

'An injury to one is an injury to all'

Race, gender and the struggle for working class power in Aotearoa



A union "green ban" helped stop the theft of Maori land at Bastion Point

By Mike Treen, National Director, Unite Union

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Working people need to confront racism, sexism and anti-immigrant prejudice if we are to be successful in uniting our class sufficiently to take on the huge power of the one percent – the super-rich owners of most productive wealth in society.

Workers face many challenges uniting against their common enemy – the boss class and its paid servants.

We are usually brought up to see our role in life as being nothing more than cogs in someone else's machine. Creativity is discouraged. Aspiring for "something better" is seen as only leading to disappointment and failure. Rebellion is crushed.

Our role in life is to become a wage slave working for "the man".

Organising collectively is the worst crime and can result in being banished from polite society as a "communist unionist", or ["haters and wreckers"](#).(1)

Since humanity emerged from the stage of primitive communism 10,000 years ago all human societies have been class societies divided between the producers of wealth and the owners of that wealth. These societies are of course run by those who own or control the wealth. The dominant ideas of those societies are the ideas that promote the interests of the ruling class. We are told that those who make up the ruling class are superior in some way. Identities we have in common to the ruling class are promoted. Those of us who provide labour and create the wealth for the rulers – be that as peasants, slaves or workers – are taught to think as members of a kingdom, a nation or a race rather than as members of a class.

Before class society existed there were no special forms of oppression that could be imposed. There existed an equality of poverty. No one could accumulate a surplus and turn that into their private property to be protected by force and violence.

[Women were equal](#).(2) "Race" did not even exist as a category. People lived in small tribal groups with no idea of separate "nations" or races. However, with the development of agriculture, there was a surplus in production that was able to be monopolised by a separate class of owners. This was the first revolution in production and as well as

producing the first forms of a class divided society also witnessed the subordination of women as a “second sex”. Institutionalised discrimination followed. This was referred to as the “[world-historic defeat of the female sex](#)”(3) by socialist pioneer Frederick Engels writing over 100 years ago.

This interconnected process was explained well by Thomas Sankara the revolutionary leader of Burkina Faso before his overthrow and execution in 1987: “Humankind first knew slavery with the advent of private property. Man, master of his slaves and of the land, became in addition the woman’s master. This was the historic defeat of the female sex. ... Property was now handed down from father to son, rather than as before from the woman to her clan. The patriarchal family made its appearance, founded on the sole and personal property of the father, who had become head of the family. Within this family the woman was oppressed. Reigning supreme, the man satisfied his sexual whims by mating with his slaves or courtesans. ... Wherever the patriarchy has triumphed, there has been a close parallel between class exploitation and women’s inferior status.” (Thomas Sankara, 1987, 'Women’s Liberation and the African Freedom Struggle')

Today the bosses use the differences that have been bequeathed to them like the oppression of women to their advantage. The second class status of women was simply institutionalised under modern capitalism into paying women less. Women in New Zealand today earn on average [12 percent less than men](#).(4) Pasifika women are the [lowest-paid in the country](#),(5) earning only 69.9 per cent of what white men are paid, or why Maori women earn only 76 per cent of the white male pay rate.

Racism, however, was created as a tool by capitalism at its birth to justify the degradation and super-exploitation of non-whites. Racism emerged with the development of world trade (including trade in slaves) in the sixteenth century. It became a central tool of the capitalist rulers as part of the growth of colonialism to justify the barbaric methods needed to sustain the system of rule and exploitation that existed.

The legacy of that racism remains an important part of a system today that maintains a section of the population of different countries in a second-class status in order to super-exploit them. It is also a key

element of modern imperialism's colonial and neo-colonial relationship between the "first" (white) and "third" (Black, yellow and brown) worlds.

Colour differences, however, are not essential. Other differences can be used. The British empire maintained a discriminatory and oppressive relationship with the Irish people for centuries and justified it through a completely different narrative.

The colonisation and oppression of the Irish in Ireland was supplemented by forcing them into a second class status within the workforce in England itself. Lower wages, super-exploitation and super profits followed.

The ruling class is very conscious about using any differences to promote disunity whenever they are threatened by working class unity and struggle.



Signs like this were common in the UK through to the 1970s

Genuine class consciousness is needed to fight uncompromisingly for our own rights. We have to understand that our rights as workers are in

opposition to not just our own boss but the whole class of parasites that he belongs to. That means knowing that the class interests of our fellow workers – black, brown, yellow, Catholic, Protestant or Muslim, native born or migrant, female, Gay or Trans – are much the same as our own.

Divisions between workers strengthens the bosses' power

Allowing the bosses to use prejudice, ideas of national superiority over others, or racism to marginalise and subjugate a portion of the working class so that they are able to pay them less money and impose inferior conditions on them will only strengthen those same bosses against us when we try to improve our situation.

As a young man, I was somewhat infected by a belief that things would always get better. That seemed true for living standards and democratic rights for the 1960s and 1970s and continued into the early 1980s. Racism appeared to be being challenged, women's rights were being advanced, and we assumed gay rights would inevitably follow.

The Springbok Tour in 1981 and its aftermath appeared to shatter the crusty old colonial racism of the National Government led by the then Prime Minister Robert Muldoon.

Maori, in particular, seemed on the march. We saw the huge Land march in 1975, the Bastion Point and Raglan occupations, the regular Hikois to Waitangi. Some victories were achieved around language rights.

The Treaty of Waitangi Tribunal was established in 1975 to hear claims about breaches of treaty rights from that date. A decade later it had its jurisdiction extended to investigate claims going back to the signing of the Treaty in 1840. Some modest compensation settlements have been paid following Tribunal rulings even though it lacks the power to make binding rulings in most circumstances.

But that progress has been reversed in many real respects since the mid-1980s. This is true even as the establishment opened the doors to some Maori among more middle-class professional layers while excluding the vast majority from the fruits of capitalist "civilisation".

Most workers being pushed backwards

In the last few decades working people as a whole have been pushed backwards. Levels of poverty have doubled from 10-20% of the population using a consistent measure. Child poverty rates are nearer 25% of all children. Unemployment rates of 5% are considered a “success” when the rate was virtually zero for most of the half-century from 1935-85.

At the same time, Maori and Pasifika unemployment rates are more than double those of workers who are Pakeha.

The concessions won by Maori from the system are extremely modest compared to past losses.

Paying a miserly billion dollars over a 20 year period to “settle” all outstanding claims is a joke. The loss by Maori in real terms is many hundreds of times that figure. \$1 billion is a little over 1% of this year's government expenditure. Over the 20 year period since it began it would equal 0.1% or less.

Working people who are Pakeha are encouraged to resent the concessions to Maori and see any compensation paid to Maori as somehow coming from their own pocket. While we fight among ourselves over scraps from the bosses' table they are laughing all the way to the bank.

Let us compare that \$1 billion given in justified compensation to Maori to the billions lost by working people because we didn't fight together as a class hard enough these last few decades.

Billions robbed from working people

[CTU economist Bill Rosenberg calculates that](#) “labour share of income fell from approximately 60% of income in the early 1980s to 46% in 2002 – a loss to wage earners of about a quarter of aggregate income. It then recovered to around 50% – a sixth lower than the 1980s. In current dollar terms, that is a loss of about \$19bn per year or \$10,000 per wage earner per year. The present value of the loss over that period is estimated at between \$660bn (invested in term deposits) and \$1,200bn (paying off mortgages) or 3 to 5 times GDP. New Zealand's

labour share is very low by developed country standards: Piketty considers 60-70% typical. In United Nations comparisons, only Chile and Mexico are lower among OECD countries.”(6)

The successful right-wing neoliberal offensive against working people in the late 1980s and afterwards has robbed workers of a sum of wealth equivalent to at least \$660 billion dollars in today’s money!

It is not true that we can't afford welfare

That is also why it is economic nonsense to fall for the arguments that a changing demographics mean “we can’t afford” to continue to provide national super at 65 or top quality health care to the aged.

