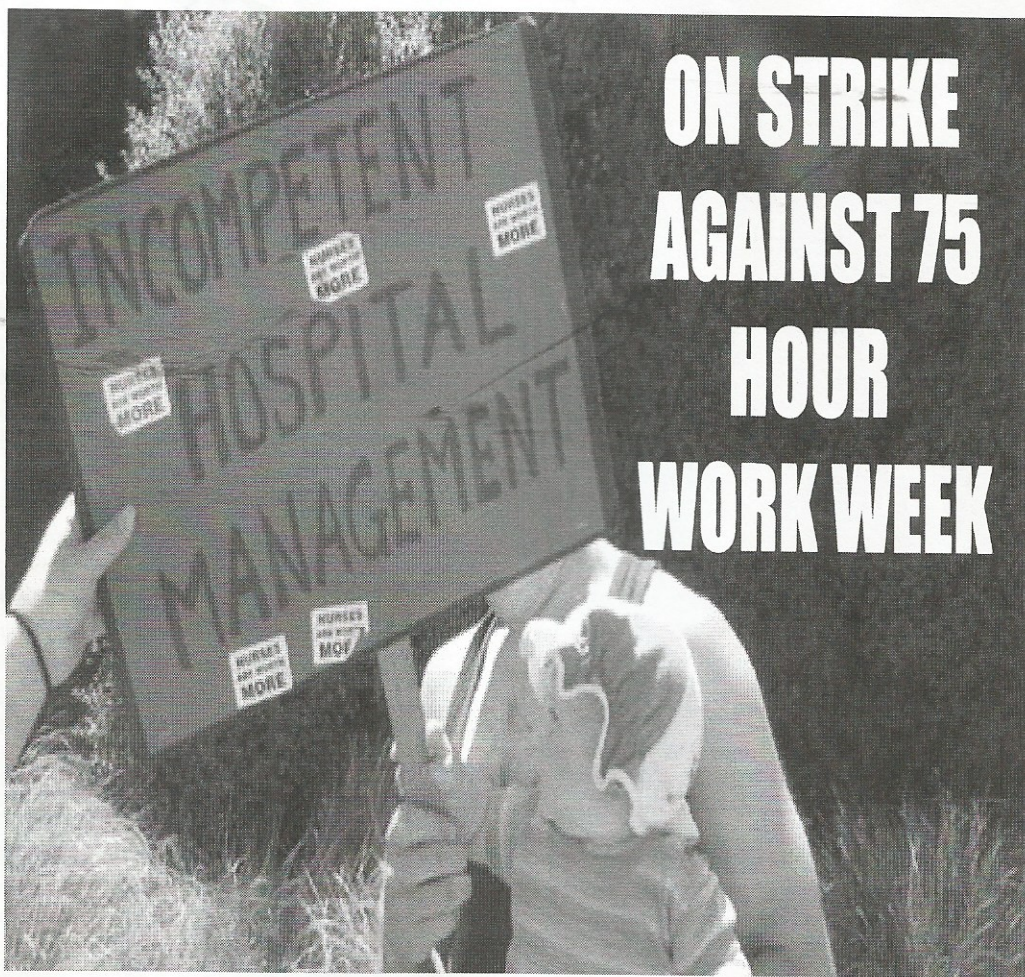


THE ★ **SPARK**



THE ELECTORAL FINANCE ACT: DRACONIAN AND OVER-THE-TOP

INTERNATIONAL ANALYSIS: NEPAL, PAKISTAN, VENEZUELA, AUSTRALIAN ELECTIONS

KHALED HOSSEINI'S THE KITE RUNNER REVIEWED

WELLINGTON BUS DRIVERS CONTINUE TO FIGHT CLAWBACKS

CONTENTS

Christchurch support
workers strike against 75-
hour weeks 3

Opinions divided over
Nepal 4

The legacy of Benazir
Bhutto 6

Venezuela: the revolution
in danger? 7

The Electoral Finance Act:
analysis 8

Australian elections:
Howard's out but it's the
same old bullshit 11

Khaled Housseini reviewed
12

Party news: why I joined
the Workers Party 14

Bus drivers' battles
continue 16

REGIONAL WORKERS PARTY CONTACTS

Auckland: Mike 0212885601

Hastings: Sam 0273152131

Wellington: Nick 021584294

Christchurch: Byron 0211540612

Dunedin: Tim 4730509

www.workersparty.org.nz

Beyond the soft soundbites

The far-off land of Nepal has been much in the news lately, through its connections to the late Sir Edmund Hillary. Overwhelmingly, New Zealand mainstream media depicted Nepalese people as passive recipients of Hillary's humanitarian aid. It came as rather a surprise when it was reported that the Nepalese government had not flown the flag at half-mast. Departing from the script our news compilers had written for them.

In fact, far from being a land of passive victims, modern day Nepal seethes with intense political struggle. Previous issues of *The Spark* have run several eye-witness accounts of Nepal's Maoist-led mass uprisings. In this issue we examine the latest contradictions of this revolutionary movement. As you'll see when you read the article, there are many difficult questions and no easy answers.

The Spark doesn't shy away from grappling with difficult questions, because they're an inescapable part of the international struggle for working people's liberation. This issue of *The Spark* also takes up the local issue of the Electoral Finance Bill, a piece of political chicanery neglected by most of the New Zealand left and fudged by our top trade union leaders.

If you want to get beyond soft soundbites to the real nitty-gritty, then *The Spark* is your paper.

The Spark editorial board:

Jared Phillips, Don Franks (coordinating editor),
Sam Kingi, Tim Bowron, Mike Kay.

Layout :

Chris Rigby: cover. Rebecca Broad: layout.

Authorised by Rebecca Broad 2/789 Mt Eden Rd

THE SPARK February 2008 Vol. 18, No.1, Issue No 213 Published by the Workers' Party of New Zealand PO Box 10-282, Dominion Road, Auckland, New Zealand.

