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Socialist Voice #322, May 4, 2009

## **Stop the massacre of Tamils in Sri Lanka!**

### **Introduction**

Canadians of Tamil origin, like Tamils in many other countries, are continuing to organize mass protests to condemn the assault by the Sri Lankan military on the remnants of an armed resistance force and up to two hundred thousand civilians who are trapped in a tiny enclave in the Tamil homeland in the north of Sri Lanka. Decades of repression and open war by the government has resulted in a modern-day human rights tragedy.

The military offensive has killed thousands, while hundreds of thousands of Tamils have been herded into internment camps. There is an imminent danger of a massive relocation of the Tamil population by the government, an "ethnic cleansing" in modern human rights doublespeak.

Among the largest protests in Canada were rallies of 50,000 in Toronto on January 31 and tens of thousands on Parliament Hill in Ottawa on April 21. But the Conservative government and the opposition Liberals remain unmoved from their firm support of the Sri Lankan government. Both parties refused to address the crowd gathered on Parliament Hill on April 21, most of whom had taken a day off work and traveled for hours by car and bus.

*Socialist Voice* supports the demands in the International Appeal, published below, which was issued from the World at a Crossroads international solidarity conference in Sydney, Australia in early April.

We also urge readers to circulate the appeal of the Canadian Tamil Congress directed at members of Parliament, or an equivalent in other countries. The appeal calls on the Sri Lankan government to institute an immediate ceasefire, to allow the transport of emergency food and

medical supplies to alleviate the suffering of the populations in the war zones, and to respect the right to self-determination of the Tamil people in Sri Lanka. You can read and download the petition at: <http://www.canadiantamilcongress.ca/>.

We urge readers to join the ongoing protests by Tamils and their supporters that are advancing similar demands to those of the Canadian Tamil Congress.

These articles from the Australian publications *Green Left Weekly* and *Links* provide further background on the situation in Sri Lanka:

- Sri Lanka: Brutal slaughter of civilians (May 2, 2009)
- The Tamil question in Sri Lanka (October, 2008)

**International Appeal:  
Stop the genocide against the Tamils!**

Participants at the World at a Crossroads conference, Sydney April 10-12, recognise the genocide being carried out against the Tamil people by the murderous Sri Lankan government. The genocidal policies of the Sri Lankan government are a continuation of over six decades of systematic discrimination carried out against the Tamil population.

The drive towards genocide of the Tamils has intensified since the Sri Lankan government abrogated the peace process in January 2008 and embarked on the reconquest of the island's north through brutal war with devastating consequences for Tamils.

The last few months have been particularly brutal. More than 3500 Tamil civilians have been killed in a space of three months by the Sri Lankan state offensive. Tamils fleeing the fighting are being herded into concentration camps.

According to the former foreign minister of Sri Lanka, "A few months ago the government started registering all Tamils in Colombo on the grounds that they could be a security threat, but this could be exploited for other purposes like the Nazis in the 1930s. They're basically going to label the whole civilian Tamil population as potential terrorists."

Two hundred thousand Tamils are now facing starvation.

We believe people throughout the world must become more vocal against this genocide and protest governments that support the Sri Lankan government. Governments such as the United States, Israel, China, India and Pakistan have all equipped the Sri Lankan army with high technology weapons, including illegal chemical weapons and cluster munitions.

The undersigned participants demand:

- an immediate end to the Sri Lankan governments attacks on Tamils and for there to be an immediate ceasefire;
- that diplomatic, economic and cultural sanctions be applied till the Sri Lankan government agrees to an immediate ceasefire;

- that all military aid and assistance from governments to the Sri Lankan government must end immediately, because the money is being used to perpetrate genocide;
- that the IMF not to grant the Sri Lankan the use of \$1.7 billion, as it will be used on military equipment to kill Tamil civilians; that governments of the worlds to recognise and give full citizenship rights to Tamil refugees who have had to flee to avoid the genocide;
- that the self-determination of Tamils up to and including their right to form an independent state must be respected by the governments of the world; and
- that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam be taken off proscribed terrorist lists.

### **Initial signatories**

**Salim Vally** – Spokesperson of the Palestine Solidarity Committee

(South Africa); lecturer and senior researcher at the Education Policy Unit and the School of Education at Wits University;

**Michael Lebowitz** – Director of “Transformative Practice and Human Development” at the Centro Internacional Miranda, Caracas; Professor Emeritus of economics, Simon Fraser University;

**Luis Bilbao** – Union of Socialist Militants (Argentina); advisor to the Hugo Chavez government in Venezuela; editor of XXI magazine;

**Reihana Mohideen** – vice-chair of international department of the Power of the Masses Party (PLM – Philippines); chairperson of Transform Asia, a gender and labour institute in South East Asia; editor of Socialist Dialogue magazine;

**Mericio Juvinal Dos Reis** – Executive Director of the Luta Hamutuk Institute (East Timor);

**Ian Angus** – Socialist Voice (Canada), co-founder of Ecosocialist International Network;

**Roger Annis** – Socialist Voice (Canada),

**Ian Beeching** – Vancouver Socialist Forum;

**Mike Treen** – Nation director of organising, Unite union, New Zealand;

**Daphne Lawless** – Socialist Worker New Zealand;

**Dr Brian Senewiratne** – Singalese pro-Tamil activist;

**Tim Gooden** – Secretary, Geelong and Region Trades and Labour Council;

**Jess Moore** – Resistance national co-organiser;

**Dick Nichols** – Socialist Alliance national co-convenor ;

**Peter Boyle** – Democratic Socialist Perspective national secretary;

**Pip Hinman** – Sydney Stop the War Coalition; Socialist Alliance

**Brianna Pike** – DSP Sydney organiser;

**Stuart Muncckton** – Green Left Weekly co-editor;

**Emma Murphy** – GLW co-editor;

**Peter Robson** – GLW journalist;

**Tony Iltis** – GLW journalist;

**Jay Fletcher** – GLW journalist;

**Federico Fuentes** – World at a Crossroads conference co-organiser, GLW journalist, editor of Bolivia Rising;

**Lisa MacDonald** – World at a Crossroads conference co-organiser; DSP National executive;

**Chris Latham** – National Tertiary Education Union, Murdoch University branch organiser;

**Jamie Doughney** – Senior researcher at the Work and Economic Policy Research Unit, Victoria University of Technology.

**Terry Townsend** – Managing editor, Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal

Socialist Voice #323, May 13, 2009

## **Unite union wins gains for vulnerable workers in New Zealand**

**By Roger Annis**

The Unite union in New Zealand is the country's newest, and among its most dynamic, trade unions. It is at the forefront of a revitalization of a section of the labour movement in New Zealand that has resulted in thousands of young and marginalized workers gaining union representation for the first time and winning significant wage raises, including to the national minimum wage.

