

The struggles will continue in 2020

Welcome to the final edition of SEARCH News for 2019. Inside you'll find articles on a breadth of topics - the uprising in Chile, the Black - Palestine solidarity conference, ecological socialism and the activities of the New International Bookshop in Melbourne, to name a few. If you read nothing else, don't miss the article on the celebration of our comrade Vera Deacon's enormous contribution to the Newcastle region, and to Australian politics and the arts more generally.

In national politics, PM Morrison has left for Hawaii, while a ring of fire encircles Sydney, fires blaze across the country, and the country bakes in record heat. The nation is losing precious World Heritage forests and native animals, some irreplaceable, as well as houses and infrastructure.

The attempt by the climate-denying right to deflect blame onto 'greenies', for allegedly stopping hazard reduction burns, has been so disingenuous that only the most rusted on right-wingers are still trying to pursue it. The feeling in the rest of the community is often despair. Activists have responded with snap protests, while organised workers on the docks have stopped work due to unhealthy smoke hazes.

This week's half-yearly Budget review, MYEFO, revealed that growth, employment and wage forecasts have all been downgraded. It shows this government to be the highest-taxing since Howard's, while one third of major Australian corporations still pay no tax.

Wage stagnation continues, despite 33 wrong wage forecasts. The government says nothing about inequality, and has no plans to raise the Newstart allowance, nor for the aged-care crisis, under-investment in public infrastructure, homelessness and housing affordability.

Labour's devastating loss in the UK election is a blow for the left everywhere. As in the US, Australia and elsewhere, too many working-class voters believed Johnson's right-wing populist lies.

Labour will need to analyse the reasons for its defeat and work out strategies to win next time on the progressive policies that actually had wide support in many opinion polls. The membership will most likely continue to support such a program for real change and elect a leader who will resist right-wing urgings to swing back to neoliberalism.

Johnson will now roll out a hard-line neoliberal agenda under the cover of Brexit. Britain's progressive forces will need strong unity to resist the coming onslaught.

Johnson will not have it all his own way. Once the UK leaves the EU, the focus can switch to Britain's rampant inequality and unfairness and the real agenda of the Tory hard-line right.

The electoral defeats of 2019 make independent mass movements even more imperative. The strikes and mass demonstrations happening worldwide - in Chile, Ecuador, Brazil, Lebanon, France, Iraq, and Pakistan - have not been reported by the mass media here (see Richard Walsham's article on page 11). But 2020 will undoubtedly see more resistance, protests, and activism world-wide on the climate crisis and inequality.

These issues make it more important than ever that SEARCH continues its work of linking and enabling socialist activists through our education programs, our publications and online presence, our events and our participation in mass campaigns. We have a very full calendar for 2020 that will rely on our members' commitment. ❖

INSIDE

- > P.2 Newcastle honours Vera Deacon
- > P.3 Ensuring Integrity Bill
- > P.4 Chile Woke Up
- > P.5 *Sorry We Missed You*
- > P.5 Literacy for Life
- > P.5 New International Bookshop
- > P.6 Black - Palestinian Solidarity
- > P.7 Ecological Socialism
- > P.8 2019 in images
- > P.10 Watermelons down the Tigris
- > P.11 The Australian media's terrible reporting on international events
- > P.12 Review: Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*

Newcastle honours veteran activist Vera Deacon

Marilla North & Brian Aarons

At a ceremony on 25 September, the City of Newcastle honoured SEARCH member and veteran socialist activist Vera Deacon, for her ongoing contribution to the life and progressive movements of the city. About two hundred of Vera's friends and family, together with community leaders, gathered at Newcastle City Hall to celebrate Vera's many contributions to her beloved native city.

Local historian, conservationist and social justice advocate for people and place - especially the rivers - Vera Deacon is a true daughter of the Hunter River estuary and the wider Newcastle region.

She returned to live in Newcastle in 1997 and bought a house at Stockton, the nearest place she could live close to the river and the islands where she had been reared. She joined the Kooragang Wetlands Rehabilitation Project where she has volunteered for the past 20 years, with hundreds of other dedicated conservationists, to plant thousands of trees and reclaim the wetlands and her beloved Ash Island as green lungs breathing for the residents of the Hunter into the future.

Newcastle Lord Mayor, Nuatali Nelmes, presented Vera with the Keys of the City, naming her a Civic Ambassador with the title "Freeman of the City". Vera quickly amended that title to "Freewoman of the City". The Lord Mayor's citation on behalf of the City of Newcastle is in the box at right.

SEARCH member Rod Noble was one of those who provided a testimonial in support of Vera's Lord Mayor's award. He mentioned her longstanding membership of the Communist Party (CPA) and noted:

She never became obsessed with success but more with getting on with whatever project she was involved in. If put end to end, these projects would take up many normal lifetimes. Whether it was local history, labour movement history, Aboriginal history, cultural history, environmental activism and much more.

