the pressure that he's under.

The trick for progressives is to demand punishment and criminal indictment, but at the same time not allow the Biden administration or the Democratic leadership in the House and Senate to turn impeachment and so on into a distraction.

I think it's entirely possible for progressives to demand the sternest punishment for the Trump administration, but at the same time point out the need for fundamental structural reform. The American constitutional political system is completely undemocratic in certain aspects. The Senate, for example, was designed primarily as a check on the tendencies and movements towards democracy in the early republic. Even if reform is difficult or ultimately impossible to accomplish, it's necessary to change the discourse and to put these hallowed institutions in a realistic light.

Thinking more broadly about the situation in the US in 2021, what do you think are the most consequential "known knowns" and "known unknowns"? What do you think are the most important issues facing the US left?

The conditions in this country are extreme for low-wage workers in general and the working class as a whole. They're living under depression conditions. And it's doubtful that the Biden administration will be able to do anything dramatic about that, at least in the short term.

The great priority must be struggles to organise workplaces and defend workers, to organise in the communities around life and death issues like rent control and medical coverage and to build effective national protest movements after the bitter experience of last year—of seeing the pandemic response annexed by the Trumpites, allowing the far right to mount the only effective protest movement that occurred, rather than a broad progressive coalition fighting for workplace safety and supporting the healthcare and essential workers. Never has the progressive camp, or more explicitly the American left, had greater tasks and responsibilities placed on it than it has for the forthcoming year.

Among the known unknowns is the cold war with

China, of which Australia is the front line. Biden ran on Trump positions about China. Remember this was one of the centrepieces of the second Obama administration—the pivot from the Middle East to South-East Asia and the South China Sea, and the attempt to create a more activist and militant alliance against China. This is extraordinarily dangerous. I think progressives should do everything they can to support the rights of Uyghurs and democracy in China. But a cold war is an extraordinarily dangerous situation.

Another known unknown is the ability to restore, within the OECD bloc, a stabilising level of economic growth. I tend to be extremely sceptical about that possibility. Clearly, in the United States, the private sector cannot any longer create a stable supply of well-paid, meaningful jobs to compensate for the job losses that have occurred so far in the pandemic, but especially for what all the mainstream economists are telling us will be job losses due to the application of artificial intelligence to every sector of the economy. What that means is that the public sector has to be the engine that drives employment and keeps up the level of domestic demand—but public sector employment, particularly in the English-speaking countries, has been savagely cut over the last generation.

Another known unknown will be whether the labour uprising and resurgence, which is the central hope of the left, will occur. Right now, the most progressive unions are ones like Nurses United and some of the public sector unions. But other sections of the union movement that historically have been decisive power centres have been enormously weakened by job automation and job export, but also by corruption. The United Auto Workers, once the most powerful single union in the country, which set the pace for national labour negotiations, was eviscerated a few years ago by immense corruption and crisis inside the leadership. The American union movement has very activist and committed sectors, but it also suffers from a great amount of internal decay.

The establishment is just gloating over itself and instrumentalising the events of 6 January to its advantage. This also creates more leverage for the new administration, which is a restoration of the status quo ante—the Obama personnel and regime. It gives them more leverage to try to punish and control the progressive wing of the party.

Then there's climate change and the environmental crisis. In places like Australia and California, what we're seeing in the phenomena of annual or biannual mega-fires is an immense biological transition. Forests are dying and not being replaced. Fire is creating irreversible changes in the landscape. Drought is ravaging some of the most important irrigated agricultural systems in Europe. Food security is as precarious as it has been in a generation and will grow even more so. This is the background crisis to everything else. And certainly here in California, like you in Australia, we have a heightened sense of this. I live in San Diego, but I grew up in the rural East County. And almost half of the East County has been burnt in the last sixteen or seventeen years. California's iconic landscapes in some cases are disappearing. It's no longer a matter of an episodic disaster; it's a continuing catastrophe that grow bigger and bigger every year.

You shouldn't ask me these questions because, you know, I'm always characterised as a prophet of disaster (laughs). I probably have too many bad scenarios. I ultimately believe that global capitalism can't create meaningful social roles for humanity, that it cannot decarbonise the planet, that it cannot prevent nuclear wars, that it cannot provide food security. I don't think another golden age of capital is possible, certainly not globally.

And China's ability to step in and take the place of America, as it did after the 2008 financial crisis, engage in vast public spending campaigns that increase demands for products and help a large part of the world escape the economic crisis—well it's an open bet on China's capacity to do this, but I'm extremely doubtful that a new market-based world order will emerge to bring us back to anything that represents prosperity.

Rather, the opposite seems to be happening, with, even in the rich countries, enormous numbers of people, particularly young people, reduced to the most marginal economic roles, without any forward motion or ability to escape the purgatory of casualised and contingent labour or, for that matter, the housing crisis that threatens to put hundreds of thousands of people out on the streets.

One the other hand, the United States differs from Western Europe in one important aspect. Okay, we've seen the growth of far-right authoritarian movements which had success in areas of Western and Central Europe among formerly left-wing blue-collar workers. But in this country, the most astonishing thing, I think, is not so much the rise of Trump and far-right populism. It's that among people under 30, every poll shows that a majority looks more favourably on socialism, whatever that means to them, than on capitalism. And it's that so many of them, hundreds of thousands of them, have been active in campaigns from the Occupy movement to Black Lives Matter and so on.

One of the principal concerns of progressives right now is how to sustain that activism, how to prevent it from being demobilised. Much of the future rests on the ability of the left to do that. There's been no other country—certainly no European country, or Australia, New Zealand or Canada—that has seen such a powerful resurgence of the left, or one that is so solidly, generationally specific and anchored. And of course, youth of colour, the coming plurality of the American population, played a central role in this—particularly the Black women who built Black Lives Matter. After Sanders' concession, you faced the possibility that tens of thousands of young people who had been active in his campaign would just become pessimistic and disorganised, when instead their activism was recycled by BLM. We must conserve and nurture activism above all.

There was no coup, but the US far right is growing

Vashti Fox

Coups, if the term is to retain some serious meaning, are organised affairs. They generally involve some section of the state breaking with the existing political order and violently commandeering the main levers of society. The riots that took place at the US Capitol on 6 January, described by US socialist Mike Davis as "essentially a big biker gang dressed as circus performers and war-surplus barbarians", were organisationally incapable and politically ambivalent about taking state power. The Trump protesters were violent and dangerous—pipe bombs were found after the event, and protesters beat a police officer to death—but this was no insurrection.

What happened in Washington was an inchoate far-right riot, designed to express and encourage rage and disaffection. It was an action designed to pressure, as Trump urged in his rally speech, those "weak and spineless Republicans" to pursue his challenge to the election result. It was an expression of one side of the political polarisation in US society. It revealed the degree of intersection between a wing of the Republicans and an enraged conglomeration of conspiracy theorists, neo-Nazis, white supremacists, militia groups and evangelicals. The moment spoke to many things about the crisis ravaged USA, but a coup it was not.

You would never know this, however, if you listened to the nearly unanimous chorus of the major daily newspapers, the liberal punditry, Democrats, "moderate" Republicans, representatives of business and the heads of most major trade unions. It is difficult to think of another event in recent US history that has generated such bipartisan agreement.

Joe Biden expressed the mood when he declared the riot to be the "darkest day" in US history. Forget slavery. Forget the deaths of many tens of thousands of young Americans in Vietnam (let alone the Vietnamese they slaughtered). Forget the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. Forget the massacres of America's First Nations people. Forget the daily indignities of minimum wage work. Forget the deportations of thousands of migrants from the only homes they have ever known. Forget the police knee on the neck of George Floyd. And especially forget the bodies mounting up in makeshift freezers and morgues across the country as the pandemic kills 4,000 people a day. In other words, forget the vale of tears that is modern America. That is what Biden is telling people to do.

Much as they wax lyrical about the horror of the Capitol riots, Democrats and anti-Trump Republicans are taking maximum political advantage. After the tumult of the Trump years, and now the horror of COVID-19, there is widespread agreement among the US ruling class that America must be restored to its former glory. Biden, they hope, is the man to do it. The incoming administration is moving to consolidate the security apparatus of the state. Biden is talking already about strengthening domestic terrorism legislation, laws which would be used, in a period of significant upheaval, against the left and anti-racism protests.

To point out that the riots were not a coup and that the events of the day will be used as part of the revanchist project of US capitalism is not, however, to say the far right is not a problem. While a number of his Republican supporters abandoned him in the wake of the events at the Capitol, Trump still has supporters in the House, the Senate and some state legislatures. These figures can play a role in giving national voice to far-right politics; they can continue to push mainstream politics to the right on questions of migration, race and policing. They can also give confidence to even more radical far-right organisations.

In popular terms, it is also undeniable that there is widespread support for Trump's politics. Indeed, his 2020 election campaign, just as reactionary in rhetoric as his 2016 run, garnered more than 70 million votes. A sizeable minority came to his campaign rallies, and a minority of those are open to even more political mobilisation. Trump's years in power, with his nods and winks to fascists, Nazis, Christian extremists and conspiracy theorists, gave marginal politics a huge megaphone. While we have yet to see what impact Trump's ignominious departure from the White House will have on his supporters, the underlying social dynamics that gave rise to the far right are not going to disappear.

While the Liberal punditry present Trump's base as crazed rural working-class dummies, the reality is quite different. A detailed socioeconomic study by Jacob Whiton, a former research analyst at Brookings Metro, of the areas that voted for the most pro-Trump Republicans revealed that those legislators "have been largely elected by higher income white homeowners in the fast growing exurban fringe. They feel the social status traditionally associated with their identity as white Christians is being degraded and that left-wing political movements pose a threat to their livelihoods and political power".

These are people with some wealth and power in society, and they have an interest in trying to create a world in which their privilege is maintained. Many of these individuals are less tied to the old east coast establishment conservatives and to big capital (much of which has now abandoned Trump). They are rogue elements in the US body politic.