On April 6, 2009, I spent a day visiting Unite's offices in Auckland, New Zealand, in order to learn more about its successes.

### **Organizing the unorganized**

My day at Unite started with an invitation to observe the weekly Monday morning staff meeting. Fourteen staff in Auckland were joined via teleconference to three staff who campaign in three other cities – Wellington (New Zealand's capital), Christchurch, and Hamilton.

The meeting began with a review of new-member recruitment. The previous week was a big one for the union, netting 250 new members. Unite was founded in 2004. In the past year and a half, it has grown by 3,000 to reach 8,000 members. The largest components are fast food, followed by call centers, hotels and a casino, and postal workers.

Many of its members are from the nationally oppressed Maori indigenous and Pacific island populations.

Unite uses a variety of tactics to win members. Staff and volunteers visit worksites and convince workers to sign membership cards. New Zealand law permits access to worksites by union organizers, though the latter still encounter threats and intimidation by employers, or worse. For example, on Friday, April 9, the British-owned Synovate company locked out 30 workers during first contract talks.

The next day, union members and supporters blockaded the entrance to the center. Unite announced flying pickets squads for the following week to target major companies in Auckland and Wellington that are clients of Synovate. A new collective agreement with the company was soon won.

Unite has led imaginative and militant strikes, including the world's first strikes at the Starbucks coffee chain, in 2005, and short strikes at MacDonald's outlets in 2006 and again in 2008.

### **Building a broader labour movement**

From the beginning, Unite has fought for a \$12 per hour national minimum wage (one New Zealand dollar equals 57¢ U.S.) and an end to hated, slave-labour, youth wage rates. It gained

support from other unions for these demands, and last year they won the minimum-wage demand. It has since been raised to \$12.50.

Wage rates for 16- and 17-year-olds are still 80 percent of the adult rate. But as of 2009, these rates have been abolished at all the employers organized by Unite, including McDonalds, KFC, Pizza Hut, Burger King, and the major movie theatre chains.

The union's fighting reputation recently earned it the affiliation of 500 members of the national postal workers union branch that covers the top half of the North Island (New Zealand is divided into two large islands of near equal size; about two-thirds of the population of 4.2 million live on the North Island).

Several other unions have emulated Unite's tactics and have transformed themselves into more activist and representative unions as a result. The 22,000-member National Distribution Union (NDU) recently scored a breakthrough at the country's retail giant The Warehouse (New Zealand's answer to Walmart), signing up 2,000 new members.

The proportion of union membership in New Zealand is 22 percent, down from a high of 69 percent in 1980.

### **A representative union staff**

Unite's national office in Auckland is spacious and bright. It's strictly functional-no expensive furniture here. Staff are paid salaries that approximate those of the members its serves. No one earns higher than NZ\$20 per hour. While that's tough to maintain when other unions can pay considerably higher, Unite National Secretary Mike Treen and the rest of the union leadership believe there are important matters of principle involved.

“Unite is not just a trade union that negotiates collective agreements,” Treen says. “It’s also a social project to better the lot of the entire working class.

“Most of our members live in very difficult economic circumstances, and if our staff lead lives of significantly greater comfort, the broader vision of the union will weaken.

“We want to encourage a turnover that brings in staff members who are young, female, or from oppressed nationalities. An entrenched staff that gets comfortable with big salaries will, over time, get in the way of this kind of evolution of the union and its staff.”

The weekly staff meeting reviewed several social projects that Unite is promoting for its members. One is providing basic information on a new national pension fund called “Kiwisaver.” For every dollar of savings put into the plan by a New Zealand worker, up to a maximum of \$20 per week, an employer and the national government will each contribute one additional dollar. Workers have a choice of providers to direct their savings. Unite earns a small rebate when its member chooses the union's recommended provider (a fund that claims an ethical investment policy).

Unite also operates an education institution in downtown Auckland that accesses government education funding and offers courses in computer literacy, Maori language, and small business management, among others. Several thousand Unite members have attended the school since its inception in 2007.

### **Fighting for higher minimum wage**

Unite and the NDU are preparing a campaign to win a \$15 an hour minimum wage, itself a step towards an eventual goal of a minimum wage set at two-thirds of the average wage. Unite will soon launch a campaign for a national referendum vote on the matter. It needs 300,000 signatures to get the proposal on a national ballot, and Mike Treen has every confidence that it will succeed.

He explains, “The goal of the campaign is not only to win the \$15 minimum wage. It’s also to expand the base of support for trade unionism and progressive social policies.

“This campaign will place the world economic collapse at the center of New Zealand politics because it rejects the notion that workers must pay the price of that collapse. We can expect that employers and the government will fight us very vigorously.

“In the 1990s we paid a heavy price in New Zealand for capitalism’s failures. Unemployment hit 12 percent and real wages declined by 25 percent. Wages have never recovered. We think that workers will respond very positively to a campaign seeking to retake some of that lost ground.

“We will use the 300,000-signature campaign to gather e-mail addresses permitting us to keep in touch with signatories. They will receive information bulletins that the union will issue on the \$15 campaign and other issues of broad social interest to working people. And of course, we hope and expect that workers will contact us to join our union or another of their choice.”

### **Temporary workers’ rights**

The evening after the Monday staff meeting, Unite joined with several other trade union organizations to host a widely publicized public forum to defend the rights of temporary, migrant workers in New Zealand. There are several hundred thousand workers at any given time in the country who work on temporary permits in such industries as agriculture and retail services.