Similarly, we can afford decent health care, education, and welfare as a right for all.

There is a mathematical rule that you can use to work out how long it takes for a quantity to double at a particular growth rate. This is done by dividing the growth rate into 70. This is useful for looking at economies.

Between 1978 and 2011, aggregate labour productivity in New Zealand grew by an average of 2.73% a year according to a recent Productivity Commission report. At that rate, it means that every New Zealand worker will be producing twice as much as before every 26 years. The issue is not “can we afford it” but who will control that additional wealth. The problem we have is that the benefits of that productivity increase are being captured by the wealthy elite.

Max Rashbrooke, editor of *Inequality: A New Zealand crisis*, calculated that “In 1986, the top 10 percent took home 26.5 percent of New Zealand’s income. In 1999, it was 37.8 percent and in 2004, it was 33.2 percent.”

For the past three decades, NZ and the USA were among only a few countries with the enviable achievement that their workers doubled production but ended the period poorer in real terms than when they started. This is because all of the wealth gains were being captured by a tiny, thieving elite. This is the first generation in the history of capitalism in both countries for that to be a reality. This is not something the defenders of capitalism should be proud of.

They fact that our rulers have done it to us without us rising up in anger and hanging some of them from the lamp posts is to our shame.

Attacks on welfare benefits part of attack on all workers

Demonising beneficiaries was a necessary part of promoting divisions between working people, and pushing one group further down, in order to advance this attack on working people.

Having access to a benefit is a basic element of protection for working people confronted with the ups and downs of the business cycle under capitalism.

The bosses hate paying anything to working people – employed or unemployed. They use the threat of unemployment to discipline workers to obey and work harder. The lower the level of benefits the better from their viewpoint, because part of the fear of unemployment is the misery that will accompany life on the dole.

The bosses tell us that workers on a benefit are “bludgers” who don't want to work as justification for cutting benefit levels and making it harder and harder to access benefits.

But levels of unemployment were much lower in the period from the 1960s to the 1980s when benefits were higher in relation to average wages than they became in the early 1990s. When jobs were freely available, people chose to work rather than go on the dole.

Benefit cuts are designed to help cut wages as well.

Since the early 1990s, benefit levels have been slashed in real terms. The governments of the day were motivated to save money to give in tax cuts to their rich mates.

But they also made it clear they wanted to lower real wages. That is why they destroyed collective bargaining and union representation for most workers.

But to cut real wages the employers thinks they need the gap to grow between wages and welfare payments. They want to make living on a benefit as miserable as possible.

In 1991, National savagely cut the rates of all benefits, including the invalids and sickness benefits. The harshest cuts were for the unemployed.

The unemployment benefit was cut by 25% for young people, 20% for young sickness beneficiaries, and 17% for solo parents. They abolished the family benefit and made many workers ineligible for the unemployment benefit with a stand down period of up to six months. Unemployment benefits were stopped for 16 and 17 year-olds and the youth rate for 18 & 19 year-olds extended to the age of 25. The 1992 benefit cuts were worth approximately \$1.3 billion – about the same size of each of the tax cuts handed out in 1996 and 1998.

Benefits as a percentage of the average wage fell significantly after 1985. The single person unemployment benefit dropped from 42 to 30% of the average wage by 1996. National Super for a married couple went from 85% to 72%. A domestic purposes benefit for a parent with one child went from 80% to 53%. The benefit for an unemployed couple with two children went from 95 to 69% of the average wage. The real value of National Superannuation was cut by 40% when combined with the extension of the age of eligibility from 60 to 65 years between 1992 and 2001 (See Table 1).

Table 1:

BENEFITS AS A PERCENTAGE OF THE AVERAGE WAGE

	Single unemployed aged 20+ (%)	Mrd couple on aged benefit/ National Super (%)	Widow/Solo parent + 1 child (%)	Married couple plus 2 children (%)
1960	37.1	65.9	70.0	78.2
1965	35.3	63.9	67.2	73.8
1970	35.3	64.0	64.6	74.0
1975	41.2	68.7	68.7	83.4
1980	37.1	79.1	72.0	87.2
1985	42.4	84.8	79.8	95.2
1990	37.8	75.9	67.2	84.0
1991	32.7	72.5	57.4	73.9
1996	30.2	66.4	52.7	69.3

(1996 FIGURES INCLUDE FAMILY SUPPORT OF \$44.50 FOR THE FIRST CHILD AND \$29.50 FOR THE SECOND)

Prior to the cuts in 1991, around 25% of children in beneficiary families were identified as poor in the Household Economic Survey. That rose to 75% post cuts and hasn't changed much since.

To justify these cuts (and the refusal of the 1999-2008 Labour-led government to reverse them), a whole ideology around deserving and undeserving poor has been developed. Anyone who is not working is a "dole bludger".

Assistance is targeted to those "deserving" people in work through Working for families. Universal entitlements like the family benefit were eliminated so assistance could be targeted to the in-work "deserving" more accurately.

The system became one where seeking assistance became more and more difficult, humiliating, and vindictive.

Sometimes working people get misled by the arguments used to attack beneficiaries as bludgers and so on. Often the beneficiary bashing is accompanied by racist stereotypes of Maori and Pacific people breeding for welfare.

Firstly, we should know that having a welfare system is vital to putting a floor under how far we can be pushed down in this society.

When unemployment went from less than 3% to 12% in just a few years during the deep recession of the late 1980s and early 1990s it was not because there was a sudden mass infection of these communities by a laziness virus that saw tens of thousands of them quit work over just a few years.

Nor were Maori and Pasifika genetically more prone to get infected with the laziness virus. Prior to this recession, Maori and Pasifika actually had *higher labour force participation rates than did Pakeha*.

It was capitalism and its crises that drove tens of thousands of people out of work and into the unemployment queues.

Full-time male employment fell by 120,000 over four years 1987-91. Of course, this impacted much more on Maori and Pasifika. Working class communities and families were torn inside out and upside down.

To compensate for the loss of real income, families worked more hours. Two parent families with both working full time doubled from 20% in the 1980s to 42% of all families. Another 28% of families have a parent working part time.

A report by Simon Collins in the *New Zealand Herald* on November 25, 2006, found that average family income in 2001 in constant dollars was the same as in 1981 despite the fact that the proportion of women working went from 47% to 61% and the percentage of families working 50+ hours a week went from half to two-thirds.

The benefit values were slashed not because they were considered too high and seducing workers into giving up jobs but because the bosses wanted to cut real wages as well and the lower the real vale of a benefit the lower they could cut wages.

The 1990-1999 National government also saw only one increase in the minimum wage in nine years, so its real value dropped from about 50% of the average to about one third. Its real value was only restored through struggles by Unite and other unions under the 1999-2008 Labour-led government.

Unemployment also never dropped back to the levels that existed before the 1980s “reforms” that were meant to make the capitalist economy so much more competitive and dynamic. The lowest official rate was between three and four percent for a few years before the 2008 world financial crisis and accompanying recession drove the official rates to around six or seven percent.

And those official levels are using a very narrow measure of unemployment that only counts you if you tick a lot of boxes. A more accurate number is the “Jobless” category, which is around 11% of the workforce currently.

Making it difficult to access welfare

Both the last Labour-led government and this government have systematically introduced measures that make it more and more difficult to access welfare entitlements.

At the end of the last Labour government, there was a much more dramatic fall in the number of people receiving unemployment benefits than the comparable fall in the official measurements of unemployment. That was a direct consequence of the “active” case management of people off their entitlements.