Christchurch support workers strike against 75-hour weeks

Tim Bowron

Between January 11 and 13, around 140 support workers and nurses at Brackenridge Estate near Christchurch took part in a 48-hour strike over issues of severe understaffing and low pay.

The workers there, who look after people with serious intellectual disabilities, are members of the National Union of Public Employees and the NZ Nurses' Organisation.

The starting rate for support workers is currently \$13.34 an hour. Staff have to deal with patients who have very high needs and whose behaviour can at times be very challenging. Assaults on staff by patients are common.

Sandy, an NZNO delegate at Brackenridge, told reporters from *The Spark* attending the picket that it is not uncommon for nurses and support workers to work 75 hours a week (including double shifts) with only one weekend off in six. This workload is due to inadequate staffing levels and the workers' unwillingness to let their patients and colleagues down.

Sandy said that the management of Brackenridge (which is actually a subsidiary company of the Canterbury District Health Board, funded 100% by the Ministry of Health) seems to have no incentive to do something about the staffing problem, as there is no provision for overtime rates in the current agreement. Rather than looking to attract and train new permanent staff, it simply relies on its existing staff to work longer hours.

Management had made an initial pay offer of 4%, which was later amended to 5% but only in return for cuts to training and weekend outings for patients. Unsurprisingly, when the union took the offer back to the membership it was rejected, with 95% voting to take industrial action.

During the 48-hour strike the mood on the picket lines was very positive, with

members of the local community as well as the families of patients at the facility dropping by to offer their support.

Since the strike ended it has been revealed that Brackenridge management is now employing up to three agency workers from the Christchurch Nursing Bureau every fortnight to fill gaps in the staffing roster.

Given that agency staff are prohibitively expensive, this would seem to cast doubt on Brackenridge Estate's claim to have no money all to pay the sorts of wages which would actually help attract new permanent staff as well as compensate those who do work beyond their regular contracted hours.

Meanwhile, the unions involved have given warning that unless an improved offer from the employer is tabled soon, further industrial action is likely.



Picket line on day to of Brakenridge strike

Opinions divided over Nepal

Daphna Whitmore

Nepal is gearing up for elections in April. The monarchy will be dissolved, ending its 300-year reign, and elected representatives will draft a constitution. The elections are part of a peace package which suspended an eleven-year people's war led by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist). Is this an inspired move by the Maoists to spread their revolution or are they on a course to capitulation?

New route

The Maoists are clearly trying new avenues. The wisdom of this will ultimately be measured by their success, not by preconceived notions of the "right revolutionary path". Nevertheless, there are some fundamental principles of the science of revolution that, if abandoned, spell the end of a revolution. Similarly, ultra-left dogmatists never get to see their textbook revolutions materialise.

So far, the Maoists' new tactics seem to have propelled the movement forward, enabled them to work openly in the cities and sealed the fate of the monarchy. But these gains may also come at a cost to revolutionary progress in the countryside if the new people's organisations are dismantled.

Every revolution is shaped by the existing conditions. Most of Nepal's 24 million people are dirt poor. Around 80% are rural, and 50% of the workforce is either unemployed or underemployed. Fewer than half of the people get a secondary school education; industry barely exists, and the economy is propped up by \$US1.2 billion in remittances each year from Nepalis abroad.

Transformation

In 1996 the Maoists began an anti-feudal and anti-imperialist New Democracy movement. The people's war spread rapidly, and within a decade most of the country was being transformed. In these base areas agricultural cooperatives were set up, people's committees challenged the old conventions, and feudal traditions, like dowries, were dispensed with. A genuine women's liberation movement took hold. The countryside was being radicalised, but the cities were still under the thumb of the monarchy and the feudal elite. It was a strategic stalemate – and the revolutionaries were not yet in a position to stage an uprising in the cities.

April 2006 marked a turning point. A mass protest against King Gyanendra, who had abolished parliament two months earlier, erupted in Kathmandu.



Pro Maoist demonstration in Nepal

Workers and students demanded a republic. The Maoists, who until then were only able to work in underground organisations in the cities, took a leading role in the protests. They turned a spontaneous urban outburst into a sustained movement.

But the mainstream parties still had influence and were able to cut short the struggle on the condition that parliament be reinstated. Had the protests lasted a little longer, as the Maoists hoped, the monarchy would have been finished.

Nevertheless, the mobilisations overturned the king's direct rule and stripped him of his power and his position as head of the army.

Peace accords

The parliament was restored, and in November 2006 a peace accord with the Maoists was signed. It stipulated there would be an interim government including the Maoists, and by June 2007 there would be elections for a constituent assembly. The Nepalese Army would be largely confined to barracks and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) fighters would be confined to quarters. The PLA's weapons would be put in caches watched over by unarmed UN observers. The constituent assembly would be elected through a mixed first-past-the-post and proportional system, and would decide the future of the monarchy.

INTERNATIONAL ANALYSIS

It can be argued that the interim government is not a standard capitalist government. While the largest party is the conservative Congress Party, the second and third largest groups are the Maoists and the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninists).

The merging of the Nepal Army and the People's Liberation Army is contentious. However, every revolutionary force has to deal with the question of how to win over a large portion of the reactionary armed forces. So far the Nepal Army has refused to accept any merger process.

Also controversial is the Maoists' proposal to allow some foreign capital for the development of large-scale heavy industry and infrastructure such as mega power stations. Given the very low economic base and the absence of a socialist state to give support, it is hard to see alternatives. The need to turn to foreign investment is more a reflection of the failure of the far left in the imperialist world to advance socialism than of shortcomings on the Nepali Maoists' part.

Back on the streets

The ruling elite put up obstacles at every turn in a bid to hold on to power. So in September 2007 the Maoists walked out of the government in protest at the lack of progress. They said Nepal should become a republic immediately and that electoral representation should be fully proportional. They led street protests again around those demands and were able to sway the

parliament.

On December 23rd the parliament ruled that the monarchy would be abolished immediately following the April elections. The Maoists rejoined the interim government, and four of their MPs were sworn in as cabinet ministers with portfolios including information, planning and women.