The ceremony also recognised the launch of a 'chapbook' in Vera's honour, published by Yarnspinners Press. Many of the stories and articles in the chapbook were retrieved from old *Tribunes* dating back to the early 1950s and anthologies in the series "*The Tracks We Travel*".

Singing Back the River: A Miscellany of Selected Writings by and for Vera Deacon comprises a signed and numbered limited edition of 250 books. The chapbook is generously illustrated with linocuts by famous Melbourne social realist, Noel Counihan. The publishers gratefully acknowledge the support for this project from the Counihan Estate and in particular the artist's son, Michael Counihan. ❖

Copies of the book can be obtained from Vera Deacon herself at a cost of \$30.00 plus \$5.00 postage. Send a cheque or money-order to: 4 Clyde Street, Stockton, 2295 NSW or call her on 02 4920 1141.



Vera Deacon and Newcastle Lord Mayor Nuatali Nelmes.

(Photo credit: Newcastle City Council)

Newcastle Lord Mayor's Citation

The City of Newcastle deeply appreciates the contribution that Vera Deacon has made to the ongoing preservation and interpretation of our incredibly rich local history.

Born on the banks of the Hunter River, Vera's personal story is a remarkable insight into Novocastrian history itself, spanning all the way from the Great Depression to this day.

Vera remains an activist steadfastly involved in progressive social and political movements.

She is a trailblazer for women and a leading cultural activist integral in the development of Australian literature.

Newcastle has long been a progressive city where community activism and solidarity have been intrinsic in creating change for the betterment of society.

Newcastle stories will be remembered, thanks in part to the Vera Deacon Regional History Fund.

Through her generosity and passion, Vera has ensured that current and future generations of Novocastrians will be able to access the records and accounts of those who have come before them.

It is these stories that I hope will encourage future generations of activists and progressives.

It is Vera's story that I hope will inspire Novocastrians of all ages to remember our past for the prosperity it has created for us all.

Today, the City of Newcastle recognises this immense contribution by naming Vera Deacon as a Freeman of the City of Newcastle.

Lord Mayor Nuatali Nelmes
City of Newcastle

Where to with the fight against the Ensuring Integrity Bill?

Don Sutherland

How should union movement activists define the first defeat of the Ensuring Integrity Bill (EIB)? A major strategic breakthrough, or a significant tactical achievement? And why does it matter?

The May Federal election showed the limits of a union strategy focused almost exclusively on the parliamentary road to fairness. During the election campaign Morrison and the LNP policy showed no appetite for this Bill. But the employers did and they wasted no time making sure that the new Lib–Nat government would go after unions in a big way, even though the current Fair Work Act 2009 (FWA09) is heavily stacked in their favour, loaded with what we have called its “broken rules”. Remember, the government’s full Review of the FWA09 is also under way, as required by the employer organisations and their gross lie to the Australian public that the FWA09 is loaded against them, not workers.

Defeating the renewed Ensuring Integrity Bill became an immediate priority for us because it would hit hard at workers’ capacity to use both compliant and defiant unionism. And, we had to build that fight very quickly on the rocky terrain of a dispirited and somewhat confused activist base arising from the election result. This necessary defensive engagement was consistent with but could not expect to break through against the FWA09’s anti-worker “rules”. The activist base of our depleted union movement responded strongly in a lobbying campaign and has been defined as the main reason for last Friday’s win.

Our victory means we are marking time, not set back, nor marching forwards towards a “fairer” Fair Work Act, of which the most important feature is the “the right” to strike. What remains at stake is how we go about fighting wage suppression, wage theft and inequality, and associated climate catastrophe. Can we entertain strategic options beyond the “parliamentary road”?

There are good reasons to talk about the November 27 “win” as a tactical achievement.

There will be a round 2 of this battle pretty quickly

The first and the most obvious is that the Bill was returned to the Parliament the next week for reconsideration early next year. The battle will have to be won again, but next time over the torpor of the summer holiday funk that most union activists yearn for. The terrain for us to win again might improve if, in the meantime, the government loses out in the Taylor affair, and on other fronts like its proposed changes on religious discrimination. One self-

indulgent, careless act by any union leader in this time will have consequences. Whatever the thinking behind the ACTU’s courtship of One Nation (ON) and its leader Pauline Hanson, this was a necessary tactical decision; not because of the headline rapprochement with Hanson, but because it paid due respect to the significant working class cohort in the ON electoral base. However, ON’s rejection of the Bill at this Senate vote will not necessarily be repeated. Hanson is rarely consistent or logical. Repeating our effort will depend again on our movement’s effort to mobilise working class ON members and hangers on to tell Hanson and Roberts to vote NO once more. Where Senator Lambie will go next time is also an unknown.