Year	Function Wizard		Jobless numbers 000s June Year	Unemployed benefits as a % of the Jobless
	Unemployed 000s June	Unemployed benefit June year		
1990	122	149	191	78
1991	157	161	242	67
1992	184	178	276	64
1993	176	181	263	69
1994	159	170	248	69
1995	128	151	206	73
1996	115	146	192	76
1997	122	148	202	73
1998	138	161	225	72
1999	143	169	230	73
2000	125	159	206	77
2001	109	145	185	78
2002	107	130	187	70
2003	103	116	179	65
2004	92	86	165	52
2005	82	67	155	43
2006	84	57	153	37
2007	85	40	164	24
2008	85	34	164	21
2009	115	68	211	32
2010	153	78	262	30
2011	154	71	258	28
2012	157	64	265	24
2013	159	50	269	19

The above graph shows that those receiving a benefit corresponded to around 70% of the official jobless number as counted by Statistics NZ. This fell dramatically to around 20% in 2007-8 because the government used WINZ to make it much harder to access and stay on benefits.

This has continued under National with increased requirements for women with children of a certain age to make themselves available for full or part-time work. The bureaucratic nightmare of repeated form filling and participation in useless training is used to just bully and

harass people into giving up. Benefits get cancelled immediately for the most trivial and bureaucratic reasons, but mistakes by WINZ take months to correct.

The net result is that the percentage of the working-age population receiving any type of benefit (unemployment, sickness, invalid, sole parent) has been cut from over 13% in the late 1990s to less than 8% today when the unemployment rate has only fallen from around eight to six percent.

Getting that 3% of the working age population (about 110,000 people) off benefits essentially has just removed about a billion dollars a year from working-class communities. It is reflected in overcrowded homes, people living in garages or on the street, kids staying at home longer, poor health, poor nutrition.

Given the higher rates of unemployment amongst Maori and Pasifika, those negative impacts have a disproportionate impact on these communities.

That billion dollars saved isn't going to the likes of you and me. It is being used by a big business government to hand out favours to their big business friends. And, of course, there is always enough for the police, prisons, military and spies to protect their system.

Migrant workers also suffer super-exploitation

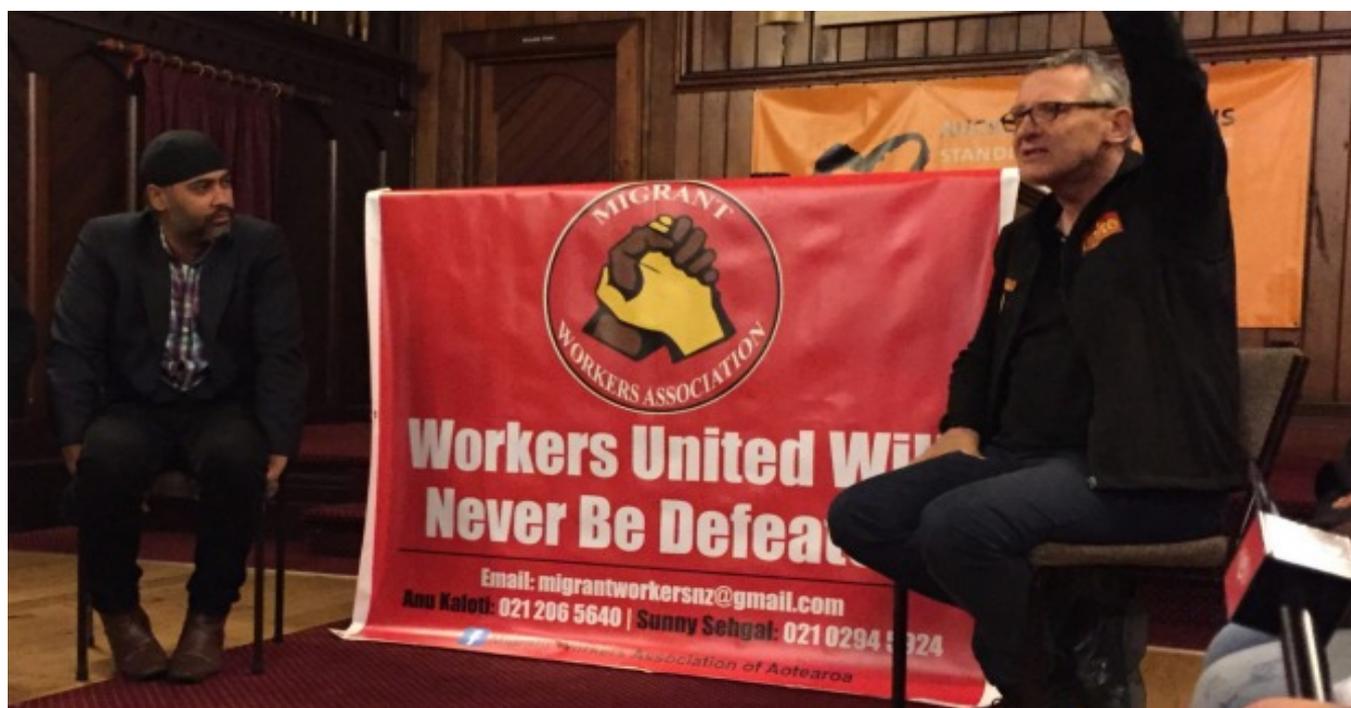
Migrant workers are another group that have become targets for super-exploitation. In recent years the National government has consciously created a pool of labour on temporary work visas that are able to be used and abused because they are in a vulnerable legal situation. Often these visas are tied to their employer in a form of modern-day servitude. Many are part of a so-called education export sector that is also exploiting them and their desire in many cases to transition to permanent residence.

According to government figures, at least 150,000 of these workers are in the country at any one time and 200,000 visas are being issued annually. Whole industries are dependent on this labour.

A few members of Unite Union have commented to me that we have put too much emphasis on protecting the rights of migrant workers when “NZ workers” are also being exploited. It is absolutely true that anyone who works for an employer is exploited in some way. The most fundamental way that happens is that the employer pays less for the labour power they employ than they get for the products of that labour.

All of an employer’s profit in the last analysis comes from the labour of workers. However, some groups of workers are able to be super-exploited for one reason or another – usually because they are in a weaker bargaining situation with their employer. Traditionally this has been true for women and young people. In the first half of last century, Maori workers could be paid less.

Until the 1970s in New Zealand, many contracts (including collective agreements) had a lower rate of pay for women. Women weren’t considered the real breadwinner. They were only working for “pin money” and so could be paid less. This was also true for young workers until last decade when youth rates were finally abolished in most industries.



Etu organiser Sunny Sehgal (left) and Unite National Director Mike Treen (Right) at a rally for migrant workers rights.

Some employers take advantage of migrant workers for the same reason. Many of these workers are desperate for a job and often willing to work for less or “go the extra mile” for the boss to prove they are good workers. Some aren’t “legal” in terms of their visas. Often this means working for less than the minimum wage in some industries. This super-exploitation can be by bosses of their own ethnic group in a small restaurant, but it can also be done by a multi-national company if the managers are given the freedom to take advantage of these workers.

If we allow this super-exploitation to exist – whether it is for women, Maori, young people or migrants – we allow the employers to hold all of our wages down. All wage systems are built from the bottom up. That means we all benefit if the minimum wage goes up because those who traditionally earn above the minimum can argue that their wages need to go up to maintain their margins for skill or experience.

If a boss is able to pay one group of workers less or force one group of workers in a workplace to do things that are not acceptable – then eventually everyone is dragged down.

So it is very important for a union to fight any signs of super-exploitation. In the end, we all benefit because we are more united as a class and are able to fight harder to improve the situation for everyone.

Racism remains pervasive

Maori were victims of a colonial holocaust that sought to extinguish them as a people with their own land, language and culture. But Maori refused to go away.

The system that was established by the colonial settler state also found it useful to have Maori as a cheap, reserve agricultural labour force. After World War Two, Maori and Pacific workers joined the new factories of South Auckland and Porirua – before those factories and jobs were destroyed again in the 1990s. Out of exploitation and oppression, a new resurgence of Maori emerged.

