

# The SPARK

For workers' power and international socialism

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The Spark

July 2011

# NO YOUTH RATES

Pay Equity 4  
All Workers  
Women + Youth

SAME WORK  
PAY

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## Editorial

### Jared Phillips

Last month the question of equality was blown open publicly and in quite profound way by three events. The most prominent of these was of course the righteous controversy which resulted from Alisdair Thompson - CEO of the Employers and Manufacturers Association, the mouthpiece of a large section of the capitalist class - justifying the gendered wage gap on the basis of women's menstruation. Away from the PR and spin-doctoring of the employers and government, who may present themselves as 'centrist', this really underlined the deeply reactionary essence of capitalism as it exists right now. We also had in

Wellington a large demonstration of queer and transgender people demanding the right to not be bashed in the

streets, which has prompted some tentative calls for a new GLBT liberation movement. This has included a large demonstration and organising meetings of up to 85 people. Thirdly, we saw the government indicate a possible reintroduction of youth rates, which was promptly opposed by a protest response within one week. We've been involved in the thick of the opposition against inequality and we aim to put *The Spark* and anti-capitalist ideology into the hands of others involved. Note: As of July 4, this issue will carry a comprehensive insert which overviews the Mana Party by-election victory and the subsequent foundation hui.

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*The Spark* 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 'Workers Party, PO Box 10-282, Dominion Road, Auckland' as well as what you would like to leave to us.



# Alasdair Thomson and the Anti-Workers laws

Mike Kay, Workers Party, Auckland

The comments made by the head of the Employers and Manufacturers Association that pay discrimination against women was justified because they may take sick days when they have their period has rightly provoked widespread outrage. It seems hard to believe that Alisdair Thomson thought he could get away with spouting such crap. But the fact is that he has the arrogance born of someone who has been getting his own way for years. His comments have to be seen against the sustained attack on the working class for a generation. Even under the so-called “worker-friendly” Labour led government of Helen Clark, inequality spiralled and union membership stagnated.

Over its term of office, the National/ACT/Māori Party coalition government has instigated a number of anti-worker laws. The 90 day “sack at will” law was initially brought in for the benefit of businesses employing 20 or fewer staff. That law has now been extended to be available to all employers. Other negative changes for workers include the right of an employer to demand a sick note after a single day’s absence without reason, restrictions on union access to the workplace and the removal of reinstatement as the primary remedy for unfair dismissal. Tau Henare’s privatemember’s bill on Secret Ballots for Strikes is currently before select committee. All these assaults have gone hand in hand with attacks on beneficiary rights, thus squeezing the working class at both ends – both in and out of work.

National’s plans to further restrict workers’ rights are currently being kept under wraps, although John Key warned that unions won’t like the changes. Key has also refused to rule out ACT’s “back to the future” policy of reintroducing Youth Rates for the minimum wage. Youth Rates were all but abolished in New Zealand following a campaign spearheaded by Unite Union that involved militant actions including strikes against pay discrimination.



Alasdair Thomson

Other unions failed to fight as hard as Unite, and that situation barely changed with the Tories coming to power. Some union leaders may have talked a good fight about standing up to the government, but apart from a couple of tokenistic rallies, there has been very little action. For the most part, union

leaders have no answers to the current attacks other than to implore workers to vote Labour.

It’s not surprising that Key and his cronies have been so confident about continuing to ratchet up the exploitation of the working class another notch every few months. The only potential spanner in the works is the formation of Mana. If Mana manages to mobilise a movement of low paid workers and beneficiaries, the government may finally face some serious opposition.

We have seen a few isolated, elementary protest actions recently. For instance, on Budget Day, the Rotorua People’s Union staged a rooftop protest at the offices of the local National Party MP, Tom McClay. What’s currently lacking is a co-ordinating centre for such dissent. Workers Party members will be participating in upcoming hui organised by Mana to help shape a programme that workers and oppressed people need to confront the latest capitalist crisis.



Police presence during the anti-budget protest organised by Rotorua Peoples Union in May

## Legal battle over sleepover shifts demonstrates union role in women's pay equity struggle

**Horizontal labour market segregation on the basis of gender has been well-entrenched in New Zealand's economy, including within the care sector which is majority-comprised of women workers. The following article by Kelly Pope – a member of the Christchurch branch of the Workers Party who works as a mental health support person – demonstrates the continued relevance of the workers' movement and trade unionism in addressing equal pay issues.**

In 2007 the Service and Food Workers' Union (SFWU) and the Public Service Association (PSA) took cases against two major residential service providers in the intellectual disability sector, attempting to gain minimum wage pay for hours spent on sleepover shifts. After a decision by the Employment Relations Authority that considered sleeping over to be work, the issue was appealed to the Employment Court by IHC in May 2009. A support worker who was employed by IHC's IDEA Services, Phil Dickson, was the individual applicant in this case.

Since then, the Employment Court has found the existing payment of sleepover rates to be in breach of the Minimum Wage Act, ruling in favour of Mr Dickson and the union. A subsequent case taken to the Court of Appeal by IHC has resulted in the same outcome. Since this decision on 16th February 2011, the case has been taken further by IHC and will now be considered by the Supreme Court with a decision expected sometime after this year's general election. While this long legal process has been unfolding, the PSA has filed additional legal proceedings against more than thirty health and disability support employers also currently paying below minimum wage sleepover rates, including Barnardos, Hawkes Bay DHB, Spectrum Care and Healthcare NZ.

This week Alisdair Thompson of the Employers and Manufacturers Association asserted that the gendered wage gap is justified because women have periods. This clearly illustrates the role

of the employing class in holding back women's equality and also exposes the class nature of women's oppression.

Though the lawyer for IHC, Kit Toogood QC, argued that the service was not in breach of the Minimum Wage Act because Mr Dickson's pay averaged out to pay the minimum hourly wage, this argument was rejected by the courts. This means that if IDEA Services and IHC are unsuccessful in the appeals process, workers effected by the ruling will receive minimum wage for each hour of a sleepover shift in addition to the \$15 to \$20 per hour paid for day time hours worked.

Andrew Geddis, an expert in constitutional law from Otago University believes it is unlikely that the Supreme Court will reach a different finding to those of the three preceding hearings. If the Supreme Court's decision is consistent with the previous hearings, to comply with the law as it currently exists,

IDEA Services will be required to pay at least minimum wage for each hour worked in a sleepover shift. The finding in the IDEA Services case is significant because it sets a legal precedent for future cases of the same nature. Considering that large numbers of similar cases are now being filed by unions such as the PSA, this could have significant implications for the health and disability sector on the whole, its service providers and their funders.