Unite is concerned that with the rise of unemployment, temporary workers’ rights are coming under attack by employers and the national government. It supports equal rights for all workers and is working with such organizations of oppressed workers as Migrante Aotearoa ( a trade union-based, immigrant workers organization) and Runanga, the council of Maori trade union members within the national trade union council, the CTU. Both of these organizations were co-sponsors of the public forum. Seventy-five people attended.

Unite is also an outspoken participant in New Zealand's antiwar campaigning. Several of its leaders, including Mike Treen and John Minto, are founders and spokespeople for Global Peace and Justice Auckland, the country's largest antiwar group.

*Roger Annis is a union activist in Vancouver, Canada and member of the International Association of Machinists. To contact or learn more about Unite, go to <http://www.unite.org.nz/>.*

Socialist Voice #324, May 15, 2009

## **Nepal: The people resist elite coup**

by **Stuart Munckton**

*Green Left Weekly, May 10, 2009*

This is not just a Maoist movement,” *Green Left Weekly*’s correspondent in Kathmandu, Ben Peterson, said on the struggle that has erupted in Nepal. “This is threatening to become a new people’s movement, like the one that swept away the monarchy.”

Peterson was commenting on the large number of daily demonstrations across the country to demand respect for the people’s will. They have come in the aftermath of the forced May 3 resignation of Prime Minister Prachanda and other members of the government belonging to the Unified Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (UCPN-M).

Peterson described the events as a “soft coup”.

The resignations were forced by the insubordination by the military high command, backed by the president and sections of the coalition government.

The UCPN-M, which had led the coalition government until its members walked out on May 3, had tried to use constitutional measures to sack the chief of the army, General Kul Bahadur Katwal.

### **Military rebellion**

The army high command had refused to obey instructions from the elected civilian government. The high command refused to implement key parts of the peace accords that, in 2006, ended the armed conflict with the Maoist-led People’s Liberation Army.

Sections of the high command in the Nepalese Army, infamous for its human rights abuses during the armed conflict, even spoke openly to the *Times of India* on April 24 about an aborted plot for a military coup against the elected government.

It is difficult to imagine a more blatant threat to democracy. If the military is not subordinated to an elected civilian government, but is allowed to defy it openly on central issues, then there is no democracy — merely military rule with a civilian government as window-dressing.

However, Nepalese President Ram Baran Yadav, from the conservative Nepalese Congress party (NC), issued a decree countering the UCPN-M decision to remove Katwal from his post. This is despite the fact that under the interim constitution the power of the president is largely ceremonial.

The result was the creation of two military heads: the Maoist-appointed head and Katwal, who, backed by the president, refused to recognize his sacking. [The Council of Ministers had appointed Lt. General Kul Bahadur Khadka, the former second-in-command, as Acting Army Chief.]

Coalition partners, such as the social democratic Communist Party of Nepal-United-Marxist-Leninist, despite internal divisions, failed to support the UCPN-M decision.

With little choice, the Maoists called a press conference announcing they were withdrawing from the government. The Maoists called for street protests to defend democracy.

Just over a year since the historic declaration of a republic, which brought people out into the streets in celebration, Nepal has been thrown into a fresh political crisis.

The monarchy was overthrown through a combination of the decade-long Maoist-led “people’s war” and the 2006 mass democratic uprising. A central demand of the Maoists was for elections to a constituent assembly to draft a new constitution to create a “New Nepal.”

The central role of the Maoists in the democracy movement, and the degree to which the poor identify with them, resulted in the Maoists winning nearly 1 million votes more than their nearest competitor.

Seeking the widest possible consensus, the Maoists established a broad coalition government. However, the UCPN-M’s proposals for a peaceful and democratic pro-poor transformation of Nepal that were endorsed at the ballot box have been frustrated by opposition within the parliament, the state and even the coalition government.

The cause of the crisis is the moves of the elite, based in the political and military establishment, that seek to frustrate the popular mandate for a New Nepal based on equality and social justice.

### **Class conflict**

The Nepalese elite are backed by the government of neighbouring India and the United States — both of whom fear the example of radical, pro-poor change in the region.

India, in particular, played a big role in bringing the Maoist-led government down. The former king and leaders of NC and the CPN-UML all visited India under various pretexts in the weeks before the anti-Maoist coup.

For the poor majority, the program the UCPN-M seeks to implement includes an increase in workers’ rights, land reform for the peasants, equal rights in a federal structure for ethnic and national minorities, access to education and health care, and a plan for extensive pro-people economic development.

In the lead-up to the crisis, while the bureaucrats and opportunist politicians were moving to stab the UCPN-M and its poor supporters in the back, the Maoist deputies were out in the countryside talking to the poor to gather proposals for the new constitution.

For all concerned, the stakes are high.

The elite, and their foreign backers, are terrified of the consequences of implementing the 2006 peace accords. These require the integration of PLA fighters into the existing army to create a new, democratic armed forces.

This could mean the military would no longer be a weapon in the hands of the elite to violently repress the struggles of the poor.

The poor, however, have every reason to fear the continuation of the unreformed old army, which committed great crimes against the people.

The situation remains uncertain. The Maoists are refusing to take part in any government and are boycotting parliament until their demand for the sacking of Katwal is met.

It is likely to prove difficult for the opponents of the Maoists to form a coalition government to replace the one that has now collapsed.

The UCPN-M alone controls 40% of the seats in the assembly. Also, the main point of unity among the other parties is opposition to the Maoists. All this makes it difficult for a government to be formed without them.

However, the situation is not simply determined by parliamentary numbers. Rather, the greatest difficulty facing the elite is the genuinely popular support the Maoists enjoy.

Peterson explained that recent events have only increased support for the Maoists. He said ordinary people he had spoken to everywhere, regardless of party affiliation, are furious at the actions of the president and the opportunist behaviour of parties like the CPN-UML.

He said the overwhelming majority of Nepalese people believed the undemocratic actions that had occurred had been organized by foreign forces like the US and India. There is incredible anger at those political parties that have allowed themselves to be used by foreign powers.

### **‘The mood is angry’**

The UCPN-M has called for protests in the streets until its demands have been met.