But racism remains real and pervasive. A small but telling example was provided on TV3's Campbell Live show in 2013 when they got a Maori male and a Pakeha male to attempt to buy petrol from five pre-pay

petrol stations. Same clothes and car. The result was infuriating, but we knew it was coming. The Maori was asked to pre-pay in four of the five stations. The Pakeha was allowed to fill their car at all five without pre-paying.

The daily humiliations and indignities like the petrol station episode are bad enough.

But then there is the institutionalised racism that sees Maori make up 50% of the prison population but only 15% of the general population. Maori know why.

If anything the situation is getting worse. The March 31, 2017, NZ *Herald* reports:

Ministry of Justice figures released last week showed 56.3 per cent of people imprisoned last year were Maori - the highest proportion since records were available from 1980.

The proportion of Europeans imprisoned dropped to its own record - falling below 30 per cent of the total for the first time.

In the past decade, the number of people convicted has dropped significantly. At its peak in 2009, about 100,000 people were sentenced. Last year, that figure had fallen to fewer than 65,000 - a 35 per cent drop.

However, the number of people imprisoned has not reflected the decrease in convictions.

Compared to 2009, there was just a 9 per cent fall in the number of people sent to jail.

Proportionally, those convicted in 2016 were 40 per cent more likely to end up in prison than those convicted in 2009.

Auckland University of Technology law lecturer Khylee Quince said New Zealand courts were "incredibly punitive".

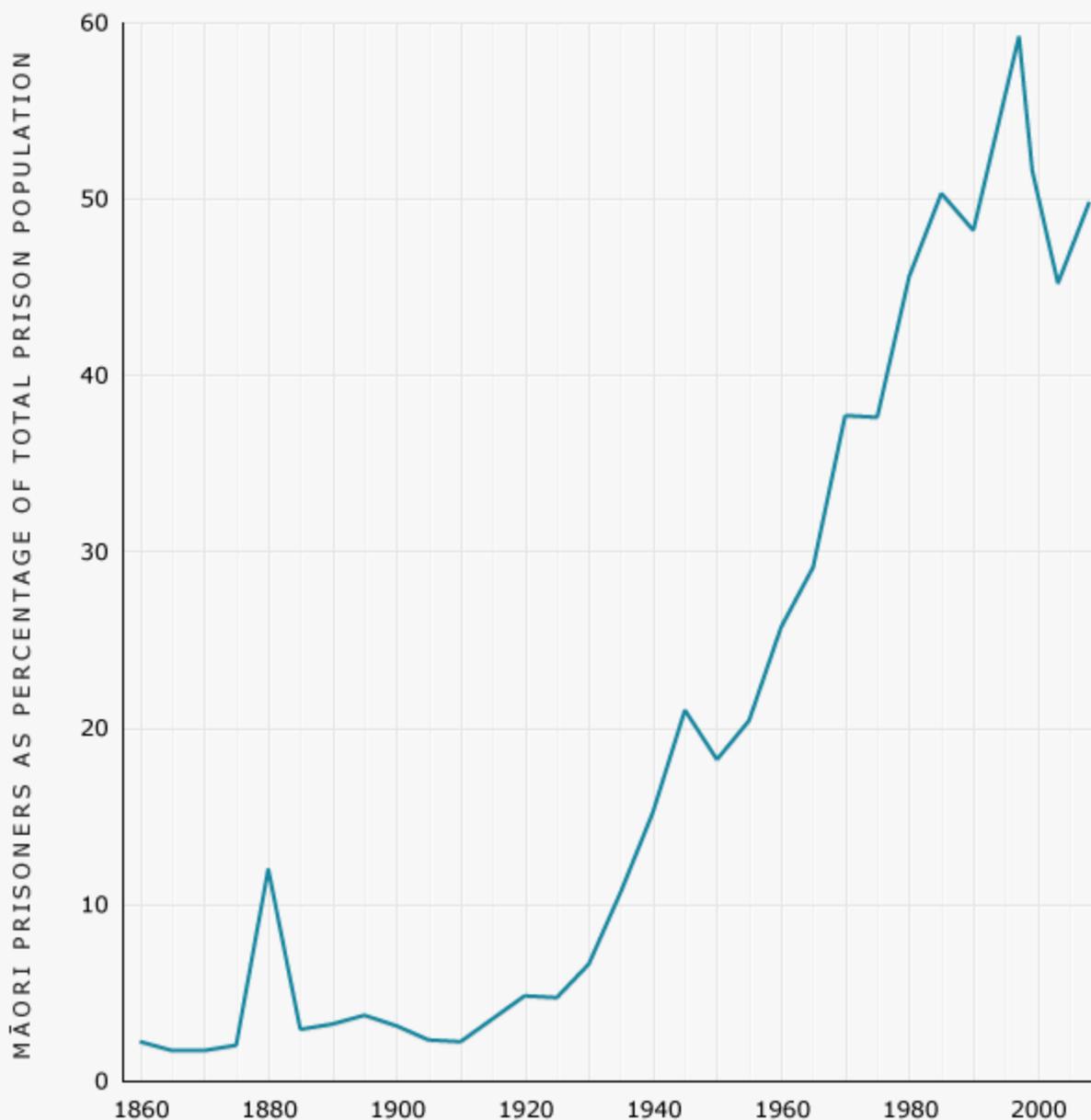
She said there was "no doubt" New Zealand needed to reduce the number of people being put behind bars.

"We are incredibly harsh on people," Quince said.

"About half of people in prison in New Zealand are there for property and drug offending. Very few Western nations send people to prison for those types of offences.

"It's outrageous."

Nationwide last year, Maori convicts were imprisoned at a higher rate than any year since records began in 1980 - 17.3 per cent, while Europeans were imprisoned at 10.3 per cent.(7)



* Figures up to 1965 are for prisoners received. From 1965 they are for prison inmates.

* From 1990 prison census figures only released for 1997, 1999, 2003, 2008.

You are much more likely to be stopped on the street by a cop if you are Maori. Once stopped you are then much more likely to be arrested for some reason. You are then more likely to be charged and go to court (rather than a warning or diversion). You are then more likely to be convicted. You are then more likely to be given a custodial sentence rather than a fine or home detention. The cumulative impact is obvious.

The same (but opposite) is true for the health system. Rather than more attention you get less. For example – Maori males are much more likely to suffer heart disease but get treated at a rate that is far less than the prevalence of the disease would indicate.

Capitalism has an extraordinary ability to use each and every difference between people to justify unequal treatment (and of course pay).

Insofar as working people accept the prejudices used to justify this inequality we do ourselves a disservice.

White privileges

That does not mean that there are no real material interests that are being used to promote the divisions in the class. Workers who are white usually get a “better” deal than workers who are brown. That is a fact in life. Men on average still do less housework than women. As an old white guy, I know I don't have to prepay for petrol at the garage. I probably have a “better” chance of getting a flat than a refugee. I have a “better” chance of getting a job.

But I do myself a disservice allowing these "privileges" to blind me in ignorance and unable to see that this capitalist society is holding me and all working people down.

If I start thanking my boss or my landlord for my good fortune in life I will end up on the wrong side of progress in society – including my own as part of the working class.

Even in the short to medium term, I believe we damage our own economic and social interests by thinking that the minor privileges we may have are worth “protecting” by siding with our masters against our fellow workers who are struggling against inequality.

The reality we all need to wake up to and see is that we live in a class-divided society where ownership or not of productive wealth is the fundamental determinant of who actually controls the society. We must open our eyes to the truth of why poverty is growing, why housing is unaffordable, why unemployment remains a social blight, why health care is being priced or rationed out of existence for many. That fact that access to many of these necessities of life is a bit harder for someone else does not actually make our own access fair or reasonable.

It is not by sucking up to our “betters” that we move society forward. It is only by ordinary people uniting in a struggle against all reactionary ruling classes – including our modern-day capitalist ones - that social progress has been made. It was only through struggle that we progressively brought the working day down from 12 to 10 and then eight hours. And it is our failure to struggle that has seen the working day put back to 12 or more for many workers while many others can't even get 8 hours' work. Only struggle forced the system to grant us a welfare state. Only struggle gave the right to vote to women.

