

Preface

A menace is stalking our workplaces – the menace of global capital.

All the Powers of the old Market remain intact but new, global, forms of oppression are emerging: the unprecedented and worldwide explosion in credit which traps and enslaves not only individual families but also entire nations stripping them of their sovereignty and forcing them to adjust budgets and social policies to the dictates of international financiers; the cannibalising of one nation's essential industries and services by the business interests of another; the almost total dependence of some nations on natural resources found only in the lands occupied by other nations; the massive militaries seen worldwide with their equally massive expenditures which drain national budgets; all have forced an un-holy alliance so overwhelming that the political class no longer makes even a pretence of governing for the common good but have abandoned all our destinies to ideologies of 'free trade', 'the invisible hand' and 'de-regulation' in the vain hope that the 'market' will achieve what they cannot: social cohesion.

The main stream political class have long since decided that Australia's future will be subjected to the demands of a globalised economy and to that effect will reduce the role of government as near as possible to none at all. In Margaret Thatcher's words 'It's government's job to get the finances right and to provide a framework of law in which free enterprise can operate'.¹ That much and no more, she might have added.

That section of the political class who are the natural inheritors of this philosophy, flushed with the seeming invincibility of their ideology and noting the degree to which some in the working class have adopted their beliefs and granted them political support, triumphantly declare: 'we are all conservatives now.'²

On the other side, those who have traditionally opposed market forces, always lukewarm and piecemeal in their opposition, have crumpled before the onslaught of global capital and now themselves look to 'free enterprise' to arrange society's affairs and to solve society's problems.

Where once their ranks were full of workers with experience in industrial struggle, workers who knew that their power lay in solidarity and collective action and were willing to use that power in defence of their rights, workers who understood that they were a distinct class whose interests and destiny were antagonistic to the interests and fortunes of employers and property owners, now they are careerists who share the dominant view of our times which holds that discord is not to be found in different class interests but in the corruption of individuals.

Discord follows misguided regulation by a government, failed interference in the market or corruption. Modern problems are the problems of individuals — problems of corruption or collusion by individuals to benefit themselves through either state intervention on their behalf or by monopoly activity of government owned corporations. The solution is to end worker collusion of unions, privatise government enterprises and limit the public sector.

A clear example of 'individual' failure in modern economics is unemployment. The cause is seen as either corrupt business management or, more likely, failure of the individual unemployed person. The unemployed are failed individuals. They do not seize the opportunities offered by the market.

"Get your lawnmower, go out and mow lawns."

Peter Costello, Australian Treasurer,
Words of advice to the unemployed,
said in the Australian parliament

When it is difficult to pin societal problems down to individuals they are attributed to races, religions or failed nations. These groups interfere with the market in the same way as individuals. They fail to seize opportunities offered by the market because they are limited by old or primitive cultural practices, e.g. tribalism.

It is 'outdated practices' that limits human progress not the expropriation and accumulation of wealth by the few. The European imperialist plunder of the world in the 19th and 20th centuries and its modern U.S. equivalent did not create discord but harmony. Some call it 'liberation', the coming of 'freedom'. This conquest smashes the barriers to human progress by the expansion of global markets.

So also with workers in their industries, they should not collude or be allowed to form common cause with their comrades. They should ignore them. If necessary they should compete with them. The workers will advance as individuals.

These views currently dominate our society. Few question this logic. It is logic sharply distinct from class analysis. Class analysis holds that the market, supported by state power, acts in the interest of one class, the owners of property, to the detriment of the working class.

Should those who live by their labours accept the dominant view?

This question caused the collective of LeftPress to write a book centred on an example of workers 'resisting progress' – the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA). On the surface a battle over the number of shipping

containers that can be moved every hour through an Australian port may not appear momentous but it was more than this. It was an issue embroiled in the rights of workers to have a say over their employment conditions and this right to be expressed by an organised union.

Was the MUA dispute of 1998 a continuation of the workers' right to challenge, by collusion in unions, a system of exploitation or was it a misguided challenge to human progress?

The MUA and its predecessors the Waterside Workers Federation (WWF) and the Seamen's Union of Australia (SUA) were among the most powerful and militant unions in Australia during the period 1950 to 1998. Their members had achieved better wages than most other labourers. By 1998 its membership, reflecting increasing mechanisation of work on the waterfront, had become relatively small. It retained, by dominant membership among waterfront workers, considerable influence over the work practices in the maritime industries. Maritime companies, recognising a prevailing decline of workers' union power in the late nineties, in collusion with government, sought to change union influence and increase their profits.

The dispute was triggered by an employer lockout. It was viewed by other Australian workers as symbolic. Some saw it as a last stand of strong unionism. For this reason they gave waterfront workers significant support but for many reasons active participation in the dispute was low. Underlying this were onerous legislative secondary boycott provisions. Few unions mustered strike action in support, even though the employer action was recognised as a challenge to the right of all unions to organise. Preference was given to public protests. In the state of Victoria these made an impact. Overall industrial and political action by unions were a public focus to a reliance on legal challenges through the courts.

This reflected an acceptance by union leaders that workers' class consciousness was limited or at low ebb.

As a result the dispute, though highly focussed, was small. It did not expand into generalised action or even to other firms in the Maritime industry. Major terminal operators, other than the main protagonist, Patricks, continued operations throughout the dispute.

This containment meant that the dispute did not revive unionism as many had hoped. It did not provide any momentum for political success for the Australian Labor Party.

It could be said the workers shouted but later became quiet. Today in Australia this is how they remain.

'The workers are quiet.'

LeftPress Collective

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¹ ABC Radio National, Hindsight program 15th April, 2007: *An attitude of mind and faith – liberalism in Australia's political history.*

² Janet (Pauline Hanson of the tertiary educated) Albrechtsen writing in The Australian after the 2004 federal elections.