

Christmas Island workers revolt 5

New Zealand Alliance— popular front 6

Workers' Power Aotearoa! New Zealand & the League for a Revolutionary Communist International
7Kampucheari migrants and the I.S.O 8

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One million unemployed

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PART FROM THE OLYMPICS, the word on everyone's lips is...unemployment. Earlier this year the official figure of those recognised as unemployed was ten percent. Now, there

are at least eleven percent. And a recent survey put out by the ANZ bank suggests that the number will go even higher! Of course the government has every cause to be worried. After all this extremely high figure exposes the whole bankruptcy of their "strategy". But the opposition has no real answers either. No one who supports this system pretends that the problem will go away. The only difference in policies is the level of acceptable unemployment and to what degree wages should be driven down. Unemployment should be opposed outright. A job with a living wage should be a right. Under this system of capitalist exploitation the only guarantee of even a minimal existence is to have a job. And if the system cannot give people this basic right then it should be overthrown.

Unemployment is, of course, of serious consequence to us in the working class movement. For the unemployed it means austerity and misery. It is a struggle to survive the fortnight until the next cheque arrives without being hungry and/or broke by the end of it.

Often the desperate choice is whether to pay the bills for rent, gas and electricity or go hungry. Being unemployed seriously affect ones health and social life. The unemployed face the highest rate of heart disease and the highest rate of suicide. Being unemployed means alienation from the social life many had formerly through their work place. It means being unable to afford the clothes or door admission to a dance or disco. The strain of poverty breaks up marriages and relationships. Often frustration is taken out, not against the bosses and their system, but against other working class and unemployed people. Crimes such as assault and rape increase as unemployed youth, out of desperation, attack the wrong enemy. The dole is way below the poverty line but it is not a right. Just last year the government replaced the unemployment benefit with a Jobsearch allowance for those who have just lost their jobs and Newstart for long-term unemployed. This serious attack on the Social Security system paves the way for the Liberals to abolish the dole to long term unemployed or even outright. For those on Newstart the dole is now subject to agreement. The content of the agreements varies. Often it involves forcing the unemployed to do useless courses to learn to jobs that are simply not there. These sometimes involve some work for the dole, called work experience, where the bosses get the unemployed person's labour for nothing!

Unemployment is also of direct concern to those who remain employed. Unemployment is used as a knife at the throat of the working class. What the bosses say is: if you don't accept our extremely low wages and sacrifice your hard-fought-for working conditions, then it's out the door. After all

there are plenty more workers out there. And so the gains of the union movement go out the window. Either with the co-operation of the unions or with scab labour. Traditionally, the unemployed have been used as scab labour against the unionised work force. All this makes it vital that the working class develop a strategy to fight it. It has been more than twenty years since the number of unemployed was over one hundred thousand. That such a serious situation was not only allowed to remain, but indeed, intensify, thoroughly damns the reformist and Stalinist leaderships of the working class.

Unemployment is caused by the periodic crises of capitalism. Capitalists employ workers only when there is profit to be made. When profits fall, workers are laid off. Whilst under capitalism it is the productive sector which is dominant, not all workers are employed in work which is immediately profitable to capitalists. Those employed by the state are more vulnerable to being laid off. The crisis hits the least profitable (from the point of view of capitalists) first.

Capitalism usually has a reserve army of labour. This is useful in disciplining the employed workforce keeping them disciplined. The low rate of unemployment in Australia during the fifties and sixties when a figure of three percent was considered a disaster, almost bringing down Menzies were indeed exceptional. Australia, historically, has mainly had an economy based on rural industries and mining "Australia rides on the sheep's back". It was only after the Second World War that manufacturing developed as a significant sector. This manufacturing developed in a state of weakness. It was over protected, underequipped and had a small local market. It was developed under the umbrella of tariff protection. During the fifties and sixties capitalism experienced a long boom. This is well and truly over. Capitalism is reverting to its normal state of perpetual crisis with the Australian economy is reverting back. The structural change due to the collapse of manufacturing industry will not develop significantly again under capitalism.