In a December 2010 publication by the SFWU, IHC chief executive Ralph Jones was quoted criticising the union for not considering the impact legal action would have on the organisation and its staff. Jones estimates that changes made to staff pay could cost \$176m in back pay with wage costs rising up to \$30m a year. Based on the PSA's action against more than thirty organisations, costs associated with the replacement of sleepover rates with the minimum hourly



**IDEA Services support worker Phil Dickson was the original applicant in the 2007 case taken by the SFWU and PSA to the Employment Relations Authority over sleepover shift pay rates.**



wage is expected to cost up to \$500m in back payments. Because the community sector receives almost all of its financial resources from the state, this cost can only be met with increased government funding.

In a publication on the sleepover rates issue, the SFWU notes the continued underfunding of IHC subsidiary companies IDEA Services and Timata Hou by the government as a barrier to securing higher sleepover rates for workers in the past. The limited liability status of IDEA Services means that the company is under statutory management and payouts would have to be covered by the government, not out of service funding.

Service management staff have commented on the government's unwillingness to increase funding, with Philippa Sellens, spokesperson for IHC, saying the organisation wishes to be able to pay workers more but "the money we have to pay our staff is what the government gives us". Unions have also noted that "the reason that IHC has been forced to put its trading companies into statutory management is because the government, as the funder, has sat on its hands and refused to acknowledge that disability support workers have been ripped off for the last 20 years". In response to the estimated additional funding which will be required if the Supreme Court ruling sets a precedent that results in all sleepover staff gaining hourly pay, the government is considering changes to current minimum wage legislation to once again exclude health and disability sector workers from reasonable hourly rates for sleepover work.

Provider organisations have insisted on the necessity of sleepover pay at a lower rate than hourly wages to continue providing de-institutionalised care in the community. Resultantly, support workers and the unions who represent them have been framed as self-interested and willing to compromise the care of their clients. However, what the court cases and following media attention has highlighted is that sleepover work is real work deserving real pay. Articles with titles such as IHC sleepover staff not slumber party attendees (this was the title of an Alliance Party press release published by Stuff) have challenged the



**IHC New Zealand Chief Executive Ralph Jones**

perception that sleepover shifts are good money for a good nights sleep.

In relation to Phil Dickson's role working for IDEA Services the court noted that sleepover staff could not leave the facility without organising cover, have visitors, or engage in any activity which might disturb service users and would need to be available to be woken any time during the night to manage incidents. Employees in the sector whose work is largely made up of sleepover shifts with few daytime hours, primarily women balancing work with caring for their children, can expect to work five sleepover shifts a week with rates which amount to roughly a third of the minimum wage per hour.

In my job as a mental health support worker many people I've talked to who work in the field feel that the current sleepover rates are not adequate recompense for the work that is required. Some staff working in residential units estimate they manage about four hours of broken sleep during a sleepover shift, and when staff who sleep well at work

mention this to their managers they can be told that they do not deserve sleepover work if they cannot sleep lightly and stay alert for the night. The response from providers and the government to sleepover rate challenges suggests this will be a long struggle but one worth following and getting involved in. Up to date information and links to news articles can be found on the Facebook page "New Zealanders who do Sleepovers Discussion and Poll" for those wanting to find out more about the issue. As the PSA has commented, the government has been getting employees in the health and disability field "too cheap" for too long. This is one of the key struggles relevant to pay equity in New Zealand today.

For latest figures on income and employment inequality on the basis of gender, visit <http://workersparty.org.nz/2011/06/22/women-still-coming-off-worse-under-capitalism/>

# The Arab Spring: A new future for North Africa and the Middle East

Josh Glue, Workers Party, Hamilton branch

The following is adapted from the presentation that Josh made as part of a speaking panel on the international situation at the Workers Power 2011 conference.

### Situation

Since the beginning of 2011, protests, uprisings and revolt have rocked the Middle East, from Tunisia to Egypt, from Algeria to Libya, Syria to Bahrain. Working people, as well as students, activists and professionals, have risen to demand democracy, often challenging decades of dictatorial rule from corrupt governments backed by Western imperialism and funded by oil wealth.

Protesting against crippling unemployment, systemic government corruption, rising food prices, and brutal repression, the people have spoken out for control over their lives, in many cases facing harsh state violence for standing

up for their rights.

In Tunisia, the first wave of protests began in December following the death by self-immolation of an out-of-work young university graduate, who set himself on fire outside the government buildings to protest government corruption and constant police harassment. Protests calling for reform were violently put down, with several people shot by police. These crimes only exacerbated tensions, with even larger rallies calling first for justice for the deaths, then for the resignation of the country's long-time dictator Ben Ali. With Ben Ali gone, his ruling party continued to hold power in a caretaker government, holding most key positions, but further protests forced a reshuffle and the eventual dismantling of Ben Ali's party in March.

In Egypt, massive popular demonstrations forced the Mubarak

government to resign, placing state power in the hands of an interim military government. Many feared the new regime would act as the last had, using the State Security Apparatus to crush dissent, often using torture to keep the people afraid of opposing the status quo. In an act of bravery and conscious people's power, a huge protest formed outside the local headquarters of the state security force in Alexandria. The people gathered demanded freedom from repression, investigation of the secret police's crimes, and justice for all those tortured in their dark dungeons. The secret police tried to shred all documents that might incriminate them, but the protesters stormed the building and seized documents and detained so-called police, opening up a real chance for justice for the people of Egypt.

In Syria huge protests have been repeatedly crushed, with hundreds





killed by soldiers so far. In one Syrian city, Dara'a, food has been confiscated and electricity shut off as collective punishment and to weaken the people's power to fight. Chances for change there may depend on the willingness of the masses to make the struggle physical, to actively destroy the state as it stands. The Syrians may also need help from their neighbours in the struggle to win their own freedoms, as some reports suggest Lebanon is supporting protested materially. It remains to be seen what will happen there, but the tension there is unlikely to simply dissipate.

Amid massive deficit, unemployment and poverty, the Jordanian government faced a series of protests that began in January with thousands of activists from the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood, trade unions, and communist organizations calling for the Prime Minister's resignation and that something be done about the social problems in the country. Thousand-strong protests continue regularly, and clashes with police and government supporters are common. What will happen in Jordan is also unclear, but the potential for change is there, all it needs is the will of the people.

In Libya a rebel army of armed civilians and defecting soldiers has presented the first challenge to military dictator General Gaddafi in decades. What started as another wave of peoples protests there escalated into civil war after Gaddafi showed his contempt for popular democracy with a vicious military crackdown on dissenters. The involvement of Western military in the situation may help the rebels in the short-term, but it remains to be seen what the motivations behind such assistance is, and, if the rebels win any concrete victory in Libya, whether the West will leave them to find their own path to democracy or interfere and dictate terms as they have in other conflicts.

