

Fightback May 2014

Struggle, Solidarity, Socialism

Why the Internet Party is resonating

**Democracy, Freedom & the
Realisation of the Imagination:
or 'What is Socialism'**

Socialists and Trade Unions

**Venezuela: Chavistas
debate pace of change**

China: Exploitation & resistance

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Table of Contents

- 3 Editorial
- 4 Why the Internet Party is resonating
- 6 Democracy, Freedom and the Realisation of the Imagination - or 'What is Socialism'
- 9 Let's remember the martyrs on May Day
- 10 Socialists and Trade Unions
- 12 New Zealand's Union Movement: A socialist perspective
- 16 Venezuela: Chavistas debate pace of change
- 21 China: Exploitation and resistance
- 22 Capitalism: Not Our Future schedule

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Fightback magazine is now in its 20th year as we continue the long-term fight for socialism. Readers and supporters may consider remembering us in their will with assets or money that will help the struggle in the long-term. If this is you please put in your will 'Fightback, PO Box 10-282, Dominion Road, Auckland' as well as what you would like to leave to us.

About Fightback

Under our current system, democracy consists of a vote every 3 years. Most of our lives are lived under dictatorship, the dictatorship of bosses and WINZ case managers. Fightback stands for a system in which our workplaces, our schools, our universities are run democratically, for social need rather than private profit.

Fightback participates in the MANA Movement, whose stated mission is to bring “rangatiratanga to the poor, the powerless and the dispossessed.” Capitalism was imposed in Aotearoa through colonisation, and the fight for indigenous self-determination is intimately connected with the fight for an egalitarian society. We also maintain an independent Marxist organisation outside of parliament, to offer a vision of a world beyond the parliamentary capitalist system.

Fightback stands against all forms of oppression. We believe working-class power, the struggle of the majority for self-determination, is the basis for ending all forms of oppression. However, we also recognise that daily inequities such as sexism must be addressed here and now, not just after the revolution.

Fightback is embedded in a range of struggles on the ground; including building a fighting trade union movement, movements for gender and sexual liberation, and anti-racism.

Fightback also publishes a monthly magazine, and a website, to offer a socialist perspective on ongoing struggles.

Fightback stands for struggle, solidarity and socialism.

Editorial

This issue of *Fightback* magazine comes out in preparation for our *Capitalism: Not Our Future* conference, to be held in Wellington over the first weekend of June 2014. Please check out the expanded programme on pages 22 - 23 of this issue.

If capitalism is not our future, what is? The bureaucratic states of Eastern Europe were a far cry from the endless possibilities of a post-capitalist future. But “the collapse of communism” means that it’s almost impossible for the average person to envisage any kind of future which doesn’t entail production for private profit, mindless consumption, and the steady erosion of both human civilisation and the ecosystem itself.

The Marxist answer is that the answer can’t be known in advance – it can only come about through the struggle of the working people. And this forms the centrepiece of this month’s issue. Auckland writer Dean Parker takes us through the history of May Day, the international working people’s holiday. Fightback’s own Ben Petersen discusses why we still need worker organisations today, while our comrades from the Committee for a Worker’s International (CWI) give a perspective on where the New Zealand union movement can go from here.

If there’s any part of modern society which shows clearly the truth of Marx’s insight that forces of production outrun relations of production, we can see it in the “digital economy”, where the increasing sophistication and speed of the Internet has meant a crisis of existence for the music and video industries. Fightback’s Byron

Clark looks at why Kim Dotcom’s Internet Party resonates for so many people – even those who “can’t afford a computer”.

The “utopian” side of Marxism is further explored in the notes from a recent talk by Wellington Fightback member Joel Cosgrove on the nature of socialism. “Democracy, freedom and imagination” are not words that most people would have associated with the old Warsaw Pact nations. But they’re words which capitalism has taken and twisted, turning dreams of self-realisation into alienation and the massive accumulation of useless commodities. Socialists will have to re-learn this language to appeal to the digital outlaws and precarious workers of the 21st century.

Finally, we have a couple of snapshots of how hard the struggle for this better world is in the here-and-now. In Venezuela, a revolutionary government struggles against all odds to peaceably move to a post-market future, despite right-wing uprisings and corruption within the state. Meanwhile, China continues to push forward to becoming the dominant capitalist power on the globe – with its attendant costs in human misery and environmental catastrophe – while still claiming to promote “socialism”.

The fight for a post-capitalist future is therefore, in large part, a fight to determine what “socialism” means in the 21st century. If you’re interested in making that happen in the coming months and years, join us in Wellington on Queen’s Birthday weekend.

Fightback
Struggle, Solidarity, Socialism

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Internet party

Why the Internet Party is resonating

By Byron Clark (*Fightback - Christchurch*).

In the March issue of *Fightback* we examined the politics at the then new Internet Party. The verdict at that time was that “there is no sign that it represents a progressive force”. There have been some developments since then; Kim Dotcom has dispelled the idea that he is a libertarian, confirming in his *The Nation* interview that he supports a welfare state. Later at the party’s members-only picnic held at his Coatesville mansion, he also spoke in favour of free education.

The policies released on their website, internet.org.nz, are all supportable - though the one about a digital currency seems like a silly gimmick. The main difference between the Internet Party and the Green Party - at least in the areas they share policy - appears to be a question of emphasis. If the Internet Party failed to register over 5% (the threshold for seats in parliament) in opinion polls, and Dotcom then folded it as he indicated he would, it could have been expected that the Greens would gain his endorsement.

This isn’t what happened. In what came as a surprise to many, he looked further to the left and sought out an alliance with the MANA movement. While *Fightback* took a position in opposition to such an alliance, the outcome of talks at the recent MANA AGM was to continue discussions between the two parties. *Fightback* remains opposed, but we will continue to participate in the MANA movement, provided there is no compromise of core policy or principles. The Internet Party has only got as far as it has with MANA because its message resonates with a significant number of members. The only significant gain for MANA in such an alliance would be a better chance of changing the government at the September 20 election, and

that wouldn’t be enough on its own to get people excited. The Internet Party has signed up over 2000 members in a matter of days, attracted 700 to its launch event and is equalling MANA in the polls (not to mention three other parties currently in parliament) before even officially registering. This level of support is not insignificant.

Some in MANA, as well as commentators watching the saga unfold, have questioned how relevant an Internet Party is to “someone who can’t afford a computer.” This might have been a valid point had the party emerged 15 years ago. But today, internet access is seen by most as an essential utility for full participation in society. It’s notable that those making this political criticism do so largely via Internet platforms such as social media, purportedly on behalf of those who don’t have the same level of access to those platforms.

One of the Internet Party’s core policies, increasing access to high speed internet and halving the price, is a policy comparable to halving the cost of electricity. It will appeal to a late night *World of Warcraft* player, of course, but also to a single parent aiming to escape life on the DPB through an Internet-delivered distance learning course. The latter actually benefits more from the policy, even if the former might be closer to the idea of an Internet Party supporter we have in our minds.

Crossover

Examples of the crossover between the demographic targeted by MANA and the policies of the Internet Party are easily found. Wahine Paewhenua of Te Kotahitanga Marae in the Whangarei suburb of Otangarei told the *New Zealand Herald* that, when they surveyed a newly formed youth group about what they’d like to have available, computers and internet access were to top of the

list. The marae now has an IT hub with twelve computers connected to ultra-fast broadband.

“Before, there was nothing happening for the children and the youth. Now they just have so many projects,” she told the *Herald*, adding that a lot of children in the area didn’t have internet access at home. She also said that those involved in the project also wanted to roll out the programme to the senior citizens, as a lot of them didn’t have a telephone.

“Otangarei has a very transient and poor population and to run a project like this is a big ask, but this has the potential to upskill people with the many opportunities that are available.” said Piripi Moore, project manager of the hub.

This sort of project is something MANA would support in principle, but the policies to make it happen are underdeveloped. In contrast, the Internet Party places them front and centre. The “missing million” who didn’t vote in 2011 are over-represented among youth, Maori and the poor, three groups that often intersect. No doubt many MANA members, including some in the leadership, are in favour of an alliance as they see the potential for Internet Party policy to mobilise these groups. The growth in MANA’s membership since media coverage of the proposed alliance lends credence to that idea.

While there are local branches forming, and an online forum for developing policy, the Internet Party is not holding an AGM until after the election, so its membership is not having the democratic discussion about an alliance that is going on within MANA. Yet some members have been vocal about their support.

On his Facebook page Hone Harawira shared an email he received after appearing on Radio NZ’s *Nine to Noon*:

“My husband and I are geeks; that is to

say, privileged, well-paid, middle-class etc. We are natural supporters of the Internet Party and I want you to know that I don't have any problem with an alliance between MANA and the Internet Party because from my perspective, the two have a lot in common - as Internet Party supporters, we believe that good internet access is a way out of poverty...