Who knows where this force will go, but it is unlikely they will be sucked easily back into the mainstream of the Republican Party. Indeed, if you trawl through the descriptions of the known Trump rioters, hardly any fit the liberal caricature of Trump's base. Among them could be found a number of realtors, a bankrupt gym owner, the former associate general counsel and director of human resources for an insurance company, the son of a Kings County, New York, supreme court judge, the co-owner of a Louisiana chain of supermarkets,

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A Donald Trump supporter stands outside the US Capitol on 6 January
PHOTO: Matt McClain

along with CEOs and other business owners.

The far right also has widespread support among police officers and immigration agents. Indeed, one study by a former FBI investigator revealed multiple links between law enforcement and white supremacist, fascist and militia groups. One of the most concerning revelations from the riot in Washington was the relationship between the police and protesters.

One account of the day reported that cops among the protesters were flashing their badges and getting let through barricades and into the Capitol building. Other footage reveals that barriers were removed by cops to allow the protesters in. Inside, interactions between the cops and the protesters appeared convivial. A *New York Times* article reported:

"An officer with the Capitol Police tried to reason with the crowd. 'You guys just need to go outside', he said to a man in a green backpack. Asked why the police were not forcing the mob out, the officer said, 'We just got to let them do their thing for now'. Another officer stood by a stairway, watching everything unfold and answering a few questions, including directing a woman to the bathroom."

For all their subsequent outrage, the Washington police force and the Democratic mayor didn't consider the threat posed by a well-advertised demonstration of known white supremacists to be a genuine threat. The contrast with the Black Lives Matter demonstrations couldn't be clearer. While police (initially at least) allowed the Trump rioters into the Capitol, it was a different story at the BLM protest on 1 June, when nearly 6,000 law enforcement officers were mobilised. More than 300 people were arrested that night. They never got close to the Capitol building or the White House.

Openly fascist currents do not have a stable, cohered and coherent organisation in the US. Nevertheless, there are broader layers in US society that are attracted to authoritarianism, extreme white supremacy and vigilante political violence. The disorganisation of the far right is a good thing; the left needs to fight to make it a permanent state of affairs.

That will be achieved only if the left builds an anti-fascist movement that looks beyond the institutions of US capitalism. This means breaking with the logic expounded by many progressive Democrats such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who, in the aftermath of the riot, has been valorising the institutions of American capitalism. "Accountability, rule of law, and removal of clear & present dangers are what will help stabilize the present situation", she tweeted.

But the rule of law in the US means white power and ruling-class privilege. The laws and institutions of the American state help maintain a deeply despotic, unequal and brutal system. Those institutions cannot be "reclaimed". Rather, a movement needs to challenge the far right on the streets and to build a counter-power to the system that bred the far right in the first place. In the end, a successful anti-fascist movement will build on the strength and power so magnificently displayed in last year's Black Lives Matter demonstrations.

Reject Australia Day. CELEBRATE RESISTANCE

Jasmine Duff

Why not celebrate Australia Day? The first reason is obvious. Australia's national holiday is scheduled to celebrate the beginning of a genocidal invasion. Between the landing of the First Fleet on 26 January 1788 and 1900, around 90 percent of the Aboriginal population was wiped out. In Queensland's frontier wars alone, researchers Raymond Evans and Robert Orsted-Jensen say that roughly 60,000 Aboriginal people were killed.

As the country was colonised, invaders had to fight for every inch. Examples are legion, even as the massacres were covered up and deliberately "forgotten". The Bathurst War is just one case. From 1824, the Wiradjuri waged a guerrilla war to protect their lands. Bathurst's governor placed the area under martial law, and Wiradjuri men and women were indiscriminately massacred. Approximately 1,000 were murdered.

While the invasion continued, Aboriginal people were taken from their communities and forced into labour on cattle and sheep stations. In the late 1800s, Reverend John Gribble wrote, "I have seen numbers of natives brought in from the interior, and some of them had never before seen the face of a white man, and they were compelled to put their hand to a pen and make a cross which they never could understand, and having done this they were then slaves for life, or as long as they were good for pearl diving".

To cover up the barbaric legacy of Australia's founding, a national mythology was created, claiming that before invasion, this land was empty earth, a *terra nullius*. In this mythology, the Aboriginal people were terminally barbaric, with no ability to organise their own civilisation, and "settlers" had done the benevolent service of setting one up for them; the invasion was humane. This ideology didn't die out in the nineteenth century. It is constantly revived by right-wing culture warriors. In the year 2000, right-wing media commentator Keith Windschuttle could write, "Ever since they were formed in 1788, the British colonies in Australia were civilised societies, governed by both morality and laws that forbade the killing of the innocent".

New research constantly reveals more proof of the invasion's brutality. But the basic narrative has been known, and covered up, since the crimes were committed. In 1869, a writer in the *Newcastle Chronicle* lamented the barbarism of what was taking place:

"We have not only taken possession of the lands of the [A]boriginal tribes of this colony, and driven them from their territories, but we have also kept up unrelenting hostility towards them, as if they were not worthy of being classed with human beings, but simply regarded as inferior to some of the lower animals of Creation."

There's a liberal version of this national mythology, too. It acknowledges that Australia was created through barbaric violence, but asserts that this barbarism is confined to the past. The alleged moral cleansing of Australia is exemplified in Kevin Rudd's 2008 apology. Rudd apologised in particular for the Stolen Generations, asserting that "this Parliament resolves that the injustices of the past must never, never happen again". But even as he spoke these words, Rudd was presiding over the creation of a new Stolen Generation, as he continued the "intervention" into Aboriginal life in the Northern Territory. Between 2007 and 2013, the rate of child removals in the NT increased by 80 percent. In this context, the apology takes on a far more sinister quality. It was not a heartfelt attempt at reconciliation; it was the words of a snake oil merchant. Rudd sold the lie of reconciliation in an attempt to dissipate anger at what was being done to Aboriginal communities, so that he could continue their oppression.

Despite the ongoing crimes of the Australian state against Aboriginal people, every year a national holiday asks us to celebrate the start of the oppression. To get together with beers, barbecues and Australian flags to enjoy a day that marks out the beginning of a genocide; to hit the beach with your mates to party on the day which started the massacres, the poisoning of land, the stealing of children.

The whole thing needs to be abolished, and anyone with a bone of righteousness in their body should refuse ever to celebrate it.

Recognising this sickness, some have popularised the call to "change the date". But the problem with Australia Day isn't just the date. Australia Day exists to celebrate Australian nationalism. It's a holiday designed to bond us all to the idea that all Australians are part of a single national project: that ordinary people, you and I, have something in common with those who rule this nation.

This narrative needs to be rejected. Australia is a capitalist country, in which a small, wealthy minority dominates and controls the vast majority of us. They make a profit out of exploiting us. As part of exploiting the majority, the capitalist class and their political servants carry out many kinds of oppression. They gut welfare payments, forcing many to live in poverty. They steal wages from vulnerable workers. They whip up racism against Aboriginal people and migrants through the media conglomerates they control. They subject refugees to psychological torture by keeping them imprisoned indefinitely, and they justify it by saying these people may be a threat to our nation.

Why would we have a holiday to celebrate our supposed "common interests" with those who perpetrate these crimes? We aren't on the same team as those who committed massacres against Aboriginal people, or the system that kills them now in the prison cells.

Let's not 'perfect' Australia Day by putting it on some benign day, so we can ignore the genocidal origins and criminal conduct of the Australian state. Australian nationalism isn't something we need to improve, it is something we need to fight. The whole thing needs to be abolished, and anyone with a bone of righteousness in their body should refuse ever to celebrate it.

Invasion Day rally in Melbourne in 2020
PHOTO: Matt Hrkac (Flickr)

For nearly 20 years, Australian troops have helped to occupy Afghanistan, part of an invasion and occupation that have killed more than 100,000 civilians, according to the United Nations. As has been revealed recently in a war crimes investigation, Australian soldiers carried out what amounted to "sanctioned psychopathic behaviour". Australian nationalism—and Australia Day—tells us that these people were "our" troops". That they fought under "our" flag. That we are on their team.

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Every time nationalism is used to justify oppression, we need to shout: "Not in our names!" We need to learn the history of resistance to barbarism in this country, celebrate it and stand on the side of those who fought back.

Those like Dooley Bin Bin, Daisy Bindi and Clancy McKenna, three of the key organisers of the Pilbara strike, when more than 800 Aboriginal people walked off stations and workplaces across Western Australia on May Day 1946—beginning the longest strike in Australia's history. Those like Sam Watson, who fought for justice for Aboriginal people his entire life and linked it to a world of struggles against oppression, like the movement against apartheid in South Africa.

Throughout history, there have been those who have resisted Australian barbarism. Being an "Australian" doesn't tell you what side of justice you're on: you can be John Howard, who ordered war crimes, or Julian Assange, who is being psychologically tortured for the crime of uncovering those atrocities. This country is deeply divided: some oppress, and some resist. This year on 26 January, you should join the ranks of those who resist. Attend Invasion Day protests wherever you are. Refuse to celebrate Australia.

But don't just leave it to 26 January. Resist every day of the year. Turn up at Black Lives Matter demonstrations. Attend protests to free refugees from offshore detention and the hotels they are imprisoned in. Fight, and push others to fight alongside you. We don't need to change the date; we need to change the world. And as radical Aboriginal activist Gary Foley told an Invasion Day rally in Melbourne: "If you want to change the world, it's important to get together with others and be organised, because you can't do it by yourself."

What's the prison

Priya De

Last year, the number of people in Australian prisons fell for the first year since 2011—but the representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders increased. Aboriginal people are 2 percent of the national population, but account for more than one-quarter of prisoners. They are more likely to be jailed than to graduate university.

It's an indictment of the criminal "justice" system that Blacks continue to be targeted by cops and sentenced by judges. It's also illustrative of what the system is there to achieve. The laws in our society are not written for the benefit of all. They are there primarily to defend a system of private property.

For example, it is a crime to steal a loaf of bread, but perfectly legal for corporate supermarket chains to discard millions of tonnes of good but unsold food while people starve. Likewise, it is a crime to squat in an unused apartment or house, but the law says that it is fine for hundreds of thousands of dwellings to go empty while thousands sleep rough on the streets.