At the same time as the Maoists rejoined the government they reactivated the Young Communist League to carry on mass revolutionary work.

The new direction of the CPN(M) drew criticism from many quarters. Within the Workers Party there are differences of opinion on the course the CPN(M) is taking. Some think that the signs in Nepal are not encouraging and argue that taking part in a bourgeois government is a bridge too far. Others, including this writer, consider the experiment has the potential to succeed.

Despite the mixed views, there is a consensus in the Workers Party that it is too soon to draw hard and fast conclusions.

There is a risk that too many expectations may be placed on the constituent assembly, which can only be a stepping stone, not an end in itself. Leaders in the CPN(M) point out that their decision to engage in parliamentary struggle arose from the need to win over the urban masses. They insist that their involvement in government is just one front in the fight for revolution.



Maoist leader Prachanda speaking at a meeting in Pokhara, Nepal

The legacy of Benazir Bhutto

Joel Cosgrove

No one should be crowing about the way in which Benazir Bhutto, the former Prime Minister and leader of the Pakistan Peoples' Party, died – killed by an assassin's bullet at the end of a political meeting in Rawalpindi on December 27.

Yet the obituaries that quickly flowed across the Western world following her death illustrated the way in which history is being constantly rewritten to suit the times. Bhutto is not being remembered for the trail of corruption that littered her two previous terms as prime minister. Nor for her husband Asif Ali "10%" Zardari and the serious charges of money laundering laid against the both of them.

She is remembered, rather, as someone who could have made positive change in Pakistan, someone who "coulda been a contender". A belief fostered and promoted, when in fact nothing in Bhutto's political legacy could be described as either accountable or progressive. Quite the opposite, in fact.

It is also ironic that it is Al Qaeda who are being blamed for the killing, as it was Bhutto's government in the mid-90s that promoted and supported the current fundamentalist Muslim groups prevalent in Afghanistan and the Northwest Frontier province of Pakistan, notably the Taliban.

Bhutto had withdrawn in a self-imposed exile to escape both political and legal pressure after her second government had collapsed amidst another corruption scandal in 1996. Then in October 2007, after a decade or more in exile, she suddenly appeared back in the spotlight with the support of the western imperialist powers (currently caught up in the quagmires of Iraq and Afghanistan, and rapidly losing patience with the discredited Pakistani dictator Pervez Musharraf), and all her previous crimes were forgotten.

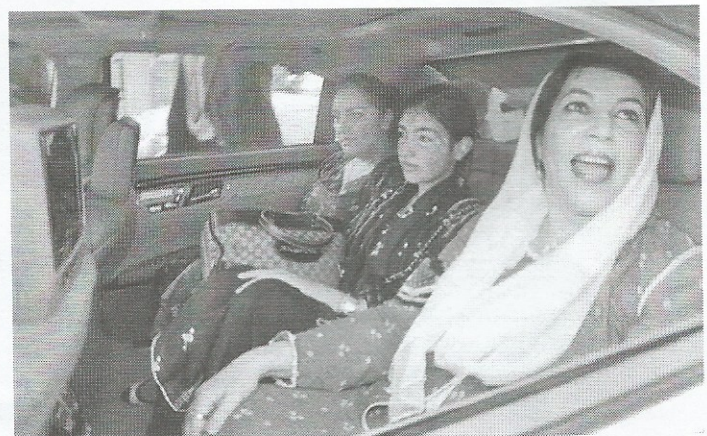
Bhutto was the daughter of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the first elected prime minister of Pakistan. He was the founder of the Pakistan Peoples' Party, which took power following the Civil War of 1971, leading to the secession of East Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh. The PPP's slogan was "Islam is our religion, democracy is our politics, and socialism is our economics". This gave it a progressive liberal veneer, but in reality the party relied for much of its support on

appeals to Sindhi and Punjabi chauvinism, as well as on the status of the Bhutto clan as powerful feudal landlords. Zulfikar Bhutto was deposed in a coup by General Zia-ul-Haq in 1977 and executed two years later.

Benazir's political life mirrored her father's closely, only bastardising his politics even further – updating the PPP slogan for a new set of (Western) supporters by stating that "Islam is our religion, democracy is our politics, and the justice of the Prophet Mohammad is our economics."

Bhutto was the self-declared leader for life of the PPP in the same way her father was. This is the product of the pernicious influence of the Bhutto clan in the regional politics of what is now Pakistan, with their influence stretching much further back into history than the sixty-year existence of the Pakistani state. With Bhutto's 19-year-old son Bilawal Bhutto Zardari taking accession of the PPP "crown" on his mother's death, the family ownership of the party continues.

This was the secular leader lionised and promoted by the West and in particular by the United States. A contradiction that could only end in a similar manner to the dozens of interventions by the US into the third world in the last fifty years – that is, in the worst interests of the masses and in the best for the small group who benefit from the ongoing imperialist exploitation of Pakistan.



Benazir Bhutto on right

Venezuela: the revolution in danger?

Tim Bowron

Having suffered a narrow defeat in the constitutional referendum held last December, Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez has signalled that plans to accelerate his Bolivarian socialist project will have to be placed temporarily on hold. On January 6 he announced during his weekly television show "Alo Presidente":

I'm obliged to slow down the pace of the march. I've been imposing on it a speed that's beyond the collective capabilities or possibilities; I accept that, that has been one of my mistakes... Vanguards can't lose their contact with the masses. They must stay with the masses! I will stay with you, and therefore I have to decrease my speed...

However, despite the referendum defeat, the right-wing opposition forces have not gained significantly in terms of their actual support. In the December poll the "No" vote increased by only some 300,000 over the vote total of the opposition candidate in the previous year's presidential elections.

What was decisive, though, was the abstention of some 3 million Chávez supporters, who this time simply stayed home and did not vote.

These voters, concentrated in the poor barrios where joblessness and inadequate housing are still widespread, clearly felt that the priority of the socialist revolution should be economic transformation and not constitutional window-dressing.