“The protests have been many and all over the place,” Peterson said. “They are organized by a whole range of different groups. Every different group has its own protest. The mood is angry.”

The protests ranged from involving hundreds to tens of thousands, he said. However, he emphasized that these protests occurred simultaneously — there could be dozens of protests in Kathmandu at any one time.

“Many of the people I have spoken to at the protests were not Maoists,” Peterson said.

As an example of the mood, he explained: “The other night I was at the bus park, and about 20 people just waiting around for a bus spontaneously started chanting against the president.”

The foreign media have attempted to play up protests by right-wing Nepalese Congress supporters. The *Sydney Morning Herald* even featured a photo of an NC supporters’ protest with the caption “People’s Power.”

However, Peterson said that before the Maoists left government, there were some tiny protests involving a few hundred people at most. Since then, no such protests had occurred.

In some cases the police have attacked protesters, including tear gassing a demonstration by the Maoist Young Communist League. Police repeatedly attack attempts by protesters, mostly Maoist women, to demonstrate in front of the president's offices. Protests in that area have been banned, resulting in regular clashes.

However, the state has held off from trying full-scale repression.

So far, the Maoists have also held back from full-scale mobilizations. They are yet to organize a centralized, all-out demonstration that calls the greatest numbers onto the streets together.

However, as the likely futile negotiations by the anti-Maoist parties drags on, that could be about to change.

Peterson said on May 9 that, over the last day, things had felt quieter. But he likened this to the calm found in the eye of a storm: "The storm rages and then it is peaceful as it passes over you — until the rest of the storm follows through.

"Right now, Nepal is in the eye of the storm."

Peterson emphasized the determination of the Nepalese people to defend the democracy they won through great sacrifice. The people, he insisted, would not turn back.

Socialist Voice #325, May 18, 2009

## **Dissident Afghan MP Condemns NATO Bombings**

### **Introduction**

This massacre offers the world a glimpse at horrors faced by our people.” In the article below, dissident Afghan MP Malalai Joya expresses her country’s the growing outrage at the intensified NATO air strikes, and its outrage that the occupiers continue to prop up of the corrupt regime headed by Hamid Karzai.

With the Obama administration’s “surge” in Afghanistan – adding tens of thousands of additional U.S. troops to the occupation – it is more important than ever to work for an immediate withdrawal of Canadian troops from Afghanistan. The Canadian Peace Alliance and its member coalitions and organizations continue to campaign to bring the troops home, with the most recent pan-Canadian mobilization having taken place on April 4.

Updated information and media analysis on the war in Afghanistan is available at the StopWar blog maintained by Dave Marland, a Vancouver-area activist and researcher.

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### **By Malalai Joya**

*Malalai Joya was the youngest member of the Afghan Parliament, elected in 2005 to represent Farah Province. In May 2007 she was unjustly suspended from Parliament. Her memoir, A Woman Among Warlords: The Extraordinary Story of an Afghan Who Dared to Raise Her Voice, will be published in October by Scribner.*

As an elected representative for Farah, Afghanistan, I add my voice to those condemning the NATO bombing that claimed over 150 civilian lives in my province earlier this month. This latest massacre offers the world a glimpse of the horrors faced by our people.

However, as I explained at a May 11 press conference in Kabul, the U.S. military authorities do not want you to see this reality. As usual, they have tried to downplay the number of civilian casualties, but I have information that as many as 164 civilians were killed in the bombings. One grief stricken man from the village of Geranai explained at the press conference that he had lost 20 members of his family in the massacre.

The Afghan government commission, furthermore, appears to have failed to list infants under the age of three who were killed. The government commission that went to the village after three days — when all the victims had been buried in mass graves by the villagers — is not willing to make their list public. How can the precious lives of Afghans be treated with such disrespect?

The news last week is that the U.S. has replaced their top military commander in Afghanistan, but I think this is just a trick to deceive our people and put off responsibility for their disastrous overall strategy in Afghanistan on the shoulders of one person.

The Afghan ambassador in the U.S. said in an interview with Al Jazeera that if a ‘proper apology’ is made, then ‘people will understand’ the civilian deaths. But the Afghan people do not just want to hear ‘sorry.’ We ask for an end to the occupation of Afghanistan and a stop to such tragic war crimes.

The demonstrations by students and others against these latest air strikes, like last month’s protest by hundreds of Afghan women in Kabul, show the world the way forward for real democracy in Afghanistan. In the face of harassment and threats, women took to the streets to demand the scrapping of the law that would legalize rape within marriage and codify the oppression of our country’s Shia women. Just as the U.S. air strikes have not brought security to Afghans, nor has the occupation brought security to Afghan women. The reality is quite the opposite.

This now infamous law is but the tip of the iceberg of the women’s rights catastrophe in our occupied country. The whole system, and especially the judiciary, is infected with the virus of fundamentalism and so, in Afghanistan, men who commit crimes against women do so with impunity. Rates of abduction, gang rape, and domestic violence are as high as ever, and so is the number of women’s self-immolations and other forms of suicide. Tragically, women would rather set themselves on fire than endure the hell of life in our ‘liberated’ country.

The Afghan Constitution does include provisions for women’s rights – I was one of many female delegates to the 2003 Loya Jirga who pushed hard to include them. But this founding document of the ‘new Afghanistan’ was also scarred by the heavy influence of fundamentalists and warlords, with whom Karzai and the West have been compromising from the beginning.

In fact, I was not really surprised by this latest law against women. When the U.S. and its allies replaced the Taliban with the old notorious warlords and fundamentalists of the Northern Alliance, I could see that the only change we would see was from the frying pan to the fire.

There have been a whole series of outrageous laws and court decisions in recent years. For instance, there was the disgusting law passed on the pretext of ‘national reconciliation’ that provided immunity from prosecution to warlords and notorious war criminals, many of whom sit in the Afghan Parliament. At that time, the world media and governments turned a blind eye to it.

My opposition to this law was one of the reasons that I, as an elected MP from Farah Province, was expelled from Parliament in May 2007. More recently, there was the outrageous 20-year sentence handed down against Parvez Kambakhsh, a young man whose only crime was to allegedly distribute a dissenting article at his university.