In Yemen, massive protests have also occurred, starting first with anger over rising unemployment and inflation, and turning later to calls for the resignation of the country's President. From January onwards, anti-government protests 10, 15, 20-thousand strong have been held in the Capital Sana'a and other cities. The protests even have inventive names



**Demonstrators and teachers rally to march around the Pearl Roundabout in Manama, Bahrain in February, against Bahraini Royal Family's rule**

like the Day of Rage and the Friday of No Return! The government response, however, has been severe. In March a protest in Sana'a met with violent police attacks and dozens were killed. The President enter mediation with the opposition, agreeing to step contingent on amnesty and an end to the protests, but backed out at the last minute, leaving the current political situation in question.

In the capital city of Bahrain, Manama, protesters occupied the iconic pearl roundabout to demand greater political freedom. The Arab Spring has taken a different racial/class character there, as the protesters called for greater freedom and representation for the Shia majority, who are blocked from political agency and full rights by the ruling class Sunni minority and the power of King Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa. In March, in an attempt to suppress the protests, the king's government called in soldiers from neighbouring Saudi Arabia to crush dissent. The uprising met with brutal punishment, many being beaten, and a few killed by state police or Saudi forces. Shia mosques have been demolished and hundreds arrested. While the crackdown has militarised the protesters somewhat, increasing calls for a republic or a real constitutional monarchy, most protesters remain moderate on the monarchy question, calling for greater parliamentary power, justice for human rights abuses, and an end to the demographic gerrymandering technique

of importing and naturalising Sunni immigrants en masse to give the Sunnis greater control.

## Analysis

When viewing uprisings like these from a distance, they seem to come out of nowhere. One day Egypt is a stable country, a friendly regional partner the west can rely on, even giving silent acceptance to the terror state of Israel, and the next day there are hundreds of thousands of people on the streets screaming for freedom, justice and democracy.

In reality these movements develop over years. Progressive and anti-government organisations build during quiet periods, so that when there's an upswell in activity, they are there to provide experience and leadership. The Muslim Brotherhood, an organisation with varying political influences that started in the 1970s Pan-Arab Nationalist movement, has followed this model of activity and played a major role in the Egypt uprising. We on the left in New Zealand can learn from these victories. We don't face harsh repression for our political actions, conviction for our convictions. With the freedoms we enjoy because of the struggles of the past, we can organise now, in a period of low political activity, to be present and ready when conditions change, when the mass of people are ready to fight this country's military imperialism in Afghanistan



# North Africa/Middle East

and economic imperialism in the Pacific islands, as well as the exploitation of New Zealand's own working class.

Unions have also worked to build a presence in Egypt, particularly in the important textile industry and the highly valuable national asset the Suez Canal. A key group involved in planning and organising the massive protests in Tahrir Square in Cairo and other cities was named the April 6 Movement in honour of the 2008 general strike started by textile workers in Mahalla and supported by activists, unionists and workers across Cairo. The strike itself was repressed with rubber bullets, tear gas and live ammunition, but the spirit of defiance it awakened in the Egyptian people smouldered away until the latest uprising, when it ignited in a fire of people's power. Nearly 2 thousand strikes took place in Egypt since 2007, in defiance of the Egyptian Trade Union Federation's pro-government calls for order. Working class consciousness is rising in Egypt, with strike activity being seen from public and

private sector workers, from tax collectors to textile workers, from building to transport to food processing workers.

Since the January 25th revolution began, the Egyptian working masses have celebrated May Day, the international workers day, publicly for the first time since 1952. New independent labour unions have formed, as well as an United Front grouping of 5 socialist parties, the Coalition of Socialist Forces, drawing together the experience and energy of worker activists, committed socialists and social justice fighters. Many within this group are calling for nationalisation of industries, an end to Neoliberal adjustment programmes and greater freedom for working people to organise, assemble and resist.

The tide of popular unrest moving through the Middle East has huge flow-on effects for the geopolitical situation there and for United States dominance in the region. Some Western analysts are bemoaning the situation and wringing their hands at the possibility

that Iran may come to dominate the new governments of the Middle East, particularly Jordan and Syria. This is actually a real possibility, as is the chance that the societies currently in the process of changing may take a more conservative stance than many on the Western left would prefer. Islamist forces in Egypt, Syria and elsewhere, hold onto Pan-Arab anti-imperialism but often hold out-dated notions of theocracy and religious intolerance, or reduce the fight against Zionist imperialism to a race-war against Judaism.

As the people rise up in the Middle East, the close ties between the Imperialist nations of the West and the unstable dictators of the Middle East are becoming more visible to the people of those countries and the rest of the world. Connections between France and Tunisia's ousted President Ben Ali have forced the resignation of the French Foreign Minister. France, Britain and the USA have been quick to back the new movements in the Middle East



Tens of thousands march in Sanaa, Yemen during March, demanding the ousting of the president



with words and in the case of Libya, bombings, hoping to maintain some influence on any new governments that might arise there, and avoid the embarrassment of public exposure for decades of backing inhumane and authoritarian regimes across the region. There is fear of Iran in these moves too, because if a new Syria or Bahrain, for example, took an anti-imperialist stance, seeing the support of America behind their former dictators, they might look to a regional power for direction, namely Iran. There is an unanswered question as to what role a new Egypt (and indeed how different Egypt will actually be) will take as a regional player in the future development of the Middle Eastern and North Africa states.

It may seem obvious to many people in this room, but in order for the people of Egypt, Syria, Bahrain and other countries heaving off the shackles of corrupt and brutal government to be free and prosperous in the long term, they will need to fight for socialist republics. We in the West have no right to dictate how to create a revolution to people actually engaging in a real revolution, but in order to truly overcome the inequality, unemployment, mistreatment of minorities, oppression of women and poverty these countries have inherited, their people will need to look outside the limits imposed by capitalism and the bourgeois parliamentary process. That path is one of people's power, of popular

ownership and democratic control of resources and industries, of liberation of people from all forms of oppression and exploitation. That is the path of revolutionary socialism, and hopefully the path the Middle East, and indeed the world, will one day follow. The question is whether that day is dawning now, in Cairo.

## **Egypt, the Middle East, and Israel/Palestine**

The escalating mood of revolution and reform in the Middle East, particularly Egypt, also impacts the situation in Israel. Egypt has long accepted the existence of the state of Israel, despite the historic robbery of the Palestinian homeland and the savagery of their treatment at the hands of the Zionist state. The Egyptians themselves have also suffered directly at the hands of Israel. The last Egyptian leader to oppose Israel had his air force destroyed by an Israeli surprise attack. The Palestinians, despite having every right to view their situation as so much more dire than that of other Arab states, have demonstrated in solidarity with the people of Egypt and Syria and other states going through political transition.