As the leaders of Marea Clasista y Socialista, a Marxist current inside Chávez's newly formed party, the United Socialist Party (PSUV), wrote in an analysis of the referendum defeat:

The government talks of the project of socialism and equality, but it does not always resolve key social problems like insecurity, housing, the wages of big sectors of the population, whereas other wealthy sectors still dispose of big companies and maintain their economic and political power. We all know that there are very positive social gains and that the reform brought others, but revolutions have unavoidable laws: to advance; it is necessary to take clear measures which weaken capitalist economic power and orient according to social needs.



Chavez, holding up a small copy of the constitution, speaking after defeat in constitutional referendum December 2007

There are signs that Chávez has at least partially assimilated this essential lesson. In his speech to the opening congress of the PSUV on January 12 he warned of the dangers of the new party being infiltrated by bourgeois or middle-class elements, only out to enrich themselves and betray the revolution.

This should be kept in mind when analysing Chávez's other recent statement (widely reported in the capitalist press) that the revolution "must seek out an alliance with the middle classes, even the national bourgeoisie". This remark was made in a separate speech on January 2, which also included an announcement of a government amnesty for the supporters of the failed 2002 CIA-backed coup against Chávez.

But although it may be necessary for Chávez to outwardly conciliate with pro-business forces and "play to the gallery" of foreign diplomats, he is clearly still aware where his true support base lies and also of the need to build the PSUV as a combative party of the workers, peasants and urban poor.

As Chávez summed it up in his speech to the delegates at the PSUV congress, at the end of the day the revolution "cannot depend on one man or an elite, rather it must be built by the people".

The Electoral Finance Act: a draconian and over-the-top law that will be used against unionists and radical leftists

The Electoral Finance Act sounds like a pretty boring piece of legislation, yet it sparked one of the biggest disagreements in New Zealand politics last year. Does it really have much to do with workers' concerns? And will it advance the interests of workers? *The Spark* talked to Bryce Edwards, a lecturer in Politics at the University of Otago.

The Spark: There's been a huge amount of talk expended about Labour's Electoral Finance Bill. Now that it's been passed, what actual changes does it make to politics?

BE: The Electoral Finance Act is about increasing state restrictions on political activity. So now that it's in place we have a lot more regulations concerning how political debate occurs in New Zealand. More than ever before, the state now tells us what we can say and how we can say it.

There's two main ways that it does that. First, it extends the period during which the state regulates election debate from about six weeks to nearly a year. Second, the new regulations take a much wider view about what debate needs to be regulated. Previously the rules really only dealt with election advertisements. Now they include virtually anything that might publicly express support for or opposition to a party. So a chant on a protest march, a placard, a speech, a chalk slogan on a pavement, a website or emails are all classed as election advertisements, and it's a crime if you don't include your name and home address with them.

But significantly, these rules will hardly affect the politicians. The government decided to make those in Parliament exempt from the rules when they're using their millions of dollars of taxpayer funding to electioneer.

The Spark: Council of Trade Unions (CTU) President Helen Kelly called the new law "an important step in the direction of open, transparent elections and a limit on the undue influence of wealthy interests." Doesn't this suggest the law might be beneficial to workers?

BE: I think Helen Kelly is just playing her usual Labour Party cheerleading role when she says that. First, the legislation will not really make elections more transparent. The law has been written so poorly that there are so many loopholes and exemptions, things could actually be a lot murkier than in the past.

Second, the elections certainly won't be more open because it's going to be harder for groups from outside of Parliament to participate in political debate, and it's going to be harder for parties outside Parliament to be elected because the new rules heavily favour the incumbents.

Furthermore, the legislation won't actually limit "the undue influence of wealthy interests" as Helen Kelly suggests. Her statement is just a typical false-radical attempt to obscure the relationship between power and politics. It suggests that if you simply get big money out of elections then "real" left-wing governments can be elected to bring in some kind of more just society. I'd remind her that there wasn't much big money involved in the 1984 general election, but look what the Fourth Labour Government and Rogernomics then did!

So, no – workers have nothing to gain from the EFA. If anything it will disadvantage them, especially if they want to be involved in political activity that's separate from the Labour Party.

The Spark: The CTU says it "proposed changes to the third-party definitions so that they more carefully targeted electoral speech, rather than wider political activity, and the revised Bill appears to have fixed these problems." What's your reaction to that?

ELECTORAL FINANCE ACT

BE: The CTU are either dreaming or being disingenuous. The EFA is one of the most extreme regulations of politics in the western world. The CTU should have been totally opposing this legislation, because in fact the revised legislation was in many ways even more restrictive than what was initially proposed.

For example, the final law that was passed actually extends the definition of an election advertisement to include "verbal political advocacy." The law now specifically states that "the use of loudspeakers and megaphones" will need to be accompanied by a declaration. That's the sort of draconian and over-the-top law that will be used against unionists and radical leftists.

The Spark: *The loudest opposition to the bill came from right-wingers and groups like Family First and the Sensible Sentencing Trust. Have these groups suddenly become champions of democracy? Why should we line up with them?*

BE: The problem is that the left in NZ has given up its historical values of democracy, opposition to state censorship and its general libertarian orientation. This has allowed the right wing to capitalise on these ideas.

In forsaking its belief in liberty and popular participation, the left has passed this role on to the right. But many of these right-wing groups are opportunistically putting themselves on the side of democracy and, unfortunately for us, this is the correct side of the debate. If a National government had implemented such a draconian act, I doubt these reactionary forces would be protesting. I imagine that the left would be protesting against it, but possibly just out of opposition to National rather than any principles.

Obviously it's not easy to line up on the same side as some right-wing groups, but we can't just abstain from the issue because we might be uncomfortable to be seen with right-wingers – that would be politically vain. And after all, the situation is only such due to the terrible position of most of the left. But this doesn't mean we should stop criticising those right-wingers who are on the same side as us – many of them are just being opportunistic or inconsistent in their opposition to the EFA.

And of course we shouldn't forget that it hasn't just been the right wing opposing the EFA. Other prominent opponents included Matt McCarten of Unite union, a number of other unions, the Human Rights Commission, the *Listener*, and so on.