"I am appalled by Duncan Garner's casual racism when he talks like this: 'Dotcom wants internet freedom. Many of Hone's rural supporters in outback Hokianga and Kaikohe don't even own computers, let alone have super-fast broadband at their doorstep. Hone wants jobs, opportunities and better wages; Dotcom wants to stay in NZ.'

"He's talking as though he can't imagine a world where your supporters in Kaikohe and the Hokianga use computers to access the web, and this speaks volumes about the kinds of jobs he sees them doing.

"A big reason for our support of the Internet Party is that we believe that the people of rural Hokianga and Kaikohe should have computers as well as super-fast broadband because it's a path towards jobs, opportunities and better wages for them as it has been for us and our family. If poverty is an inability to participate in society then the internet is a powerful tool that can break down the barriers that prevent participation."

Indeed, MANA and the Internet Party are not necessarily the strange bedfellows a casual observation would make them appear.

The risks of an alliance

Members of MANA, and no doubt many voters as well, have been sceptical of Kim Dotcom. Reasons include his treatment of his own workers, the fact that he is a foreigner lacking knowledge of Te Ao Maori (the MANA AGM was the first time he had been

on a Marae), his class position, and the presumed politics that come with that. People have noted his use of the phrase "social fairness" during his address to the MANA AGM rather than "social justice" or "social equality". The difference in meaning here is subtle but significant. The woman who emailed Hone is correct when she says "good internet access is a way out of poverty," but it's only one way. It's the way used by Kim Dotcom in his rags to riches story; providing the opportunity might be "fair," but it can't work for everyone. Not because of individual failings, but because capitalism is not structured in a way that means everyone can be an entrepreneur and become wealthy. If the focus on innovation and entrepreneurialism that Dotcom and party president Vikram Kumar are so keen on overshadows MANA's goal of lifting everyone out of poverty, it becomes a problem.

Internet Party members have also raised their own worries about the alliance. "My biggest concern is that the Internet Party is not going to be taken seriously by voters because it is choosing to make an alliance with the MANA party," writes a member going by the name Alana Hyland on the party's policy forum. "Everyone that I have talked to about the Internet Party has told me that they weren't going to vote for the Internet Party because 'they're joining with the crazy racist group'. I think the Internet Party would do better on its own." Responses to a photo of Kim Dotcom and Hone Harawira the former shared on Twitter seem to be of the nature Alana talks about: "You had my vote. You lose it if you align with that racist idiot!" and "Hone is the biggest racist I've ever seen in a while" (sic).

These views of course are ignorant and incorrect, and we shouldn't judge the party based on its supporters. It's worth commending the Internet Party for a clause in their constitution stating "the Internet Party will also maintain and promote economic, cultural, social, ethnic, age and gender diversity and

equality within the membership, candidacy and organisational structure of the Internet Party".

That said, how many potential Internet Party voters share the "MANA are racist" view, and would stay home on polling day rather than vote for an alliance? iPredict and other media are estimating the number of seats an alliance would win by adding together the poll results of both groups, yet this won't be an accurate prediction if a significant number of supporters of each party abstain.

Moreover, a joint list would have to mean a shared policy platform. At the AGM, Dotcom criticised MANA's support of the Hone Heke (Financial Transactions) Tax and Capital Gains Tax, instead endorsing "luxury taxes". While Dotcom says he supports taxes on the wealthy, he appears to mean taxing consumption, not property or business. After Harawira's principled opposition to raising GST, and endorsement of the Hone Heke Tax, it remains unclear whether Dotcom will compromise on this point. While it is entirely possible for a capitalist to support progressive working-class struggles, this also must mean betraying their own class and making sacrifices, and Dotcom's choices so far seem more opportunistic.

Perhaps MANA's best course of action would be to adopt the Internet Party's progressive policies and continue to advocate lowering the threshold for entry to parliament, remaining independent. As we go to print, results of the negotiation remain to be seen.

Intro to Marxism

Democracy, Freedom and the Realisation of the Imagination - or 'What is Socialism'

By Joel Cosgrove (*Fightback* – Wellington)

(Notes from a talk in the "Introduction to Marxism" series)

We spent last week talking about capitalism (a social/economic structure which is based on the production of things for profit). The flip side of a discussion of capitalism is a discussion of socialism.

Clearly this is an hour long discussion so I'm not interested in stating a definitive answer to this question. But I am keen to start a discussion, because to be honest, I've been a revolutionary socialist since 2005 and I'm still learning, still pondering this question.

Let's start with three points to build a discussion around.

- Democracy
- Freedom
- Imagination

Outside of the fact that things are good grouped in threes (which we all know people work well with), these are points that I think are important within my conception of Socialism.

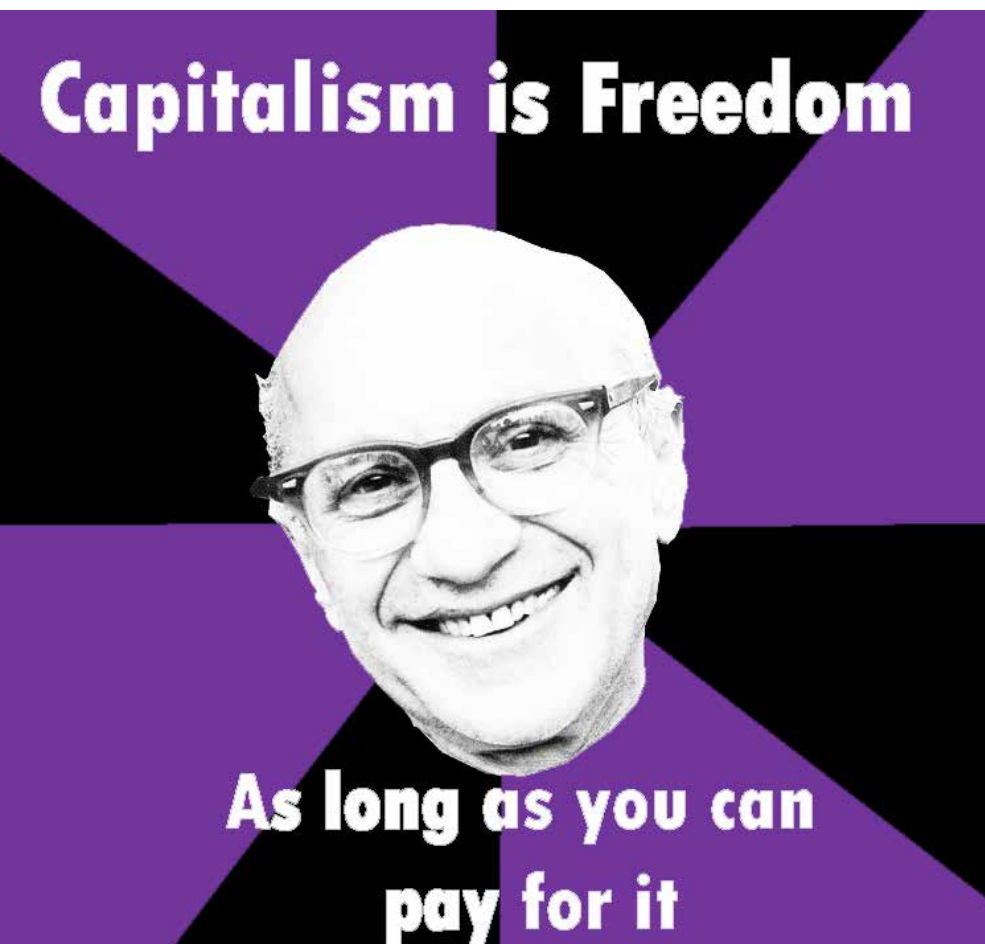
Democracy

First off, I think this is a useful place to start. I think we can agree that there is more than one idea of democracy, a word which comes from *Demokratia* - Demos being the Greek word for 'people' and Kratos meaning "power" or "rule."

Bryan Roper, a member of the International Socialist Organisation in Dunedin, has written a great book titled *The History of Democracy: a Marxist Interpretation*. In it, he talks about the polarisation between Athenian and Roman democracy, and the way in which that difference has been reflected in the application of democracy over the centuries.

To grossly generalize, in Athenian democracy you had an environment where the people were compensated to take part in the democratic process. Even though, in Greece at the time, the "people" didn't include women, slaves or foreigners, still it was definite progress. With Roman democracy you had an environment where those who had the time or money could take part. So what you had is a democracy where the rich could take part and the poor had no way of taking part.

It won't be much of a surprise to say which of these examples of democracy was generally imitated. It wasn't until 1892 that MPs in Aotearoa were given an annual salary and it wasn't until 1944 that MPs were considered to be working fulltime. Needless to say, the history of democracy is also the history of struggle for representation by the working class. It is no coincidence that the changes above came about in a period when the Liberal government was enacting progressive reforms in the 1890s and the first Labour government was bringing increased working-class representation. Still, within this dynamic, the history of democracy has been a history of struggle against the dominant expression of it; namely, a Roman model that structurally excludes the poor/working class. I think we can see the same thing in current practice, where hundreds of thousands of people are disengaged from the political process.