It is both useless and counter-productive to advocate protection as a means of defending jobs. It is precisely the most protected sectors that are the most vulnerable. As well, there is no guarantee that the protection will be used to provide jobs. But also defending "Australian" manufacturing divides us from our class comrades in Asia. Capitalism is international so the fight for jobs must be international. The way to stop the multi-nationals playing off Australian and Asian and Pacific workers is not to defend Australia's privileged position but to fight for the interests of both Asian and Australian workers in Australia. This way workers cannot be played off along national lines. We must oppose tariff protection, "BUY AUSTRALIA" "KEEP INDUSTRY IN AUSTRALIA", immigration controls and all campaigns which divert us from fighting the real enemy — the capitalist system.

To fight unemployment you need a revolutionary programme. Factories and plants must be occupied and taken over under workers' control. Workers and unemployed must be united under the banner of a sliding scale of hours and wages. This means that the working week must be continually reduced until everyone is employed with wage rises which match the cost of living. Short time work has been a growing trend. The bosses are using this to undermine the working class. They use it to attack trade union awards and employ people on low rates of pay. We need a shorter working week on our terms. This means with wage rises. If this is pursued consistently then the balance of forces will be on our side not the bosses. Obviously, the bosses will resist. That is why they and their system must be fought.

The bosses and their political parties — Liberal and Labor — consider wage levels too high and industry too “regulated”. Deregulation means the bosses want unfettered right to maximise profit without any obstruction in the form of hard fought for working conditions such as not having to work in the rain and receiving holiday pay.

The Liberals have held a summit with much pomp and razzamatazz. The upshot of this was the announcement of a policy allowing youth wages to be reduced even further below their dismally low level. This will give the employers incentive to employ youth short term and sack them when they get too old, only to employ more young people destined for the scrap heap. The Labor Party has feigned horror at this blatant super exploitation. “FOR SALE AUSTRALIA’S YOUTH” says a Young Labor poster. But what does the Keating government offer—very much the same

Christmas Island workers revolt

CHRISTMAS ISLAND IS in the Indian Ocean, much closer to Indonesia than to Australia. It is what’s euphemistically known as an Australian “territory”, which means it’s a colony. The population is mainly of Malay decent. Its main industry is phosphate mining. The main employer is the British Phosphate Commission. Australian workers get paid the same rate as they would in Australia. The local Christmas Islanders get somewhat less. In 1969 that rate was the same as the Australian dole! Yet the cost of living, including the price of land, was even higher than on the Australian mainland. As well as this, the amenities were atrocious! There was no hot water, refrigeration or decent cooking facilities.

So in June 1979 the workers too up militant trade union struggle, including hunger striking, against this super-exploitation. Led by their union, the Christmas Island Union of Workers, their struggle was partially successful, winning a significant wage rise. They were still paid well below the Australian workers. The British Phosphate Commission still makes millions out of their sweated labour.

Just recently there has been more militant action coming from the working class people there. This time the target was not their British bosses but the Australian colonial administration. Australia is a colony. But it is also mini-imperialist. In exchange for domination the British, US and Japanese have given Australia a small sphere of influence in Asia and the Pacific. Australia has a few colonies, most of which are formerly independent, even though Australian multinationals such as CSR, Burns Philp, R.W. Carpenter, Westpac, BHP and others still enjoy the fruits of their investment in places such as the Solomons, Fiji, Nuigini, Vanuatu and New Zealand. Only Norfolk Island, Christmas Island and Cocos Island are still recognised as “territories”.

The Adelaide Advertiser reported on July 1 that “the island was in a state of tension last night after residents blockaded the administration offices and cut off power and water to the building. They also passed a vote of no confidence in the islands administrator, Mr Michael Grimes and demanded a form of self government. At one stage, the island’s three policemen prevented two islanders lowering the Australian flag and replacing it with a sheet bearing the words Christmas Island Independence flag. The islands predominantly Chinese population is angry over a range of issues including alleged discrimination in housing and confusion over the introduction of WA laws into the territory on July 1 ... During the protest several hundred people blockaded the administration’s car park with motor cars and set off fire crackers and sky rockets outside the building. Later they set up a camp in a grassed area and vowed to stay there until their demands are met. The protesters,