The CEO of Rio Tinto faced no charges after his company last year destroyed a cave showing a 46,000-year continual human occupation of the Juukan Gorge in Western Australia's Pilbara region. Yet anti-racist activists were arrested and charged for minor graffiti of a Captain Cook statue in Sydney.

Prisoners are more likely to be poor, more likely to have experienced homelessness, more likely to be disabled and more likely to struggle with substance abuse than the general population. Their ranks are almost never swelled by millionaires or corporate executives.

Police and magistrates have discretion to apply the laws selectively, yielding obvious hypocrisy and discrimination. The death of Yorta woman Tanya Day in 2017 highlighted the different ways drunkenness is treated, for example. Day was arrested for falling asleep on a train to Melbourne, and later died in a Castlemaine prison cell. Yet when Liberal Party frontbencher Tony Abbott passed out drunk in Parliament House and missed crucial votes on the Australian government's response to the Global Financial Crisis in 2009—a far more consequential lapse than Day's—he was never escorted out and put in a cell. He later became prime minister!

Cops and magistrates can be imbued with the worst bigotries of the system they defend, spending their days exerting power over the powerless, often with impunity. More than 430 Aboriginal people have died in police custody since 1991, but not one police officer has been sentenced for murder.

The police sometimes get stood down on full pay (a holiday!) after killing Aboriginal people. In 2004, Queensland Senior Sergeant Chris Hurley bashed Cameron Doomadgee to death on Palm Island. The pathologist who conducted a post-mortem likened his injuries to those of a plane crash victim. Hurley was charged with manslaughter but was acquitted, granted leave with pay, awarded $100,000 for belongings lost after his police residence was burned down amid community protests, and later promoted. Hurley was fined $500 in 2016—for assaulting a police officer.

Last year, the number of Aboriginal women imprisoned for "offences against justice" increased by 15 percent, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics. The crimes contained within this offence include bearing false witness and tampering with evidence—but it also provides an exceptional catch-all for people to be locked up for "disrespecting" cops and judges, whatever that may mean. When Kumanjayi Walker was shot in 2019, while asleep in his bed at 5am, he was "being arrested" for allegedly breaching a suspended sentence, which falls under offences against justice.

A Black Lives Matter protest in Adelaide in May 2020 PHOTO: Tim Lyons

Many people in Australian prisons have not even committed a crime. More than one-third are on remand; that is, they are waiting for their day in court and possibly are innocent of the charge(s) against them.

The cops, courts and prisons work together to keep people down by reinforcing social inequality and by punishing people who are deemed not to have assimilated into Australian capitalism.

That is why Aboriginal people have been a constant target of state repression. Muslim communities, whose decades-long experience of scapegoating has involved house raids, spying and unfair imprisonment, have also been prime targets for state harassment. So-called anti-terrorism laws, primarily used against Muslims,

system for?

The cops, courts and prisons work together to keep people down by reinforcing social inequality and by punishing people who are deemed not to have assimilated into Australian capitalism. That is why Aboriginal people have been a constant target of state repression.

allow people to be arrested for thought crimes. Laws passed last year gave ASIO the power to issue oral arrest warrants for people as young as fourteen, to prevent detainees from accessing the lawyer of their choice and to prevent people arrested on terrorism charges from revealing that they have been arrested.

The Australian state tries to scare people into submission, to show that standing up to power has serious consequences. The state also tries to harden the hearts of broader sections of society against potential solidarity with the oppressed, by painting the people being harassed as dangerous elements undeserving of due process or rights. This means making an example of those who are "disrespectful", as well as those who "follow the rules".

Because prisons aren't designed to "keep people safe", but to punish the vulnerable and intimidate the rebellious, the conditions inside are grotesque.

A 2019 ABC *Four Corners* report revealed a scandal of children being locked up in Queensland's watch-houses, which are designed as maximum-security prisons for adults. In 2018, Human Rights Watch detailed sickening abuse of disabled prisoners in Western Australia and Queensland. Prisons adopted a model whereby inmates, rather than healthcare professionals, were tasked with the care of prisoners with disabilities. One disabled prisoner was left in nappies for days. Another was repeatedly raped, abuse that was discovered only when guards found soiled and bloodied sheets during a raid.

Surveying the reality of prisons tears apart the lies justifying them: that all are equal before the law; that if you don't do the crime, you won't do the time. What's left is an abominable institution that tortures the vulnerable in defence of the elite.

Prisons are designed to maintain the social relations of an economy based on exploitation. The legislators set the rules, the cops enforce them, and the prisons lock away individuals caught in the gaps. Capitalism needs repression because a tiny minority controls most of the wealth, while the majority struggles to get by week to week. The working class produces all wealth while the ruling class pockets the profit. Without the state, capitalists would be defenceless in the face of working-class resistance. What prisons help "keep safe" is a system of minority rule.

Prisons need to be abolished. But doing so will mean overthrowing the criminals in the capitalist state and the racist, brutal class system it upholds. That would be real justice.

Ranger uranium mine is dead: A victory for the Mirarr people, and for activism

Jerome Small

"The Mirarr Traditional Owners welcome the conclusion today of uranium mining on their country with the end of processing at the Ranger Uranium Mine adjacent to Kakadu National Park. The ending of active operations comes some 40 years after the Commonwealth government, which originally owned 50% of the mine, imposed uranium mining on traditional owners."—**Statement by Gundjeihmi Aboriginal Corporation, 8 January**

"Although Ranger went ahead, massive protests prevented Jabiluka, a sacred site for the local Mirarr people, from being mined."—***Australian Financial Review*, 8 January**

I think it was early 1998 when I first met Jerome Fitzgerald. I'd set up a stall near the corner of Bourke and Swanston streets in Melbourne with a petition, info and leaflets for one of the first rallies of the Jabiluka Action Group.

"Good on you son, but you're never going to stop it", he told me. Jerome Fitzgerald was a retired metalworker—friendly enough, but unimpressed by my one-person-with-rickety-card-table operation. "I led 10,000 metalworkers down Bourke Street protesting against uranium mining back in the 1970s, and we never stopped it then", he said. "And I don't see 10,000 metalworkers marching down Bourke Street now."

Over the next couple of years, Jerome would stop for a chat every once in a while, when I was on a Friday night stall in town. Each time, we'd have a version of the same conversation, with me trying but never quite succeeding in enticing him out of his "good on you but you'll never win" frame of mind.

Probably the closest I came was after one of our regular blockades of the St Kilda Road headquarters of North Limited, the company developing the mine. By this stage, the Mirarr Aboriginal people had invited people onto their land for a mass blockade of the Jabiluka site. During the six months that followed, more than 5,000 activists travelled to the blockade. More than 500 were arrested. Also arrested was Mirarr senior traditional owner Yvonne Margarula, literally arrested and prosecuted for "trespass" on her own land for protesting against the mine. Blockaders travelled back to the cities and got involved in the campaign, especially in Melbourne.

Unlike those early days of leafleting in Bourke Street, we could hand out a leaflet saying "Jabiluka" and people knew what it was about. We never duplicated Jerome Fitzgerald's feat of 10,000 metalworkers in Bourke Street, but John Cummins from the construction union set up a series of meetings for us on St Kilda Road building sites, and small groups of construction workers provided an important boost to our blockades of North Limited.

The campaign was gaining traction in other ways: someone noticed that every time there was a major protest, the share price of North Limited tanked—and even more so the share price of its subsidiary, Energy Resources Australia, which was digging at Jabiluka while operating the nearby Ranger uranium mine. Slowly but surely, the campaign was nailing the company's precious share price to the floor.

Clockwise from bottom left: A 'Stop Jabiluka' banner hangs from the escarpment within the Jabiluka mineral lease; A 1978 protest in Melbourne opposing the Ranger uranium mine PHOTO: Lyn McLeavy; Mirarr Senior Traditional Owner Yvonne Margarula leads a march against the Jabiluka mine along the Oenpelli Highway in Kakadu National Park in September 1998 PHOTO: David Hancock; Mounted police attempt to break a blockade of North Limited's Melbourne offices in March 1999.

Another sign of progress was that, after one of the protests at North Limited, the *Age* had dedicated an editorial to the campaign. The Jabiluka mine was problematic, the *Age* intoned. On Aboriginal land, opposed by the Mirarr people and within the borders of Australia's most famous national park. The cause of the protesters was just, according to the *Age*, but we had done ourselves no favours by our methods, including stopping people going about their lawful work.

The next time I saw Jerome Fitzgerald, I told him about the editorial. He laughed and recounted a story from his time as a shop steward at Johns & Waygood, one of the biggest and most important heavy engineering firms in the country. He paraphrased an *Age* editorial about a strike: "Oh, the workers have a legitimate complaint, they've been treated terribly, the employer is totally at fault, they should really listen, the workers have a good cause—*but* they've done themselves and their cause terrible harm by taking strike action". He added his own editorial comment on this, looking me straight in the eyes: "Listen. You're

More than 5,000 activists travelled to the blockade. More than 500 were arrested. Also arrested was Mirarr senior traditional owner Yvonne Margarula, literally arrested and prosecuted for 'trespass' on her own land for protesting against the mine.

never going to get anywhere till you've been condemned by the Melbourne *Age*".

I've always remembered that line. At the time, I took it as a backhanded compliment, that we were actually getting somewhere. And we were.

The complicated alliance—of the Mirarr Aboriginal people fighting for their country, of conservation groups, socialists, unionists and all sorts with our rickety card tables, campaigning and protesting and blockading—was still building. Eventually, we had such an impact on the share price of North and Energy Resources Australia that ERA was declared by the business pages of the *Age* to be the "dog stock" of 1999, and Rio Tinto bought out North Limited at a bargain basement price.

Rio is as large and vicious as companies come, but it decided that the practical and political obstacles in front of Jabiluka were insurmountable. It shelved the project, backfilled the mine and started revegetation. The Mirarr and their allies had won an extraordinary victory.

And now, a further important milestone. From midnight on 8 January, operations have finally ceased at the Ranger uranium mine, opened up by ERA in the late 1970s against the wishes of the Mirarr people. The world's third biggest uranium mine is now history. The massive milling operation on the site, which would have been processing ore from Jabiluka if not for the opposition of the Mirarr, is now shut.