I don't think it is a big call to say that the democratic frameworks we have currently are a bit shit. Because in part democracy is about more than putting your hand up, casting a vote every three years. It's the environment surrounding the act of voting which frames the level of democracy we engage in. I'm not going to engage in much depth with the issue of three-yearly voting in elections. But Parliament is a relatively powerless thing, when it has no real ability to engage in the question of what is made in and what quantity. Clearly though, we need a process that involves actual participation as opposed to token involvement.

Building on that, the real gaping hole is in the workplace; namely, the lack of democratic decision making. We spend most of our time in the workplace and yet we have little say over what goes on, on what is produced. We're not going to get on top of issues like climate change without democratization of our workplaces.

If you look back historically at the Soviets in Russia, the Factory Councils in Italy and Spain, what links them all (broadly) is a direct link between the workplace and the political decision-making bodies. But there is also a direct democracy that gives people some collective control over their lives. These are the stories that have inspired me, examples of people taking control over their lives. Yet, for some people, the fact that the Russian Revolution didn't immediately lead to everyone having a beach house and a pool to get a tan by is some sort of indictment of the experience, as if freedom is just carefree idleness. The thing for me though, is that with this newfound freedom from their former lives under an autocratic Tsarist regime came *more* responsibility, not less, part and parcel with the freedoms that were won through struggle.

That unflinching determination makes sense when viewed as a fight for more responsibility, for the right to have a real say in how society is run - which echoes

Why you should get involved in Fightback

We support trade union activism

Because we believe that only the working class can create socialism, we are active in the basic organisations of the working class, the trade unions. Currently, unions are generally dominated by middle-class bureaucrats who see themselves as peacemakers between workers and bosses. We work towards transforming unions into strong, democratic, fighting organisations, controlled by their members. Such unions will mobilise workers for struggle in the workplace and society through strikes, workplace occupations and

other forms of militant action. In an economic crisis they are more important than ever. We join in the struggle to extend the union movement to the majority of workers who are not yet organised, especially the campaigns by Unite Union to involve youth and workers who have insecure conditions. We stand with workers in struggle for better rights and conditions, and initiate discussion on revolutionary ideas through strike bulletins and electronic media.

We support student-worker solidarity

On campus and in schools, Workers Party members are actively trying to rebuild the radical student movement. We oppose fees, demand living grants for students, and fight for free speech. We encourage students to link their struggles with those of the working

class. Workers ultimately pay most of the bill for education, even in a semi-private university system such as we have. Workers will be won to the idea of free education from kindergarten to university if they see students willing to support their struggles.

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Intro to Marxism

in part to the older tradition of Athenian *dēmokratía*.

Freedom/Liberty

I'm going to paraphrase both Immanuel Kant and Spiderman in saying "with freedom, comes great responsibility". And also, "from each according to their ability, to each according to their need" - twelve words by Marx, that he took from the French radical tradition.

For me, freedom is a term that has become hijacked by the Right. We've got to be aware of the neoliberal co-option of language, especially the powerful liberatory language of the Left. The dominant (right-wing) perspective lacks a collective framework for individual freedom. For me, my individual freedom is predicated on a broader collective freedom. If society as a whole is unfree, then there is little real basis for my personal freedom.

This is important when talking about socialism, seeing the world as a totality and not the individual as some abstract decontextualised Ayn Randian superman. All too often, when you look at the "freedom" of the Right, near the surface somewhere is the oppression that this freedom rests on. But for me, freedom and imagination are interlinked to a

large extent. You can't have real freedom without...

Imagination

This is the point where I hope there aren't too many sniggers. But I passionately believe that without an ability to imagine, we're stuck with the status quo that we currently have. Furthermore, I think we've seen a gradual limiting of the space within society in which we can dream/imagine something different, something new.

You only have to look at Margaret Thatcher's well known phrase "there is no such thing as society," or the survey result that came out a few years ago which showed that people could more easily imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, to see how dangerous capitalism sees the imagination as being.

If we start with the Thatcher quote, I think we see a key battleground. Not just the right to dream, but the right to dream/imagine collectively. This collective imagination is tied back to my conception of freedom, based around a relationship between the individual and the collective. On top of that, we need to be able to imagine the future; otherwise we end up trapped in the pre-

sent. As Marxists we need to be able to imagine this concept of a future society, based on our critique of capitalism and our understanding of the limitations of previous attempts at building an alternative to capitalism (France, Germany, Russia, China, Cuba etc). From there we need to be able realise and develop these ideas in practice.

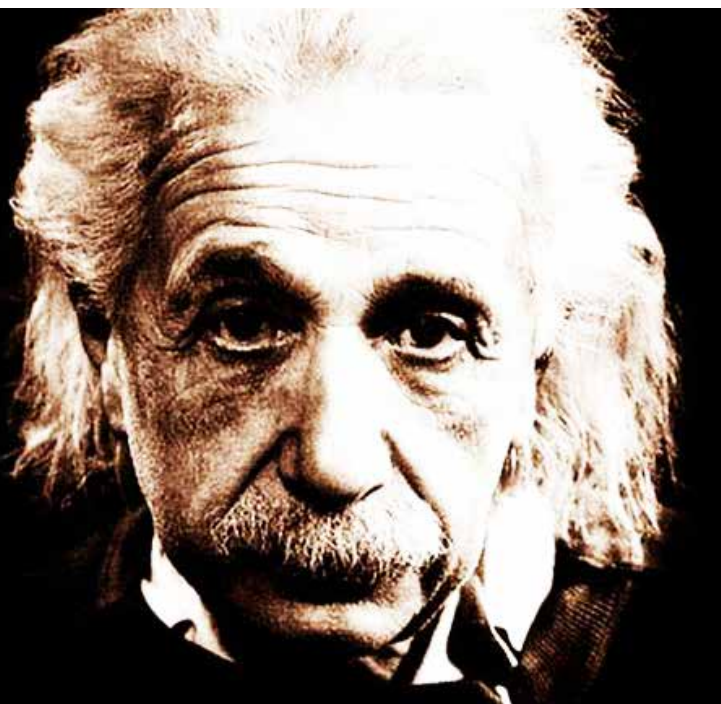
This is where we gather together as a small group of people dreaming of revolution, of a fundamentally changed way in which society is run, where we have a totally different conception of democracy, freedom and the imagination than the bullshit we are presented with currently.

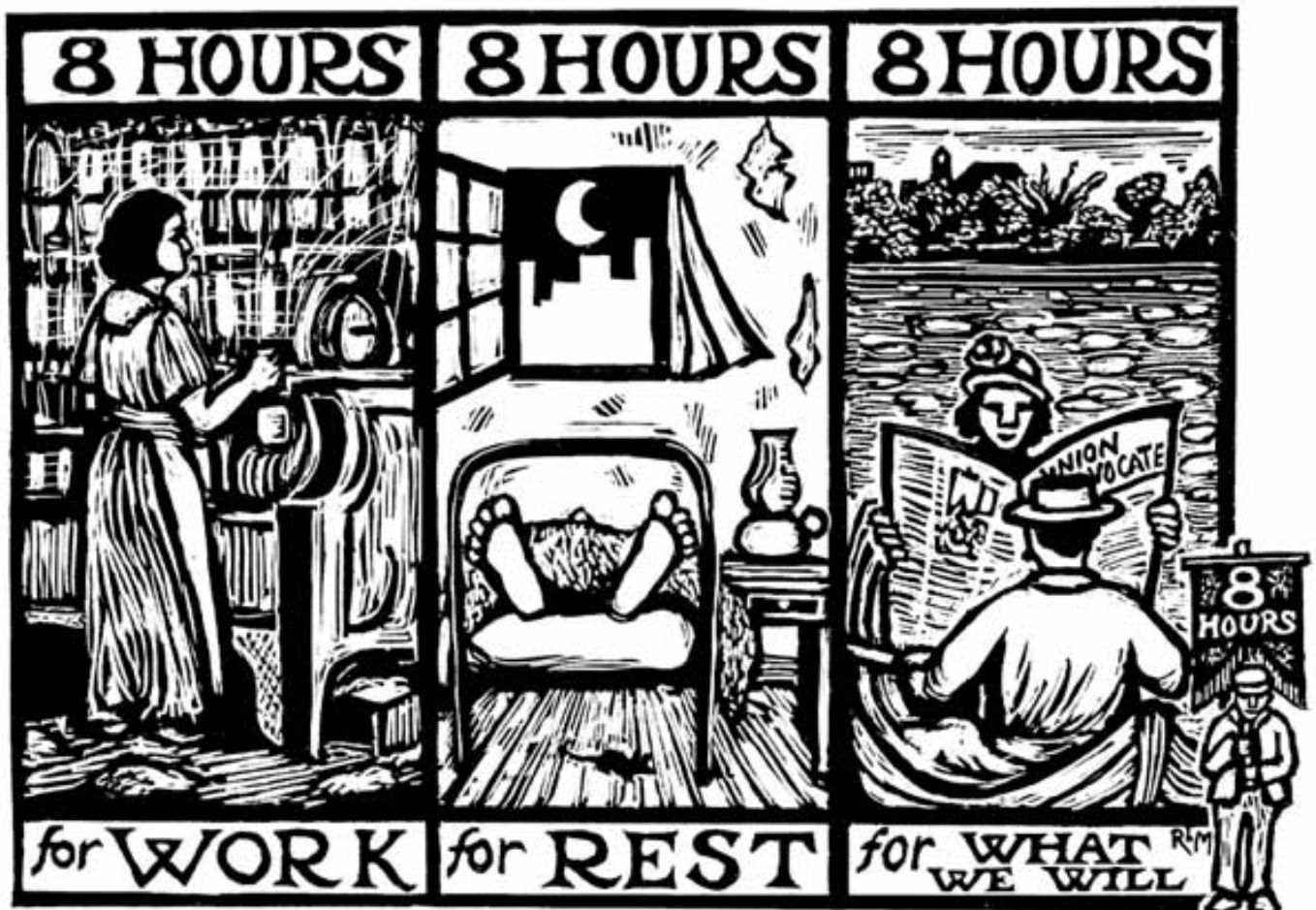
The challenge from this point of collective dreaming is the realization of these ideas on a small scale (let's not pretend we are a revolutionary army of thousands), which right now, could be going on a poster run to promote the next Intro to Marxism session, opposing white supremacists in Christchurch, or helping make a banner for the anti-Trans Pacific Partnership Agreement march this Saturday.