mainly members of the Christmas Island Union of Workers, faxed a petition to the Minister of Territories Mrs Fatin, expressing no confidence in Mr. Grimes and calling for him to be replaced by an island management committee. Mrs Fatin sent a reply expressing her full support for Mr Grimes, but when Mr Grimes distributed copies he was jeered by the islanders who tore up his papers. The general secretary of the union, Ms Lilian Oh told the meeting that workers on the island had for decades suffered inferior living standards and inferior rates of pay. "We have been denied basic human rights and have no say in how we are governed, she said, the territory continues to be run as a colonial outpost... Late last night [July 30] Mr Grimes was virtually a hostage in his office." The Advertiser also reported the strong possibility of Federal Police reinforcements to assist their besieged administrator.

Communist Tendency salutes the militancy of the Christmas Islanders. Their demands for increased wages and national rights are fully justified. In fact they are fully justified in taking over the phosphate mine and the administration and running the island themselves. Of course whilst they remain isolated to one island their task is difficult. However it is our job the working class in Australia to fight in solidarity with the Christmas Islanders and overcome the isolation. Strikes and solidarity actions now! Pickets must be organised against the Western Australian and Australian Governments and the British Phosphate Commission. It is an outrage that this imperialism has been allowed to continue without consistent opposition from Australia.

The Australian working class have an interest in standing up for the Christmas Island working class. As long as workers accept the Australian state when it dominates colonies such as Christmas Island, facilitating the super-exploitation of the workers there, then we cannot fight the Australian state when it attacks us! International solidarity is, indeed, a matter of urgency.

New Zealand Alliance popular front

IF THERE IS ANYTHING we agree with the Democratic Socialist party on, it's that the Australian Left has, on the whole, totally ignored and refused to learn from experiences in New Zealand. New Zealand has a much smaller working class. It is much poorer with a smaller mini-imperialist domain. The working class there is much less a labour aristocracy and more likely to be revolutionary. They gain less from and identify less with imperialism. The Democratic Socialist Party is now looking there because its current model for an alternative party to Labor is the New Labour Party. A couple of years ago, we were greeted by a visit from Jim Anderton, NLP M.P. for Sydenham, a Christchurch suburb. Just recently, courtesy of the DSP, we were able to experience their national president, Matt McCarten. He is a man bubbling with confidence. The latest opinion polls give the NLP 28% support from the New Zealand electorate. As Joan Kirner is telling Victorians, life in New Zealand under the Nationals is horrific. Social services have been slashed to ribbons. There is massive unemployment. The Employment Contracts Bill makes illegal effective trade unionism. According to John Laws, New Zealand has recently turned the corner but there is little, if any, benefit to the ordinary working person.

The policies of Bolger and Finance Minister Ruth Richardson are merely the continuation of what was begun by Labour under their finance minister, Roger Douglas. This became known as "Rogernomics". Douglas is honored by the New Zealand ruling class for changing the mould of New Zealand politics. No longer will New Zealand be known for having a welfare state and a strong government-owned sector of the economy. Roger Douglas introduced user pays for health and social

services and sold off government enterprises such as Air New Zealand and the Bank of New Zealand. Working people there are very well aware of this. “There’s no alternative”, is a popular New Zealand saying about the electoral options available.

For revolutionaries, it’s no surprise that the public sector and the welfare state have collapsed. This is the logic of the collapse of the long boom and the economic crisis of capitalism. Whilst the bourgeoisie offensive must be fought all the way, we do not pretend that capitalism offers anything else but austerity, especially in semi-colonial New Zealand. Capitalism is a system based on profit. Keeping ordinary people healthy is, on the whole, not a profit-making venture. So when the system is in crisis, public health is dispensed with. Of course, under some circumstances, with the threat of revolution, the ruling class may concede a public health system to save their skin. However it is not in the economic interest of the system to maintain it. Revolutionaries’ task is to show it’s only through working class power — a revolutionary workers’ and small farmers’ government — that a decent health service can be guaranteed. This is not the lesson offered by the New Labour Party.