The Spark: *Although you've said that political finance*



Bryce Edwards

reform is futile because political money is just like water in always finding find the weakest links through which to flow, electoral law expert Andrew Geddis has replied by saying: "Similar claims also are made in the field of (say), taxation. Or health and safety regulation. Or environmental law. It's the basic anti-statist, anti-'interference in the market' rhetoric. So why do you think that taxation law can be effective in bringing about social outcomes, while election finance law can't?"

How would you reply?

BE: The regulation of political finance is a very different matter from the regulation of tax. Tax loopholes are relatively easy to identify and plug up, whereas the political finance ones aren't. This is partly a function of the size of the issue – the NZ state collects \$50b annually through taxes. And so if the state loses money through tax avoidance it means the government departments that run health, education, welfare, etc might be poorer by billions of dollars.

But if a loophole exists in political finance law, nothing much is affected in the day-to-day running of the state. The state has less incentive to even bother with fixing political finance loopholes and avoidance. So the IRD in NZ has something like 8,000 employees

ELECTORAL FINANCE ACT

making sure that tax is paid, whereas the toothless Electoral Commission has about 4 staff to ensure that a similarly complicated system of regulations is adhered to. And while tax loopholes can be closed when they are identified, the nature of political regulations mean that when authorities attempt to close one loophole their actions merely open another one.

On the question of being anti-statist, I actually think that sometimes it's important for the left to be anti-statist. The best socialism is that which incorporates a fair dose of libertarianism. We shouldn't fetishise state intervention or an overwhelmingly powerful state. In many areas the left has traditionally been against the interference of the state – in terms of opposing the state telling us what sort of sexual partners we can have, or what we can read or watch. I don't think many of the left really would want to live in a totalitarian state like China.

The Spark: *What do you see as a workers' solution to the oppressive power of money in politics? If the Electoral Finance Act is undemocratic, how ought we to oppose it, and what should we be seeking as an alternative?*

BE: I wonder how many workers really believe that they are oppressed by the "power of money in politics." Sometimes liberals try to tell us that the problem of politics is that electoral competition isn't fair, and that if only the rich didn't give their money to the political parties they favoured then we would have a "level playing field", and the left would be able to get power and create a more just society. This is a total misunderstanding of how politics works and of the nature of the state in New Zealand.

Business interests have been able to exert an incredibly strong influence over politics during the last 25 years, but that's got little to do with political finance and much more to do with the fact that they run the economy. The markets can just about dictate what governments do, so it's a system thing, not a conspiracy.

Basically, we live in a society where a minority of people have access to gigantic amounts of money, and that's a very good reason why those of us on the left without huge amounts of money need to organise collectively, use our much greater numbers in politics, and come up with better political programmes than the rich.

That's the great thing about unions, and other democratic, mass-membership organisations. They allow people to join together in order to have a louder

voice. The other option of trying to "level the playing field" by state intervention into political activity has been shown to be, at best, fairly useless and, at worst, draconian and counterproductive.

Big day out for Workers Party

Daphna Whitmore

The sign said "Rage against capitalism", and people were in the mood to do just that. Workers Party comrades signed up 109 new members at Auckland's recent Big Day Out. Concert-goers signed up steadily from 8am until 1pm non-stop. At times there were small queues waiting to sign and pay the membership fee.

We were really struck by the good political responses from people. They were signing up with some political consciousness, not just to be nice. There was quite a "good on you" sentiment about the place.

A couple of people (separately) asked us what our position on the monarchy was. They were anti-monarchy. Quite a few were happy we were communists, Marxists, radicals etc. The good thing about the crowd was that they were mostly working-class and mostly under 30. People from Auckland, Christchurch, Dunedin, Hamilton and Wellington joined, as well as lots from other smaller cities and towns.

Later on, at the Police concert, a further 30 people signed up to the Workers Party and one made a \$50 donation to the cause.

The Workers Party is on track to gather the 500 members required to get the organisation on the party list to contest the general election this year. That will be the first time New Zealand voters will have the alternative of party voting for a socialist organisation in every electorate.

If you want to help make workers' issues high-viz this election, please get in touch with the Workers Party contact person in your area listed on the inside cover of this paper.

Australian Elections: Howard's out, but it's the same old bullshit

Alastair Reith

In the recent Australian General Elections, the eleven year reign of John Howard and his Liberal-National Coalition government was ended with a victory for the Labor Party and its leader Kevin Rudd.

The elections saw a significant voter shift towards Labor, with Howard even losing his own seat in the election to Labor challenger Maxine McKew <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maxine_McKew> .

While no one is sorry to see Howard and his Coalition thrown out, the facts are that "Kevin07" and Labor will be no better than Howard was.

A major reason for the Coalition's defeat was the unpopularity of its "WorkChoices" industrial relation (IR) legislation, a frontal attack on the Australian working class and the Australian union movement, that made it harder for workers to strike, made it easier for employers to force their employees onto individual workplace agreements rather than collective agreements, and banned clauses from workplace agreements which supported unions.

Despite the ALP's promises to "oppose the Howard Government's industrial relations legislation in every respect, at every stage until the next election".(1) Rudd changed the position to being "removing many of the worst aspects of WorkChoices".(2)

Rather than ditching the massively unpopular WorkChoices in its entirety, Rudd has instead given it a facelift, in a similar way to what the current Labour government in New Zealand did with National's Employment Relations Act.

Businesses with under fifteen workers will still be exempt from unfair dismissal laws, with the original legislation exempting businesses with under 100 employees. (3)

*Restrictive right of entry rules into workplaces for unions introduced under WorkChoices will remain and secret ballots (rather than open ballots) to decide on carrying out strikes will continue, strikes will become **banned** except during periods of collective bargaining.* (4) (emphasis added)

The new Labor government has stated that "Federal Labor will not allow industrial action to be taken outside a clear set of tough rules"(5), and that "Small business will be protected from unlawful and disruptive union activity."(6)

All of this should prove to anyone with a brain that

the ALP government and "Kevin07" is no more worker friendly than the Howard government that preceded it, and should be opposed with just as much vigour as the Coalition was.