There are still many battles to fight. The Mirarr want the land rehabilitated and returned to their control as part of Kakadu National Park. Plenty of local people still live in poverty and get cancer at twice the Northern Territory average. The nuclear industry continues its trail of toxic destruction around the world. But if it weren't for the incredible campaign that the Mirarr spearheaded, they would be dealing, not with the toxic legacy of a toxic industry, but with a continuing, profitable plunder of their country, spreading poison around the world.

All of which has got me thinking about Jerome Fitzgerald a bit over the past week. Despite his firm scepticism about our prospects, Jerome and many thousands like him were instrumental in the win at Jabiluka. The anti-uranium movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s was strong enough to ensure that the Labor government elected in 1983 had a policy of banning uranium mining.

Bob Hawke sold out on that policy, along with so much else, initiating the notorious "three mines policy" that allowed Ranger to continue and Roxby Downs/Olympic Dam, the world's second largest uranium mine, to open up and start spewing out its poison for Western Mining Corporation. That particular sell-out was felt all the more keenly because WMC was headed by Hugh Morgan, a notorious union-buster, opponent of land rights and, more recently, one of Australia's most prominent climate change deniers. It summed up perfectly which side Labor was on—and still is today. (WMC was eventually bought by BHP, which still operates Olympic Dam.)

Demoralisation followed for many after Hawke's sell-out, understandably. In my opinion, Jerome Fitzgerald's cynicism about the prospects of ordinary people changing the world was a direct result of Labor's betrayals of the 1980s. Nevertheless, the movement had put limits on the spread of uranium mining and established a baseline suspicion of the nuclear industry that we were able to draw on twenty years later when organising against Jabiluka. Without Jerome Fitzgerald and his 10,000 metalworkers in the 1970s and 1980s, we would never have been able to fight and win twenty years later.

So a salute to Yvonne Margarula and the Mirarr people, who fought for 40 years against incredible odds, and to the kids of the time of the blockade who are now the next generation to fight. To Jacqui Katona who played a crucial role at the Gundjeihmi Aboriginal Corporation, the Mirarr people's organisation. To Gary Foley, Gundjeihmi's link person here in Melbourne. To Dave Sweeney at the Australian Conservation Foundation. To Saro, Bruce, Albert Araya and the whole crew at Friends of the Earth. To Loretta Jane, Hillel Freeman, Fleur Taylor and the many, many people who passed through the Jabiluka Action Group here in Melbourne. We stood on a platform constructed by Jerome Fitzgerald, Sandra Bloodworth, tens of thousands of unionists and so many others. We made a bit of history, and still have a world to win.

NOONKANBAH 1979

When unionists stood up for Aboriginal rights

Alexis Vassiley

"It was important to have stood up and said this is not right", unionist Arthur Clarke reminisced in 2011 of the stand the trade union movement took for Aboriginal rights during the Noonkanbah dispute of 1979-80. The support of the labour movement caused a political crisis for the Western Australian government, resulting in blockaded roads, unionists arrested, truck drivers refusing to work and drillers refusing to drill for oil on Aboriginal land. Workers' industrial action very nearly stopped a multinational company in its tracks.

In June 1979, the Western Australian government approved oil drilling exploration by US multinational Amax, despite the location being on sacred land. The Noonkanbah community in the Kimberley region resisted from the onset. Their determined stand shocked the establishment, the afternoon newspaper *Daily News* noting that it was "the first time in WA an organised group of Aborigines is determined to keep outsiders off what they consider is their land". On 15 June, they locked the gate and refused to let company representatives onto their land.

The Noonkanbah community won support from Aboriginal communities as far away as the Northern Territory, organisations such as the Kimberley Land Council (founded three years previously with seed money from unions and no government funding), anti-racism groups, Uniting Church ministers and some Labor politicians. Crucially, they won support from the union movement. One hundred delegates at the Trades and Labour Council (TLC, today called UnionsWA) meeting in Perth 2,500 km away, unanimously passed a solidarity motion on hearing about the traditional owners' stand.

Noonkanbah was at the time a successful Aboriginal-owned and -run pastoral station. Aboriginal workers at Noonkanbah had walked off the white-owned pastoral station in 1971 to protest against the non-payment of wages and the generally horrific conditions. To take one example, they were first provided with "toilet facilities"—one earth pit latrine for 30 people—that year. The station eventually went bankrupt, and the federal government bought it "back" for the community, which "quickly restored it to good health", wrote anthropologist Erich Kolig in *The Noonkanbah Story*.

There was a mining and resources boom at the time, and the vast Pilbara and Kimberley regions in the state's north-west were key sites of exploitation. Premier Charles Court was pro-development and an arch reactionary. His anti-union section 54B (of the Police Act) prevented three or more people gathering without a permit. He told his biographer Ronda Jamieson: "You're not dealing with a mob of naughty Sunday School children when you're dealing with these hardline, left wing, militant trade unionists".

He also brought in laws to deny Aboriginal people the vote and described the 1968 equal wages decision for Aboriginal pastoral workers, which unions supported, as "devastating".

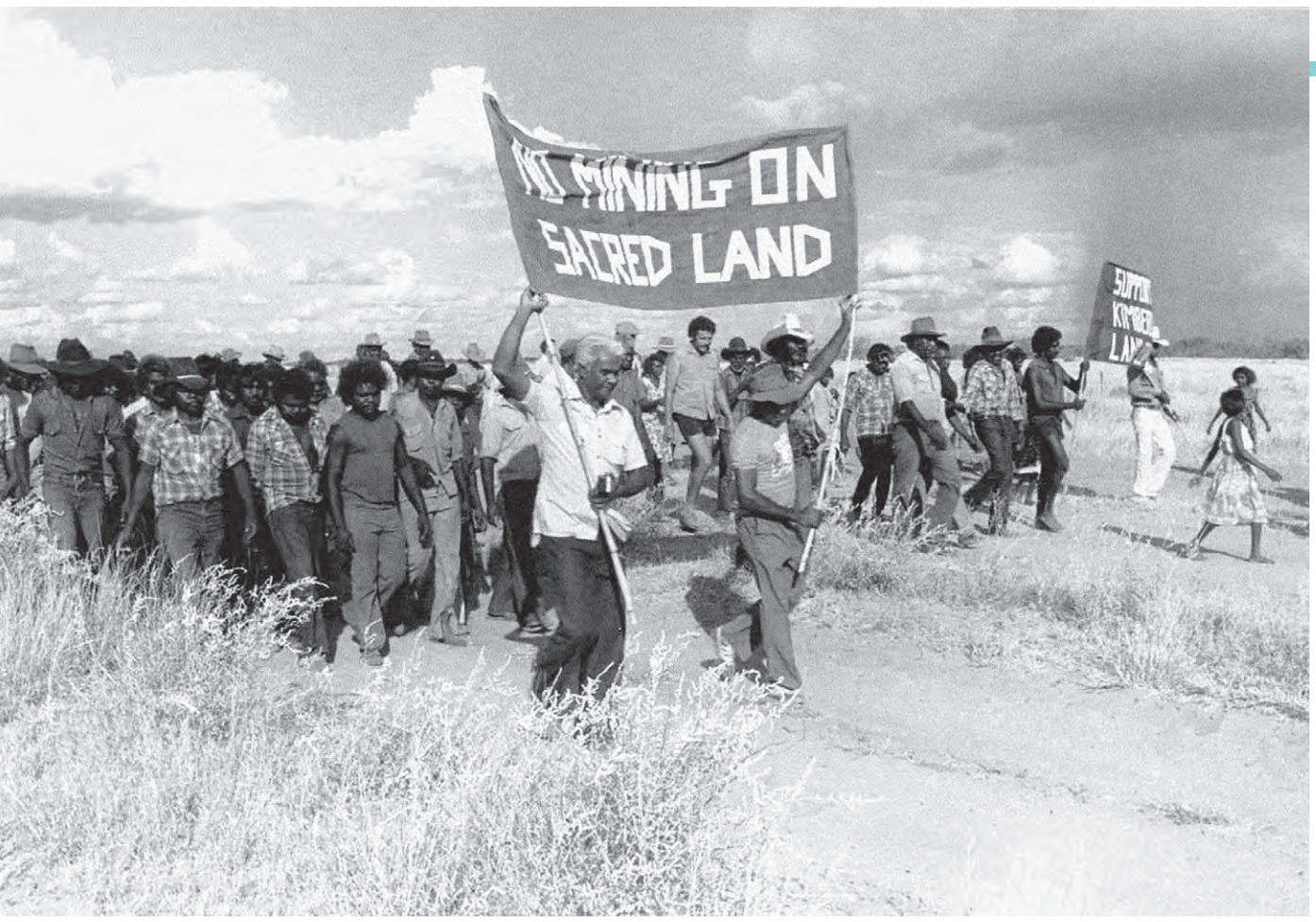
On 25 March 1980, the trade union movement increased its support from the political to the industrial, the TLC placing bans on the transport and operation of the drilling rig that was to be used at Noonkanbah. Amid delayed plans, the union opposition and campaigning against the drilling, Amax wanted to pull out of the whole thing. But Premier Court wouldn't let it, offering compensation instead. "If we walk out of Noonkanbah it will be the next station and the next station, and the next, and the whole of Western Australia will be denied oil exploration", he told Jamieson.

The Transport Workers' Union instructed members not to transport the rig. Given the high level of unionisation in the industry, and that major trucking companies didn't want to anger the union, this put a big spanner in the works. As then secretary of the Transport Workers' Union John (JJ) O'Connor told me in 2011: "The trade union movement doesn't just get involved in industrial things, it gets involved in social issues ... We could see an injustice and ... Charles Court's bloody storm trooper attitude to all these things ... and we felt we needed to do something".