Matt McCarten has, to his credit, clarity and succinctness. After hearing him speak, no one could be unclear about where the NLP stands. The New Labour Party is leading a classical popular front called the Alliance. With the NLP and the Maori nationalist Mana Matuhaki, there’s the petty bourgeois reactionary Greens and the bourgeois Liberal and Democratic Parties. In other words Matt McCarten and the NLP fully support the subordination of the New Zealand working class to the national bourgeoisie. He assures us that every candidate who supports the Alliance is committed to the commonly agreed to list of demands. These demands include a defence of trade unionism. But if one has a programme acceptable to the bourgeois, which ignores the fundamental question of overthrowing capitalism, then you are their prisoner. If one wishes to hold office through a bourgeois government then capitalism’s rules must be obeyed or one will be ruthlessly dispensed with by the repressive state apparatus. This is what happened in Australia when Sir John Kerr sacked Gough Whitlam and in Chile when the military coup led by General Pinochet drowned in blood the democratically popular front led by Salvador Allende. It is this type of disaster that the NLP-led Alliance is leading the working class to in New Zealand — if they are not fought by a revolutionary communist leadership.

In the meantime Alliance policies have also had a devastating effect on class struggle. Matt McCarten reinforced what Jim Anderton informed us: the NLP/Alliance, whilst they rejected the Aussie Accord, believed that an incomes policy could be in the interests of working people. No, it couldn’t! The ruling class will not permit a government to carry out such a policy. What the NLP will do is encourage workers to give up struggle so as to elect an Alliance government. They will be persuaded not to rock the boat. The NLP are blinding workers so they will remain within the system and not see that it is only through a revolutionary programme that their basic needs can be satisfied. Their calls for protectionism are reactionary. These demands mean propping up New Zealand capitalism instead of the united international struggle needed to fight for the right to work internationally. Giving the bosses money will not solve the economic crisis.

The NLP will have a devastating counter-revolutionary effect on class struggle in New Zealand and this concerns us here. A successful revolution will have a flow on which will give massive impetus for class struggle in this country. A counterrevolution will massively demobilise class struggle here. However, as well, the Democratic Socialist Party are attempting to use the “example” of the NLP as

their model for their “alternative party to Labor”. This will mean a reformist alternative. In Australia and New Zealand millions of workers are disillusioned with Labour. It is up to us revolutionaries to show that Labour, in both New Zealand and Australia betrayed because of its reformist framework. The NLP are trying to oppose Labour with an alternative reformist framework. It is reinforcing the system. This is why alternatives, similar to the NLP, such as Phil Cleary, independent member for Wills, must be ruthlessly exposed by revolutionaries.

Workers’ Power Aotearoa/ New Zealand and the League for a Revolutionary Communist International.

COMMUNIST TENDENCY has previously recognised the organisation known as Communist Left of New Zealand as fighting for the Communist Left Programme for New Zealand. In August 1991 in Red 15 CTA made a public statement that we could no longer recognise that group as such as it a joint statement with the international Tendency known as League for a Revolutionary Communist International (LRCI). CLNZ then changed its name to Workers’ Power Aotearoa New Zealand. Workers’ Power is the name of the British section of LRCI and it is the dominant section within the international tendency. As was stated in Red 15, CTA considers that there are fundamental lines of principle between LRCI and the Communist Left programme and therefore we oppose any international affiliation. In the recent edition of the WPANZ publication Workers’ Power it was announced that WPANZ has joined LRCI. Further comment is warranted.

The joint statement between LRCI and CLNZ recognised differences. What happened to these? Have they been resolved? Or don’t they matter or what? Not to comment on, for example, different characterisations of the New Zealand Labour Party is the hallmark of opportunism. An international tendency should be based on international principle. Even more serious are the political criticisms that CTA has made of LRCI which remain uncomforted.

LRCI does not recognise dialectical materialism as the means of fighting revisionism. For Marxists hardened revisionism is not merely a question of the wrong demands but of a material interest at the expense of the working class. The struggle against revisionism is a struggle for Marxism is a struggle for the proletariat. The LRCI formulation “programme first” resembles Schactman’s “concrete political question”. It is a sure recipe for degeneration.

