JustComment

People's movements shaping the future of globalisation

Globalisation is a contentious and uncertain process. It has been hailed by some as both beneficial and inevitable. Critics have responded by joining large people's movements, sometimes called the 'anti-globalisation' movement. These very different responses make it difficult to work out exactly what globalisation is, how it impacts on people's lives and how people, communities and governments can shape it in the future.

Globalisation refers to a range of different processes that make countries, cultures and peoples more integrated with one another. However, critics claim it is not globalisation per se, but a particular form of globalisation that they oppose. The World Council of Churches claims that there is a distinction 'between globalisation as a multi-faceted historic process and the present form of a pernicious economic and political project of global capitalism.' (WCC, Geneva, 2005). Alternatively, the International Monetary Fund, referring to the same economic and political processes, has claimed 'As globalisation has progressed, living conditions (particularly when measured by broader indicators of well being) have improved significantly in virtually all countries' (IMF 2002)

Globalisation is not an abstract uncontrollable force. People's movements are shaping the future of globalisation around the world.

Globalisation and Inequality

It is economic globalisation driven by 'neo-liberal' principles that has received the greatest level of criticism. People all around the world have begun to question *who benefits* from these 'neo-liberal' economic policies and critics have argued that the resulting model of wealth distribution has generated gross inequalities across the world.

For example, while the United States, one of the biggest advocates of 'neo-liberal' economic globalisation, has recently experienced sustained growth, almost all the benefits have gone to the top 5% of American families. The real incomes of minimum wage workers have actually declined since the 1970s (*Just Comment*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2002).

In Australia the gap between the rich and the poor has widened since the implementation of 'neo-liberal' principles in the 1980s (*The Reality of Income Inequality in Australia*, St. Vincent de Paul, 2005). While the current form of economic globalisation has exacerbated inequalities between countries, wealthy nations such as the United States and Australia, pushing a 'neo-liberal' agenda have placed the majority of their own citizens in a more vulnerable situation for the advancement of a few.

Peoples' Response to Inequality

Changes to industrial relations and workplace laws around the world have been one of the most important factors in changing the distribution of income, particularly within individual countries. The Australian Work Choices legislation is only the most recent of a series of changes within Australia and around the world that reduce

protections for workers and allow wages to be determined by market forces, rather than social norms of fairness. However, right around the world people are challenging this trend.

In France similar changes recently led to massive demonstrations. Schools, universities, workplaces and roads were shut down in April 2006 as people objected to laws that would make it easier to sack young workers. In response the French Government revoked its controversial employment laws.

The Waterfront dispute of 1998 began after Patrick Stevedores, the coalition government and the National Farmers Federation attempted to replace dockside workers with cheaper labour. Workers belonging to the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) responded swiftly by forming coalitions with international workers. As a result while the MUA picketed the dockside, workers in India, Papua New Guinea and the United States refused to handle goods that had been packaged by non-union labour on Australian shores. In addition airline workers who were members of the

International Travel Union (ITU) refused to fly the replacement, non-union labour to Dubai for their training (*Protest and globalisation: prospects for transnational solidarity*, Goodman, 2002). In the face of threats to workers conditions, the Waterfront dispute saw workers form global coalitions to effectively shut down the Australian waterfront.

Globalisation and the Environment

Leading scientific bodies such as the UN appointed Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change (IPCC) and world leaders now claim that 'Climate Change is the single most important issue we face as a global community,' (UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, April 2004). In response to this environmental crisis a diverse set of scientific, social and political movements across the world, known as the environment movement, are successfully placing environmental issues on the public agenda and are continuing to change the way people, governments and business operate.

Internationally, strong pressure from environment movements has to date seen 163 countries sign and ratify the very first international treaty on climate change: the Kyoto Protocol. It is estimated that the cooperation of these countries will generate more than one billion tonnes of emission reductions by the end of 2012 (http://unfccc.int, 9 June 2006). While the Australian Government refused to ratify the Kyoto Protocol, the environment movement has recently seen a win at the state level. In late June 2006, the South Australian government tabled draft legislation setting targets to reduce greenhouse pollution and increase renewable energy, in line with the targets set by the Kyoto Protocol. Environment groups commended the move noting that 'this is the first time ever an Australian government has legislated on climate change and greenhouse pollution reduction.' (Green Peace Australia, 29/6/06)

The recent prevention of the sale of the Snowy River Hydro signals another 'win for people power' (Australian Conservation Foundation, 2/6/06). Following the announcement of plans to transfer this public asset to private ownership in May 2006, various peoples movements including engineers and workers who had helped build the dam, irrigators, local residents and environment groups came together to prevent the sale. While the Snowy River Hydro meant different things to many of these people, what was unanimous was that decisions regarding the environment did not belong in private hands.

Globalisation and Racism

Critics of 'neo-liberal' globalisation claim that the desire to maximise profit has overridden the interests of people and the environment. 'As the economic interests of corporations erode the power of the nation-state to safeguard its' citizens from harm, a strong sense of insecurity has marked the turn of the 21st century' claims the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Sadako Ogata (http://www.unhcr.org). It is in this climate of insecurity that modern day racism has targeted asylum seekers particularly coming from the Middle East. The Australian Government's policies of offshore processing, mandatory detention and dangerous deportation have seen asylum seekers treated as a threat to national sovereignty and "dangerous" foreigners to be controlled, rather than people who deserve protection in accordance with the UN Refugee Convention.

Hundreds of thousands of Australians however have responded to the treatment of asylum seekers within a strong and continuing peoples' movement known as the 'Refugee Movement.' From Malcolm Fraser, former Liberal Prime Minister to Merlin Luck, participant on channel Ten's 'Big Brother,' various public personas backed by strong community support have spoken out against the Federal Government's treatment of asylum

seekers. In the last few years the refugee movement has seen all children released from detention centres, time limits imposed on the refugee determination process, and the establishment of a Commonwealth Ombudsman to oversee this process (*Overview of Refugee Policy Change*, www.ajustaustralia.com). Australians involved in community organisations, lobby groups, school groups and artistic and creative groups have been so effective in changing public opinion on the issue of asylum seekers that some politicians from the Liberal party have recently started challenging their own government's policies on Asylum Seekers ('PM agrees to law changes', *SMH*, 21/6/06). In combating modern day racism, the refugee movement in Australia is effectively arguing that human dignity and racial tolerance should be national priorities in the process of globalisation.

While political, economic, cultural and social relations continue to intensify across the globe, the direction of globalisation is by no means uncontested. Peoples' movements fighting for the rights of workers, for environmental sustainability and preservation, for the rights of asylum seekers are united in that they all envision an alternative global world shaped by much more than the economic interests of private corporations.

Just Action

• Watch *The Corporation*, a Canadian documentary about the role of corporations in the process of globalisation (http://www.thecorporation.com)

• Find out more about peoples' movements shaping globalisation. Read:

Power, profit and protest : Australian social movements and globalisation, Verity Burgmann, 2003

Protest And Globalisation : Prospects For Transnational Solidarity, James Goodman, 2002

• Find out about and get involved in peoples' movements in your local area

Full references on the ERC website