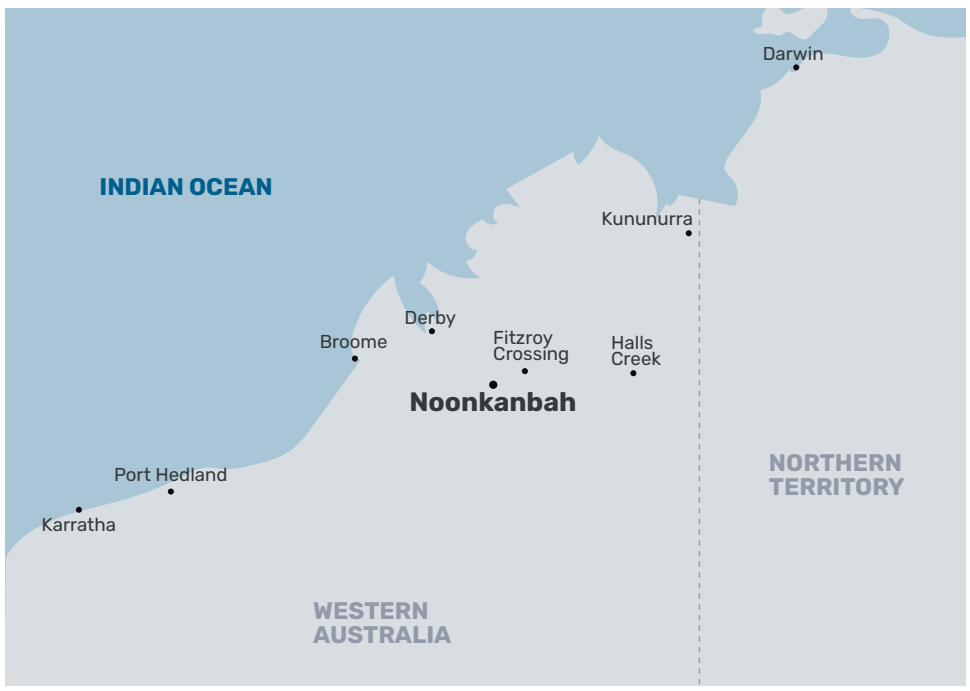
Incredibly, the government set up its own scab trucking company especially for the operation, paying drivers well above the going rate. The scabs left Midland Brick—owned by prominent Liberal Party donors—in the dead of night. The convoy of 50 trucks had a police escort for the whole 2,500 km journey. Many of the scab drivers wore disguises, so scared were they of repercussions from trade unionists. Unionists and Aboriginal people protested at several locations along the scab trucks' long journey.

At the North West Highway near Karratha and Roebourne in the Pilbara region, around 50 protesters blocked the road. Transport Workers' Union organiser Paddy Hartnett was arrested after parking his car in the middle of the road to block the trucks. Hartnett

The support of the labour movement caused a political crisis for the Western Australian government, resulting in blockaded roads, unionists arrested, truck drivers refusing to work and drillers refusing to drill for oil on Aboriginal land. Workers' industrial action very nearly stopped a multinational company in its tracks.



Left page: Police break up a blockade PHOTO: Michael Gallagher; This page: A protest march at Noonkanbah PHOTO: Kimberley Land Council



told *WA's Irish Scene* magazine many years later that the use of scabs "was like a red rag to a bull and as the union organiser in Karratha it was my job to stop the convoy". Five more unionists from a range of unions were also arrested.

Graeme Haynes—a long-time Electrical Trades' Union shop steward at Cliffs Robe River iron ore company—took part in the protest. "A copper chased me—I was taking photos of all the idiots with false beards", he says over the phone from Victoria. "A few hundred metres into the shrub and spinifex, he realised he wasn't up to the task." Haynes, a socialist, abhorred the anti-Aboriginal racism so prevalent in the state's north-west and had been campaigning against it for years. There was even talk among unionists of parking a train loaded with iron ore across the road, but this didn't eventuate.

Aboriginal protesters stopped the convoy at Strelley, not far from Port Hedland. "About one hundred and sixty of the mob occupied the bridge at Tabba Creek and covered it with rocks and stones", activist Steve Hawke wrote in *Noonkanbah: Whose Land? Whose Law?* During the 1946-49 Aboriginal pastoral workers' strike in the Pilbara, the "Strelley mob" came together as a self-sustaining strike community. Many never went back to work.

The Broome protest was organised by the local Waterside Workers' Federation branch and the Aboriginal community. Aboriginal unionist Terence (Terry) Mathews, on the union's Broome branch committee, was central. The federation and other left-wing unions had a history of support for Aboriginal rights going back many decades.

Between 200 and 400 protested, setting up a picket across the road. Most of the protesters were Indigenous, joined by some wharfies and other unionists. Some handwritten signs read, "Poor fella my country" and "ACTU picket line". Another was "There's no flies at Noonkanbah but the scabs are on the way".

The picket temporarily stopped the convoy, but eventually the trucks "smashed through the picket line at about 30kph showing no regard for the safety of protesters ... with sirens and horns blasting", according to the *Maritime Worker*. Union representatives Kevin Bullen and Mathews were both nearly hit. They were arrested along with four others.

The final blockade was at Mickey's Pool, just out of Noonkanbah, where a crowd of 60 Noonkanbah community members, Uniting Church ministers and unionists tried in vain to stop the convoy. Six ministers were arrested.

When the convoy arrived at Noonkanbah, the twenty workers employed to do the drilling held the fate of the entire dispute in their hands. They had joined the Australian Workers' Union six months earlier. A right-wing union with a mixed record on Aboriginal rights, the union eventually came around to supporting the dispute. After an ACTU call-out garnered $128,000 in donations, in part to pay the drillers' wages, the workers decided to ban drilling.

"The ban imposed by the drilling crew was the union movement's triumphant tactical counter to the convoy", Steve Hawke wrote. "The roughnecks ... who worked the drilling rigs were renowned as a hard-working, hard-drinking, high-living, independent-minded mob. There was a high degree of mobility in the industry ... No one had counted on them coming out on an issue like this."

The government organised a scab crew, which started drilling on 29 August, when virtually the entire Noonkanbah community was at Fitzroy Crossing for the races. No oil was found.

As well as industrial action and the protests against the convoy, unions contributed by way of visits by union leaders to Noonkanbah, through articles in union publications, by lobbying the government and relevant companies, and by participation in demonstrations. For example, in August, protesters marched to St Paul's Cathedral in Melbourne to set up a mock "oil rig" made by members of the Builders Labourers' Federation.

Three factors explain how this incredible episode came to pass. First, the inspiring resistance of Aboriginal people at Noonkanbah. Without this, it could never have happened at all.

Second, the high level of industrial struggle in Australia at the time. The 1969 Clarrie O'Shea strike had opened a floodgate of union militancy, which didn't subside until the 1983 Prices and Incomes Accord. Workers struck for an incredible 11 million days between 1979 and 1981. Workers in the iron ore sector in the Pilbara region, where some of the Noonkanbah protests took place, were one of the most militant sections of the Australian working class at that time, strongly organised, regularly striking and driving management wild. For example, in 1979 workers struck for ten weeks at Hamersley Iron (a large iron ore company, now part of Rio Tinto), pushing back attacks on union rights and winning big increases to wages and conditions.

This is not to say all workers were convinced anti-racists—far from it. But when unions are fighting and winning over issues of wages, conditions and safety, they are more likely to take serious industrial action in support of social issues. There was also a legacy of social campaigns, including for Aboriginal rights in the 1960s and 1970s, campaigns that left-wing unions strongly supported.

Third was the presence of activists highly committed to the cause. Those activists spearheaded the union response on the ground and argued for solidarity.

The Noonkanbah dispute remains an important chapter in both the struggle for Aboriginal rights and union solidarity with the struggle. The song "The Noonkanbah Scabs" by R U Ready—sung at the protests—captures the essence of this campaign:

> The Noonkanbah scabs
> each one of them's a mug,
> they'd sell their mothers
> and their kids for just a buck.
> The Noonkanbah scabs
> helping Charlie Court the thug,
> push the oil rig to Noonkanbah
> on scabby black-banned trucks.
> Up here in the Kimberley
> a struggle's going on,
> the Yungyora of Noonkanbah
> are standing up real strong.
> They're fighting for their country
> and for people all around.

Alexis Vassiley is a labour historian based in Perth. He is the author of a longer article on trade union solidarity during the Noonkanbah dispute published in *Labour History* 110 (May 2016), on which this article is based.

How segregation was smashed in southern NSW

Jack Mansell

In late 1961, a group of activists founded the South Coast Aboriginal Advancement League to fight against Aboriginal oppression on the south coast of New South Wales. Their successful struggle, largely hidden from the popular record, is an impressive chapter in Australian working-class history.

On the south coast, segregation and exploitation went hand in hand. Pea and bean farming, which was at its peak at the time, relied on seasonal labour. Pickers, recruited from poor Aboriginal families, worked twelve-hour days for measly pay of £5 a week, pitiful in comparison to the minimum wage at the time, which, for eight-hour days, was meant to be £14 a week.

Aboriginal picker Jeff Tungai, quoted in Mike Donaldson's 2017 collection *A History of Aboriginal Illawarra*, Volume 2, quipped that, at Bodalla (about 250 kilometres south of Wollongong), Black labourers worked so hard for their white boss that they had "bought him a truck, tractor and God knows what else", and that they'd "buy him a helicopter soon".

Oppression conditioned every aspect of life for Aboriginal workers, both out in the field and in the community when the workday finally ended. Banned from staying in guesthouses or attending schools, Black families doing seasonal work had to sleep in railway stations, parks, tents or hay bales on the outskirts of town. Black workers couldn't even buy a pint at the local pub at the end of an arduous workday.

Anti-Aboriginal racism on the south coast was a many-headed hydra: wage gaps, exclusion from housing and schools, segregation of services, land disputes and a swathe of other issues including the detested Aboriginal Welfare Board. The Welfare Board exercised nearly total control over Aboriginal people's lives, including taking children from their mothers. It would take a determined struggle to challenge this state of affairs.

The impetus for the formation of the South Coast Aboriginal Advancement League came from communist agitator Joe Howe. He had been inspired after working alongside Kungarakan man and wharfie activist Joe McGinness, the president of the League's Cairns branch. Howe returned to Wollongong intent on starting a branch in the city.

One of the people he sought out was Bobby Davis, a Dharawal man and a union comrade from his time on the wharves. The wharves at the time were a hotbed of radicalism, and the Communist Party had considerable influence. For Aboriginal workers like Davis, union activity was a rare experience of power as an oppressed person.