We should never forget that ON politics is based on a racist view of the world that in its essence divides the working class. All the more reason not to build our offensive strategy for the future on tactical necessity to persuade their leaders in the short term.

What type of unionism: compliance and/or defiance?

The second reason for defining this win as a tactical achievement lies in the character of the unionism that we wish to practice both immediately and into the future.

Much of the “mainstream” debate was framed around militant unionism being bad and obedient unionism being acceptable. The Ensuring Integrity Bill is an attack on both. The Bill’s primary spokesperson, Attorney-General Christian Porter, defended the Bill because it would inflict no harm on the Shop Assistants Union that he defined as a “gold standard” union.

To be accurate about it, the ACTU’s messaging was not always about this: highly regarded union workers like nurses, teachers and firefighters, need to defy the “unprotected action” laws of the current FWA09 to run effective campaigns on healthy employment ratios and the like.

However, this messaging was not always promoted to the broader public. Pushed along by Senator Lambie’s bargaining position, the tendency to “CFMMEU bad, nurses good” was quite prominent.

The modern parliamentary ALP wants compliant unionism. It was the primary architect of the “broken rules” of the FWA09. At the May election it advocated quite narrow reforms if it won government that would reward cooperation with employers and not include an advance on the “right” to strike. There are enough union leaders around who are quite comfortable with that model of compliance.

Continued on page 4 ...

But do we want an early 2020 tactical campaign to allow ourselves to be defined as “compliant”? What is wrong with defying laws that deny workers the bargaining power to deal effectively with employers on a single employer or industry basis, or to intervene industrially in issues of great social consequence, for example anti-apartheid, anti-war and the march to climate catastrophe? Compliant unionism has been a dominant feature of our union history but the great historical breakthroughs have been made by defiant, militant unionism that stretch and even break the law. They have NOT been produced through cooperation with employers. ❖



Massive popular rally, Santiago, October 25, 2019.

Chile Woke Up

Jose L Muñoz

Chile has now seen over fifty-two consecutive days of mass mobilisation throughout the country. It started off in Santiago as protests by mostly high schoolgirls over the increase in metro prices. The protests gained mass support and within a few days had spread throughout all of Chilean society. People from every demographic took to the streets demanding deep structural change and outright rejecting the neoliberal agenda implemented by Milton Friedman’s “Chicago Boys”, a model untouched from the days of the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet.

Social demands over inequality are at the core of this crisis - the Gini index that measures inequality has ranked Chile as the most unequal country in the OECD. The class divide that was always big is now bigger. Chile has long working hours (the work week was 45 hrs, recently legislated to 40 hrs a week), and low wages - the minimum wage is about A\$600 a month. Chileans also want a new pension scheme since the current AFP private system gives on average A\$300 a month. It is common for seniors to continue to work to make ends meet. Being in debt from going to university or to cover medical expenses is considered normal.

State infrastructure has been reduced to ruins after being rolled back and sold off for over 30 years. For example, all of Chilean water is privatised. Public education and health are extremely underfunded with over demand.

The resignation of President Sebastian Piñera has become a more prominent demand after mishandling the situation from day one. On October 19 he declared a state of emergency, stating “we are at war with a powerful enemy”. The state of emergency lasted for nine days. The state repression has been brutal and reckless with the same methodology as was done during the dictatorship.

Piñera now has blood on his hands. Twenty-three people have been killed, and 3,449 have been injured at the hands of the military and police. The damage from shotguns and rubber pellets have caused 352 eye injuries, people are shot at close range with shotguns and tear gas launchers with the intent to do as much damage as possible. The INDH (National Human Rights Institute) reports 192 cases of sexual violence, 405 claims of torture, strip searches and forcing people (predominantly women) to squat naked for long periods of time. Exactly like 1973.

With an approval rate of 4.6% by Encuesta Pulso Ciudadano, Piñera has not been able to take control of the crisis.

He had to cancel hosting the COP25 and APEC 2019 Forum. A Cabinet reshuffle and bandaid solutions have not met the social demands coming from the streets. A new law criminalises the protests with tough jail terms for throwing stones, making barricades and hiding faces.

In Congress, the whole Right, Centre and even some Left MPs have signed off on agreement for constitutional change with a plebiscite announced for April 2020. There are two options for the plebiscite. One is for a body to draft a new constitution to be of equal parts of current MPs and others elected from the public. The second option is to be wholly elected from the public. How these are elected from the populace is still not clearly defined.