At its core though, my point is a call for radical critical thinking and corresponding action.

**"Imagination
is more
important than
knowledge"**

Albert Einstein
1879 - 1955





Let's remember the martyrs on May Day

By Dean Parker

The fight for workers' rights has been a long and bloody one, with deaths on both sides of the political divide.

Go down to the Queen's Wharf on the waterfront and you'll see the beginnings of a heritage trail with cut-out effigies of figures from the past and background information.

These figures are described as "Lovers of Auckland", Tamaki Makaurau, Tamaki of a Thousand Lovers.

It's a catchy theme for a heritage trail but problems arise when dealing with major historical events of waterfront history. Such as the strike of 1913.

Last year the trail included, as one such lover of Auckland, the figure of a 1913 Police Special together with a plaque saying, more or less, that this bloke

loved Auckland so much he came down to the wharves and beat a whole lot of other Aucklanders' heads in.

Following reservations about the wisdom of this, the 1913 exhibit was removed and never replaced.

Today being May 1, May Day, International Labour Day, it's worth remembering a similar attempt elsewhere to commemorate one side of history, the bosses' side - and the consequence, and all of it rooted in May Day history.

If you're ever in Chicago, head west on Randolph. You'll cross over two arterial routes, the river and then the thick cordage of midwest railway lines. Just as you reach a third artery, the Kennedy Expressway, pull up. You'll be in a bleakish urban clearing of concrete surrounded by characterless offices and warehouses.

There's a pedestal there. It's a bit

knocked about, but evidently once served a purpose. If you approach and bend forward, you'll see inscribed on it, "In the Name of the People of Illinois I Command Peace".

But there's nothing there commanding anything. The pedestal used to host a 2.7m bronze statue of a 19th-century Chicago policeman with a raised hand. The bronze policeman had stood there, firm and unyielding, until 1927 when a Chicago street car driver deliberately jumped the rails and rammed his tram into it.

It was re-erected and stood on its pedestal for four decades until, in 1969, it was blown up by the urban guerrilla group, the Weathermen. It was replaced and blown up again.

A suggestion was made that the Chicago City Council investigate having a series of duplicates made out of fibre-

May day/trade unions

glass so as each was blown up it could be the more easily replaced.

This was opposed by the Mayor who wished the statue restored in its original bronze. The Mayor had his way, but a 24-hour police guard was engaged.

After 12 months the bill for securing the statue had reached US\$67,440 (\$78,800).

Rather than expending further civic finance, the council came up with a novel cost-cutting alternative. Instead of bringing the police to the statue, the statue was brought to the police, removed from its pedestal and placed in the lobby of the Chicago Central Police Headquarters.

There it remains.

The genesis of the bronze policeman was a period of international labour agitation for an eight-hour working day: eight hours labour, eight hours recreation, eight hours rest.

Nineteenth century Chicago had been the centre of that agitation.

In May, 1867, 10,000 union members had marched through the city and struck for the eight-hour day. Some employers caved in. Most took advantage of a time of unemployment to bring in jobless from out of town. The strike was defeated.

Twenty years later the eight-hour day movement was again a force.

Meeting in Chicago, the Federation of Organised Trade and Labour Unions of

the United States and Canada resolved, "That eight hours shall constitute a legal day's labour, from and after May 1, 1886".

The date may have been chosen to commemorate the May strikers of 1867, but just as likely is that the delegate who sponsored the motion, a carpenter, figured the beginning of spring would see the building trades back in business after the winter lay-up and more willing to settle.

Nationwide a total of 340,000 workers struck on May 1, 1886, a Saturday. Almost a quarter of those were from Chicago.

In the world's first May Day parade, Lucy Parsons, a labour and women's rights speaker, together with her husband Albert and their two children, led 80,000 Chicago workers up Michigan Avenue, arm-in-arm, singing.

The following Monday, 200 eight-hour day supporters marched to the McCormick Reaper Plant (now the International Harvester Company) to join a picket. Chicago police under orders of a minion of Cyrus McCormick II - of McCormick Reaper - turned up and fired on the crowd, shooting two men dead.

Next day 2500 protesters gathered in the evening near Chicago's Haymarket Square to condemn the shootings.

Waiting were 176 armed police. This time someone got the retaliation in

early and threw the first-ever dynamite bomb, killing one policeman and injuring others.

The police immediately fired back, killing four and wounding 20.

The leaders of the protesters were rounded up and four hanged. One was Albert Parsons.

Two years after the Haymarket deaths a Chicago businessman put up \$10,000 for a statue to be erected in the square to commemorate the police action.

The statue was sculpted: a policeman with raised hand and the inscription, "In the Name of the People of Illinois I Command Peace".

The policeman who modelled for the statue was later removed from the force for trading in stolen goods.

In 1889, in Paris, at a meeting of the International Labour Congress celebrating the centenary of the storming of the Bastille, a delegate from the American Federation of Labour requested that May 1 be adopted as International Labour Day, upon which the working class would march for the eight-hour day, for democracy and the rights of workers to organise - and would remember the labour martyrs of Chicago.

And that is how workers come to celebrate May 1, and how there is a bronze statue of a policeman, arm upraised, in the lobby of the Chicago Central Police Headquarters, a warning to all about taking history lightly.

Socialists and Trade Unions

By Ben Petersen (Fightback - Wellington)

Socialists have a long relationship with trade unions. There are exciting chapters of history where socialists have led important working class battles, such as the fight for the eight-hour working day. Today, socialists will often meet in union offices and often will seek to involve unions in our campaigns.

This is not just a coincidence. The socialist movement has important contributions to make to the trade union movement, and needs to consider these organisations to achieve radical change.

Common ground

The socialist movement is a project for revolutionary change. Socialists want

to overthrow today's society based on exploitation, and build a new world where ordinary people have control over their lives and communities. The agent for this change is the working people themselves.

Trade unions are organisations for working people. Trade unions seek to organise workers in a particular industry (such as teachers, construction work-



Unite National Director Mike Treen at an international conference on organising fast food workers.

ers, or dairy workers). A trade union should then represent workers and their interests. Unions fight on the job for better pay and conditions, or for better legislation from government to protect workers or strengthen their bargaining position.

The overlap is obvious. Socialists seek to empower working people to change the world and trade unions are organisations for working people to defend their interests. Socialists participate in trade unions because they provide an important space to build an alternative.

Unionism is a living question

Often socialists talk about trade unions as a question of the past. Historical events are remembered and eulogised, but can be presented in a way that is divided from the present. It is important to remember the important events in union history, such as the great strikes in 1913 or the lockout of the waterside workers in 1951, but this is not to rote learn a historical narrative. Socialists study the radical past to learn lessons to

build from today.

Radical unionism is not an identity. Radical unionism is not confined to particular historical periods or militant industries. Unionism is not confined to white men in overalls. The first strike in New Zealand was by Maori forestry workers who demanded to be paid in money or gunpowder, instead of in rations.

Some industries have long traditions of unionism, such as waterside workers and the West Coast miners. But today's economy is much broader than these industries. There are thousands of workers in education and health care, or in service industries.

For socialist unionists, it is important to be part of building the unions in these areas. Capitalism is a system that serves to exploit. This exploitation changes and develops over time. Capitalism in Aotearoa today has important education industries, and a vast civil service that administers capitalism as a whole. To challenge capitalist exploitation, it is important for trade unions to be in all

sectors of the economy.

When workers are organised they can exercise their collective power. A unionised workforce can therefore dictate the terms of their exploitation by going on strike or refusing to work for shit pay, work long hours, or in unsafe conditions. This process is a challenge to the authority of the capitalist system.