We are told that additional U.S. and NATO troops are coming to Afghanistan to help secure the upcoming presidential election. But frankly the Afghan people have no hope in this election – we know that there can be no true democracy under the guns of warlords, the drug trafficking mafia and occupation.

With the exception of Ramazan Bashardost, most of the other candidates are the known, discredited faces that have been part and parcel of the mafia-like, failed government of Hamid Karzai. We know that one puppet can be replaced by another puppet, and that the winner of this election will most certainly be selected behind closed doors in the White House and the Pentagon. I must conclude that this presidential election is merely a drama to legitimize the future U.S. puppet.

Just like in Iraq, war has not brought liberation to Afghanistan. Neither war was really about democracy or justice or uprooting terrorist groups; rather they were and are about U.S. strategic interests in the region. We Afghans have never liked being pawns in the 'Great Game' of empire, as the British and the Soviets learned in the past century.

It is a shame that so much of Afghanistan's reality has been kept veiled by a western media consensus in support of the 'good war.' Perhaps if the citizens of North America had been better informed about my country, President Obama would not have dared to send more troops and spend taxpayers' money on a war that is only adding to the suffering of our people and pushing the region into deeper conflicts.

A troop 'surge' in Afghanistan, and continued air strikes, will do nothing to help the liberation of Afghan women. The only thing it will do is increase the number of civilian casualties and increase the resistance to occupation.

To really help Afghan women, citizens in the U.S. and elsewhere must tell their government to stop propping up and covering for a regime of warlords and extremists. If these thugs were finally brought to justice, Afghan women and men would prove quite capable of helping ourselves.

Socialist Voice #326, May 21, 2009

## **Australia's Continuing Assault on Indigenous Rights**

### **Introduction**

This article is based on a presentation made at the April 2009 “World at a Crossroads” conference in Sydney, Australia, by Emma Murphy, a co-editor of Green Left Weekly. In December, 2008, Murphy participated in the newspaper’s investigative reporting delegation to the Northern Territory (NT) of Australia.

Murphy previously lived and worked in the remote Indigenous community Irrunytju, and she has done cultural and linguistic work with the Yankunytjatjara, Pitjantjatjara and Ngaanyatjarra peoples of central Australia. Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Straight populations numbers 527,000; 31% of those live in the NT.

### **by Emma Murphy**

This talk examines the current attack on Indigenous land rights and self-determination in the Northern Territory that began with the 2007 Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) legislation of the Coalition government of Prime Minister John Howard – the “Intervention,” as it’s broadly known.

The legislation culminated 12 years of attacks on Indigenous people by the Coalition – but the election of the Labor Party government in November 2007 has not in any way ended these attacks.

### **Draconian legislation**

Among the key attacks in the NTER legislation are:

- Giving the federal government the power to seize land which was granted to Indigenous people in 1976, and convert freehold title into five-year leases.
- Removal of Indigenous peoples’ right to control who enters their land, a right that had been protected through a widely supported permit system.
- Withholding 50% of the welfare payments due to Indigenous people in proscribed areas. The money is granted as store vouchers.
- Widespread bans on consumption of alcohol and pornography.

To provide a legal fig leaf, the legislation suspended the *Racial Discrimination Act*.

### **Land rights and self-determination**

Central to most Indigenous struggles in Australia, from the European invasion until today, has been the question of self-determination, that is, land rights and Indigenous control of Indigenous affairs more broadly. Sovereign rights to the land are central to Indigenous culture, identity, and

wellbeing. In capitalist, resource-rich Australia, ownership and control over land would also give Indigenous people unprecedented economic and political power through direct access to means of producing social wealth and through the ability to negotiate or exercise veto over mining ventures.

Although only about 25% of the Aboriginal population lives in remote communities, the Intervention has focused great national attention on them, so it's important to understand what these communities are like, and where they came from.

One thing to note is that traditional law and culture are very rich and alive in these remote communities. These are among the last peoples in Australia to have been colonized. When I lived at Irrunytju, I would often be told I couldn't take women out hunting on a certain day because there was "men's business" traveling through that area. Similarly, when traveling past significant landmarks, people break into specified song as a sign of respect to the various totems and Dreamtime animals or spirits. Town Camps in Alice Springs are nestled amongst hills and rocks that are identified as having played central roles in the creation of that land, at the dawn of time.

An awareness of how alive these traditions still are, and how recently a distorted form of capitalism has been thrust upon this ancient people, only serves to increase our awareness of the depths of racism and offensiveness of the paternalistic Intervention.

The communities in central Australia and the NT were mainly established in the 1970s and 1980s. As Indigenous people became eligible for welfare payments – as late as 1975 for unemployed adults – and as limited rights to Native title were slowly won, Indigenous people began to enjoy more freedom of movement. Many began to demand the right to return to their traditional lands. Movement also occurred in the wake of the equal-pay decision in 1966 that saw many Aboriginal stockworkers (ranchhands) and their families leave the stations (ranches) they had been living and working on.

As part of a new era of "self-determination," federal and state governments committed to providing infrastructure and essential services to these communities and homelands. In some cases, missions and reserves were handed back to be managed by the Indigenous people.

The homeland movement was an important part of the struggle for land rights. In many cases it gave Indigenous groups access to productive resources for the first time. Communities were able to experiment with being part of the capitalist economy through, for example, farming or arts and crafts enterprises, while still maintaining a connection to their land and a commitment to their culture.

However, diminishing government support and underfunding of Indigenous organizations meant that many of these communities faced social, economic, and political problems. Basic infrastructure such as drinking water and housing was at substandard levels, and the social fabric of many of these communities was fraying. Reports of 100% unemployment, substance abuse and violence became commonplace.

By the late 1990s, the first Howard government was expressing the view (through its unofficial mouthpiece, the Australian newspaper) that self-management had failed, that Aboriginal communities were unviable, and that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC – the organisation established under the Labor government in 1990) was failing its constituents.

These arguments failed to acknowledge that declines in social indicators were the responsibility of the state and federal governments and not the ATSIC.