Rudd has reconfirmed that Australian troops will continue to occupy Afghanistan indefinitely, saying that "Australia is here in Afghanistan for a long haul".(7)

While Rudd has confirmed that he will pull Australia's 550 combat troops out of Iraq, 500 "non-combat" troops will stay in the country doing "re-construction work" (aka building, maintaining and repairing military bases and so on).

Rudd has pledged to continue with the so called intervention into the Northern Territory Aboriginal communities, described by former Northern Territory MP, and Indigenous leader John Ah Kit as "in some ways genocide"(9)

All of this clearly shows that (despite what some on the left may claim), Kevin Rudd and the Australian Labor Party is not, never was and never will be worthy of any support whatsoever, and despite Howard being gone, it's still the same old bullshit.

1. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WorkChoices>
2. <http://www.alp.org.au/fresh-ideas/forward-with-fairness/forward-with-fairness.html>
3. <http://www.alp.org.au/media/0807/msdloploo280.php>
4. <http://www.alp.org.au/media/0807/msdloploo280.php>
5. <http://www.alp.org.au/media/0807/msdloploo280.php>
6. <http://www.alp.org.au/media/0807/msdloploo280.php>
7. <http://www.stuff.co.nz/4335452a12.html>
8. <http://www.juancole.com/2007/11/new-australian-pm-rudd-will-withdraw.html>
9. http://www.nirs.org.au/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=209&Itemid=11
<http://www.nirs.org.au/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=209&Itemid=11>

Khaled Hosseini reviewed

Jared Phillips

The Kite Runner (Book) by Khaled Hosseini, 2003

The Kite Runner (Film) directed by Marc Forster (2007)

One Thousand Splendid Suns (Book) by Khaled Hosseini, 2007

The Kite Runner (novel)

Despite workers' and students' democratic uprisings throughout the 1960s, Khaled Hosseini depicts relative social stability in Afghanistan up until the succession of the republic in 1973. The decades of unrest and persecution that follow are the context in which the story begins. *The Kite Runner* is centred around the betrayal by the considerably wealthier of two boys who are friends in Kabul. The wealthier is a Pashtun, a dominant ethnicity, and his servant friend is a Hazara, an ethnic minority.

Hosseini's description of Soviet intervention in Afghanistan deals a blow to 'the tankies' - the pro-Soviet communist parties that supported Soviet interventions. To escape the persecution of the Soviet intervention, and to escape the war between Soviet and Peoples Democratic Party Afghanistan forces on one side and the U.S-backed Mujahadeen on the other, the Pashtun family seeks refuge outside of Afghanistan. In 1989 the Soviets withdraw and the PDPA is soon after overthrown by the Mujahadeen. The alliances within the Mujahadeen splinter and deliver more war and chaos until they are out-warred by the fundamentalist Taliban, who cast more death over Afghanistan. On the carnage, one character reflects, 'I have been dreaming a lot lately...some of them are nightmares, like hanged corpses rotting in soccer fields with bloodred grass'.

By the time of Taliban rule the boy from the Pashtun family is an adult living more comfortably in East Bay California. He is told by a family friend that there is a way for him to make up for his childhood betrayals. He is told that 'There is a way to be good again'. This is the tagline for *The Kite Runner* movie.

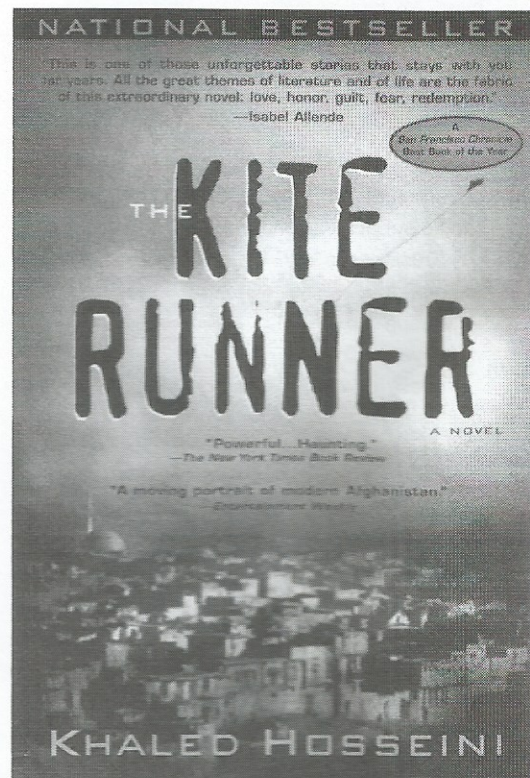
The Kite Runner (film)

The adaptation to film, directed by Marc Forster, screenplay by David Benioff, is very satisfying. In particular, the fitting-in of the whole long line story is relieving although it makes the film slightly fast-moving. Presumably for a more popular audience, the film is

more palatable. For instance, a brutal suicide is omitted and a drag-out, one-on-one, fight-to-the-death becomes a fist fight ending with far less injury. With great visual effect (filmed in China), the film drives at the dusty and deadly environment enforced by the Taliban. The film is a bit light on the Soviet intervention, just showing some red flags marching into town will do the audience. The disappointment of *The Kite Runner*, book and film, is that it doesn't explore the next chapter of oppression in Afghanistan, the oppression of the U.S-led war.