Even by their own criterion, “programme first”, the LRCI fail. In virtually every election in Britain they have an “action programme” placing “concrete demands” on Labour which are totally separate from the struggle for the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism.

LRCI formal opposition to chauvinism is of no consequence when intervening in the working class or the Labour Party. Workers’ Power is full of formulations such as “only the rank and file organised as the rank and file can defeat the NUM”. This is fundamentally untrue. Only the rank and file organised as communists can defeat the NUM. Tony Benn is attacked on the basis of his refusal to organise the rank and file or support trade union struggle not because of his British chauvinism which should be the fundamental question. Consistently the question of chauvinism is relegated to being a secondary question — to the extent that it is mentioned at all!

The Workers’ Power school of intervention is: build minimalist caucuses called “rank and file” with programmes including militant trade union struggle, rank and file control of that struggle, opposition

to the bureaucrats, extension of that struggle up and to a general strike which poses the question of power. This separates the general strike from the question of power. As Trotsky pointed out a general strike “poses the question of power” but it doesn’t resolve it. Workers’ Power does not confront the question of how to resolve it and therefore their general strike will either lead nowhere or be smashed. The latest issue of Workers’ Power New Zealand calls for a general strike for a general election. Here we have them demanding strike action which poses the need for revolution — to be resolved by a different administration of bourgeois rule! For Trotsky errors on the general strike were impermissible. If Workers’ Power want the working class to fight politically they must organise on the political level. This they do not do.

These differences encompass principles which are fundamental to Marxism. They have been raised both in RED 18, in discussion and in correspondence.

These errors are not just one off mistakes but are consistently made by Workers’ Power and are consistent with its economist and opportunist method. WPANZ and LRCI are once again challenged to reply.

the defence of Kampuchean migrants and the International Socialists Organisation

As we pointed out in RED 18, there was a lot of media attention given to some Kampuchean refugees who were understandably fearful about returning. RED defended their right to stay here unconditionally. As we also pointed out, the main tendency to build demonstrations in opposition was the International Socialist Organisation. They deserve credit for building some opposition. Those who did nothing deserve strong criticism. The DSP, for example, did not support the campaign on the grounds that the refugees may be safe in Kampuchea. Their right to come here must be defended. This war against migrants is not confined to Australia, but is world-wide.

ISO built an alliance between themselves and Kampuchean community organisations. These organisations are totally respectable and wanted to “defend the refugees by persuading Gerry Hand of their danger if they were to return to Kampuchea. The ISO argued for high profile demos and several were organised with a bit of media publicity. The ISO also at their own public meeting made it clear that they unconditionally opposed immigration controls and gave some excellent analysis on recent attacks on immigrants in Australia and how totally unfair the totally unfair the Hawke governments criteria for immigration has been. However at the demos this came over secondary. What the ISO effectively did was cash in on the mass sentiments of understandable concern for the refugees plight.

For revolutionaries all immigrants must be defended unconditionally irrespective of whether they are here because of justified fear or alternatively whether their fear is not warranted or alternatively, they just want to live in the country because they like it. To make an issue of whether the Kampucheans were legitimate refugees or not, is divisive. It creates a division between the migrants who apparently should be here for reasons of safety and others who according to the wisdom of public opinion don’t qualify. For revolutionaries the defence of the Kampucheans should be directly linked to a working class movement to oppose all immigration controls.

ISO didn’t try to seriously mobilise the working class. This is because they write off the working class due to their analysis of the “downturn”. Because class struggle is at a relatively low level they

concentrate on students. Working class organisations did not support the campaign as most of them are tainted with chauvinism. The ISO did nothing to change this situation. They made no serious attempt to lobby unionists at the leadership or at the rank and file level. The ISO supported demos were dependant on the Kampuchean community organisations. When these withdrew support due to their being bogged down with their lobbying the minister, the campaign ended. And so ISO go onto another high profile campaign such student fees or AIDEX. The tragedy is that so-called "illegal" immigrants will remain isolated from the organised working class and the ISO campaign did nothing to change the situation.

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