Both Bobby and his wife Mary helped establish the League. The Coomaditchie Mission where they lived did not even have houses on it. Until the League was able to win the construction of six houses on the mission, the Davises lived out of their car, together with two children.

Another founder was Fred Moore, now the last surviving founder of the League's south coast branch. Moore had a reputation as a militant in the coalfields, where he'd worked since he was 14 years old. His dad had fought against the New Guard, a mass fascist organisation, during the Great Depression, and in 1957 Fred had travelled to Sydney to be part of the launch of a petition to amend the constitution to remove the explicitly discriminatory clauses.

Alongside Howe, Moore and the Davises, five women—Olga Booth, Gladys Douglas, Dolly Henry, Linda Kennedy and Rhonda Delaney—made up the activist core of the League. The women faced extreme discrimination and the threat of having their children abducted by the state at the height of the Stolen Generations.

But they persisted. In his oral history of the period, recorded by the Wollongong City Library, Moore said despite the fact that, and perhaps because, they had so much to lose, the "great strength of [the League] lay with the women". And as Mary Davis' son recalled to Mike Donaldson, his mother "was never shy, never scared or intimidated" in the pursuit of equality.

The leadership of the League was working-class and viewed organised labour as a crucial weapon in the fight for equality. Trade union support could give fragmented and disorganised groups of Aboriginal activists much needed cohesion. They also understood that workers not only had an unrivalled power to force social change, but also that workers could be convinced that they shared a common struggle with Aboriginal people.

The South Coast Labour Council was renowned for its militancy and willingness to take political stances. Rooted in the steel and mining industries, and on the wharves, Wollongong's unions had a notable Communist Party presence, and participated in campaigns against nuclear weapons, and later in solidarity campaigns with Vietnam, South Africa and Chile. Workers viewed their industrial power not only as something to use to improve their own working lives, but also to improve society as a whole.

In August 1961, just before the south coast branch of the League formed, Bobby Davis and the Labour

In late 1961, a group of activists founded the South Coast Aboriginal Advancement League to fight against Aboriginal oppression on the south coast of New South Wales. Their successful struggle, largely hidden from the popular record, is an impressive chapter in Australian working-class history.

Below: Unionists in Wollongong carry a banner supporting a 'yes' vote in the 1967 referendum; Top right: Members of the South Coast Aboriginal Advancement League in Canberra on the steps of Old Parliament House in 1962 - left to right are Fred Moore, Olga Booth, Jock Delaney, Dolly Henry, Aunty Mary, and Bobby Davis

Saturday, April 21, 1962

South Aborigines Adopt Policy For Advancement

Fred Moore (Nebo) writes:—
Having been mandated by the N.S.W. Southern District miners to attend a further conference of the Aboriginal Advancement League along with Joe Howe, Port Kembla wharfie and president of the League, we arrived at Nowra on Saturday,

brought up to council heal requirements for as long as stations exist.
• Anolition of the Aborigines Protection Act.
• Legislation to prevent the of child labor in farming wo such as fruit and vegetab

Council had played a key role in opposing the eviction of Aboriginal people from Hill 60 at Port Kembla. A stop-work meeting of Kembla wharfies had unanimously resolved to oppose the evictions, and the Wollongong City Council was forced not just to back down, but to construct permanent housing there.

One of the early victories of the League was winning the right for Aboriginal people to drink in Port Kembla and Wollongong pubs. It wasn't just the racism of individual publicans that they were up against. In NSW, it was illegal for pubs and cafes to serve Indigenous people; doing so could result in a venue losing its licence.

As in the United States civil rights movement, Aboriginal people staged sit-ins—demanding to be served in segregated bars and shops and refusing to leave when asked. Unlike in the United States, though, on the south coast the intervention of organised workers contributed to an impressive pace of desegregation and generated a groundswell of support for equal rights.

The key advantage that the League had was its support among unionised workers, who have a power that ordinary direct action doesn't—they can stop the supply of stock that businesses need to make money. Because of the backing of the workers in the supply chain, the League could simply ban deliveries to stubborn business owners and force them to desegregate. As Fred Moore told Mike Donaldson, "We just wouldn't deliver any more kegs, that was it".

Early successes in Wollongong inspired the League's expansion further south. In March 1962, a new branch was set up in Nowra with the help of local Aboriginal women such as Norma Sharman and Communist Party member Harry Hesse. Segregation in Nowra and Bega was more severe than in the city, and shocking even to the League's activists. For example, Aboriginal women could not even buy or try on dresses for themselves, and instead had to ask white women to go to shops and buy on their behalf.

Remarkably, because of the League's work, Nowra's complete desegregation was achieved by 1964, a full year before Charlie Perkins' famous freedom rides set off from Sydney into western NSW. With the backing of workers up and down the south coast, desegregation happened well before the laws were changed.

The League's national activity culminated in the referendum of 1967. In 1958, the national council of the Aborigines Advancement League began campaigning for a referendum to eliminate explicitly racist sections of the constitution. Nine years later, almost 91 percent voted "yes" to empower the federal government to override racist state laws, and to start counting Aboriginal people in the census.

Illawarra miners, spearheaded by Fred Moore and communist activists, were a core base of support for the petition. At Nebo, where Moore was working, all 1,000 workers at the pit (bar the managers) signed on. This was quickly followed by more signatures as well as financial support from other unions up and down the coast. Moore alone collected 2,500 signatures, overwhelmingly from miners, earning him the title of "champion signature collector" in the League's national newspaper, *Smoke Signals*.

Seamen played a prominent role too. Bound for Western Australia to retrieve iron ore, they would leave Port Kembla with blank petition sheets, and return with them overflowing with names.

The Illawarra mines were surprisingly cosmopolitan. At least 42 nationalities were represented in two dozen sites. At one, the workforce included Cypriots, Italians and even Germans who had worked in the Ruhr coalfields, where workers had staged an armed uprising in 1920. Workers who had fought on both sides of the war, some as conscripts in the German army, toiled together in very difficult working conditions.

Despite the apparent divisions, there was a general sense of solidarity among miners. "If you stayed together, you had a chance", Moore said. "But if they could break you up into little groups, they could annihilate you." This basic tradition of solidarity was an essential aspect of the miners' support for Aboriginal rights.

Such was the sensation of the south coast struggle that Aboriginal activists from across the country travelled to the "strong south" looking for support. And support was something they always found. When Gurindji stockmen walked off Wave Hill station in August 1966, they promptly sent a delegation to speak to Illawarra miners.

So moved were they by the Gurindji, who would stay out on strike for a decade in a watershed land rights struggle, the miners immediately levied themselves to donate to the strike fund. "The union never, ever let up on it, and to this day if the Aboriginals want help, it's there", Moore remarked in his 2015 oral history.

Contrary to the official history, which exalts the importance of smart lawyers and sympathetic politicians to the advancement of Aboriginal rights in the 1960s and 1970s, the reality is that the victories were won by working-class people. Without the efforts of thousands of trade unionists, radicals and Aboriginal people willing to disrupt the functioning of segregation and racial discrimination, none of this would have been possible.

India's farmer protests: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

A protest against the new agricultural laws in Mumbai in December PHOTO: AP

Sagar Sanyal

India is witnessing one of the largest farmers' protests in decades. More than 200,000 are camped out in trucks and trailers along all the highways leading into the national capital, New Delhi. As the farmer convoys were making their way, police blocked their route in several places with boulders, concrete road dividers, shipping containers and trenches. They attacked protesters with batons, tear gas and water cannons. The determined farmers pushed through regardless, shunting aside any barricades and overwhelming the police with sheer numbers. They were finally stopped just outside the city limits by special armed forces.

This is no one-day demonstration. The convoys began in late November, and the encampment has now lasted seven weeks, creating transport bottlenecks in one of the most important industrial and commercial regions of the country. With makeshift kitchens, electricity generators and supplies to last months, the farmers make a credible threat that they will continue this semi-blockade of the capital until their demands are met. Eight rounds of talks with the government have failed to convince them to compromise.

With increasing support from local community organisations, and with the continual inflow of reinforcements of farmers and solidarity contingents from non-farmer activist campaigns, the protesters' political confidence is high. They have declared that if their demands are still unmet by 26 January, marking two months since the start of the convoys and coinciding with a national holiday that commemorates the Indian constitution, they will march into Delhi.

The farmers demand the repeal of a set of farm acts rammed through parliament in late September by the far-right BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party, or Indian People's Party), which rules at the federal level. On 12 January, the Supreme Court provisionally suspended the farm laws and appointed a committee to look into the farmers' grievances. As a result, there are calls for the farmers to disband their blockade. However, the farmers point out that the committee appointees are well known for their support for the farm laws. They see the Supreme Court action as a demobilising tactic ahead of the 26 January ultimatum, and they are determined to continue their protest.

To appreciate the grievances of farmers, it is worth beginning with their situation before these acts were passed. Agriculture employs almost half of the workforce of India. According to the 2011 census (the latest available), more than half of this agricultural workforce is landless: tenant farmers or wage labourers. Of farmers who do own land, 86 percent are small (owning less than two hectares) or marginal (less than one hectare). They usually work with just ox and plough, and hand-dug irrigation canals.

For the past three decades, small farmers have faced a dire economic situation as they struggle to match the low sales prices of the big farmers who own the most fertile land and can afford high productivity inputs like tractors, mechanised irrigation, fertilisers and pesticides. There are tens of thousands of farmer suicides annually as small farmers despair at the prospect of forfeiting their land when they find themselves unable to repay usurious loans they have taken to pay for inputs at the start of each sowing season.

As dire as this situation was, it was prevented from being even worse by various kinds of government support. State-run agricultural produce markets and granaries maintain minimum prices for many agricultural products. These give farmers a level of certainty about the sale price for their produce when they make sowing decisions. While such measures disproportionately benefit big farmers, some benefits flow through to the rest. This regime of state regulation is to be dismantled by the new farm acts.

Writing in the Indian journal *Economic & Political Weekly*, Pritam Singh argues that the main objective of the farm acts is to open state-regulated agriculture to big agribusiness, both foreign and domestic. In the process, the acts will economically weaken small and medium farming households to the point that they cannot make a livelihood as farmers any more. Many will be compelled to sell their farms and become wage labourers, whether remaining in the rural economy or migrating to the cities. Both rural and urban wages will likely be pushed down as a result.