A Thousand Splendid Suns (novel)

Again, Hosseini explores how relationships endure, or not, under extreme conditions. This time he develops a friendship between two women, with a lot of difference



REVIEW

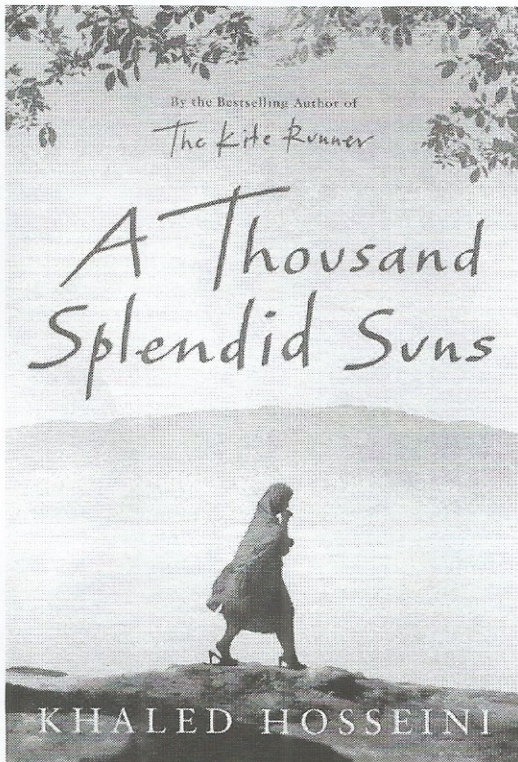
between them, who share equivalent hardships. Their relationship with a man serves as a metaphor for the conditions women in Afghanistan have endured prior to the Taliban and then under the fundamentalism of the Taliban.

In *The Kite Runner* there are moments of mysticism, for example, the young servant knows where to stand, without looking, to catch his friend's kite. *One Thousand Splendid Suns* is more realist, and has more emphasis placed on political and historical detail. The story captures the Taliban's public hanging of former President and PDPA leader Mohammad Najibullah. It details the factions in the Mujahadeen, including that led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who was, in his student days, aligned with the PDPA and rose to fame in 1972 when he assassinated Maoist leader Saydal Sokhandan (within the republican movement the Maoists were the main organised counter-weight against the increasingly soviet-dominated PDPA), and then went on to become Prime Minister after helping to lead the Mujahadeen to force soviet withdrawal.

The author spends quite a bit of time on health and education, and has to concede that under the PDPA regime there was improved healthcare and, in the cities at least, vast and extensive progress made for women, especially in the field of education. Hosseini identifies the movement towards womens' equality as one of the main factors in the anti-Soviet

resistance, led from the countryside. This brings attention to the complexities of advancing social progress when large parts of the public support the current culture. In relation to soviet intervention, Hosseini shows that progress can't be imposed by an outside force, especially one that subverts everything to the agenda of a foreign state. However, he doesn't reach the same conclusion in relation to the United States and Operation Enduring Freedom which is still, of course, imprisoning, claiming life, and preventing national sovereignty. Hosseini's story concludes that life under Enduring Freedom is improving, albeit slowly. At the end of *Splendid Suns* it becomes more obvious that Hosseini is a mix of liberalism and philanthropism. It seems he believes what the Bush administration knows is propaganda. But he is nevertheless an outstanding writer.

Other issues Hosseini explores in both stories include the refugee crisis, and ethnic discriminations that transform into sectarian violence under the Taliban.



Workers Party activists attend educational retreat

Over the Christmas-New Year holiday period about 20 Workers Party activists from around the country attended an educational retreat at Cracroft House, situated in the Port Hills of Christchurch.

Over four days, they took part in study sessions on topics such as women's oppression under capitalism, trade unions and the state, and the development of the Workers Party's political programme. A planning workshop to discuss the party's political priorities for 2008 was also held.

The level of discussion was very informed, and people attending all felt that they had learned a great deal.

However, it was not all in deadly earnest, and in between study sessions fierce regional rivalries were also tested in games of soccer and volleyball played out on the grounds of the retreat venue.

The retreat has now become an annual event, with another planned for early January 2009 somewhere in the South Island.

Why we joined

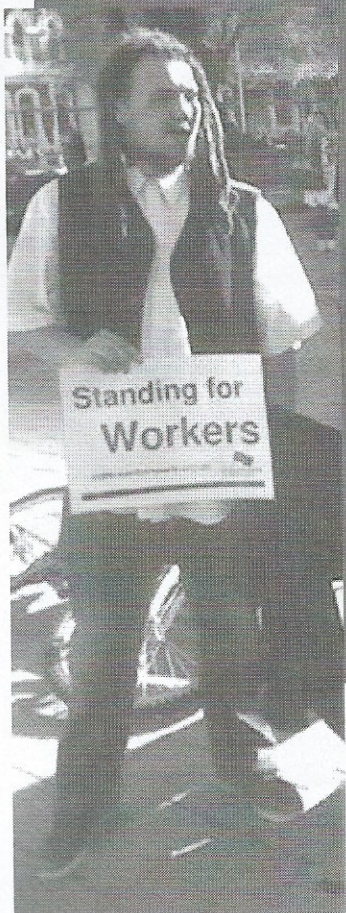
Josh Glue

Aged 22

I had long considered myself a Labour voter, even before I could vote, but as I learned more about Socialism, I became increasingly disillusioned with Labour's actions in government, especially their impact on poor and working people. After a time I decided I was best described as a Revolutionary Socialist, convinced that the people who create the wealth ought to own it, but didn't think there were any viable political parties in New Zealand in which I could really participate.

It was this point that I stumbled upon a Workers Party stall at university. I joined and started attending meetings, talks, protests and have been an active member for over a year since then. The more I've read about Marxist and Socialist theory since joining, the more satisfied I've been

with the Workers Party's platform of revolutionary social change and workers control of society.



Eli Boulton

Age 16

The reasons I joined the Workers Party are mainly because I myself have been a victim of capitalism. I am fatherless because of the anarchistic free market, because he brought a house and then our house plummeted in value through no fault of his own, and he was so distraught he killed himself. Now me and my mother are struggling to survive on a mere primary school teacher's salary, which is rather difficult.

Through my observations of history and the news and the world at large, I started to realise capitalism was a pretty dumb system. It causes wars for resources that kill a bunch of innocent people, its profit and growth attitudes are screwing up the environment and the huge inequality caused between rich and poor, with the rich having mountains of food while the poor having hardly any.