With Egypt starting on a new path, the potential for popular control of the democratic process there is huge, whatever the limits imposed on that process by bourgeois democracy. Egypt shares a border with the embattled Gaza

strip and monitors the Rafah crossing. The decision of the Egyptian interim government to reopen this crossing on the 28th of May is significant, as it will allow people to enter and leave Gaza more easily, alleviate the humanitarian crisis Israel has created in Gaza and potentially allow a greater flow of material support for the Palestinian resistance there.

Unfortunately, Israel will still control cargo movement through the Rafah Crossing, but the Egyptian move does show a greater solidarity between their peoples and their Arab neighbours, less fear of Israeli military force, and recognition of the elected Hamas government in Gaza.

The Israeli government has long recognised one of the biggest challenges to the illegal occupation of Palestine is opposition from neighbouring Arab states, even precipitating war to quell such opposition early in the Zionist state's history. If the nations of Syria, Lebanon, Egypt and Jordan move in a more democratic and revolutionary direction as a result of these uprisings, a Pan-Arab defiance of Israel, and support for the Palestinian resistance, might arise, helping to turn the tables on one of the greatest humanitarian crimes of the 20th and 21st Centuries, the Zionist State of Israel.

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## Australian socialists on border controls: “We aim to undermine myths and explain the real dynamics of the situation”

On World Refugee Day, the 19th of June 2011, hundreds of people marched in Melbourne under the slogan “unite to end mandatory detention.” After the march Ian Anderson who is on the editorial team of *The Spark* caught up with leading members of the Socialist Party of Australia, Mel Gregson and Anthony Main.

*The Spark:* So the movement against mandatory detention of refugees has made headlines in recent months. Could you go a bit into the background of this?

**AM:** Australia has practiced mandatory detention of refugees since 1992, when it was introduced under the Labor government. Refugees arriving by boats are placed in detention centres while their claims are processed. Often this takes months, and in some cases 6-7 years to process, while the refugees are kept like animals. At various points the mass anger and frustration over these brutal conditions have led to protests and riots. There is also a small but growing solidarity movement on the mainland.

**MG:** The Howard government tried to negate Australia’s obligations under the UN treaty by processing refugees offshore, at detention centres on Christmas Island, in Nauru, Papa New Guinea and elsewhere. The Rudd government was elected in 2007 on a platform of a “more humane” refugee policy, but ultimately reverted to a similar policy to the Howard government. Most recently, the Gillard government announced a policy of sending refugees to Malaysia. Malaysia is not a signatory to the UN convention, and even deploys state-sanctioned militias to cane refugees. There are numerous deaths and tens of thousands of canings a year.

*The Spark:* Can you talk about the World Refugee Day march, and the wider solidarity campaign?



**AM:** World Refugee Day is organized by the Refugee Advocacy Network, which is a broad coalition dominated by NGOs, as well as members of the Labor Party and so on. On a week-to-week basis action tends to be coordinated by another group, the Refugee Action Collective, which involves more left groups and individuals. They organize very regular actions.

**MG:** The solidarity movement was bigger under the Howard’s time, with more detention centres on the mainland. There were a number of breakouts, which led to detention centres moving off-shore. However the Labor government

has begun opening detention centres on the mainland again, and the solidarity movement has resuscitated a little. Protests tend to focus on the mainland detention centres. Groups can also organize tours and it’s easier to get information.

*The Spark:* What approach has the Socialist Party taken to agitating for refugee rights?

**AM:** We’ve had a long history of involvement going back to the 1999-2000 period. We were involved in all the major convergences, in particular the Woomera convergence in 2002, which



had a big impact on the movement and the government; that detention centre was ultimately closed down. We've tried to take a different approach to the moralism of the NGOs, which isn't sufficient to deal with the mass of workers. Right now there is no mass left party, the unions are largely silent on the refugee issue, so many workers with genuine concerns are influenced by right wingpress..

**MG:** Workers have genuine concerns about access to jobs, to housing, to healthcare, and the ruling class puts the blame onto refugees.

**AM:** We argue that refugees are not responsible for these deteriorating conditions. The deterioration is driven by the economic crisis, by privatization, profiteering, not by a few thousand refugees. There were only about 14,000 refugees processed last year, and 90% of them were found to be genuine. Moreover a great bulk of those refugees come from Iraq and Afghanistan, where the occupation, supported by the Gillard government, is driving people to leave their homes. There are also many refugees from Sri Lanka, where the Australian government has backed a genocidal regime.

First and foremost we demand an end to mandatory detention. But we also relate it back to the system and demand access to jobs and services for all, make the point that these things are achievable, but held back by the profit-driven system of capitalism.

**The Spark:** What views do you encounter in day-to-day agitation?

**AM:** It's very polarized. There's a minority of people who support the refugees, but the majority have concerns fuelled by right-wing populism. These are genuine concerns, about rising unemployment and underemployment, housing more expensive than ever, and people are looking to blame someone. We point out that the system is to blame.

**The Spark:** What links have been developed with international groups?

**AM:** We've built a number of links



**Protest march in Melbourne on World Refugee Day, June 19.**

mainly around practical campaigns. Particularly in late 2009 when the Rudd government sent refugees to Indonesia, which is also not a signatory to the UN convention. One set of refugees refused to leave their boat, and occupied it for over 6 months. I visited to build links with left groups and unions in Indonesia, to provide practical support for those refugees.

**The Spark:** What role does international law play and should socialists uphold it?

**AM:** We have no illusions in capitalist law. However, when laws are achieved that provide some relief to people, it can be tactically useful to use those laws.

**MG:** It's also a good propaganda point, when the Australian government claims to uphold human rights, to point out both their abuse of refugees and their support for policies which force them to seek refuge. We have no illusions in the UN, but its good propaganda to point out the hypocrisy of the Australian government.

**AM:** The solution lies in solidarity between poor and oppressed people world-wide. The capitalist class will not solve a problem they've created.

**The Spark:** What are your strategic priorities in fighting border controls?

**Mel:** We try not to focus on border controls in isolation. We connect the situation to military interventions overseas, and the need for full access to provisions.

**AM:** We link the refugee issue to the transformation of society. We currently have open borders for capital, while workers' movement is restricted. We support the right to free movement by workers, not restriction or movement under duress.

There are a lot of prevalent myths about border controls, that they exist to protect workers from terrorism and various other things. We aim to undermine those myths and explain the real dynamics of the situation.

# Post offices and Kiwibank outlets under attack

**The following article is a guest contribution to *The Spark* by trade unionist and Alliance Party co-leader Victor Billot who is also spokesperson for the campaign to Save Dunedin Metro Post Shop and Kiwibank.**

New Zealand Post are closing and downgrading a number of post offices around New Zealand, including Kiwibank outlets. One of these is the Dunedin Metro Post Shop and Kiwibank, in the Exchange, Dunedin's central business district. Another nearby suburban post agency in Mornington was recently closed as well. A community campaign was mounted to stop the closure in Dunedin.