The reason we are going backwards today is that the union movement (and the broader labour movement) was housebroken. The Labour Party – which many working people considered to be “our” party - became no longer even pretended to be other than an instrument for our enemies the 1980s. The central union leadership then abandoned the fights against the raft of anti-union laws adopted by National-led government from 1990. Demoralised and disoriented workers often fell into the trap of blaming someone easily at hand for the trouble we faced rather than the system.

We are not taught to think in class terms by our education system and never will be. That class consciousness has to be learnt through struggle. If we can't see who is profiting from unemployment, recession, slashing wages, and cutting welfare – the ruling rich - then we will fall for what seems “common sense.”

It seems “common sense” that if I don't have a job it was taken by an immigrant. It seems “common sense” that if my kid can't get into University it is because someone else (maybe a Maori on a Ngai Tahu scholarship) who got there ahead of my child. Why does the Maori kid have “more rights” than my kid, I am encouraged to ask.

While I am blaming someone else for my problem I am treating it as a personal failure that I don't have a job or my kid has missed the education he deserves. It may be because someone else has an "unfair" advantage, but it is still a personal problem. I am not blaming "the system".

Where this leads is demonstrated by the position of working people who are white in the southern United States and British-occupied Northern Ireland.

Discrimination makes us all poorer

The poorest sections of the working class of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is that situated in the North of Ireland. One section is Catholic and is marginally poorer than the other section which is Protestant. They are both in that abysmal situation because the working class which is Protestant thinks that defending its "privileges" over its Catholic "Papist" enemy means it must support continued British domination rather than fight together with the even poorer Catholic neighbours against the rotten system that is condemning them both. British imperialism's ability to cut off this northern enclave from the rest of Ireland in 1922 following the war for independence also held back progress for the liberated southern part of the island.

The same has been true in the United States. A hotel housekeeper in New York state gets \$20 an hour under a union contract. A worker in Mississippi and other "right to work" states in the southern USA is lucky to get \$5 an hour and no union representation.

The reason for the difference was a system of racial separation and terror that was allowed to be established in the South after the defeat of the slave-holders in the US civil war. In the process, chances of interracial unity and struggle was set back for generations.

With adult male suffrage after the Civil War, hundreds of thousands of blacks and a similar number of poor whites registered for the elections. Prior to the Civil War, landowners were the only social group who had the privilege to vote, excluding the majority of poor, landless whites from active political participation. Freed slaves and poor whites cooperated in establishing radical regimes in the South that began to pass laws in favour of labour rights, free public education, hospitals, roads and

modest welfare measures. These regimes were eventually overthrown by force once federal troops were withdrawn and the Klu Klux Klan established as a terrorist militia to enforce racial segregation. The overthrow of radical reconstruction was a gigantic defeat for Black people in the US, but it was also the biggest defeat suffered by the US workers movement and has crippled or restricted its progress ever since.

Blacks were effectively denied the right to vote and excluded from access to normal protections or welfare. A semi-apartheid system of formal segregation known as the “Jim crow” system was established. Black workers were excluded from most unions. The new racist and right-wing state governments instituted anti-union laws that remain in place today.



The Klu Klux Klan were a racist terror group to impose segregation in the US.

It is this legacy that still lives in the continuing inability of the US trade union movement to ever establish itself as a serious presence in the former slaveholding states in the South.

The civil rights movement overthrew formal segregation in the 1950s and 60s, but right through to today it remains a fact that all working

people across the southern United States – black and white – are [much poorer on average\(8\)](#) than their Northern counterparts.

The left has to challenge all forms of ignorant and prejudiced views strongly. These views are wrong. They are unscientific and can be refuted with facts. Genetics has confirmed we are all essentially the same. Just as importantly, ignoring prejudices will not make them go away.

But we can only really defeat them when we are struggling together. It's hard to hold a grudge against the Maori, Islander, Immigrant or "welfare cheat": who is holding a placard beside you on the picket line and getting batoned by the same copper who is batoning you. But if we don't struggle, then the cancer of prejudice and hatred will keep eating away at what I believe is our more fundamental human character – solidarity.

It was solidarity that allowed us to emerge as humans and build the first cooperative societies before class society emerged and destroyed that. It is solidarity that will lead us out of this dog eat dog system that is capitalism. It is solidarity that will bring an end to the shallow, mean, selfish morality that goes with capitalism. It is solidarity that will recreate a value system that sees everyone as a human being of worth and value that should be treasured until they have met their full potential.

But if the human and social organism is not nourished by solidarity, then cancerous mutations – fascism being the worst historical example – can emerge and conquer us.

A rich history of struggle in Aotearoa

There is a rich history of working people in Aotearoa uniting and overcoming the divisions imposed on us.

In particular, during periods of working class upsurge, we see working people shake off the shackles of prejudice and ignorance and join hands in struggle.

In my own life, I have been witness to a number of instructive examples. I began my working life in 1970 as a meat worker in the Auckland works. I have worked in warehouses, car assembly, in a glue factory, a

soap factory, and as an English language teacher. I was an active unionist and participated in numerous strikes. These included actions to attempt to improve conditions at work or actions that had a broader target such as opposition to wage controls by the government or to protest the arrest of a fellow unionist on the picket line.

During these decades, some unions also took action against the government's international policies such as the sending of New Zealand troops to the Vietnam War, the support given to apartheid South Africa or the welcoming of US nuclear warships to New Zealand.

During the 1970s and 80s, there was an almost continuous rise in the class struggle – at least in terms of the number of people participating in strike action. At first, the unions were largely unfit to the tasks being demanded of them. The leaderships were overwhelmingly older, white men who had been tamed by earlier defeats in the 1950s and had lost faith in working people and their capacity to struggle.

Strengthening the ability of the unions to fight involved a process of both democratisation within the unions and steps being taken to involve broader and broader layers of workers in action. One elementary form of the democratisation process was to deepen the involvement of women, Maori, Pasifika and other migrant workers. Later, there was a recognition of the oppression applying to LGBT workers. That also meant acknowledging the weaknesses that existed in structural terms but also a basic acknowledgement of the needs of these workers as women, Maori, and Pasifika workers. The working class was no longer – if it ever had been – a bunch of white men.

Typical of these transformations was that of the Hotel Workers Union in Auckland. A young militant Maori worker by the name of Matt McCarten led a rank and file revolt in the early 1980s that ousted the old leaders, organised militant strikes and other struggles, including hotel occupations, that massively increased the membership at the same time.

As a consequence, the unions were drawn into the struggles against sex and race discrimination, in support of Maori struggles for land and language rights, protests against police violence, as well as rejecting the racist scapegoating of Pasifika workers during periods when “dawn raids”(9) were commonplace.

NEW ZEALAND

WORKING WOMEN'S CHARTER

1. The right to work for everyone who wishes to do so.
2. The elimination of all discrimination on the basis of sex, race, marital or parental status, sexuality or age.
3. Equal pay for work of equal value — meaning the same total wage plus other benefits.
4. Equal opportunity of entry into occupations and of promotion regardless of sex, sexuality, marital or parental status, race or age.
5. Equal education opportunity for all.
6. (a) Union meetings be held in working hours.
(b) Special trade union education courses for women unionists to be held with paid time off for participants.
7. Equal access to vocational guidance and training, including on-the-job training, study and conference leave.
8. Introduction of a shorter working week with no loss of pay, flexible working hours, part-time opportunities for all workers.
9. Improved working conditions for women and men. The retention of beneficial provisions which apply to women. Other benefits to apply equally to men and women.
10. Removal of legal, bureaucratic and other impediments to equality of superannuation, social security benefits, credit, finance, taxation, tenancies, and other related matters.
11. Special attention to the needs and requirements of women from ethnic communities as they see them.
12. Wide availability of quality child care with Government and/or community support for all those who need it, on a 24-hour basis, including after-school and school holiday care.
13. Introduction of adequate paid parental leave (maternity and paternity leave) without loss of job security, superannuation or promotion prospects.
14. Availability of paid family leave to enable time off to be taken in family emergencies, e.g. when children or elderly relatives are ill.
15. Sex education and birth control advice freely available to all people. Legal, financial, social and medical impediments to safe abortion, contraception and sterilisation to be removed.
16. Comprehensive Government-funded research into health questions specific to women.