Reforms for revolution

Of course, socialists have a vision that looks much further than limiting the forms of exploitation that working people submit to. Any radical that is true to their ideals dreams of overthrowing capitalism and building a new world based on co-operation and social ownership. So for some, this can seem contradictory - if unions are fighting to reform and limit exploitation, is it really a place for revolutionaries?

Fighting for socialism will be a long and complicated process. Achieving a revolution will not be by simply convincing a majority of people that change is

Trade unions

necessary, but by building a movement that makes change possible.

One of the challenges in fighting for revolutionary change will be a question of confidence. If working people do not have the confidence in their ability to fight and win a pay rise, do we think that working people can have the confidence to fight for fundamental social change? Winning these small gains can help to show oppressed people their collective strength, and only this strength can open the road to more fundamental change.

Even to be aware of this collective strength is not enough. The power of working people has to be organised and developed. To enable a world where working people run their own communities will need organisation. A socialist future will be built on participatory democracy. To make this democracy possible, working people will need the experience of participating in and organising their workplaces and communities. If working people don't yet have the organisation to win a pay rise, it won't be possible to have the organisation to run an alternative society and an economy to support it.

If socialists are serious about working class power, we need to understand that this will not just fall into place. It will need to be built.

Problems of unions

Part of the challenge is that this is not a simple task. The existence of unions is not enough. Many unions today are run by bureaucrats that are more interested in a cushy job than in working class power. Proportionally, wages have decreased for decades, but unions have failed to resist the slide. Failing to protect working people, the union movement has struggled to make itself relevant for working people today. Union membership has decreased to the point where as few as 7% of workers in the private sector are union members.

In many unions, the leaders are divorced from the workers that they are supposed to represent. Union officials often haven't worked in the industries they nominally represent, and are on wages that are well above that of the industry they organise. Spaces for union members to democratically engage in their union are weak or non-existent. Unions

have become 'professionalised', where the services of union officials replaces the activity of activists in workplaces.

Socialists support trade unions as organisation for workers to fight for their interests. Therefore, socialists do not support practices that undermine unions, and seek to challenge them.

The militant minority

Socialists support unions because we believe in the power of ordinary people. The role of a socialist in a union can be varied. Socialists will always try to be good unionists at their work, but this can take different paths, depending on a range of factors.

Being a union radical can mean assisting with initiatives in the union and building organisation for the next fight with the boss. It could mean opposing a rotten leadership and building rank and file networks to challenge entrenched bureaucrats. Sometimes socialists may work for unions to contribute to building the organisation as an official.

But always, radical unionists seek to build the capacity for the working class to fight against their oppression.

New Zealand's Union Movement: A socialist perspective

By Committee for a Workers' International

New Zealand employers are seeking to maintain their profits by increasing productivity. In most cases this means people working harder and faster for less money and fewer conditions. Very little is being invested by employers into research and development.

For example, in 2011 only 17% of businesses with 100 or more employees invested in research and development

(R&D). Of the businesses with 50-99 employees only 13% of businesses invested, while just 10% of businesses with 20-49 employees put funds towards R&D. New Zealand employers prefer to continue their efforts intensifying the exploitation of the working class.

Since the onset of the crisis, employers lobbied the National government for industrial law changes which have been passed, including the implementation of 90-day work trial periods without rights to grievances for unjustified dismissal, the narrowing of the interpretation of

unjustified dismissal, and the narrowing of prospects for reinstatement where a dismissal is held to be unjustified. Such measures are designed to make labour more flexible for employers and to further discipline working people for the employers' needs.

Other changes, such as enabling the employer to require a medical certificate for only one day of sick leave (previously employers were only able to require proof on the third consecutive day), have the stated aim of improving productivity. They are also about increasing

employer control over the workforce. A range of changes have encroached more directly on union rights such as the tightening up of union right of entry to workplaces. This is now only with the permission of the employer and the burden placed on unions to prove an employer is being unreasonable by denying access.

The reintroduction of youth rates – “starting out” rates – will not impact on worksites where unions, notably Unite and FIRST Union, have written youth wages out of union agreements but it will increase the exploitation of thousands of young workers in unorganised workplaces.

The government also changed the review process for the adult minimum wage by limiting consultation to only the Council of Trade Unions and Business New Zealand. It has narrowed the factors that should be considered in the annual reviews by excluding social factors and wage relativity factors.

This is an attempt to send a clear message out against sections of the union movement, like Unite Union and the Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU), which have run Living Wage campaigns. Firstly Unite ran a campaign to have the minimum wage to be indexed at 2/3rds of the average wage, with an immediate increase to \$15 per hour. Next, the SFWU has led a public campaign which has got traction for a living wage which would allow for a decent standard of living and the ability for ordinary people to properly participate in their communities.

Due to the pressure of these campaigns both Labour and the Greens have accepted the need for a \$15 minimum wage. If they do come to power in 2014 the claim for \$15 which Unite pushed in the 2009 to 2010 period will be less relevant. Workers have moved on from the \$15 per hour demand and organised low paid workers are now looking for considerably more.

If Labour and the Greens take power

they may make some minor changes to the minimum wage, but against the backdrop of a fragile economic situation they will be under intense pressure from employers to ensure these changes are mere window dressing and that there are various factors that would allow employers to opt out. The only way a real living wage will be won will be via a union-led industrial campaign.

At an institutional level, the government has made the major change of merging the Department of Labour, the Department of Building and Housing, the Ministry of Science and Innovation and the Ministry of Economic Development into one Ministry of Business, Innovation, and Employment. This has set the tone for the function of the former Department of Labour to become more business orientated with the stated aim that “The purpose of MBIE is to be a catalyst for a high-performing economy to ensure New Zealand’s lasting prosperity and wellbeing.... We are working to support the government’s Business Growth Agenda.” The false idea of the prosperity of business being synonymous with lasting prosperity has been pushed by this government. But there has been no increased prosperity for ordinary people.

Lastly, the government is now in the process of passing legislation that will enable employers to declare that bargaining is frustrated and they will not be required to conclude bargaining. This is essentially removing the right of workers to a collective agreement. The International Labor Organisation (ILO) says the proposed legislation would contravene their principles. There has been a huge amount of union submissions so far, but the government announced in December 2013 that it is proceeding to the second reading regardless.

The trade union response to legislation changes

The main form of opposition to the changes has consisted of public rallies held after work hours, stopwork meetings, and legal action to secure the best

possible interpretations of the changes. On some occasions union leaders made bold statements about mounting a more serious opposition, in 2010 for example one union leader said there would be “chaos in the factories” if the extension of the 90-day legislation to all workplaces came to pass. Unfortunately this sentiment was short-lived and the leaderships continue to be conservative on the question of strikes.

Clearly these new laws need to be challenged with industrial action. Public rallies held after hours and brief stop work meetings do not sufficiently impact on the employers profits and should be seen at best as a starting point to build towards more generalised forms of strike action. The role of socialists is to establish an organisation with the type of authority in the working class from which we can competently argue such basics.

The problem is not one of union resources or worker apathy. The problem is political, that unions have in large part become wedded to pro-market and capitalist ideas. The attachment of some unions to the Labour Party, which proposes no economic alternative to neo-liberalism, means that those unions don’t fight for a fundamental alternative to the system either. Without being tied to Labour’s politics, and by linking with other fighting organisations, these unions could play an exciting part in producing deep social change.

An increasing number of union and left activists have become de facto apologists for the conservative perspective in the bureaucracy by arguing that the economic conditions are not right for strikes or that there is not the right attitude amongst workers. Others say there are too few resources or not the right information. The truth is that most unions have plenty of resources and most workers respond well to campaigns that will improve their work conditions and living standards. The problem is purely political.

The bulk of union leaders today do not

Trade unions



adhere to an alternative to capitalism. Such an alternative is the only thing that can provide relief and the necessary changes for working people.

What we need most is a new type of politics to dominate the union movement. This means a return to socialist ideas which provide a genuine political and economic alternative to the profit driven system. When people have a vision for a better type of society this translates into a more fighting attitude on the ground.

Therefore the task of rebuilding the union movement along fighting lines will be best done in combination with the tasks of building a serious socialist political organisation as well as a new workers party that can challenge Labour's grip. These ideas will get the best

reception from those who have the most to gain – the union rank and file.

Bosses seeking to undermine traditional sectors

During the last upturn, the employers sought to increase profitability by placing emphasis on increasing absolute surplus value. For example, in 2004 workers in New Zealand were working longer hours than in any OECD country except Japan. In more recent times however employers are now seeking to increase surplus value by further rationalising and flexibilising the labour process.

In particular, the employers in the traditionally unionised sectors want access

to the flexibility and casualisation that exists in other sectors. This is what was behind the 2012 attacks on the conditions of meat workers throughout the country. It is also what is behind the attacks on port workers in Auckland – an ongoing situation where there is currently something of a stalemate.