It has been an interesting campaign. The users of the post office are a diverse mix, ranging from business people and conservative professionals, office workers,

unionists, all the way through to parents, beneficiaries and the elderly. However most people have come to similar conclusions as to why they are opposed to the closure.

They see the decision as being made by remote managers, with little concern or understanding of local communities. People were angered at the lack of interest from NZ Post, and how the closure would create problems for them. The Post Shops that local people will now have to use are already crowded and busy.

The Post Office is a community hub, which provides useful services for many people, and which cannot be seen in terms of "profit and loss". Some of the points we tried to get across included how New Zealand Post is owned by the people of New Zealand, and its priorities should reflect our priorities. This involves

questioning the state owned enterprise model.

The campaign itself has been about both street action and lobbying, as well as using the media to put the spotlight on NZ Post. Our campaign ran a petition which gained over 2500 signatures, plus around 200 signed letters, and an online petition as well.

We held a public rally, an evening meeting, two "stamp mobs" where we formed queues at post offices to buy a stamp and promote our cause, plus a protest outside the Town Hall which then marched down to the Exchange where we free posted a giant postcard to the CEO of NZ Post Brian Roche.

Mr Roche has been strangely absent from the furore around Post Shop closures, and even the recent fiasco where NZ Post was found to be breaching basic privacy rights with their national research



Public rally in Dunedin opposing the closure of Dunedin Metro Post Shop and KiwiBank



surveys.

He has perhaps been preoccupied with his other role as Chairman of Rugby New Zealand. How many jobs can one CEO do?

The public response from NZ Post and its small army of spin doctors has been patronizing and condescending, which has served to infuriate local people even more.

There has been a disorganized response from city authorities to the problem, and much effort of the campaign was spent trying to co-ordinate and motivate these institutions.

It is interesting that a local National MP has been very sensitive about the

issue, sensing perhaps the problems this could cause for him down the track. Some of the more politically inclined supporters of the campaign have noted how the closures are an echo of the 1980s "Rogernomics" era, and perhaps signal a further round of attacks on public services or even privatization. Ironically, the current Chairman of the NZ Post Board is Michael Cullen, one time Labour MP for Dunedin South. He replaced Jim Bolger in the job.

A similar campaign has been running in Grey Lynn, Auckland, and seems to have attracted greater support from political representatives and business groups.

From my own perspective, these attacks on post and Kiwibank services indicate the future direction of right wing Government: cutbacks, service reductions, privatisation and asset stripping, job losses.

However the public backlash will lead to new opportunities to build movements for public services, accountability, resistance and social change. As of the time of writing, the Dunedin Metro Post Shop and Kiwibank faces imminent closure. But the issue has moved into the national media and pressure is mounting on NZ Post management. Watch this space.

## 'Go back to where you came from' SBS, 2011

Reviewed by Byron Clark, Workers Party, Christchurch branch

A new documentary series has shined the spotlight on refugees in Australia. It puts "ordinary Australians" in the shoes of asylum seekers and is challenging the nation's view of immigration. Australian TV network SBS set a new audience record when over half a million people watched the second episode of the three part reality/documentary series Go Back To Where You Came From. The show makes for gripping drama and unlike a majority of so-called reality TV does not shy from being politically confrontational.

### The refugee journey

The show takes six "ordinary Australians" on a journey similar to that taken by those who immigrate illegally to Australia seeking asylum, only in reverse. While illegal immigration to Australia by sea makes up only one percent of total immigration, "boat people" have become a polarising political issue, leading to 'race riots' in 2005 and conversely protests at refugee detention centres- by the incarcerated and by their supporters on the outside.

One of the Go Back participants

believes that Australia can take in more refugees and argues for human rights and cultural diversity, the others are more difficult to sympathise with. Racquel, a 24 year old unemployed woman from West Sydney openly describes herself as racist and is appalled by the number of Sudanese now living in her neighbourhood, while Raye complains of the supposed luxury refugees live in in the detention centre next door to her rural farm.

### Changing perspectives

The views of Racquel and Raye begin to change as they stay with refugee families and visit the infamous Villawood detention centre (where buildings were set alight during riots by inmates) though Racquel remains stubborn at least in the beginning, Raye is brought to tears by the life story of the African woman who welcomed the shows participants into her home. While progressive minded people can get a smug feeling watching the participants be confronted with the reality that their ideas about refugees (especially Muslim refugees) are false- particularly when watching Darren from

Adelaide who is often shown to be well out of his comfort zone- the people the show will hopefully reach are those who share views in common with Racquel.

While the stories of refugees in Australia have been told before, though media such as the book Dark Dreams: Australian Refugee Stories, this is the first time the stories are reaching those who would rather avoid thinking about the reasons people leave their families, pay obscene amounts of money to people smugglers and put themselves at great risk to reach Australia's shores. With the conflicts happening around the globe the issue of asylum seekers is not going to disappear any time soon, and Go Back To Where You Came From is a welcome contribution to the debate.

### Sources:

- 'Go Back to Where You Came From' SBS
- 'Another Record for SBS with Go Back To Where You Came From' Mumbrella
- 'Ralston, Nick, 9; Buildings Set Alight in Villawood Detention Centre Rooftop Protest', Sydney Morning Herald, 2011-04-

# Anti-youth rates protests send signal to government

By editors of *The Spark* with input from Jared Phillips, Byron Clark, and Chris Matahaere

On June 25 Unite and other progressive organisations, as well as socialists, sent a message to the government that any attempt to reintroduce youth rates will be met with resistance. These protests were very much the beginning and will be intensified - up to and including strikes and high school demonstrations - if the government does pursue a reintroduction. The Auckland and Wellington demonstrations went ahead successfully, with the Auckland demonstration being focussed on the head offices of the Employers and Manufacturers Association, whose CEO had in a radio interview justified the gendered wage gap by claiming that women are less productive because of 'monthly sick problems'. The Auckland protest drew the connection between unequal pay for women and the potential for discriminatory rates to be applied to young workers. Below is a summary of activities in other major cities.

### Christchurch

A short-notice picket was held outside Minister of Labour Kate Wilkinson's office in Rangiora. Car pools left Christchurch loaded with activists who brought the North Canterbury town the first protest it had seen in some time. Fifteen people gathered and chanted "no youth rates" and "working for nothing really sucks, what do we want? \$15 bucks". Open mic speeches were made by Matt Jones (Unite organiser), Jared Davidson (Beyond Resistance) and Byron Clark (Workers Party) highlighting the need for ongoing action against youth rates and other anti-worker laws. An impromptu march down the main street took place, and even in this predominantly conservative and mainly National-voting town the picket got a lot of support, especially from young people.