I found capitalist rhetoric to be very naive and selfish, such as when I mention how capitalism causes war and starvation, they acknowledge it but noted that as citizens of the Western world, it doesn't affect us directly so we should not care. Or they say that it's the poor people's fault that they're poor, which usually is a load of crap, unless you were born into a more upper or middle class situation and became poor by mismanagement of your money, it's usually a case of you were born into the situation just by chance. So I started looking into Marxism.

I found I agreed with most of what Marx said, and looked about joining a Marxist group. I found that most groups in NZ were more concerned about which dead communist from 50 years ago they followed than revolution today, and rather than building a solid working class movement they seemed more interested in having meetings to complain about capitalism. The Workers Party (New Zealand), on the other hand, is actively trying to recruit new members and is the only party that is trying to build a solid socialist alternative to the usual capitalist parliamentary parties.

Workers Party

Alistair Reith

Age 16



I joined the Workers Party in May 2007. I'd held my socialist (and by this time, revolutionary communist) beliefs for quite a wee while, but that alone wasn't enough. If you believe in something but don't get off your arse and *do* something about it, you might as well not believe in it at all. You can't do your bit in changing the world by bitching about it to your mates, posting stuff on internet forums or whatever. If you really want to do something about the crap system we live under, you have to get out there, link up with people who have similar beliefs to yours and start playing a part in the revolutionary struggle.

As well as that, you may feel strongly about the need to change the world *now*, but there's no guarantee you'll feel the same way ten, twenty or thirty years from now. The world is full of people saying "oh yeah, I used to be right into Marxism when I was your age" who are now driving flash BMWs and doing absolutely nothing in the struggle for a better world. If you're not in a Party, you'll end up feeling isolated, alone, like you're the only

person who feels the way that you do. You'll end up thinking that "nah, a compromise here and a bit of moderation there won't hurt", and within ten or twenty years you'll be just another washed up liberal, voting for Labour or the Greens and sipping margaritas in some yuppie bar. You'll have sold out.

This scenario terrified me. But joining a Party does a lot to prevent that from happening. You'll be in constant contact with comrades who feel the same way as you do, you'll be able to actually accomplish something for the cause you believe in, and you'll be able to educate yourself and train yourself up in Marxist theory and the history of our movement. You'll get the veils lifted from your eyes, and you'll be able, for probably the first time in your life, to understand *what* our world is and *why* it is that way.

The Workers Party is the only organisation seriously dedicated to building a strong, Marxist-Leninist Party with real, organic links with and roots in the working class. It's the largest, fastest growing, most widely dispersed and all round healthy revolutionary group in the country, with a branch in every single major urban centre in New Zealand.

If you're serious about the need to overthrow capitalism and build a better, socialist world, you should join and get active in the Workers Party. I did.

Marika Pratley

I became a member of Workers Party in early 2007. It stands true to Marxist and Socialist values while proactively supporting the rights of the workers, unions and the class struggles within New Zealand (unlike other New Zealand political parties). Our studies about Marxism were on a level that everyone could understand, and everyone had equal opportunity to contribute and make decisions together. This has helped me understand my rights as a worker and the flaws of capitalism in theory and practice. Workers Party is also inclusive to all people and treats everyone with respect.

Bus drivers' battles continue

Don Franks

In December 2007 the Workers Party produced a *Spark* insert, *Bus drivers stand up to the boss* (this insert can be viewed at www.workersparty.org.nz). It described how Management of Go Wellington imposed shift changes in 2007 that resulted in driver salary reductions of up to \$20,000 a year. At the same time, the company introduced an alternative collective to the Tramways Union one, with inferior conditions and, unlike the Tramways collective, no penal rates. In December this contract was being challenged in the courts. This case is still before the employment court at the time of going to press, with a decision due in early February. Watch this space.

Since then there have been various developments at Go Wellington, and for other Wellington bus drivers. The first has been the typically capitalistic decision of Go Wellington to jettison responsibility for the maintenance of trolley bus wires, threatening workers currently employed in this area with redundancy. At this point it is unknown which company will win the contract for lines maintenance, but workers are likely to come out worse off from the deal.

More positively, Tramways members at Mana Coach Services Bus Company successfully defended their fifth week of annual leave. Prior to negotiating the Tramways agreement, Mana Coach Services negotiated a collective with the Central Amalgamated Workers Union (CAWU) (who were responsible for the flat rate contract at Go Wellington) which gave away the fifth week of leave. CAWU have the majority of members on site, making the struggle for the Tramways members difficult.

After being locked out by the company and a

tough struggle, Tramways members were offered a \$16 flat rate but losing the fifth week's leave, or \$15.75 and the fifth week. While this wasn't a perfect result, it's a plus that the collective strength of Tramways workers at Mana in Porirua and Paraparaumu helped defend the fifth week of leave.

Times may have changed. This writer recalls a Panama Hotel session in the late 1970s where present-day CAWU advocate Ritchie Gillespie strongly advised against workers selling off their hard-won job conditions for a few cents...

The Tramways collective at Go Wellington expires in early May 2008. This will be the first round of negotiations since management attacked drivers' penal rates in 2007. *The Spark* understands that Go Wellington management have flapped their feathers and informally told drivers they'd better get ready for a big one. The signs are all out that bus drivers need to stand fast together over the coming year.

SUBSCRIBE NOW TO *THE SPARK &*

REVOLUTION *The Spark* (16 pages) is published every 4 weeks, *REVOLUTION* (36-40 pages) quarterly.

SPARK \$ 15 for 12 issues or \$30 for 24 issues within NZ; Australia \$A20 for 12 issues or \$A40 for 24 issues airmail.

REVOLUTION \$22 for six issues within NZ; \$NZ35 to Australia and \$NZ40 to the rest of the world.

SPARK SUBS SEND MONEY OR CHEQUE TO:
THE SPARK, PO BOX
10282, DOMINION RD,
AUCKLAND.

REVOLUTION SUBS POST CHEQUES TO: RADICAL MEDIA COLLECTIVE, PO BOX 513, CHRISTCHURCH.