Unions also had to adapt to the push by women in traditionally “male” industries like the meat works to open up the more skilled and better-paid jobs to women. I was a worker at the Westfield meat works when women workers took cases to the Human Rights Commission and won the right to work as butchers. Workers at Westfield generally were not opposed to these efforts – it was more a case of being a bit bewildered and bemused. But as soon as women stepped up and proved they could do the work, they were usually strongly defended by most of their workmates.

Unions supported the Maori Land March in 1975 and imposed a “Green Ban” on the sale and development of Maori land at Bastion Point in 1976. A “Working Women’s Charter” – a powerful and radical programme for women’s rights – was debated and voted on at mass meetings of workers across the country in the late 1970s before being adopted by the Federation of Labour in 1980. It included demands for equal pay, 24-hour child care, abortion rights, an end to discrimination on the basis of gender or sexual orientation.

I remember one union meeting in particular. There were 1500 members of the Northern Drivers Union filling the Auckland Town Hall. They were overwhelmingly male. I was there to support a female comrade presenting the motion to support the charter who inauspiciously was subjected to catcalls and whistles as she walked towards the stage. My friend made a strong argument that endorsing the charter would help not just women workers but all working people and their families. After a serious debate, the charter was endorsed overwhelmingly by the workers present. This was true in meeting after meeting across the country during the years 1977-80. And it was true for so-called “male” unions as much as for those with strongly mixed membership.

Maori working-class leaders emerge

Many of the Maori working class leaders emerging from struggles in those years were naturally part of both the more narrowly defined “union” struggles as well as leading organisations dedicated to promoting Maori rights. For example, the leaders of the Gear Meat Workers Union in Wellington were also leaders of Maori land rights groups in Wellington. It was natural then that the Gear Meat workers went on strike to protest the eviction of protestors from the occupation at Bastion Point in May 1978.



Maori Land March in 1975 was supported by many unions.

In fact, the merging of union and social protests during this decade saw the ruling class back off a bit and adopt a new strategy to try to capture and co-opt Maori rather than end up in an endless cycle of confrontations.

Up to this point, the National Party was an openly racist party. Election ads in 1975, for example, had [racist caricatures](#)(10) of Pacific Islanders beating up people.

White South Africans were referred to as being “[our kith and kin](#)”(11) by then Prime Minister Robert Muldoon.

Through the mid-1970s, Maori and Pasifika were [rounded up on the streets](#) (12) and asked for their passports to try to identify Pacific island “overstayers”.

When police were criticised for these random checks, a National government minister justified the police action by arguing that if a Friesian cow with black and white markings was in a herd of light brown Jersey cows then it was natural for the police to check the Friesian.

1982 saw [Samoans stripped of citizenship rights](#) (13) granted by the Courts to those born in Samoa during the period of New Zealand's colonial rule. This was done in a late-night session of parliament with both the Labour and National parties working together.

The Labour Party was the traditional party for Maori workers to vote for. Maori remembered the fact that it was the 1935-49 Labour Government that had given them the same access to welfare as other citizens. Labour was also credited with creating full employment and providing state housing.

There was almost a total absence of a Maori professional or middle class except for a small number of relatively affluent farmers. When I went to Auckland University in the early 1970s, fewer than 100 Maori attended.

The election of the Labour Government in 1984 allowed for a change in course from direct racism towards opening up spaces for some Maori to advance. This was especially true for professionals in health, education and other public services. For most Maori, this government was actually a disaster as tens of thousands of jobs were being slashed in the Railways, the Ministry of Works and other state enterprises where many Maori worked as they were corporatised in preparation for eventual privatisation.

The 1984-90 Labour government had an extreme free-market economic policy dubbed "neoliberal" which was normally associated with reactionary right-wing and racist governments like those in the UK under Margaret Thatcher and the US under Ronald Reagan from the same period.

In New Zealand, however, the government was able to use concessions that would appeal to the liberal left on issues around sex and race discrimination, together with some foreign policy actions like expelling the South African Ambassador and banning nuclear ships, to blunt the

opposition to the economic reforms. At least in terms of many middle-class leaders (including trade union ones) who could be bought off with perks and appointments, that was partially successful.

Waitangi Tribunal powers extended

The Waitangi Tribunal was also allowed to investigate claims from before 1975 – the year it was established. This opened the way to a series of compensation recommendations that involved the transfer of some money and land to tribal entities. Both Labour and National have deliberately done this in a manner to promote a professional middle class of corporate-minded tribal leaders who can be used to negotiate and mediate problems away without the mass confrontations of the past.

The National government from 1990 to 1999 oversaw the deepest and longest recession in New Zealand history since the 1930s. Overall official unemployment figures topped 10 percent. For Maori and Pasifika families, however, it was the equivalent of the Great Depression with official unemployment rates hitting 25%.

Using the weapon of high unemployment, the bosses were able to push their agenda forward even more strongly. Real wages were driven down. Protective measures like overtime rates after eight hours or penal rates on weekends were eliminated. Health and Safety laws were degraded. Deregulation was the order of the day. The trade union movement collapsed across the private sector. The neoliberal counter-revolution begun by the 1984-90 Labour government was continued and completed.

A large part of the responsibility for the collapse in union strength during that period was that much of the central union leadership simply refused to fight.

Retreat of the union bureaucracy

The union bureaucracy's retreat began with a dirty deal done with the 1984-90 Labour government to accept a ban on strikes during the

contract period in return for a state-led forced merger of the smaller unions into bigger ones. This was accompanied by the merger of the more militant and democratic Federation of Labour made up mostly of private-sector unions with the more bureaucratic state sector union body to create the Council of Trade Unions in 1987. All forms of local autonomy and power were eliminated in the process. The CTU leaders, of course, got promised lots of gravy-train “consultation” on government policy and appointments to various boards.

The only fight launched by the CTU leadership following its formation was a fight to the death against proposals for a general strike when the National Party government elected in 1990 introduced the Employment Contracts Act. A number of central leaders of the CTU had been members of the Socialist Unity Party trained in a bureaucratic variety of pro-Moscow opportunism so the collapse of the Soviet Union at that time simply added justifications to their rightward leap to openly praising the so-called virtues of free market capitalism.

As a consequence of the huge working-class defeats during these years action by working people collapsed to near zero and has largely remained there ever since. As a consequence, large numbers of working people have simply had very few opportunities to fight together. This undermines the confidence and consciousness of the working class.

'Identity politics'

What came to be dubbed “Identity Politics” – that is a political approach that prioritised one’s identity over one’s class – became dominant in middle-class liberal-left circles. Class was dismissed as no longer relevant or important by many. This included a significant number of Labour Party MP’s and functionaries.

This was an inevitable consequence of the retreat of the working class and led to the political disorientation and demoralisation of many working-class fighters as a result.

In an odd reversal of cause and effect, some [left-wing commentators like Chris Trotter](#) (14) seem to blame the working-class retreat on the rise of identity politics rather than the other way around.

A disappointing aspect of the retreat was the fact that union officials seemed to be focused on protecting their own positions and high salaries through bureaucratic mergers over organising the unorganised. Many unions seemed to turn the groups inside the unions which had been formed to empower workers from oppressed groups into inwardly focussed talking shops rather than organising centres.

Many of the new middle-class Maori leaders incorporated into the state, corporate and iwi bodies also seemed to simply ape the excessive salaries, bad taste and extravagance of their Pakeha “colleagues”.