The link between profitability and the recent attacks on meat workers shows the way in which the employers want to offload their profit woes on to workers. Beef and sheep still account for over 15% of New Zealand exports. The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry has stated that there have been profitability difficulties in the industry since at least 2009. In fact profitability issues for the meat sector go back decades, hence the decline in beef and sheep farming and

exports.

The locking out of over 100 CMP company meat workers in the Manawatu area from late October 2011 to late December 2012 was followed by the locking out of over 800 AFFCO workers in several meat processing plants for more than three months in 2012. The lockouts represented a new level of employer hostility in that the lockouts weren't started as retaliation to union-led industrial activity but were started to attempt to force union workers to accept deep cutbacks.

Talleys purchased the AFFCO plants in 2011 and were demanding more flexibility in the workplace. The company's demand for greater flexibility was connected to its requirement for more control over the workplace. Greater flexibility is then imposed and used to increase exploitation and therefore squeeze more profits out of the workforce.

Many AFFCO plants are now antiquated. Instead of resolving efficiency problems through investing in plant and machinery to create state of the art workplaces, New Zealand capitalists have focussed on making the workforce leaner, making it work harder and faster.

At the Ports of Auckland Limited the employer attacks against the wharfies (stevedores), including lockouts, have been fundamentally about trying to reduce the conditions and power of workers in traditional union jobs and force them down to the flexibilised conditions of the broader workforce in New Zealand.

A TV report about the dispute, in January 2012, said that "Businesses say it's a battle between old and new work practices" and Kim Campbell of the Employers and Manufacturers Association said, "I think it's do or die personally, and that really is a serious matter." The Auckland ports director told TV3 News that "Our singular focus is on addressing old-fashioned workplace practices that are a handbrake on flexibility and productivity."

Essentially employers are now going after core industrial workers in an attempt to make those workers subject to the neo-liberal workplace conditions of job insecurity, work insecurity (less guaranteed hours of work), income insecurity, individualisation of bonuses and benefits and other elements of the neo-liberal work environment. When other parts of the workforce are unorganised and working in these conditions then the core workforce is more vulnerable to the types of attacks that are happening now.

In the stalemate at the Ports of Auckland the Maritime Union employment agreement has expired and the employer has attempted to gain traction for a scab union. This dispute needs to be seen as a wake-up call to the union movement. A setback for one of the most well paid and highly organised sections of the working class is a setback for all workers.

Service sector workers struggle for income security and job security

Care workers have also been struggling over the last two to three years with strike action taking place at the workplaces one of the country's largest rest home companies. Additionally, in this period, the Service and Food Workers union has won an important legal decision which held that overnight stays must be compensated at the minimum wage. Unite Union has continued to progress and build amongst fast-food and cinema workers, and this included a long round of strikes and other actions at McDonald's outlets throughout the country. As always the key demands of Unite members have been around secure work and guaranteed hours.

Key slogans for the workers movement
Service sector struggles are connected with the struggles of workers in traditional union jobs. The service sector campaigns are generally offensive campaigns against already existing casualisation and flexibilisation. The struggles at the ports and in the meat works were defensive struggles against casualisation

and flexibilisation which the bosses have sought to impose.

In order to unify the struggles of the working class over the next period unions should adopt a general slogan along the lines of "Secure Work, Secure Hours, Living Wage". Joint industrial action, across sectors, should be organised. This type of campaign would be the best way to win improvements to the minimum wage and give workers the confidence to challenge the existing anti-worker laws.

Industrial tactics

A feature of some industrial disputes of late has been the unwillingness of union leaders to blockade or put 'hard' pickets on workplace entrances to defend against scabs and to stop the supply chain. This is a concerning trend apparent during a number of recent disputes. There have been some situations where there has been a systematic allowance of scabs through the gates and the normal operations and supply have continued. This is dramatically different to only seven and a half years ago when, in the National Distribution Union versus Progressive Enterprises dispute, key warehouses were systematically blockaded and flying pickets were established to stop the operation of make-shift dispatch centres with force. Similar tactics were used by other unions at the time. Socialists must fight for the restoration of militant tactics in the trade union movement. This is not a mere ideological point. With employers becoming more aggressive, militant industrial tactics are necessary.

(This is an abridged version of a full perspectives document to be found at <http://cwi.co.nz/2014/02/socialist-perspectives-for-aotearoa-new-zealand/>)



Venezuela: Chavistas debate pace of change

By Steve Ellner

The violent anti-government protests that shook Venezuela in February have again thrust the issue of the pace of change into the broader debate over socialist transformation.

Radical Chavistas, reflecting the zeal of the movement's rank and file, call for a deepening of the "revolutionary process". Moderate Chavistas favour concessions to avoid an escalation of the violence.

The same dilemma confronted Chile's socialist government of Salvador Allende in the early 1970s, but under different political circumstances. Unlike in Chile, Hugo Chavez and his successor Nicolas Maduro have won nearly all national elections over a period of 15 years by absolute majorities.

Also, Chavistas, since the early years, have maintained firm control of the two most important institutions in the country: the armed forces and the state oil company PDVSA.

The invigoration of the Chavista rank and file, along with mass mobilisations, became a must for the Maduro government's survival in the face of the opposition's at times violent tactics in February.

Thus, on successive days in late February, Maduro spoke at mass rallies of women, oil workers, motorcyclists, telephone workers, and finally peasants and indigenous people. On each occasion, social movement representatives called for the "deepening of the revolutionary process", "radicalisation", and "people's power."

Maduro, for his part, outlined popular measures and at times threatened the elite with radicalisation. This combina-

tion of expectations of radicalisation and announced programs favouring the popular sectors enabled Chavez to overcome situations of crisis in the past.

Ongoing radicalisation

Immediately after each triumph, the Chavez government announced bold initiatives.

For instance, after his victory in the recall election of 2004, Chavez defined himself as a socialist and expropriated several abandoned factories. After winning 63% of the vote in the 2006 presidential elections, Chavez nationalised strategic industries.

The impressive showing of the Chavistas in municipal elections last December appeared to follow the same pattern. Immediately after, Maduro took calcu-

lated risks.

Opinion, however, has been divided within the movement as to whether his moves contributed to the deepening of the revolutionary process or represented a step backward. The measures he implemented were designed to confront acute shortages of basic commodities, price rises far above those set by the government, a 56% inflation rate (nearly triple that of the previous year), widespread currency speculation, and the refusal of the opposition to recognise the government's legitimacy.

The favourable electoral results in December represented a turnaround for Maduro. Shortly after Chavez's death in March last year, Maduro was elected president by an unexpectedly narrow margin of 1.7%. In interpreting the outcome, the opposition and private media stressed the fact that Maduro failed to measure up to Chavez's leadership.

The *International Herald Tribune*, for instance, ran a story on disillusioned Chavistas and quoted one who claimed he still supported the government but, in reference to Maduro, added: "We don't want a president who is a joke."

New offensive

Maduro's popularity recovered in November when he declared war on price speculation and in doing so, invigorated the Chavista base. As part of a well-publicised campaign, Maduro and government authorities inspected large commercial outfits.

They documented what he called "grotesque prices" of household appliances and other products imported with "preferential dollars". These are dollars sold by the government to merchants at an artificially low price in Venezuelan bolivars.

The National Guard occupied the stores at the same time that prices were slashed. In several cases, the government detained and initiated legal proceedings against store owners.

This no-nonsense approach resonated among voters. Public opinion firm Hinterlaces said 70% of Venezuelans approved of the "economic offensive" and 62% supported measures to limit profits.

After the December elections, Maduro defined three strategies. First, he indicated his willingness to meet with opposition leaders and businesspeople to find ways to reduce tension and solve specific problems. Second, he announced stringent measures against speculators, hoarders, and contrabandists.

Finally, the president sought to "rationalise" government controls to narrow the disparity between regulated prices and the market value of goods and services. All three approaches generated controversy in and out of the Chavista movement, and would not have been politically feasible had the Chavistas fared poorly in the December elections.

All three strategies were accompanied by specific actions. Just 10 days after the December elections, Maduro met with nearly all recently elected opposition governors and mayors to listen to their grievances and suggestions on specific local problems including personal security, housing construction, and health.

In January, Maduro signed the Law for the Control of Fair Costs, Prices, and Profits, which establishes jail sentences of up to 14 years for those involved in trading contraband, 12 years for those found hoarding, and eight-to-10 years for merchants who sell above regulated prices.

The law also establishes a federal office to monitor prices and says that profits must not exceed about 30% of investment.

Finally, in a bid to put the economy in order, Maduro dramatically devalued the bolivar from 6.3 to 11.3 to the dollar for imports of non-essential goods.

To infuse flexibility into the economy, Maduro left open the possibility that the exchange rate could fluctuate on a regular basis, as could regulated prices

for basic commodities. Oil and energy minister Rafael Ramirez floated the idea of raising gasoline prices, the cheapest in the world, to cover production costs.