Picket outside Kate Wilkinsons office in Rangiora

### Hamilton

National MP David Bennett is the chair of the Transport and Industrial Relations Select Committee. Around 30 people from Unite, Greens on Campus, Young Workers Resource Centre, Workers Party, NZ Nurses Organisation, and Out at Work protested outside his Hamilton East electorate office. Present were Unite delegates from McDonalds and Starbucks, as well as Rail Maratime and Transport Union and Engineering

Printing and Manufacturing Union delegates. The protest outside his office went for 40 minutes before protestors decided by a vote to march over the Bridge Street bridge to a nearby convention centre at which the Young Nats were having their annual national policy-setting meeting. The protestors chanted and disrupted the event from an outside balcony with nothing between the protest and the conference other than ranch-slider doors. Protest chants



were focussed on equal pay for women and youth, and much of the megaphone talking was focussed on the point that no section of working people should pay for the crisis.

## Dunedin

Activists and others in Dunedin concerned about the possible

reintroduction of youth rates staged a demonstration. It was a good turn out for an event with such short notice, with around 50-100 being present at different times. The protestors marched from the Octagon down to a National Party office in Princes street. It was the best turn out in the country. The Unite membership know youth rates would impact on them.

Chris Matahaere, Unite's organiser in the area said there is no such thing as youth rent or youth power, so why should there be youth rates, and emphasised that youth rates create a higher level of exploitation. Other groups represented at the demonstration included the ISO, and The Green Party.



More than 50 people marched from the Octagon to the National Party office in Princes St, Dunedin.

## Defend young workers, fight all anti-worker laws

This brief article prepared by editors of *The Spark* first appeared at [workersparty.org.nz](http://workersparty.org.nz) shortly before the June 25 day of action.

This weekend there will be demonstrations in a number of cities to oppose the re-introduction of youth rates and to oppose any extension to the new entrant rate provisions.

National has already attacked working people and unions by changing union access rights, introducing new conditions for access to sick leave, and introducing a probationary employment

procedure which provides employers with the power to sack workers without reason in the first 90 days of employment.

John Key and National's Minister of Labour Kate Wilkinson have not ruled out a return to youth rates and are clearly putting youth rates back in the frame for discussion. Wilkinson, for instance, has cited high youth unemployment as a reason for the government to take a close look at policies that will give work experience to youth.

The ability of employers to legally pay youth rates below the adult minimum wage for 16-18 year-olds was brought

to an end in 2007. This victory was a result of a combined industrial campaign by Unite Union, street campaign by Unite Union and Radical Youth, and parliamentary campaign led by then Green MP Sue Bradford.

This was one of the more significant offensive campaigns waged by the labour movement over the past decade. For a whole generation of younger workers it was certainly the most significant.

We will fight any attempts by the bosses and government to roll back wages and conditions of workers of any age group.

*The following article, published on November 1, 2006, was written by John Riddell, then a co-editor of the now ceased Socialist Voice which was produced in Canada. We are publishing it in two parts with the second part due to appear in the August issue of The Spark.*

## The Russian Revolution and National Freedom: How the early Soviet government led the struggle for liberation of Russia's oppressed peoples

When Bolivian President Evo Morales formally opened his country's Constituent Assembly on August 6, 2006, he highlighted the aspirations of Bolivia's indigenous majority as the central challenge before the gathering. The convening of the Assembly, he said, represented a "historic moment to refound our dearly beloved homeland Bolivia." When Bolivia was created, in 1825-26, "the originary indigenous movements" who had fought for independence "were excluded," and subsequently were discriminated against and looked down upon. But the "great day has arrived today ... for the originary indigenous peoples." (<http://boliviarising.blogspot.com/1>, Aug. 14, 2006)

During the preceding weeks, indigenous organizations had proposed sweeping measures to assure their rights, including guarantees for their languages, autonomy for indigenous regions, and respect for indigenous culture and political traditions.

This movement extends far beyond Bolivia. Massive struggles based on indigenous peoples have shaken Ecuador and Peru, and the reverberations are felt across the Western Hemisphere. Measures to empower indigenous minorities are among the most prestigious achievements of the Bolivarian movement in Venezuela.

At first glance, these indigenous struggles bear characteristic features of national movements, aimed at combating oppression, securing control of national communities, and protecting national culture. Yet indigenous peoples in Bolivia and elsewhere may not meet many of the objective criteria Marxists have often used to define a nation, such as a common language and a national territory, and they are not demanding a separate state.

The response of Marxist currents to the national aspects of Latin America's indigenous struggles has been varied,

ranging from enthusiasm to a studied silence. Yet an ability to address the complexities of such struggles is surely the acid test of Marxism's understanding of the national question today.

Such disarray among Marxists is all the more costly in today's context of rising struggles for national freedom across Latin America and the Middle East today. The challenge is also posed in the imperialist heartlands, where we see a rise of struggles by oppressed minorities that bear more than a trace of national consciousness. For example, in 2006 the United States witnessed the strongest upsurge of working-class struggle in 60 years in the form of demonstrations and strikes for immigrant rights that were also, in part, an assertion of Latino identity. And the oppression of non-white and Muslim minorities in France has given birth to the provocatively named "Mouvement des Indigènes de la République." ([www.indigenes-republique.org/2](http://www.indigenes-republique.org/2))

The Marxist position on the national question was forged around well-documented debates on the independence movement of long-constituted nations such as Ireland and Poland. But the writings of Lenin and his contemporaries before 1917 have little to say about nationalities in emergence, that is, peoples in struggle who lack as yet many characteristic features of a nation. But precisely this type of struggle played a central role in the 1917 Russian revolution and the early years of the Soviet republic. In the course of their encounter with such movements, the Bolshevik Party's policies toward national minorities evolved considerably. Sweeping practical measures were taken to assure the rights of national minorities whose existence was barely acknowledged prior to 1917.

The Bolsheviks' policies do not indicate what course to adopt toward national struggles today, each of which



**Bolivian President Evo Morales**

has a specific character and set of complexities. Nonetheless, the Bolshevik experience is a useful reference point.

### Pre-1917 Positions

The initial position of Russian Marxists on the national question was clear and sweeping. In 1903 the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP), adopted a program specifying the right of all nations in the Russian state to self-determination. The program also advocated regional self-rule based on the composition of the population and the right of the population to receive education in its own language and to use that language on the basis of equality in all local social and governmental institutions. (Jeremy Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question, 1917-23*, London: Univ. of London, n.d., p. 14.)

In the decade that followed, the Bolshevik wing of the RSDLP became the first Marxist current internationally



to recognize the importance of the liberation struggles then taking shape across the colonial world. Lenin wrote in 1913, "Hundreds of millions of people are awakening to life, light and freedom" in a movement that will "liberate both the peoples of Europe and the peoples of Asia." (V.I. Lenin. *Collected Works*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1960-71. Vol. 19, pp. 99-100. Most quotations in this study can also be located by Internet search.)