Workers' rep should be on a worker's pay

It has been a principle of the socialist movement that workers representatives, whether they are in parliament, on local bodies or employed by unions should only receive the pay of an average skilled worker. This was seen as necessary to stop them forgetting who they were there to represent. Maybe it is time to revive that rule and look at applying it to other voluntary and co-operative organisations as well as elected tribal bodies.

While many union officials and middle-class Maori were focused on protecting themselves from the consequences of the social crisis during the 1990s, the big majority of working people – including and especially Maori – emerged in a far worse state than they entered.

The 1990-1999 National government, however, continued the process of settling Waitangi Tribunal claims. The “liberal” face of New Zealand capitalism continued as before. Tory Prime Minister Jenny Shipley attended the 1999 Gay Pride parade.

National also largely gave up on overt racism as an electoral tool except for the 2005 campaign run by the then leader Don Brash. Brash’s campaign did increase the National Party’s share of the vote from the historic lows of 2002 under the then leader Bill English but not enough to secure a majority.

It probably shocked many that racist sentiments were as deep and widespread as they were. The problem for National is that under a proportional system of election, and given the demographic changes being produced by migration to new Zealand with 25 percent of the

country's population not born here, it is difficult maintaining a majority with such overtly racist policies. Brash was forced to resign after a book exposing his methods was published. This included the fact that the use of racist dog-whistles like "Iwi or Kiwi" was entirely cynical and manipulative.

Following John Key's election as leader in November 2006, he moved to the centre again on these issues and was able to form coalition governments with the Maori Party from 2008 until today.

The Maori Party now explicitly represents a pro-capitalist upper-class layer in Maori society that is happy to compete for contracts from the state. For the government, this has the added advantage of furthering the privatisation agenda into the realm of education, welfare and housing by claiming the state has failed Maori in these areas – which, of course, is true. But the solutions being implemented will inevitably end up in a dead end for the big majority of Maori again.

The Mana Movement's establishment in 2011 represented a progressive split from this orientation. The founding leader Hone Harawira, who had in the past been closely identified with more narrow nationalist arguments around asserting Maori rights, became an articulate advocate of a class-based approach to fighting poverty and inequality. He openly acknowledged that the majority of poor people in this country were white – without, of course, ignoring the fact that the unequal impact of those social diseases on Maori in Aotearoa today means that a significantly larger proportion of Maori are poorer than their Pakeha compatriots. Nor did that approach diminish Hone's militant opposition to all forms of racist oppression and exploitation.

I believe it was correct for socialists and working-class militants to embrace this political development. It provided a basis for a fighting alliance of Maori who wanted to struggle "by any means necessary" for the liberation of their people and working-class activists who are white who wanted a class struggle oriented labour movement. That initial effort appears to have also run into a roadblock with no clear way forward. Again, it is mainly objective obstacles that exist as a consequence of the very low level of broader working-class struggle. We can only hope that the lessons that are there to be learnt can be absorbed and acted on in the future as new struggles emerge among Maori and the broader working class.



Mass protests over the foreshore and seabed in 2004 led to the formation of the Maori Party and then Mana Movement

An error to ignore class or race

Racism, chauvinism, bigotry, and anti-immigrant demagoguery all remain tools to be used by some people – especially those on the right or far right of the political spectrum – to deflect people away from the real cause of the social ills that exist in society. This is especially true when so-called centre-left governments have had a period in office and failed to fix the grotesque inequality that exists or implement measures that can overcome the social and economic crisis that faces working people today.

These crises appear to be worsening for working people over recent decades. The global recessions have become more severe whilst the recoveries are significantly weaker. Whole regions in advanced capitalist countries have become industrial wastelands. In the so-called “advanced” capitalist countries, we seem to be in a stage of capitalism's existence that is marked by stagnation and decay rather than dynamic growth and progress.

Many working class families are desperate. A generation of young people is facing [a future without hope](#). (15) Anger is growing.

Political forces to protect the billionaire class that controls our societies are also desperate to prevent that anger being directed at them. Yet it is precisely their policies that have led to this dead end.

We have seen this in Europe with a proliferation of far-right parties gaining ground. Trump's presidential bid in the US also used language filled with xenophobia, racism, misogyny and hate.

These radical right wing political views would not get a hearing if the Centre-Left had been able to address the social crises we face when in government.

Capitalism can't deliver a fair or equal society

If everyone has a job, then you can't blame the immigrant for not having one. If everyone had access to quality public transport, education, or health care then the argument that someone (Maori, refugee, migrant,

beneficiary, "undeserving" poor, Muslim, Catholic, Jew – pick one to look down on and blame) has access to these things when you or your family cannot get access will find no echo. These arguments can only seem to have weight because capitalism can't deliver a fair and equal society and those who manage capitalism without challenging its direction can only manage its decline.

The liberal Black US president Obama oversaw one of the greatest destructions of black wealth in US history as a consequence of the 2007-2009 Great Recession and its associated housing loan crisis. At the same time, he rescued the plutocrats that owned and controlled the banks and other major corporations that created the financial crisis in the first place with \$14 trillion in public money! From his class perspective, he could do little else.

The liberal wing of establishment politics in the advanced capitalist countries adopts policies that give lip service to opposing racism and other forms of discrimination by introducing measures that at best treat symptoms rather than causes. Often, these are associated with symbolic gestures of acknowledgement rather than going to the root of the problem.

Usually, this involves treating racism as an individual failure to be corrected by behavioural control rather than an entrenched system of wealth and power with institutionalised forms of discrimination and inequality backed up by police and military violence when necessary.

The Human Rights Commission in New Zealand is almost all about correcting individual behaviour rather than challenging institutionalised discrimination by the state or big business. The wealthy and powerful in society are generally immune from serious scrutiny. Their "behaviour" has a real impact on people's lives because they have the power and wealth that can be used to discriminate and oppress others in a meaningful way.

The flip side of this is to attempt to convince Maori and other oppressed groups to see their "failure" as an individual one that can be "fixed" if you get a "better education" and "work harder". Funding is made available to corporate-minded Maori to supply the "training" and "motivation" that is seen to be lacking.

'Consulting' Maori on how to oppress themselves

In New Zealand, we get the awful spectacle of the government or private corporations happily "consulting" Maori – with appropriate fees for the service received – on the building of new prisons, for example, rather than adopt measures needed to close down the disgraceful racist system of incarceration where [half the prison population is Maori](#) (16) despite being just 15% of New Zealand's population. This is actually a worse ratio than that of the US proportionately. Blacks make up 13 percent of the US population and 35 percent of the prison population. But the US imprisons a larger percentage in absolute terms.

The right-wing uses these "tokenist" measures of the liberals to try to paint the Left as being "politically correct" social engineers trying to change the behaviour of people rather than doing anything of substance. Remember the manufactured reaction against plans under the last Labour government to force everyone to use more eco-friendly light bulbs. I don't believe this idea would have been a problem if the bulbs were made significantly cheaper and readily available – and their introduction was part of a meaningful programme to combat climate change that we had discussed and agreed to. As it was, it was simply a token measure that threatened to make life more expensive and have no meaningful effect when big business continued to be given free rein to pollute and warm the globe.

The right, of course, has its own form of political correctness – a "patriotic", nationalistic, pro-war, pro-cop, anti-immigrant and racist narrative they try to force on society through their ownership and control of almost all media.

A working-class movement that wants to go to the root of the problem needs to put forward a political programme that challenged all forms of oppression and inequality.

Need to confront institutionalised racism

Running away from the debate needed of how to confront institutionalised racism in all its forms will not help our class get a government willing to make the radical changes needed to overcome capitalism and its crises. The more the right is successful in driving

wedges between us the less likely we are able to unite and fight together. We need to do that through our unions, parties and other social institutions outside of parliament as well as through electing members to parliament to represent those views.

That is why working-class leaders should help lead the struggle against all forms of discrimination and oppression. We have a duty to help explain to even the most backward layers of our class what their genuine interests are.