However, the tensions are not simply between agribusiness and farmers. A second dynamic involves a tussle between the federal government and various states, the latest incarnation of a long-running tension between centralism and regionalism in Indian politics. This is an important element in explaining why opposition to the farm acts has spread beyond farmers' organisations to many mainstream parties. Agricultural policy has largely been a matter for states, not for the federal government. The acts take a major step in centralising not only the policy, but also control over the tax revenue from the local agricultural produce markets that states currently control.

Patronage is a big part of Indian politics: the doling out of spoils of office to cronies through subsidies and contracts. It would be a big blow to regional parties if they have less to dole out. While only the ruling BJP and the opposition Congress Party can claim a national presence and hope to anchor ruling coalitions nationally, there are more than a dozen regional parties with a solid voter base in their region. They are perennial contenders as the ruling party at the state legislature level. The BJP too was once a regional party like them, but is aggressively trying to consolidate its national position by pushing out any regional rivals where it can.

The main organising vehicle behind the protests, the All India Farmers' Struggle Coordination Committee (AIKSCC), is an umbrella body that covers hundreds of farmer unions and civil society groups. It represents various political forces—conservatives, liberals and leftists. Noting this diversity is important in assessing how the farmer protests might impact broader social currents, given that the past two years have been a time of mass politicisation, hundreds of thousands of newly engaged protesters looking for a political lead.

The BKU (Bharatiya Kisan Union, or Indian Farmers Union) and the SSS (Swabhimani Shetkari Sanghtana, or Farmer Pride Organisation) are two prominent organisations under the umbrella. They have bases among farmers in the states of the north and west of India respectively. While their mobilising rhetoric is about farmers as a unified identity, their practice reflects class stratification among farmers. Their leaders orient to big farmers. Yet they frequently mobilise masses for demonstrations, including large numbers of marginal and small farmers.

On the one hand, these farmer organisations have a history of agitating for government- subsidised inputs and guaranteed minimum prices for outputs, and against the effects of globalisation and the entry of agribusiness into Indian agriculture. On the other hand, they oppose higher wages for farm labour, and they oppose land redistribution to landless tenant farmers or farm labourers. In the past, the SSS has joined state ruling coalitions with the BJP and other far-right parties in the state of Maharashtra. The BKU's social basis is tied up with conservative clan/caste institutions called *khap panchayats* at the village level that maintain, in part, the subjugation of women and of Dalits (an outcaste population who are mostly landless agricultural labourers).

Among the civil society organisations under the AIKSCC umbrella is the National Alliance of People's Movements, whose roots trace back to protest campaigns in the 1980s and 1990s against the effects on the poor of industrial development and market liberalisation. One of its leaders, Medha Patkar, has a decades-long international reputation for her human rights activism, especially in relation to protesting the displacement of tribal and village communities by the construction of big dams in the west and centre of India.

Another influential organisation in the AIKSCC is Swaraj Abhiyan (Campaign for self-rule), which grew out of a populist anti-corruption movement in the early 2010s in the north that generally positioned itself as "neither left nor right". One of its two main leaders, Yogendra Yadav, is a political scientist known for his writings on trends in electoral politics in India, such as the increasing sway of regional parties as opposed to parties that have a national profile. Its other main leader, Prashant Bhushan, is a public interest lawyer, son of another famous lawyer-activist and former law minister. This gives some indication of the party's progressive urban middle-class image and appeal.

The AIKSCC also includes left peasant organisations of the communist tradition. Their base is generally among marginal and small farmers (and they usually have separate unions of agricultural labourers). These parties have trade union wings that helped organise the large nationwide one-day general strikes that have occurred at least once a year over the

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last few years against the BJP's labour policies. The trade unions claim to have involved 200 million in the general strike of 27 November last year, which was timed to coincide with the start of the farmers' march convoy. The demands of the general strike included the repeal of the farm acts and the repeal of the spate of anti-labour laws that the unions had already been protesting since June.

Given their politics and economic program, the most that the farmer unions or civil society groups can do is to delay the liquidation of the small farmers. Ultimately, their liquidation is caused not by this or that law, but by capitalist pressures from big farmers that drive less competitive farmers into bankruptcy. By contrast, the left organisations at least have an agenda of land reform and anti-capitalism.

To assess the impact of the farmer agitation, we must look beyond the single issue of the farm acts and consider their effects on a society that was already in turmoil. Since late 2019, the BJP had been on a rampage, abrogating the limited democracy that existed in Indian-occupied Kashmir, passing anti-Muslim laws, enacting severe attacks on labour rights and pushing various ideological crusades to embolden its Hindu fundamentalist base. This provoked the largest counter-protests in decades. The BJP retaliated by arresting prominent activists and intellectuals. It unleashed deadly violence on protesters and on Muslim neighbourhoods—deploying both police and RSS goons (the RSS is a non-parliamentary fascist outfit that is the parent organisation of the BJP). Many political parties caught between the far-right rampage and the protesters in the streets found themselves forced to make public statements against the BJP.

Given this context, such a large mobilisation of farmers is a particularly welcome development. Farmers are well organised in India, more so than either Muslims or the far left. They are an important voting base for major parties that may back them—at least opportunistically, even if in another context they might be happy to side with agribusiness against farmers. The farmer protests also amplify anti-BJP sentiment among the Indian middle classes, where the BJP has its main voter base. Thus far, the BJP has not felt confident enough to start arresting leaders of the farmer protests, or to send its goons to beat up farmers, as it did with anti-government protesters last year. It may be that the popularity of the farmer agitation widens the space for dissent and protest, which had previously been shrinking.

Some parties outside the AIKSCC umbrella did not initially build the farmer protests but declared support once the protests showed themselves to be large and popular. For them, the issue is above all their electoral prospects in the north, a key part of the country where the BJP over the last few years has been trying to take over, but where these regional parties have managed to make a foothold for themselves.

The Shiromani Akali Dal (Supreme Akali Party), a major electoral force in Punjab and currently in opposition, is a centre-right party based on Sikh identity and Punjabi regional self-assertion. It has long been an electoral ally of the BJP, and it initially supported its farm acts when protests against them commenced in Punjab. But it has backtracked and left the alliance because of the scale of the protests and out of fear of losing a section of its voting base.

Another latecomer to the side of the farmers is the AAP (Aam Aadmi Party, or Common People's Party), which grew out of the early 2010s anti-corruption movement mentioned above. It now has a presence in some states in the north. AAP's Arvind Kejriwal heads the Delhi local government as its chief minister. When it first entered the scene in 2013, it campaigned on a platform of anti-corruption and more social services for the poor. In the years since, and in a dominant position in the Delhi state legislature since 2015, it has tried to shut out the BJP by making increasing gestures to Hindu religious sentiment in an opportunistic way.

The attitude of many liberals has been somewhat two-faced: supporting the opening of agriculture to agribusiness, while also wanting to swim with the tide of support for the farmers and against the BJP. An indicative example is Montek Singh Ahluwalia, former head of the (economic) Planning Commission and a cabinet minister under the centre-right Congress Party-led federal government of 2004-14. Ahluwalia said of the farm laws that similar moves were already contemplated during his term at the Planning Commission, but that he objected to the BJP introducing them in a heavy-handed way during the pandemic.

In sum, there are a few dynamics to watch. First, the past year and a half has been a back and forth between mass protest on one side, and on the other a project of ruling-class interests backed by state repression. The farmer protests have tilted the scales back in favour of protest. However, given the variety of political tendencies in the farmer alliance, it remains to be seen whether left or centre tendencies will benefit the most. This has implications for the longer term prospects of fighting the BJP's far-right agenda beyond the farmer laws. Given the rush of opportunistic parties joining the popular campaign, it is also indeterminate whether momentum will remain with mass campaigns or will be coopted into the dead end of electoralism.

Second, there is the extent to which the BJP retains the confidence of the Indian capitalist class. In recent years, the BJP has become the favoured party of Indian capital, and it continues to court capital with its attacks on labour. However, if it fails to make the laws stick and provokes too much mass protest, sections of the capitalist class may declare the BJP incompetent and turn to equally pro-business parties that have a softer and more diplomatic approach to pushing the corporate agenda.

Third, there is the issue of whether the BJP's electoral supremacy will be consolidated or weakened. After the mid-2019 national elections, commentators declared a new era of BJP hegemony, it having opened up a clear lead over the centre-right Congress Party, which is the only other party capable of anchoring national ruling coalitions. Yet now, mired in protest and losing allies, and facing a resurgence of regional parties in state elections where the BJP had expected to extend its support, its prospects seem less certain.

However, the danger is that any electoral setbacks for the BJP will at most be temporary unless underlying social problems are addressed. Many commentators expect India's social crisis to deepen in the next year or two. Many regional parties see an opportunity to eat into the BJP's voter base while it is on the ropes. Yet that competition between smaller parties may prove self-defeating. They may split the non-BJP vote, or enter lowest common denominator "anybody but the BJP" coalitions that fail to present any real economic alternative to the BJP's policies.

Meanwhile, the ideologically committed portion of the BJP's voter base, cohered around Hindu chauvinism and jingoism, may be sizeable enough to earn it a plurality of votes and leave it in a position to anchor ruling coalitions. Some of the parties that opportunistically broke with the BJP in the past year can just as easily return to the alliance if they see something to gain by it. And the longer a social crisis continues, the more likely the BJP will be to pull the capitalist class back to itself given its clear corporate agenda and demonstrated commitment to use force to quash protest.

STEVE MCQUEEN'S *SMALL AXE*: *Exposing racism, celebrating resistance*

Kerri Parke

If you are the big tree,
we are the small axe,
sharpened to cut you down,
ready to cut you down.
—Bob Marley

Small Axe, a series of five films from Oscar-winning director Steve McQueen (whose other films include *12 Years a Slave* and *Hunger)*, is a powerful representation of the lives of Black people in Britain from the 1960s to the 1980s. It is a story both of everyday racism and police intimidation, and the institutional racism of the courts, social services and education system on one side, and on the other, the beauty, joy and solidarity of community and resistance.