The Left wants “Asamblea Constituyente” (Constituent Assembly), a true democratic assembly that accurately represents Chilean society. Left wing local councils, neighbourhood groups, social organisations and even soccer clubs began their own process to ask people how to implement political change. “Cabildos” (public forums) have erupted everywhere, a rare positive development.

The majority of population want the mobilisations, which don’t appear to be losing any momentum. People want to be protagonists in the change process. The future is uncertain in Chile where the state has always placed law-and-order as a higher priority than the lives of its citizens. ❖

The statistics on human rights violations come from INDH, last updated 6/12/19.

Sorry We Missed You - a new Ken Loach film

Ken Loach returns after his award winning *I, Daniel Blake* (2016), with another brilliant study of a struggling working-class couple caught in a hopelessly exploitative system.

Ricky (Kris Hitchen) is a former construction worker in Newcastle, UK, who lost both his building work and his chance of a mortgage after the economic crash of 2008. Easily impassioned, with a liking for the drink, he is nevertheless proudly hardworking and loves his two kids and wife Abby (Debbie Honeywood), an overworked contract nurse and in-home carer. When Ricky takes a golden opportunity to buy a van, start his own business and become a freelance deliveryman, things don't quite work out as planned, and his already dire situation takes a turn for the worse. As the impossible demands of the job edge him further into debt and push his family relationship to the brink of collapse, we can only watch as his and Abby's confusion turns to despair.

Lauded with outstanding reviews internationally, this tale is a stirring example of the honesty and humour for which the director is known best.

Sorry We Missed You will be re-released on Boxing Day, December 26th for general exhibition. ❖

Support the Literacy for Life project

SEARCH News readers will be aware that a number of our members have been supporting the Literacy for Life Foundation since 2012, a national Aboriginal organisation which was set up to lead a national Aboriginal adult literacy campaign, using the Cuban *Yes, I Can!* model. In the last nine years, LFLF has taken this campaign into 10 communities in NSW, and this year also began another in the Central Australian community of Ltyentye Apurte. The campaign in Brewarrina was featured in the documentary, *In My Own Words*, produced by Blackfella Films and shown on NITV & SBS.

If you support the *Voice Treaty Truth* campaign, you will understand how important this campaign is, because the people with least literacy are the ones most likely to be excluded from this process. Overwhelmingly located in rural and remote communities, and on the fringes of major cities, they are also at the front line in the environmental catastrophe which capitalism has inflicted on their country. As the year comes to an end, the campaign is struggling to raise the funds to keep going in several communities, so Xmas present donations are welcome. Go to www.lflf.org.au/donate/ and follow the prompts, or email joe@lflf.org.au for bank transfer details. ❖

- Bob Boughton

New International Bookshop in 2019

Our Vision:

NIBS in Melbourne was established to operate a bookshop and to develop complementary activities for people whose concerns about justice, democratic rights and the environment lead them to a vision of an alternative society. NIBS provides for those who want to read and discuss critiques of contemporary capitalism as well as analyses of gender, class, environment and other important issues from a progressive viewpoint.

NIBS Events Update:

This period saw a range of NIBS events, a great way to instill and encourage analytical discussions of Left ideas and encourage like-minded people into the bookshop.

We had our major fundraiser June 29th – our annual Big Red Bookfair. This was one of our most successful book fairs in years. Thanks to our committed volunteers, donors and supporters, we raised around \$6,000.

Our book launches and speakers ranged from political and economic theoretical discussions, and this year we launched our 'underground' political documentary series, which aims to showcase a range of high quality, but often less well-known progressive political documentaries.

Our events have been well attended, with most either sold out or very well attended. As NIBS is Melbourne's only radical left bookshop, hosting these events is a significant way to ensure NIBS is recognised as a Left political hub. Also, to showcase the shop as a welcoming area to discuss the difficult and complex issues that we face, both locally and internationally.

Each event is co-branded with SEARCH and we acknowledge the organisation's support to hold such events and encourage participants to look at SEARCH's website and to join the organisation.

Some of our recent events include:

- A modern slavery story - Prum Vannak on *The Dead Eye and the Deep Blue Sea*
- Dismantling the digital dystopia - Lizzie O'Shea & John Postill in conversation
- Book launch - *Being Left-Wing in Australia: Identity, Culture and Politics after Socialism*
- Frank Stillwill & Anthea Spinks (Oxfam) on *Political Economy of Inequality*
- Antony Loewenstein on his book *Pills, Powder and Smoke: Inside the Bloody War on Drugs*

Continued on page 6 ...

(2019 events cont'd)

- How Victoria invented our world-first compulsory minimum wage, and how it needs to reconnect with that tradition
- Underground Docos @ NIBS - WORK
- Underground Docos @ NIBS: We Don't Need a Map

Growth in Volunteers

NIBS continues to grow its team of volunteers.