Lenin also insisted on the distinction between the advanced capitalist countries, where "progressive bourgeois national movements came to an end long ago," and the oppressed nations of Eastern Europe and the semi-colonial and colonial world. (CW 22:150-52) In the latter case, he called for defense of the right to self-determination and support of national liberation movements, in order to create a political foundation for unification in struggle of working people of all nationalities.

## Limitations

In the test of the Russian revolution, these and many other aspects of the Bolshevik's pre-1917 positions proved to be a reliable guide. Some positions expressed before 1917, however, required modification.

For example, consider the definition of a nation provided in 1913 by Joseph Stalin: "A nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture." (J.V. Stalin. *Works*, Moscow: FLPH, 1954. Vol. 2, p. 307) Stalin's article was written in collaboration with Lenin and was viewed at the time as an expression of the Bolshevik position. His objective criteria are a good starting point for analysis, but they have sometimes been misused to justify denying national rights to indigenous and other peoples that appear not to pass the test.

In addition, Lenin stressed that his support for national self-determination "implies exclusively the right to independence in the political sense." (CW 22:146) In 1913, he stated, "Fight against all national oppression? Yes, certainly. Fight for any kind of national development, for 'national culture' in

general? Certainly not." (CW 20:35) Lenin is sometimes quoted as being opposed to federalism as a form of state, although he also endorsed federation as a stepping stone to democratic integration of nations. (CW 22:146)

Such pre-1917 positions are sometimes applied today in order to justify opposition to the demands of national liberation movements. But they should be interpreted in the light of the way the Bolshevik position was applied in the decisive test of revolution.

## The indigenous peoples of tsarist Russia

The oppressed peoples that made up the majority of the pre-1917 tsarist empire can be broadly divided into two categories.

On the western and southern margins of the empire lived many peoples—among them the Finns, Poles, Ukrainians, and Armenians—that met all of Stalin's objective criteria of nationality. As nations, they possessed clearly defined historical and cultural traditions. It was these peoples that the pre-1917 Bolsheviks had chiefly in mind when they discussed the national question.

But there were also many peoples in Russia—in the Crimea, on the Volga, in the Caucasus, and in central and northeast Asia—that had been subjected to settler-based colonization similar to that experienced by the Palestinians, the Blacks of South Africa, and—in much more extreme form—the indigenous

peoples of the Americas. These subjects of the Russian tsar, whom the Bolsheviks often spoke of as Russia's "Eastern peoples," had seen their lands seized, their livelihood destroyed, and their language and culture suppressed. They had suffered discrimination and exclusion from the dominant society.

When revolution broke out in 1917, these peoples, although varying widely in their level of social development, had not yet emerged as nationalities. The evolution of written national languages, cultures, and consciousness as distinct peoples was at an early stage. Most identified themselves primarily as Muslims. Assessed by Stalin's criteria for nationhood, they did not make the grade. But in the crucible of revolution, national consciousness began to assert itself, provoking and stimulating demands for cultural autonomy, self-rule, and even national independence.

This fact itself is worth pondering. A revolution is, in Lenin's phrase, a festival of the oppressed. Peoples long ground down into inarticulateness suddenly find inspiration, assert their identity, and cry out their grievances. We cannot predict the shape of freedom struggles that will emerge in a revolutionary upsurge.

Next month, in the second part of this article, the author looks at the taking of soviet power, promotion of national culture, the Baku Congress, and the way in which gains of the Soviet government were reversed.



Bolshevik leader V.I. Lenin, in 1919

## New Zealand state continues to bully Fiji

Byron Clark

“Can we manage the tensions between Fiji and Tonga?” that was the question posed in the press release promoting the interview journalist Guyon Espiner was conducting with Foreign Affairs Minister Murray McCully on the June 12 episode of TVNZ’s Q&A. The question is loaded with political assumptions; first of all the term ‘we’ assumes that there is some universal ‘New Zealand interest’ shared by both the audience of Q&A, and those that McCully and the government he is part of represent. Second, it is assumed that ‘we’ have the right to intervene with the affairs of two other sovereign nations.

The diplomatic dispute between Fiji and Tonga began when Tonga granted citizenship to Tevita Mara after he fled Fiji. Mara was the Army Chief of Staff – the fourth highest position in the Fijian military – and controlled an infantry of approximately 500 soldiers. In May he was charged with mutiny and accused of attempting to overthrow the government. He has been declared a fugitive under Fiji’s Extradition Act.

He was taken out in a boat by an Estonian national and picked up by a Tongan vessel in Fijian waters. It has been noted in the media that Mara has ‘ties’ of some sort with the royal family in Tonga. Since receiving a Tongan passport he has been granted a visa to enter Australia and successfully gained an exception to sanctions that ban him from New Zealand as a member of the Fijian military.

Since fleeing Fiji Mara has called interim Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama a “little kid who doesn’t know what’s happening” and referred to him as a puppet of attorney-general Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum. “Over the coming weeks, I will travel the region to discuss with the Pacific leaders the real situation in Fiji and I will discuss the road map on how we will return Fiji to democracy in the shortest time” Mara stated in a video posted to Youtube. He claims the 2014 elections are not going to happen and the regime has no plans for bringing



Voreqe “Frank” Bainimarama

democracy to Fiji.

Tevita Mara is either a genuine democrat, a failed coup leader, a conspiracy theorist, a political opportunist, or some combination of the above. He has been supported by the Australia based ‘Fiji Democracy and Freedom Movement’ whose members include academics Jon Fraenkel and Brij Lal, who have between them a significant voice in Pacific issues in the Australian media. However the lesser known New Zealand group, Coalition for Democracy in Fiji strongly condemned Mara in an open letter to John Key and Murray McCully.

“[Mara] was directly responsible for the illegal arrest, detention, torture, sexual assault and abuse of hundreds of people. He is feared by people in Fiji and is known for his use of violent and

inhuman sexual, physical, emotional and psychological torture techniques” the letter states, and it should be noted these accusations are backed up with reports from Amnesty International. “We have been in touch over the past few weeks with our associate pro-democracy support groups and people in Fiji and the unanimous view is that New Zealand must not allow entry for people such as Mr Mara.”

How New Zealand orientates to him will be determined by how it can best advance New Zealand interest (which of course, are as universal as Q&A would imply). The government granting entry to Mara, with John Key making a point that neither key nor any of his ministers would meet with him, appears to be an attempt to hedge bets.

It won’t win the Key regime any



sympathy in Suva however, Frank Banimarama has been clear on this point; "It would be a matter of concern for everyone if John Key was to allow him into New Zealand." he told Radio Tarana. "In the first instance John Key will be reneging on his public announcement that he wants to review his relationship with Fiji, obviously he's not very serious about that,".