Radical fears

In some respects, government discourse and actions have differed, albeit in degree, from the positions assumed by Chavez. Most importantly, ever since the early years of his rule, Chavez refused to negotiate with representatives of the political and economic elite in order to achieve national reconciliation.

Indeed, Chavez's point of honour was that he would not take part in the old wheeling and dealing that had guided Venezuelan party politics since the ouster of dictator Marcos Perez Jimenez in 1958, and had left the popular sectors on the sidelines.

Radical Chavistas and many in the rank and file of the movement feared that Maduro's overtures to the opposition signalled a softening of government positions and possible concessions to powerful interests.

This viewpoint was most forcefully put forward by former guerrilla Toby Valderrama. He argued that the only alternative to capitulation to economic elites was the expropriation of their companies, particularly those that convert food into a "commodity" by illegally jacking up prices to maximise profit.

While affirming his support for Maduro, Valderrama, in an essay titled "Rectify or Die", questioned the logic of the president's willingness to meet with businesspeople: "At a time when we should have deepened the process of socialism, we asked for help from the capitalists.

"True to form, the oligarchy [the capitalists] ate from our hand and then bit it."

An announcement by several top government officials and then by Maduro himself last year came as a shock to Venezuelans and generated considerable support for Valderrama's call for expro-

International

priations and jailings.

The public was told that, during the previous year, bogus companies had received preferential dollars allegedly to pay for imports of up to US\$20 billion. Maduro placed part of the blame on government functionaries who were in cahoots with commercial interests.

Even though planning minister Jorge Giordani first levelled the charges in March last year, and the public rip-off was confirmed shortly thereafter by the head of the Central Bank, only in December did Maduro name a presidential commission to investigate the case.

Furthermore, while announcing that 1245 companies no longer qualified for preferential dollars due to the falsification of information, the government failed to reveal their names or take them to court. In early March, Vice-President Jorge Arreaza announced the government would shortly publish the names of the spurious companies that received preferential dollars.

It is puzzling that the Maduro government made the accusations if it lacked the willpower to proceed vigorously against powerful economic interests and state bureaucrats. Some Chavistas attributed the inconsistency to Maduro's lack of political acumen or ingenuity.

An alternative explanation is that Maduro lacks Chavez's prestige and power, and thus decided to avert a head-on confrontation with business groups, some with ties to sectors of his own government and movement. Proponents of this explanation feel that Maduro's warnings and some of his actions — such as the confiscation of warehouses that stored goods for contraband — demonstrate that he is not willing to close his eyes to blatant abuses.

Maduro began his presidency with a commitment to combat corruption. Throughout last year, hundreds of government officials and others were jailed on charges of wrongdoing in the public sphere.

High-profile cases included the ex-

governor of Guarico, the ex-head of the state iron company Ferrominera, and the mayor of the country's third-largest city, Valencia.

All three were Chavistas who were not considered dissidents. They were jailed along with various businessmen and aides. The social democratic and social Christian governments that ruled Venezuela for four decades before Chavez came to power never took such concrete actions.

In early February, National Assembly president Diosdado Cabello led a campaign against merchants who made extraordinary profits by illegally exporting essential commodities whose prices were kept artificially low by the government to facilitate popular consumption.

Cabello presided over the confiscation of contraband in states bordering on Colombia. He insisted that the companies that produced and processed the goods appeared to be “accomplices” of the price-gouging merchants and consequently would be investigated.

Holding up a container of cooking oil of the recently expropriated Industrias Diana, Cabello accused state functionaries: “This cannot be pardoned because Diana is a company of the people.”

At the same time Lactea Venezolana, a subsidiary of the Italian dairy corporation Parmalat, received hefty fines for hoarding powdered milk in its Caracas installations.

Long-time leftist political analyst Vladimir Acosta hailed the government's February counteroffensive as “positive news”, particularly because the business-induced scarcity was designed to “bleed Venezuela to death”.

Acosta, however, went on to refer to the government's announcement that 32 companies had been held responsible for many abandoned containers in a Venezuelan port, “but not one word was said about who the businesspeople were, what measures if any were taken against them and where the merchandise was found”.

In short, the government has waged a counter-offensive against the “economic war” of powerful interests. The radical critique, while undoubtedly failing to give the Maduro presidency sufficient credit for facing up to corrupt functionaries and what it calls the “parasitic bourgeoisie”, points to shortcomings in the government's campaign.

That is, the effort has not been ongoing; names of those involved in illegal and corrupt dealings have not always been revealed; local government and community groups have not played a central role in choosing targets; and the government has often failed to follow up on its threats of judicial proceedings.



President Nicolas Maduro speaks at a large counter-rally

Negotiating with the enemy

Similarly, the government's strategy of an opening towards business and political adversaries has been met with

mixed reactions on the left and in the labour movement. Worker leaders of the radical UNETE faction and, to a lesser extent, the more moderate Bolivarian Socialist Workers Central, expressed apprehension.

UNETE national coordinator Servando Carbone told me he feared that negotiations could be a prelude to the abandonment of key labour gains, especially the provision of 2012's Labour Law of 2012 that decrees outsourcing would be banned three years after its passing.

The government, to its credit, has incorporated large numbers of contractor-firm workers into the payrolls of state industrial companies, but it continues to

store for the ban on the vile practice of outsourcing."

Some grassroots radicals also reject conciliation with opposition political leaders. However, the government's discourse in favour of dialogue appeared as a logical and effective response to opposition-promoted violence and aggressiveness.

The meeting between Maduro and opposition governors and mayors in December, for instance, was an implicit recognition of the president's legitimacy by leaders who had refused to accept the results of the presidential elections in April last year.

Various opposition politicians, including

Peace Conference" organised by Maduro in late February. Their call for an end to political violence represented a blow to the opposition alliance, the Roundtable for Democratic Unity (MUD), which boycotted the meeting.

Maduro's decision to negotiate with anti-Chavista political leaders was premised on the existence of a rift within the MUD. According to this view, what the Chavistas call the "fascist" faction, which organised the demonstrations calling for Maduro's removal in February, is pitted against a "democratic" one, which focuses on specific issues rather than regime change.

Former vice president and long-time leftist Jose Vicente Rangel has advocated this differentiation strategy for years. In February, on his weekly talk show *Jose Vicente Hoy*, Rangel said support for dialogue is producing "a pressure cooker effect on the MUD; the alliance's days are numbered".

Nevertheless, the protests that rocked Venezuela in February have another reading. According to Cabello, MUD leader Henrique Capriles and others are playing the role of "good cop" and are working hand in glove with the "bad cops" — the so-called fascists.

Even peaceful protests that were applauded by the entire opposition involved daily disruption of traffic designed to paralyse urban transport. Also, Capriles, in his role as Miranda governor, along with other opposition governors and mayors, refrained from containing the violence in their areas.

Also, the opposition as a whole, and not just the radical fringe, refused to recognise Maduro's legitimacy after he was elected, as was the case for much of Chavez's rule. Chavista leaders vacillated between appeals to the democratic commitment of "responsible" opposition leaders and condemnation of the conspiratorial plans of the entire opposition.



hire employees in the public administration on a contractual basis.

Carbone insisted: "Implicit in all negotiations is the willingness to grant concessions; this is what may be in

the executive secretary of the Movement toward Socialism (MAS) along with the top business group Fedecamaras, which led the coup against Chavez in 2002, took part in the "National

International

Internal tensions

Another relative change since the Chavez years is the tension between the Chavista leaders and radicals, the latter expressing the concerns of the movement's rank and file. Maduro railed against radical Valderrama, even though he is a minor figure in the Chavista movement, calling his writing "stupidity".

Furthermore, while under the Chavez presidency there were always several Chavistas in leading positions with whom the radicals could identify Fernando Soto Rojas (former National Assembly president) and Eduardo Saman (former head of the consumer protection agency), for example but this has been less the case under Maduro, particularly with Saman's exit in January. Finally, several critical Chavistas with talk shows on the main state TV channel and radio station encountered problems and now broadcast their programs on the independent Chavista *aporrea.org* web page and elsewhere.

More troublesome for the radicals is the top-down nature of the governing United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV). All seven of the PSUV's vice-presidents representing different regions are governors or members of Maduro's cabinet.

Furthermore, in 2012 the party discarded the system of primaries that the Chavistas had employed in the past. The PSUV's congress to be held in late July, unlike the previous one in 2009 when delegates were chosen in internal elections, will consist of 361 delegates who are governors, mayors, and national deputies, and a slightly larger number chosen by "consensus".

At the heart of the division within the Chavista movement are the ties between the government and business groups dating back to the two-month general strike that almost toppled the government in 2002-2003.

With the aim of breaking the strike, the government enlisted the support

of businesspeople, some of whom were self-serving anti-Chavistas, others who believed that the strike was professionally unethical, and others who to varying degrees supported Chavismo.

Subsequently, the Chavista leadership rejected the thesis that the government should maintain the entire private sector at arm's length. Instead, the Chavistas in power opted for a favorable treatment in the granting of public works projects and the like to those who had collaborated with the government during the general strike.