We now have more than thirty regular volunteers who help ensure the bookshop runs smoothly or sort through second hand book donations. Several of these volunteers joined NIBS after attending our events.

NIBS also had our first intern from RMIT. Lauren was a great addition to the daily shop and events for the past two months. We hope more students will be interested in interning at NIBS.

**THE NEW
INTERNATIONAL
BOOKSHOP**
RADICAL BOOKS IN THE HEART OF MELBOURNE

Top selling books at NIBS:

- *The Origin of Capitalism*
- *Future Histories*
- *A little History of Australian Unions*
- *The Political Economy of Inequality*
- *The Dead Eye and the Deep Blue Sea*
- *Chuang 1: Dead Generations*
- *Chuang 2: Frontiers*
- *The Rise of Nerds Politics*
- *The Next Revolution*

Coffee Shop:

NIBS is currently working with Trades Hall to open a fair-trade coffee shop on the ground floor of the 'New' Council building adjacent to the courtyard. After surveying the workers at Trades Hall and discussing the idea with their management it was decided that a café would be very welcome and viable. We have hired a consultant and business advisor and we aim to open the shop early in early 2020. If it goes well the coffee shop will help to subsidise the bookstore and increase our financial viability moving forward. ❖

The Black-Palestinian Solidarity Conference - contesting settler narratives

Lee Rhiannon

The three days of the "Black-Palestinian Solidarity Conference - contesting settler narratives" were amazing. I had wondered how the three days would be sustained with sessions all day and into the evening.

We heard forty speeches from academics and activists from across Australia and around the world. Hundreds of people attended with more people there on the last day than the first. It was a testament to the organisers, the speakers and participants.

Opening the event, one of the organisers, Professor Gary Foley, said the conference was to confront the issues that Aboriginal and Palestinian people are forced to live with due to the settler nationalisms they still have to contend with. He strongly argued that "Reconciliation is not justice". Gary's opening remarks took a long view - he said clearly that while this was an occasion to share ideas and experiences he saw it as a journey to the next conference where action decisions are taken.

Gary's comments about the high rates of incarceration, deaths in custody and other aspects of the

ongoing racism of settler colonial countries set the tone for this powerful conference. The enthusiasm for a follow up event grew as we heard from all the speakers. Gary opened the conference with Ali Kazak, who was the PLO representative in Australia and Oceania in the 1990s and 2000s.

Among the very fine speakers were:

Prof Nadia Abu El-Haj (via skype from Columbia University).

Prof John Maynard, Chair of Aboriginal History at Newcastle Uni, who spoke about Aboriginal resistance.

Prof Rabab Abdulhadi with a speech titled "Narrating Cultures of Resistance and Solidarity: Palestine, Third Worldism and the Spirit of '68".

Murradoo Yanner, Carpentaria Land Council Aboriginal Corporation.

Dr Randa Abdel-Fattah from Macquarie University.

Shatha Safi, an architect with RIWAQ, an NGO working to protect the cultural heritage of Palestine.

Dr Adania Shibli from Birzet University in Palestine. ❖

Ecological Socialism

Chris Warren
Retired Senior Researcher
Canberra

On 25 November 2019, the United Nations reported that greenhouse gas concentrations reached “yet another high”. The World Meteorological Organisation Secretary General, Petteri Taalas, added that “there is no sign of a slowdown, let alone a decline, in greenhouse gases concentration in the atmosphere despite all the commitments under the Paris Agreement”.

In Australia, the latest data shows emissions are falling on a per capita basis but this is jeopardised by excessive population growth and associated urban development. This is where SEARCH has a role because capitalism only survives as long as population expands. SEARCH has long called for an alternative economic system, one based on sustainable economics and ecology. More work is needed here as socialism, as presently conceived, may not be sufficient. There is nothing within socialism that automatically regulates economic growth to ecological limits.

Nonetheless, socialism is the first step. A socialist economy does not rely on future sales producing more revenue than outlaid in current production. It does not rely on exploiting the cheapest form of labour or energy and it does not rely on commercial secrecy and patent rights to extract profits. The reason that all efforts to limit greenhouse gas emissions have failed is that capitalism is based on a lifestyle that exceeds ecological limits, particularly the Earth’s capacity to reabsorb the huge quantity of greenhouse gases being produced. Only



SEARCH members at the Sydney Climate Strike in March 2019



Climate protesters in Madrid at COP25

socialism can deliver a world economy within the various limits of global ecology.

The dominant global limit is the extent that greenhouse sources remain within the Earth’s ability to reabsorb greenhouse gases either naturally or through carbon sequestration. Capitalists will only reduce emissions if this means they make more profit. They will only roll-out carbon sequestration projects where they gain the most profit. Capitalism will never reduce emissions based on any other principle and will actively oppose any public policy that diminishes their rates of return.