Indigenous communities and especially ATSIC itself faced an increasingly hostile media. In April 2004, the federal government dismantled ATSIC, saying that services for Indigenous people would be “mainstreamed” – delivered by the federal and state governments, rather than through Indigenous-controlled or Indigenous-specific agencies such as ATSIC. The *Australian* newspaper declared that “Australia’s 14-year experiment with Indigenous self-government is over.”

### **2007 report sets stage for Intervention**

Three years after ATSIC was shut down, in June 2007, an inquiry into the protection of Aboriginal children from sexual abuse was released. *Little Children Are Sacred* was used by the Howard government to justify declaring a national “emergency” and introducing the NTER legislation just days later.

By no coincidence, a federal election was looming and pollsters were advising the Coalition to find divisive issues to stem the rise in polls of the Labor Party.

Was there an emergency? In the ten months that the report’s authors spent traveling through communities and hearing people tell their stories, they definitely collected some harrowing stories. But there was nothing new in what they found. Anyone who’d been reading the *Australian* knew about the dysfunction and social breakdown in many communities. The authors themselves pointed out, “There is nothing new or extraordinary in the allegations of sexual abuse of Aboriginal children in the Northern Territory. What is new, perhaps, is the publicity given to them and the raising of awareness of the wider community of the issue.”

They also reported that child abuse is a problem throughout all of Australian society.

The report drew attention to circumstances that lead to child neglect/abuse, including poverty and unemployment, overcrowding, substance abuse, family breakdown, etc. These, it said, are far more serious and requiring more immediate attention than the supposed “emergency” of child abuse.

None of this was news to the government, which had used reports of difficult conditions as part of earlier attacks on the concept of self-determination in general and ATSIC in particular. Communities themselves were obviously well aware of these issues as well. For years, Aboriginal women’s pleas for funded domestic violence shelters and night patrols had fallen on

deaf government ears, leaving many communities to establish grassroots, largely volunteer programs.

### **The legislation**

The authors of the *Little Children* report have condemned the Intervention because it does not implement a single one of their recommendations, which included: more resources and training for local Aboriginal people in areas of health, family support and community development; increased resources for child and adolescent mental health; support for establishing men's and women's groups/centers to assist in responses to cultural breakdown; and many more.

An overriding theme of the recommendations was the need for collaboration with and empowerment of the communities themselves. This is starkly at odds with the punitive approach of the Intervention.

The NTER legislation is only enforceable in "proscribed areas." Thus, communities, town camps, and even individual houses in suburban Alice Springs now have big signs declaring them "proscribed areas," in which possession of alcohol or pornography is a criminal act. Imagine the social stigma and racism created by such signs! Indigenous friends of my uncle can go to his house for a beer after work, but if he goes to their place, he's breaking the law by taking alcohol into a "proscribed area."

Other friends, who have never consumed alcohol, speak of the humiliation of having their car searched by police each time they re-enter their community on return from Alice Springs. Despite the fact that the police have known these people for years, and know them to be non-drinkers, the Intervention "empowers" police to search vehicles and houses in proscribed areas.

The themes of shame, humiliation and disempowerment were constants among the people we spoke to in the NT during our visit last year. Indigenous men have been branded "pedophiles" by the government hysteria surrounding the Intervention. This has had very real impacts on their confidence to show affection and care for their children. Families are breaking down.

This Intervention is a serious attack on the right and ability of these communities to solve their own problems and control their own affairs. For example, we visited Town Camps in Alice Springs that had for years urged the liquor licensing agency to declare them "dry zones," as they recognized the negative effects of alcohol abuse and wanted to be able to call on police back up when there were problems. For years they'd been denied that right. When the Intervention started, suddenly they became dry zones, not through empowerment of communities but because of paternalistic government Intervention. There are now, of course, people who are relieved that their camp is alcohol-free, but the overwhelming sentiment we heard was one of insult and disgust that their decision-making powers had been taken away from them.

Similarly, there were domestic violence services being run entirely on Community Development Employment Programs (CDEP) because the government had refused to provide funding.

However, as CDEP money was classified as “wages,” and wages couldn’t be withheld, all CDEP programs were shut down and its workers put on welfare.

The *Little Children* report noted severe overcrowding in housing as a contributing factor to abuse and neglect, but not one new house has been built as a result of the Intervention.

**Rudd: a new era?**

The NTER legislation was passed with bipartisan support in 2007, so it is not surprising that little has changed under the newly elected Labor government under Prime Minister Kevin Rudd.

In February 2008, Indigenous and non-Indigenous people travelled to Canberra from around Australia – particularly from proscribed areas in the NT – to protest the Intervention and demand it be repealed. But that protest was overshadowed by the historical apology to the Stolen Generations, delivered by Rudd on the opening day of Parliament of the new government, February 13, 2008. It was a beautifully crafted speech promising a new era in race relations in this country. It raised the hopes of quite a few people.

The Rudd government followed up with ratification this year of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People. Under Howard, Australia was one of four countries that refused to ratify the Declaration in 2007.

But these symbolic measures sound very hollow to the people who continue to live under the racist policies of the Intervention. While the rhetoric of the Rudd government is different from that of Howard – there are no explicit attacks on “self-determination” – the substance of Aboriginal policy has not changed.

If anything, Rudd has managed to take some of Howard’s attacks further than Howard himself had time to. For example, Labor is now pressuring NT communities to sign their land over to the government as 40- or 99-year leases in return for basic infrastructure funding such as public housing. Some communities have succumbed, but others are standing strong and refusing to sign their land over.

The government plans to extend this bullying tactic and land grab across Australia. In March of this year, it announced that no more public funds were to be released to Aboriginal communities unless they sign their land over to 40-year leases.

The federal government has also talked about extending welfare quarantining into other parts of Australia.

The Rudd government commissioned an inquiry into the Intervention. It heard many moving submissions from Indigenous people talking about how they felt they’d been taken back to the rations days and how the men had been branded pedophiles and child abusers. The inquiry’s report recommended that would have removed the most punitive sections of the Intervention, for example, it said welfare quarantining should be voluntary and only enforced in proven cases of child abuse.

The government has ignored the inquiry, saying that the Intervention has now “stabilized” and will continue until at least 2012.