2021 is the 40th anniversary of the 1981 Brixton riots—an uprising provoked by police harassment and alienation amid a deep recession—and these films show how the current period of race relations in the UK is firmly rooted in that history. From the continuity in the way Black communities are policed to the construction of Grenfell Tower in the background (albeit with some dramatic licence with the dates), the London of today is very much present in this collection.

My parents, both from Jamaica, came of age in the Britain of the '70s and '80s, and in many ways, this series of films depicts their lives. Both were activists around the British Black Panther Party who were schooled early in the notion that the police were always the enemy, and both fought tooth and nail to get a decent education for their kids when the system was failing them.

The films put the racist culture of Britain at the time front and centre. This is portrayed in all its multifaceted reality—from the micro scale of offhand remarks about "not being able to see you lot in the dark" to the macro of violence from the state. The racism of police, teachers, judges and schoolchildren is shown in all its horror, but the moments of beauty and joy are not skipped over either. The camera often lingers on the faces of people simply enjoying themselves in their community—displaying a sense of camaraderie and social solidarity that has been somewhat eclipsed in the decades since by the onslaught of neoliberalism.

This is on show especially in the second of the five films, *Lovers Rock*, which depicts one night at a blues party. It begins with setting up the house, moving furniture around, cooking the food and bringing in the sound system. We then see people pay their 50 pence entry to dance happily and sing along to the tunes being played. There is a beautiful moment when a record of Janet Kay's "Silly Games" cuts out and the dancers packed into the living room spontaneously start singing like a makeshift a cappella choir.

Despite all the joy inside the house, the threat of racist violence is never far away. A young woman (played by Amarah-Jae St Aubyn) goes after her friend who has left the party early, but she is forced to give up the chase when she comes across a group of white boys who start making ape noises at her. Elsewhere in the film, the same young woman's cousin arrives at the house, and we see a police car pull up outside, just watching and waiting.

The way capitalism has created the idea that Blackness equals criminality is a constant theme in these films. Just to come together, to eat, dance and protest against racism is to be seen as an agitator, a troublemaker, someone to be suspicious of, so there is rebellion inherent in the participation in and celebration of those things.

The third film in the series, *Red, White and Blue*, tells the story of Leroy Logan, who joined London's Metropolitan Police Force in 1983 after his father was bashed by police and hospitalised. This reflected a current of thought that emerged after the 1981 riots, which believed the only way to change institutions like the police was to join them and change them from the inside.

It is the weakest of the five films, despite a brilliant performance from John Boyega in the lead role. It goes some way to show the limits of one man's ability to change a state institution like the police, especially when confronted by the racism of his fellow and superior officers alike, as well as the strong feelings of betrayal from his community. But McQueen's depiction doesn't go far enough. It doesn't reflect the reality that over the intervening decades, the increase in representation of minorities in the police has been tiny, and their presence hasn't changed the institutionalised racism of the police one bit. Nevertheless, it is an important inclusion in the story of the time, as this reformist kind of identity politics was, and remains, a powerful strand of thought about how racism can be challenged.

The remaining three films, *Mangrove, Alex Wheatle* and *Education*, hold the most interest for left-wing people. *Mangrove* tells the story of the "Mangrove Nine"—nine black people from west London, connected to the Mangrove Caribbean restaurant. The Mangrove had become a home away from home for many in the local West Indian community, and for that it was subject to constant scrutiny and regular attack from the cops. The decision to organise a protest against this harassment was made because—in the words of one of the Mangrove Nine, Black intellectual Darcus Howe (played by Malachi Kirby)—they realised the futility of "complaining to police about police, complaining to magistrates about magistrates, complaining to judges about judges".

After the protest, the Nine were charged with incitement to riot, affray and assaulting police. According to historian Paul Field, the decision of Howe and British Black Panther leader Altheia Jones-Lecointe (played by the wonderful Letitia Wright) to represent themselves in court was an important one, because it allowed them to have a say in jury selection. Specifically, it enabled them to push for more working-class whites on the jury—which they thought could help, not because they would necessarily be anti-racists (only a few years earlier a group of east London dock workers had marched in support of Enoch Powell and his racist "Rivers of Blood" speech), but because they would be more likely to have experienced arbitrary police brutality.

Letitia Wright (as British Black Panther leader Aletheia Jones-Lecointe) rallies protesters in *Mangrove* PHOTO: BBC

Howe recognised that the outcome of the trial—the Mangrove Nine's acquittal—was a victory for working-class unity. He declared, "Racism as a basis for the division of the British working class had taken a beating, particularly since our defence was based on the fact that the police were liars and should not be believed".

The institutionalised racism of the education system is another topic covered. In *Education*, 11-year-old Kingsley (exquisitely played by Kenyah Sandy) is kicked out of his mainstream school and sent to a "special school", as his Mum is told. In reality, it is a school for the "educationally subnormal" (ESN), and it is filled with Black and white working-class children—some with learning difficulties and other special educational needs, some with behaviour issues—all of whom had been left behind by mainstream education.

Grenadian activist and author Bernard Coard wrote a book in 1971, *How the West Indian Child Is Made Educationally Sub-normal in the British School System*, which demonstrated the connection between the institutional racism of the education system and the poor performance of Black children in both mainstream and ESN schools. McQueen was himself educated in a mixed comprehensive school (equivalent to an Australian co-ed government school), but even there he and his mates knew they weren't getting a good education—both Black and white working-class kids were being ignored. "Even though we were from different backgrounds and races ... we all knew we were being fucked over", McQueen said in a recent interview with the *Guardian*.

In *Education*, Kingsley is humiliated by teachers

for not being able to read aloud in class. After this, he becomes increasingly disruptive, reflecting the fact that, as one parent puts it in an activist meeting, "If a teacher think a child stupid, he start to act stupid". Children in ESN schools were left to rot on the scrap heap, with serious consequences for their future prospects in life. It meant being able to work only in lower paid, menial jobs, which meant being able to afford only substandard housing, and the same fate being dealt to their children, and the cycle continuing.

Encouraged to go to a supplementary school (also known as Saturday school) run by Black community activists, Kingsley discovers he's not stupid after all—he simply hasn't been taught in a way that suits his needs. In a powerful closing scene, Kingsley rushes down to the dinner table to read proudly from a book on the kings and queens of Africa. He has been supported, encouraged and given a topic that has relevance to his life. It is an indictment of the intrinsic racism in the British education system that thousands of families from Black and Asian backgrounds still find it necessary to fund such schools today.

Education was the most moving of the five films for me—Kingsley could have been my brother, his mum could have been my mum. In 2005 a campaign I was involved in raised money from trade unions to reprint Coard's book in a collection of essays called *Tell it Like it is: How Our Schools Fail Black Children*, published by Bookmarks. The book included chapters from academics, teachers, parents and students, who explained how the education system is still failing Black and working-class children, and explored different approaches to anti-racist education. The book and campaign were so popular that a second edition was printed two years later.

Education's celebration of the collective struggle by everyday people, guided by their reading of Trinidadian Marxist C.L.R. James and others, is a powerful thread running through the entire anthology. The story of *Alex Wheatle* also draws this out explicitly.

Abandoned by his parents, abused in the care system and humiliated by racist students and teachers at school, Alex's rage is writ large across Sheyi Cole's face in the title role. Alex is angry at the world, but also naive. After leaving care, he learns the hard way that the police are not "there to help you", as he once believed. He gets picked up by the cops and is left in the middle of nowhere, as they laugh about his long walk home. I've recently been re-watching *The Wire*, in which the cops in Baltimore do the same thing—just because they can. Alex's soft Surrey vowels turn into strong West Indian patois as he learns how to be Black in Brixton.

A major turning point, for both Alex personally and British race relations in general, was the New Cross house fire in January 1981. The early morning blaze killed 13 young people aged between 14 and 22 who were celebrating a birthday. In a turn of events that surprised no-one, the police wouldn't seriously investigate the theory that members of the far-right National Front, who were active in the area at the time, may have fire-bombed the house.

McQueen's triumph in these films is to show how beautiful and joyful the politics of rebellion—the sharp, small axe of Black British life and struggle—really is.

A march of 20,000 people was held a few months later, and the police inaction was a contributing factor to the Brixton riots that broke out in April that year. There's a beautiful interlude in the film in which Linton Kwesi Johnson reads his poem "New Crass Massakah" over images of the fire and the march. For Alex, it is a political awakening. He has an interest in music and writes the following lyrics:

Uprising
There's an Uprising
There ain't no work
And we haven't a shilling
We can't take no more of this suffering
So we gonna riot inna Brixton

Alex is sent to prison for four months for his involvement in the riots, and his cell mate gives him a copy of C.L.R. James's classic *The Black Jacobins*. Like Kingsley, Alex's eyes are opened to a different representation of Black people, one centred on cultures of resistance. "Up to then", he says, "I'd only seen Black people as victims or subservient".

Some commentators have said that the films don't focus on politics in a direct way. But this is to misunderstand politics as being divorced from the everyday realities of race and class. Watching as a Marxist, the politics are right there front and centre—for example, in the criminalisation of Black and working-class communities, the exclusionary nature of the education system and the lack of police action after attacks by the far right. To be Black and working-class in Britain (as in Australia) is to be political, every day of your life.

McQueen's triumph in these films is to show how beautiful and joyful the politics of rebellion—the sharp, small axe of Black British life and struggle—really is. And, ultimately, the films call on us to re-embrace these politics to challenge racism in Britain (and by extension, the rest of the world) today.

For socialists, this means not only understanding the deeply rooted reality of racism, but also building a movement that can fight to dismantle the power structures that maintain it. It means, as a start, understanding that the ruling class use racism to divide workers, and that a culture of anti-racist solidarity is necessary to unite the working class in struggle against them. Only through such unity of action can we hope to win a society that is run in our collective interests.

Instead of continuing to try to make racists see the error of their ways with charm and reasoned argument, instead of trying to work your way to the top of society, instead of trying to tinker with the systems which we are told over and over again are institutionally racist, the anti-racist majority need to unite and fight to get rid altogether of the capitalist system that breeds racism.

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