The Earth’s capacity to reabsorb greenhouse gases (i.e. ‘sink’) is limited by the amount of ocean we have available. Vegetation cannot sink greenhouse gases in the long run as most plants die and trees that survive do not sink carbon when they reach maturity – they are in balance. The capacity of oceans to absorb gas is determined by the partial pressures of gas in the atmosphere compared to the gases in solution. The point at which this is in balance is critical and unfortunately our planet has never been in balance at least since the early Nineteenth Century.

Today, our lifestyle is based on emitting over 16 tonnes of CO₂ per capita. Consequently the changes we must make are way beyond anything that capitalists, or the Greens or the ALP, could ever consider. Humanity needs a new future and SEARCH, working within the labour movement, must rise to the challenge.

Socialism needs new concepts. Socialism must be based on balancing greenhouse gas emissions with greenhouse sinks. There is no alternative. ❖

SEARCH Foundation in 2019



Still taken from the SEARCH Foundation Federal Election campaign video, May 2019

SEARCH members at the Sydney May Day Parade, May 2019

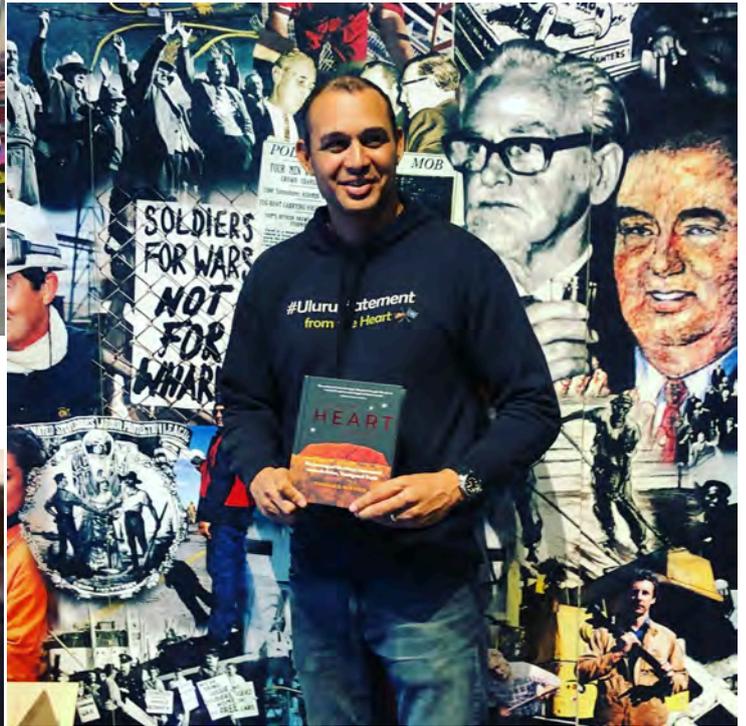
Linking & Enabling Socialist Activists



Speakers at the SEARCH Foundation post-election trade union forum, marking the 50th anniversary of the gaoling of Clarrie O'Shea and the Penal Powers Strike: Steve Murphy (AMWU), Natalie Lang (ASU), Tom McDonald (retired CFMEU), Don Sutherland (SEARCH), June 26.



Canberra members at the Palm Sunday Rally for Refugees, April 14.

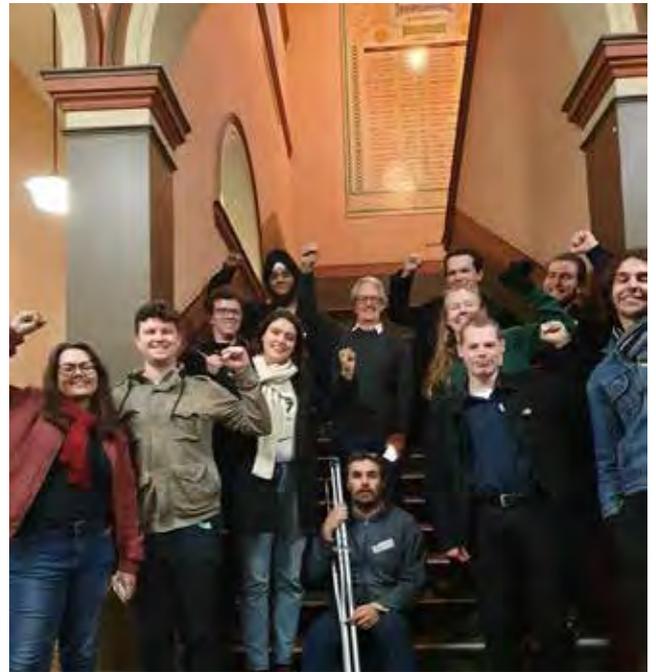


Thomas Mayor at the Sydney launch of his book *Finding the Heart of the Nation*, Maritime Union, Sydney, October 22. (Photo: Carmel Delprat)



SEARCH members' meeting, Adelaide, Nov.