It has also supported the NT government’s attacks on bilingual education. In communities where English may be a child’s second, third or fourth language, schools were using multilingual, ESL approaches in classrooms, employing Aboriginal education workers to ensure quality content in the students’ first languages. This has now been largely abolished: Aboriginal languages can only be taught in the final few hours of each day. Recent studies show a decline in school attendance as this policy is enforced.

There have also been ongoing questions raised by the government about the “economic viability” of remote communities and homelands. This ties in to an ideological trend that started under Howard: an argument that Indigenous communities need to “enter the real economy,” and Aboriginal people should enjoy the same “rights” of private home ownership as the rest of Australia.

The specter of “economic viability” hovers threateningly over Aboriginal communities. None have yet been formally closed down, but we need to draw all these different threads together and come to our own conclusions regarding:

- The increasing difficulty of living in remote communities when welfare withholding requires you to travel 400 kilometres to shop.
- The attack on the legitimacy of traditional culture and language through closing down the bilingual education system.
- The attack on the ability of Aboriginal communities to stop mining on their land, by transferring freehold title into leases back to the government.

Australian capital – especially mining interests – would benefit if life in remote communities got so hard that the Indigenous people had to move into town.

But Aboriginal people aren’t leaving their land and culture, and they’re not taking this latest attack lying down. For every attack on the land and rights of Aboriginal people, there’s been a fightback.

Aboriginal Rights coalitions have emerged across the country. There have been national gatherings to organize resistance, such as the one in Canberra in 2008 which coincided with the Apology last year and another in February of this year. We are seeing a cohering of a national leadership the likes of which we’ve not seen for a few decades.

Many communities are refusing to sign their land over to the government. The Proscribed Area People’s Alliance has formally taken the government to the United Nations, charging that the Intervention breaks numerous conventions. Amnesty International is pursuing similar avenues. There’s an awareness among many Indigenous people that the campaign to end the Intervention must broaden out to win support from the trade unions.

There's a rich history of socialists and trade unionists collaborating with Indigenous people to fight for their rights. We must see the struggle against the Intervention as a continuation of that history, and always be mindful of the two principles of land rights and self-determination as we seek to build these broad alliances and wage the current phase of the struggle against colonialism and racism in this country.

Socialist Voice #327, May 25, 2009

## **NDP and working people lose out in BC election**

**By Roger Annis**

*My fear is that we may end up with a legislature that is almost completely irrelevant to the next generation of British Columbians.*” -David Mitchell, head of the national Public Policy Forum commenting on the May 12, 2009, British Columbia election.

(VANCOUVER, BC) The May 12 provincial election in British Columbia has left a lot of working people shaking their heads in dismay. A right-wing, anti-environment, and anti-working class government was able to win a third successive term in office, by a comfortable margin no less.

How could the opposition New Democratic Party (NDP) and the 450,000-member BC Federation of Labour which backs the party fail to unseat the unpopular, if not reviled, Liberal Party government under Premier Gordon Campbell?

### **Where have the voters gone?**

The election result is very close to that of 2005. The Liberal and NDP share of the popular vote did not change, at 46% and 42% respectively. The Liberals won 49 seats in the Legislature, compared to 36 for the NDP. The Green Party won eight percent of the vote.

Voter participation dropped sharply. When the final numbers are in, they will show that only 53% of *registered* voters cast a ballot, some 1.632 million, compared to 62% in 2005.

All three main parties – Liberals, NDP and Green – received fewer votes compared to 2005. The Liberal and NDP vote dropped by 11%; the drop for the Greens was 23%.

Voter turnout in the Vancouver metropolitan area was below average, notably in ridings with high immigrant populations.

Participation numbers are even lower when statistically *eligible* voters are considered. Only half of eligible voters took part. Voter participation was lowest for the 18-24 age group. Figures for 2009 are not yet available, but in 2005 only 35% of those eligible in this age group voted.

### **NDP shift to the right**

NDP leader Carole James and her party presented very few policy proposals during the election campaign. There were only two in the social realm – to raise the minimum wage to \$10 per hour, and to build several thousand units of social housing during the four-year term in office the party hoped to win.

All other commitments were vague and couched in the language of “reviewing” policies of the preceding regime. Thus, the NDP policy book advocated a “freeze” on post-secondary tuition fees and daycare fees, not the fee reductions that activists are demanding. In the dying days of the campaign, James warned that all proposals in the NDP platform would be subject to a careful

examination of the province's public finances once the party gained office. She reminded voters of her devotion to the dogma of "balanced budgets."

The most discussed issue in the election was what to do, if anything, about climate change. The NDP and Liberals claimed the same objective – reducing greenhouse gas emissions in the province by 30% by the year 2020, using the year 2007 as a base reference. But two programs promoted by the Liberals and supported by the NDP make a mockery of any talk of reducing greenhouse gas emissions – the multi-billion dollar "Gateway" road, rail, and port expansion under way in the Vancouver metropolitan region; and massive expansion of oil and natural gas production in the northeast of the province.

The NDP staked much of its electoral hopes on its declared opposition to a modest tax on gasoline introduced by the Liberals in 2008 in the name of fighting greenhouse gas emissions, a so-called carbon tax. The NDP's "axe the tax" campaign appears to have lost more votes among people concerned about the environment than it won among those angered by increasing taxes on energy consumption.

The NDP had nothing to offer to workers that are hard hit by the deepening world economic crisis. Employment in the province's largest industry, forestry, has been devastated by a combination of the collapse of the U.S. housing market, climate change, and provincial government policies favoring raw log exports over local processing of timber. The NDP's only answer was to suggest the crisis will be overcome with prudent government management of public finances.

In response to public concerns regarding criminal violence fueled by the illegal trade in drugs, the NDP staked out a position to the right of the Liberals, calling for more police and tougher laws against illegal drugs.

Carole James made great efforts throughout the election campaign to ease the worries of the province's business elite over the possible election of her party. In a speech to the Business Council of BC on March 29, she said, "Even when we do disagree, it is important to acknowledge that we have the best interests of the province at heart. I know the BC Business Council does...."