Some on the centre-left today, as reflected in the campaign of Hillary Clinton for US President, have started to rely solely on the fact they are not a misogynist, racist, bigoted movement to justify people voting for them. This is because they have no answers on the big economic and social questions. In the face of a strong campaign from a Bernie Sanders, who describes himself as a "democratic socialist", the Clinton campaign [started attacking his more left-wing economic programme](#) (17) by claiming that adopting these measures would not end racism or sexism.

"Not everything is about an economic theory, right?" Clinton said, kicking off a long, interactive riff with the crowd at a union hall this afternoon.

"If we broke up the big banks tomorrow—and I will if they deserve it, if they pose a systemic risk, I will—would that end racism?"

"No!" the audience yelled back.

Clinton continued to list scenarios, asking: "Would that end sexism? Would that end discrimination against the LGBT community? Would that make people feel more welcoming to immigrants overnight?"

The problem with Clinton's approach is two-fold. Firstly it alienates working-class voters for whom economic issues are very important by seeming to dismiss their concerns.

A working-class programme for emancipation

Secondly, a strong socialist economic programme is essential to ending racism, sexism and anti-immigrant prejudices. Attacking economic inequality, providing jobs for all, lifting the minimum wage significantly, providing free public health care and education, will all benefit those at

the bottom disproportionately. These measures are actually a necessary part of ending racism and inequality in general. But they are not enough. We also need affirmative action in many jobs and professions. We need an end to institutionalised racism in the police and justice systems. Migrant workers must have full legal employment protections. We need to recognise the rights of indigenous peoples to their land and languages.

These policies are all part of a working class programme for emancipation.

Australian journalist John Pilger [ripped the Clinton campaign stance apart](#).(18)

Today, false symbolism is all. "Identity" is all. In 2016, Hillary Clinton stigmatised millions of voters as "basket of deplorables, racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic - you name it" Her abuse was handed out at an LGBT rally as part of her cynical campaign to win over minorities by abusing a white mostly working-class majority. Divide and rule, this is called; or identity politics in which race and gender conceal class, and allow the waging of class war. Trump understood this.

Some commentators like [John Moore, who writes for the Liberation blogsite](#) (19) in New Zealand and claims to be left wing argue in a manner that is the opposite of Clinton but equally wrong and damaging. In New Zealand, Moore claims, because capitalism can accommodate a few Maori at the top table, then the fight against racism is a diversion from the real struggle that is needed against social inequality. He also argues that capitalism can adapt to no longer need racism as a tool at all.

This is a fundamentally wrong approach. Capitalists have a material interest in maintaining racial and other inequalities. They are able to profit directly from the lower wages they are able to pay as a consequence of all forms of discrimination. All wage systems are built from the bottom up, so pushing one section of the class down drags us all down.

“Divide and Rule” is a basic tenant of capitalism

Capitalism will also never abandon methods that have proved so successful and profitable for so long in imposing divisions among working people. “Divide and Rule” is a basic tenant of a system of exploitation that the 1% want to protect at all costs. As a consequence, institutional racism exists and will continue to exist so long as it serves capitalism's interests.

Treating racism as only a byproduct of economic inequality ignores the fact that racism has an independent social force in society that imposes a brutal regime of oppression and exploitation. Trying to downplay the importance of this social reality is to be completely ignorant of the lived reality working people face who are Maori and Pasifika in this country.

Of course, the struggle against racism intersects again and again with that against economic inequality, but it is also a response to the often brutal forms of marginalisation, control and oppression that are imposed by a racist social and economic system.

It includes an [education system](#)(20) that pushes out generation after generation of Maori and Pasifika children. It includes [racial profiling](#),(21) police violence and mass incarceration. Racial bias [applies at every step](#)(22) of the criminal justice system. It includes being [excluded from home ownership](#)(23) and the creation of housing segregation along the lines of race as well as class. It includes understanding why Maori suffer [twice the rate of coronary heart disease](#)(24) as the rest of the population but receive half the rate of surgical interventions.

These “left” commentators will never understand the daily abuse and humiliation inflicted by racist bosses, landlords, state bureaucrats, police and the courts. And they will never understand why that reality can be a powerful motivator to join the struggle for freedom and social liberation that will take them on a road that leads way beyond the fight against racism alone.

That is also why Maori, Pasifika and other oppressed groups are often more class conscious than workers who are Pakeha and therefore more ready to join unions, more experienced in social struggles, and therefore more able to help lead the rest of their class in the fights that

are needed. That truth we have learnt day in and day out organising and recruiting at Unite Union.

Even worse, this form of fake “leftism” feeds the racist and class prejudice in society that wants us to blame anyone being at the bottom of the heap on their own individual failures, not to be seen as victims of a social system. Their “failure” is a personal, not social failure. After all, if some Maori can make it and capitalism is supposedly evolving in a non-racist manner, then they can only blame themselves for their second-class status.

Lecturing Maori to forget their "identity" as Maori in favour of a broader social struggle against inequality is using the language of class to subordinate and disempower Maori and their struggle against racist oppression. Working people who are Maori, because of their history of struggle against both racist oppression and class exploitation, have played a dynamic and often leading role in the broader struggle. This is a strength not a weakness of the class struggle in this country.

The stronger the fight by Maori and other oppressed groups for their rights the more ignorance and prejudice declines. Periods when the broader class struggle is on the rise also sees a decline of racist and other prejudices in the working class. No meaningful advance for Maori or working people generally is possible if one tries to subordinate one struggle to the other.

A socialist perspective

Socialist leaders of the working-class struggle have actually been advancing this viewpoint since the days of the founders of modern socialism, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, in the 19th century.

Karl Marx drafted resolutions for the International Working Men's Association in support of the Irish struggle for independence. He thought the advance of this struggle was vital to liberating English workers from their backwards attachment to their own rulers. He also drew parallels with the situation of workers in the United States in relation to blacks there.

As Marx wrote in the “Confidential Communication” of the First International of January 1, 1870:

In all the big industrial centres in England, there is profound antagonism between the Irish proletarian and the English proletarian. The common English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers wages and the standard of life. He feels national and religious antipathies for him. He views him similarly to how the poor whites of the Southern states of North America viewed black slaves. This antagonism among the proletarians of England is artificially nourished and kept up by the bourgeoisie. It knows that this split is the true secret of the preservation of its power.(25)

The letter powerfully explains the roots of all divisions as being the economic competition between workers that is exploited by the ruling class. That is reinforced by the creation of a racist belief that the white (or "English") worker is the member of a ruling nation. The way forward for Marx wasn't to adapt to this prejudice and pretend it didn't exist but to confront it openly and powerfully and demand that working-class leaders campaign for Irish emancipation and against slavery. Only on that road would they find the way to their own liberation.

Russian socialist leader [Vladimir Lenin, who led the Russian revolution in 1917](#), said a genuine socialist leader is not a narrow trade unionist but “the tribune of the people ... able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of the people it affects” – and they must be “able to generalize all these manifestations and produce a single picture of police violence and capitalist exploitation ... in order to clarify for all and everyone the world-historic significance of the struggle for the emancipation of the proletariat.”(26)

These words remain relevant today and a challenge to all of us wanting an end to capitalist exploitation and oppression. Our duty remains the same today. By following the example of the socialist pioneers, we will find our way to achieve the fighting unity that will be necessary to overthrow the class of capitalist leeches that exploits and oppresses us all – even if not equally.

Our guiding motto must remain that popularised by the International Workers of the World “An injury to one is an injury to all”.

- 1) Opinion: The case against Helen Clark <http://www.newshub.co.nz/home/politics/2016/08/opinion-the-case-against-helen-clark.html>
- 2) How modern family structure led to the downfall of women <http://www.nation.co.ke/lifestyle/weekend/How-modern-family-structure-led-to-the-downfall-of-women/1220-3358798-format-xhtml-uebidx/index.html>
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