Education Publications Campaigns



Participants and trainers at the SEARCH Education Program, Melbourne, July



SEARCH Committee members rocking their Change the Rules T-Shirts, Feb.



SEARCH Education Program, Brisbane, Sept.



SEARCH political education program with NSW Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, Nov.



SEARCH Education Program, Perth, Sept.

Watermelons floating down the Tigris - a story from Diyarbakir

Gill H. Boehringer

I was discussing the socio-economic situation in North Kurdistan/Eastern Turkey with my interpreter after we had completed an interview about the alternative justice system the Kurds have developed there (and in Syrian or South Kurdistan, just over the Turkey-Syria border). He was talking about the need for development and modernisation in this part of Kurdistan. We agreed one had to be careful what one wished for.

I discussed with him the work of Karl Polanyi, in particular *The Great Transformation*. Polanyi described the move from a society where the economy was embedded in other social relations such that the people were not simply focused on economic values. But as capitalism developed, the economy was disembedded, and gradually 'economic values' became dominant, and today all-pervading in many "developed" countries.

My friend then told me the following story which is a wonderful illustration of the process which Polanyi described, and of what Marx referred to when he wrote of the disintegration of human relationships under capitalism, so that all that was left between people, in the end, was "the cash nexus".

He told me that as a boy here in the great, historic city of Diyarbakir (Amed in Kurdish) he and his friends would go down to the river, the Tigris, and play.

Sometimes they would just sit on the bank and kick their feet in the water or splash each other. But they would also keep an eye out for dark objects floating past in the river, watermelons, for which the area is renowned. Indeed, the watermelon is the main symbol for Amed. They are very large and very tasty. Today, one finds them for sale all over the city. But in those days, maybe even just 30 years ago, the boys would haul them out of the river and devour them.

According to my interpreter, in the old days the farmers would grow the melons all along the river and the roots would be supplied by water from the river. Today much of this land is used for intensive commercial cotton crops to feed the garment industry. Growing cotton takes a great deal of water from the river, apparently more than the melons.

In the "old days", according to my interpreter, the melon farmers would toss a significant portion of their crop into the river. Why? So that people downstream would be able to fish the melons out of the water and enjoy the fruit which they otherwise would not have nor be able to afford. That was an historic practice that preceded the thorough disembedding of the local economy.

Sadly, the melons no longer float down the Tigris. They are all taken to market to be sold. And the small boys in Diyarbakir no longer go down to the river. They are busy hustling money from the tourists and others who throng the streets and alleyways of the historic "old town" with its great stone wall of basalt. ❖

Australian media's terrible reporting on international events

Richard Walsham

We are all aware of the biased reporting in the Australian mainstream corporate media of domestic news. The Murdoch media is by far the worst. It is so bad that many Australians factor it in when reading their over-the-top stories which show little distinction between news and far right-wing opinion and propaganda.

There are other outlets that provide some counter balance. The ABC is succumbing to incessant right-wing and Government pressure and failing in many instances to provide some counter balance. There are still several outlets, usually fringe, providing a counter narrative to that of the mainstream media.

I would argue that it is in the area of international affairs that we are being badly let down by our media outlets, even the more progressive ones like *The Saturday Paper*.

Australian news organisations tend to take their cues from their counterparts abroad, especially in the US and UK. Let me cite a few examples.

One would get the impression reading the Australian media that Hong Kong is the main place in the world where mass protests against an authoritarian regime are taking place. I don't suggest these protests are not legitimate, but note the sympathetic coverage given here to Hong Kong protesters destroying public assets and property in Hong Kong compared with the limited coverage given to protests in other countries where the protests are directed against authoritarian right-wing and neoliberal policies and regimes.

Maybe the fact that the US Government is using the Hong Kong situation and the Chinese Government's heavy-handed handling of it as an excuse to ramp up militarist responses to Beijing, has something to do with the mainstream coverage.

On the other hand, protests against neoliberal policies and authoritarian governments are breaking out all over the world and scarcely rate a mention in the Australian



Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez endorses Bernie Sanders in Brooklyn, NY. (Credit: Bernie Sanders Facebook page)

media. There have been massive strikes and demonstrations in Chile, Ecuador, Brazil, Lebanon, France, Iraq, Catalonia and Pakistan. There has been a fascist coup in Bolivia, never described as such.