Regardless of their motivation, these businesspeople were considered more reliable than the established business group Fedecamaras, which led several attempts to overthrow Chavez.

While a special relationship with certain businesspeople was useful from a pragmatic viewpoint, it generated corruption. The scandal of the 20 billion preferential dollars, more than any other development, exposed the strategy's pitfalls.

Maduro himself recognised the extent of the problem when he promised to investigate the possible existence of a "Bolibourgeoisie" a term previously used mainly by the opposition to refer to businesspeople who had entered the ranks of the capitalist class as a result of their connections with the Chavista Bolivarian government.

The Chavista radicals are convinced that businesspeople such as Wilmer Ruperi, who made the biggest killing of all during the general strike and went on to purchase a TV channel would be the first to go over to the enemy camp should the opposition be on the verge of returning to power.

In an interview, a Venezuelan Communist Party (PCV) leader Perfecto Abreu contrasted his own party with the PSUV, with its multi-party makeup. "The PSUV takes in businesspeople who are organised as such within the Chavista movement and reap benefits," he said.

As an example, Abreu pointed to the

business group *Fedeindustria*, headed by the politically ambitious Chavista Miguel Angel Perez Abad.

Socialists in capitalism

In short, while the Venezuelan economic system continues to be capitalist, leaders committed to socialism hold power within the state. The case of the 20 billion preferential dollars shows the close ties between the capitalist structure and the socialist government.

Socialist transformation in Venezuela will be a long and difficult process, and an understanding of the complexity of this process is necessary to avoid disillusionment which the radical critique of the government runs the risk of encouraging among those who opt for a peaceful road to socialist and democratic change.

All this points to the overriding importance of truly democratic political parties and social movements, which, unlike the state, are independent of the capitalist base.

Precisely for this reason, the final outcome of the process of transformation in Venezuela will be determined not so much by those on top, but rather by the rank and file of the PSUV, allied parties and social movements in a variety of venues including, to a great extent, the streets.

This dynamic was made evident during the violence-ridden month of February. The Chavista mobilisations, along with the perception at the grassroots level of a continuous process of change, were more important in facing the subversive threat than government-opposition conversations, which included some political leaders with no intention of abandoning their regime-change tactics.

[This piece originally appeared at <http://nacla.org/> -- North American Congress on Latin America.]

China: Exploitation and resistance

By Ian Anderson and Wenchan Cao
(Fightback).

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is the largest political party in the world with a membership of 82.6 million. The CCP claims to run a system of “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” In fact, it’s closer to a system of “capitalism with Chinese characteristics.”

Although China is “developing,” this is development marked by increasing inequality. Private companies and their cronies have joined with international capitalists in exploiting the Chinese working class.

Hong Kong Marxist Au Loong Yu characterizes China as “bureaucratic capitalist.” In the last 30 years, collective state-owned enterprises were converted by the bureaucracy into profit-generating businesses, although in practice there is little-to-no line between party bureaucrats and the capitalist class. One third of the millionaires in China are members of the communist party, and many more have family ties. Bureaucrats profited from turning China into a “sweatshop for the world.”

Although Mao’s era was harshly repressive in some respects, public management did have some benefits in terms of economic security. This security has been forcibly stripped away, in line with international attacks. State sector workers have come under attack, and many former peasants have become rural migrant workers.

This has not been a completely peaceful transition. Famously, the bureaucracy violently crushed student resistance in the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre. Less famously, workers played a key role in this struggle.

The Beijing Workers’ Autonomous Federation, a rare case in contemporary Chinese history of an independent workers’ organization, supported the

student movement. The BWAFF was politically diverse, with socialist currents and currents that later came to support capitalism. However, they were unified in opposing bureaucratic privilege, economic attacks, and in calling for greater democracy.

The BWAFF threatened a general strike. On June 4th, the CCP sent tanks into Tiananmen Square, crushing political resistance for at-least a generation. Workers were ultimately punished more harshly; while student leaders were imprisoned, workers were executed.

Au Loong Yu argues this was the last organized, independent, political opposition by workers within China. However other struggles have broken out, isolated but growing.

In the early part of the 21st century, thousands of workers resisted the privatization of state-owned enterprises. More recently, in 2010 tens of thousands of workers at manufacturing plants (including electronics manufacturer Foxconn, and manufacturers for Honda and Toyota) went on strike, winning wage rises.

Official unions in China are part of the state bureaucracy. To carry out militant struggles, workers must either temporarily take over their union at a branch level, or form their own independent short-term organizations. This is not just an economic challenge, but a political and social challenge; a demand for free association.

Bureaucratic capitalism is a system of both economic and social control. Au Loong Yu argues that

the CCP can always make episodic economic concessions from time to time, but it never allows political concessions, even if it is as basic as the right to demonstrate.

Growing up in China, I (Chao) personally experienced this social control. The material in the education system is

highly limited. The “Marxism” taught in schools, in contrast to the questioning and critical spirit of Marxism, teaches students never to question the party.

As in many Western schools, school uniforms also enforce social repression. One ridiculous rule from my previous high school was that students were not permitted to show their legs, regardless of how high the temperature was.

Sexuality that differs from the heterosexual “norm” is frowned upon. As a young queer woman, I could not publicly disclose my sexuality without fear of legal consequences.

Any individual challenging this repression could be arrested anytime. And the CCP would claim that they are doing the right thing and helping the Chinese people to have the “right mind” and be “mentally healthy.”

However, collective resistance is growing. The current ongoing strike of 30,000 workers, at the world’s largest shoe-producing factory, is an inspiring example. Strikes disrupt the production necessary both to Chinese bureaucratic capitalism, and global capitalism. They show the power both of free association, and collective action.

There is not yet an organized, sustained and independent political opposition in China. Solidarity – between workers and students, between workers at different plants, across the globe – can build on these existing outbreaks to forge a political opposition. Only organized, popular democratic struggle can pave the way for real socialism.

Capitalism: Not Our Future

A conference on struggle, solidarity and socialism.

Queen's Birthday Weekend (30th May-1st June) | 19 Tory St, Wellington | Koha entry

Friday 30th of May

5:30-7 pm – Elections and community struggle (featuring Hone Harawira)

2014 is a General Election year for Aotearoa/NZ. The last general election saw the lowest turnout since women won the right to vote. This year, Fightback will be supporting the MANA Movement, whose stated mission is to bring rangatiratanga to the poor, the powerless and the dispossessed. Are elections relevant? Do they change anything? Why do we participate in electoral work?

A discussion featuring:

Hone Harawira, MANA Movement.

Sue Bolton, socialist councillor for Moreland (Australia).

Heleyni Pratley, Fightback (Aotearoa/NZ).

Saturday 31st of May

10-11am – What is Capitalism? What is Socialism?

11-12pm – Marxist economics: Crisis theory

Mike Treen, UNITE Union General Secretary

12-1pm – Lunch

1-2:30pm – Tino rangatiratanga

Annette Sykes, MANA Movement.

Grant Brookes, Fightback

2:30-3pm – Break

3-4:30pm – Ecosocialism

Bronwen Beechey, Fightback

4:30-5pm – Break

5-6:30pm – International situation: Crisis, imperialism, fightback

In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, and the 2011 outbreak of global resistance, what are the prospects and challenges for international social movements?

A discussion featuring:

Sue Bolton, Socialist Alliance (Australia).

Gayaal Iddamalgoda, International Socialist Organisation (Aotearoa/NZ).

Jared Phillips, Fightback (Aotearoa/NZ).

6:30 - Dinner





Sunday 1st of June

11-12 – Education and capitalism

12-1 – Lunch

1:-2:30pm – Workers from the margins: Key issues in contemporary workers' struggles

Heleyni Pratley (Fightback & UNITE Union), report on US fast food struggles.

Jared Phillips (Fightback), casualisation and fightback.

Grant Brookes (Fightback), unions in defence of public services.

Wei Sun (Fightback), migration and open borders for workers.

2:30-3pm – Break

3-4:30pm – Gender and women's liberation

Kassie Hartendorp (Fightback), socialist-feminism 101.

Daphne Lawless (Fightback), gender diversity and capitalism

Teresa Teaiwa (poet and lecturer), gender and decolonisation.

Are Marxism and feminism an “unhappy marriage”, and can they complement each other? What does socialist-feminism mean for those who don't fit in the gender binary, or to those from non-Western cultures? How can revolutionaries move to a liberatory politics of gender?

4:30-5pm – Break

5-6:30pm – Anti-capitalist organising in Australia & Aotearoa/NZ

Sue Bolton, Socialist Alliance (Australia).

Gayaal Iddamalgoda, International Socialist Organisation (Aotearoa/NZ).

Joel Cosgrove, Fightback (Aotearoa/NZ).

6:30-7pm – Closing and thanks

Fightback PRESENTS

CAPITALISM: NOT OUR FUTURE

A CONFERENCE ON STRUGGLE, SOLIDARITY AND SOCIALISM



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