While its true that New Zealand has in recent times tried to engage more with the regime in Fiji, should relations between Fiji and Tonga sour further recent history suggests New Zealand would side with the latter. While maintaining harsh sanctions against Fiji New Zealand has remained a support of Tonga's monarchy, going so far as to send troops to help quell a rebellion by pro-democracy activists in 2006. This shows that whatever is behind New Zealand's attitude toward Fiji, its not a desire to see democracy.

As Fiji attempts to overturn the legacy of colonialism, one which has maintained an ethnically segregated election system long after independence was gained in 1970 (and means Fiji was hardly democratic prior to the 2006 coup) the country would prefer New Zealand stayed out of its affairs. "The more interference that we have,..the

harder it is for us to get [to democracy]" Sharon Smith Johns , the permanent secretary for information in Fiji, told Radio New Zealand, "We'd hope that countries would partner and help us to get there, but if not, we'll still get there by ourselves. The distraction from Mara is something that we don't need."



For background information see 'New Zealand's Imperialist Attitude Toward Fiji' in the March 2009 issue of The Spark available online at <http://bit.ly/iJWtG2>

## Update: Horticulture workers' dispute

The May Issue of The Spark carried a story about a dispute involving horticulture

workers at Southern Paprika Ltd in Warkworth. The owner of the Company has since

made comments directed at the Union at a seminar organised by the Kiribati

Protestant Church. Hamish Alexander is reported as saying: "One family got upset with us and decided to bring the union in, and as a company I can tell you that this has put a wall between me and my Kiribati people, and it's a real problem." The Union Secretary Ray Bianchi, has replied with the advice: "Exercise your legal right and join the Union and ensure you get protection from manipulative Employers. Unionised Workers are treated better than non-Unionised and predominantly earn more."

## On the job: working harder, faster and longer in the fast food sector

**This article was contributed to *The Spark* by a Christchurch Unite member, Joshua Wood.**

In New Zealand we eat from at least one of the nine American fast food corporations that have opened shop here. We have little real choice about whether we want fast food in New Zealand or in our lives, as fast food is now becoming the fastest, largest and in some cases the cheapest food available.

But is working in fast food what the industry makes it out to be? The answer to that is a big fat NO it's not.

I started my work in hospitality in

2006 in fast food. Moving around from fast food outlet to fast food outlet, one thing I noticed pretty fast is that they all expected the same from you; long hours, fast work, low pay, and a demand for you to come in with little or no notice on your day off or to start hours earlier than you where meant to. Often half an hour or even 10 minutes before you finish you would be asked to stay longer sometimes with no real need for it.

The current hourly rate at the site worked at is \$13 a hour, a large majority of fast food outlets make enough to cover wages within seconds of opening the doors. This is because the company's

investment (labour, plant, logistics, and advertising) on producing its commodities for sale is well below the cost at which it sells them. We who make and sell the products see little in return.

Fast food companies say they are poor and cant pay our staff anymore without cutting hours and making products more expensive, but this is obviously not the case.

A message for all you big bosses out there, stop working us harder, longer and faster for the same pay , and to all workers your rights are under attack so stand up fight back and be heard.

# Queer the Night march and speech

On June 9 an estimated 500-800 people, mainly queer and transgender, marched in the streets of Wellington to 'Queer the Night' against homophobia and transphobia. Specifically the protest was called as part of highlighting opposition to physical attacks that had been carried out against queer and transgender people.

From a socialist perspective we approach the issue of homophobia and transphobia not only from a humanist position, and not just from a diversity and equality position, but also from the position that discrimination on the basis of sexuality or gender is something that can play a role of depoliticising and de-radicalising heterosexuals. This goes hand-in-hand with the way in which discrimination against any oppressed group in society can prevent the unity that is required to create radical social change.

Ten days following the march, on June 19, there followed an organising meeting at Trades Hall, also in Wellington, to continue building the campaign. This was attended by around 85 people, which is a very strong turnout for an organising meeting.

Some Workers Party members have been key organisers in the campaign so far. At the June 9 street march, James Froch, who is also a Schools Out facilitator, Gay Welfare Group co-ordinator, and education officer for the Wellington branch of the Workers Party delivered the following speech:

*I'm one of the organisers of this march, but I'm also here as an organiser for Schools Out.*

*Homophobia is something each of us has to live with. We hesitate to hold our partners hand in public because we fear straight people's reactions, their dumbfounded staring, their screams of dyke or faggot, their fists and their bottles.*

*Their homophobic actions aim to rein in our various identities and orientations, to keep us off the streets and in the closets. Its intent is to make queer and trans-people live in fear. We're here to say we're not afraid. We're here to say we stand as a community against homophobia and transphobia. We're here to fight until everyone has the right to express and explore their queerness without religious, economic, legal restrictions.*

*More specifically, we're here because we're outraged. We're outraged that 39% of queer youth seriously consider suicide as a method of dealing with homophobia, a rate three times higher than their straight counterparts. We're here because we're outraged that 20% of queer youth actually make attempts on their life, a rate five times higher than their straight counterparts. We're here because we know that these are not just statistics but actual people, our friends, family and community.*

*Homophobia and transphobia affect us all on a day-to-day basis too varying degrees. The majority of us, queer youth included, manage to live out and a proud life, to connect with other members of the community, to ward off the isolation and fear homophobia tries to instil within us. However, a significant part of our population remains under constant lethal attack.*

*So what do we do about it? The only way to eliminate homophobia and*

*transphobia is to collectively organise for the struggle. If we want equality and a society without fear, we have to be prepared to fight for it. Simply put, we need to build movement—the types of movements queers haven't seen since homosexual law reform.*

*I don't think anyone has the illusions that homophobia and transphobia will come to an end with the close of this march. This is just the first step. We need strong community action before we can begin to effect heterosexual culture. The next step in building this movement is to attend our public meeting "homophobia and transphobia and how we respond" at Trades Hall, at 126 Vivian St at 7pm next Thursday.*

*The third step to ending queer oppression, homophobia and transphobia is to link with other struggles. We alone cannot end our oppression. We need to link our allies in other progressive movements. We need to stand with women struggling against sexism and patriarchy for equal pay, free and safe child care and free and legal abortions. We need to be standing with migrants and Maori against racism, for legal rights to work of all to work here and against land confiscation. We need to link ourselves with the radical and progressive elements of the Labour movement fighting for a living wage. The Wellington Unite Union organiser has been instrumental in helping organise this march. She has taken the first step and I call on everyone here to stand in solidarity with McDonalds workers potentially going on strike next week. Their struggle for a living wage and workers' power is connected to our struggle for community power.*