Then there's the coverage of the US presidential primaries. There's a US mainstream media blackout of the insurgent Bernie Sanders campaign. Bernie Sanders has over four million people donating to his campaign – never reported here. The US media dismisses Sanders as far-left even though many of his promises are in line with what we already have in Australia. They are exceedingly popular in the US, giving the lie to the common narrative that the US population is very conservative. The idea of democratic socialism is gaining astounding levels of support in the US, especially among young people. None of this gets reported here.

Australian media outlets just regurgitate the US establishment talking points. Washington correspondents get caught up in the US corporate media establishment bubble. Rarely do they venture out to conduct their own independent research and study the extensive progressive alternative media outlets to better inform their reporting.

Even *The Saturday Paper* which publishes excellent investigative and well-researched stories on Australian politics, falls down on international stories. Its main expert has strong connections to the Australian foreign policy establishment and rarely challenges establishment narratives.

Left and progressive people seeking alternative views on international events need to turn to some excellent online outlets. They'll quickly realise how inadequate our mainstream media is when reporting and analysing things going on in the rest of the world.

I list just a few here:

US

Jacobin Magazine online
The Young Turks (TYT)
Secular Talk (Kyle Kulinski)
Humanist Report (Mike Figueredo)
The Hill – Rising
The Useful Idiots
The Grayzone
The Jimmy Dore Show
Common Dreams – online articles
The Intercept
Rational National

UK

Novara Media
The Canary ❖

Review: Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*

Victoria Brookman

For fans of young adult fiction and anything but Margaret Atwood comes Atwood's latest novel, *The Testaments* (Penguin, 2019), a text that is indeed a testament to many things: greed, capitalist-patriarchy, and the death of literary fiction.

Its predecessor, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), was a brilliant standalone text, which unequivocally did not need a sequel. As an Atwood scholar I've long been suspicious of the corporate televisual bastardisation of her seminary text, but I've gotta say, even I was shocked at the new levels to which *The Testaments* took that bastardisation.

I read this book when it first hit the digital shelves a few months ago, but it has taken me so long to write this because frankly, reader, I'm horrified. I'm horrified that this drivel passes for Atwood. I'm horrified at the skin-crawling way that Hulu's TV Gilead has bled into Atwood's Gilead. I'm horrified that it even got a look-in for the Booker Prize, let alone won it (albeit mercifully not alone).

The book is based on the testimonies of three women: Aunt Lydia, Agnes (aka Hannah) and Nicole. The latter two are the biological daughters of Offred, the protagonist of *THT*, whose future was uncertain at its conclusion.

There was a point to this uncertainty. It let the horror hang in the air. It wasn't an empowering story. It was grinding, gritty and cautionary. The uncertainty focused the reader's mind not on a happy resolution for Offred but on the terror of Gilead and the violence and sex-based oppression that defined it. As a continuation of this story, *The Testaments* is gratuitous.

What we are offered is two-thirds young adult fiction plot (Agnes and Nicole), and one-third Atwood fan fiction (Aunt Lydia). The McGuffin is some vital data that could compromise the regime, which needs to get to Canada. For some irrational reason, 'Baby Nicole' needs to be the courier of this data, even though the resistance has literally lost lives to keep her out of Gilead's reach. Cue suspense and exciting-ish chase through the wilderness.

Aunt Lydia's commentary provides the only vaguely Atwoodian content, mostly in the subversive catty asides and brutal truths about the humanity of other characters. But Aunt Lydia irks me the most. She was one of the chief enforcing fascists of the regime in *THT*. She indoctrinated the womb-slave handmaids with some of the worst aspects of Gilead's theology and philosophy, assaulting handmaids with cattle prods and cutting their eyes out as punishment for minor infractions. She was a key element of the political message of *THT*, demonstrating that some women are complicit in the

misogynistic, sex-based oppression of other women, and elevating the message to a whole-system critique, instead of a simplistic battle of the sexes.

In *The Testaments* that careful nuance is undone. Aunt Lydia is given a forgiving backstory and ascends to a merciful, subversive, mother hen archetype. *She was a goodie all along, phew!* Have her alleged secret resistance activities been at all effective or helpful? Evidently not. Whitewashing her in this way is a copout and it cheapens the entire universe.

There were many points at which I found myself wondering if Atwood even wrote *The Testaments* at all. While Aunt Lydia's chapters could pass for Atwood, the teen angst-ridden journeys of Agnes and Baby Nicole were jaw-droppingly formulaic and commercial.

This is not to say that there's not a place for commercial and/or young adult fiction out there. But to present it as Atwoodian literary fiction? Literary fiction worthy of the Booker Prize, no less? Something has gone terribly wrong here. ❖

SEARCH NEWS

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