But her soothing words did not stop the Business Council and its affiliates from issuing harsh advertisements in the closing days of the election campaign warning that the election of the NDP would be a disaster for the "BC economy" and cause tens of thousands of jobs to be lost.

In the days following the election, NDP leaders expressed satisfaction with their campaign. MLA Michael Farnworth, the party's Opposition House Leader, said, "It makes a good base for 2013," when the next provincial election is scheduled.

James changed that tune on May 20 when she admitted that she and her party had failed to present a positive vision for the future to the electorate. The failure is not accidental. It's the product of a five-year effort by James and other party leaders to steer the NDP to the right and to

separate even further from affiliated trade unions and from the social movements that have arisen in response to the deepening capitalist crisis.

**Where were the trade unions and social movements?**

There were very few public protests against the Liberal record in office during the campaign. Liberal candidates were able to waltz through public appearances and debates in communities that have been devastated by their policies.

It was especially galling to see this played out in forest communities. In many, industry unemployment is near total. And forest companies are taking advantage of the economic uncertainty. Catalyst Paper has told four communities on coastal BC where it operates paper mills that it will not pay the \$21 million it owes in municipal taxes for the year 2008. It says the towns must either accept its offer of \$6 million or it will shut down one of the four mills.

Two significant protests did take place. On April 4, several thousand people rallied in Vancouver to demand that the federal and provincial governments commit to build social housing and end homelessness. And throughout the election, opponents of privatizing electricity generation in the province publicized their cause.

Several NDP candidates and one NDP member of Parliament attended the housing protest.

The BC Federation of Labour has for several years been campaigning for a rise in the minimum wage to \$10 per hour. Not a single rally for this campaign took place during the election.

The Federation and the NDP ignored the “Living Wage” campaign launched last year by the Hospital Employees Union. This campaign is giving voice to the 8,000 hospital workers who lost their jobs to privatization in the wake of the defeat of the 2004 strike of hospital workers. The campaign is demanding a wage of \$16.74 an hour for hospital service workers and all other poorly paid workers.

Nowhere in the NDP platform was there mention of undoing the harsh and punitive privatizations of services such as hospital cleaning and food services that occurred under the Liberals. These health care workers, and other workers in health, social and government services, toil for poverty or near-poverty wages. For many, their job security has vanished because of the abolition of successor rights that preserved collective agreements if a public authority switches the private providers with which it contracts.

The scandalous conditions affecting the approximately 200,000 Indigenous people in the province received little attention in this election. In 2002, the newly-elected Liberal government staged a racist referendum, asking voters whether they approved the government taking a hard line against self-determination and land rights for Indigenous peoples. It received the mandate it wanted, and has blocked meaningful progress ever since.

More recently, the government has softened the edges of its policy by reaching out to Indigenous leaders or local councils to strike deals that would allow resource industry investment to proceed without the troubling barriers of sovereignty rights.

The NDP and the unions opposed a referendum for an electoral reform that would have been a small but important step for greater political democracy. A form of proportional representation known as “Single Transferable Vote” went down to defeat because of widespread misrepresentation or ignorance about its progressive features.

### **The war on labour**

The Liberals’ reign has been a ceaseless assault on workers jobs and living conditions. In 2002, they tore up existing collective agreements in health care, education and government services. In 2004, a strike of hospital workers was defeated and nearly ten thousand workers in cleaning and food preparation services were replaced by low-wage workers working in precarious, privatized services.

Workers throughout government, health care and education services have seen their salaries, jobs or work conditions similarly degraded. Only teachers were able to withstand the worst of the onslaught, thanks to a militant strike in 2005 that won widespread support.

The poorest and most marginal workers have suffered the most. The minimum wage has been frozen at \$8 per hour since 2001. The Liberals even lowered it, to \$6 for the first 500 hours of new hires. Homelessness has risen in all urban areas, thanks to the federal and provincial government abandoning spending and responsibility for social housing.

Attacks on workers rights will now deepen following the Liberals’ re-election and as the decline of the provincial economy accelerates.

One front of this will be violations of democratic rights associated with the Winter Olympic Games, to be held in Vancouver in February 2010. For many, the Games symbolize so much of what has gone wrong in the province. While billions of dollars are being lavished on facilities and services for this two-week sporting spectacle, poverty has steadily risen.

A key part of staging the Games will be a massive police crackdown on political protest and on poor people living on the margins of society. Military exercises have already taken place in the skies and waters surrounding Vancouver. Municipal bylaws prohibiting petty conduct such as spitting on sidewalks are being dusted off so that marginalized people accused of repeat violations can be barred from parts of the city that have high visibility to Olympics tourism.

### **Building a movement for social change**

How can working people win a government that defends democratic rights and social justice? This is a question on the minds of many in the wake of this latest, lamentable electoral outcome. The election provides some clear answers to that question that should be discussed throughout the trade unions, social movements, and NDP in the months ahead.

- Right-wing governments with universal backing from the capitalist class, such as that enjoyed by the BC Liberals, cannot be defeated through electoral routine. The electoral process and the surrounding mechanisms of big-business media are too strongly weighted

against working people for the simple casting of a ballot to bring about meaningful change.

- A party of the working class must firmly defend the interests of its constituency. The NDP and the unions will never convince big business leaders to join the rest of the human race in making the world a better place. Capitalist and working-class interests run in opposite directions. The social and political organizations of working people need to organize accordingly.
- The fight for social justice and progressive government can only be advanced by bringing the social power of workers and our allies into action, through political education, street mobilizations, workplace actions, and all other forms of popular action. A party of the working class must be active and mobilized throughout the year, not just in time of elections.

NDP members and unions affiliated to the party should organize to challenge the party and the unions to adopt such a perspective.

Socialists and other working-class fighters face the challenge of raising our voices and program more forcefully. The voices of socialism were heard only faintly during this election. Fresh approaches to political organization and greater left unity are overdue.

Socialist Voice #328, May 31, 2009

## **World Farmers' Alliance Challenges Food Profiteers**

*La Vía Campesina: Globalization and the Power of Peasants.*

by Annette Aurélie Desmarais

Fernwood Publishing, 2007

### **Reviewed by John Riddell**

The neoliberal assault that has driven labour into retreat over the last two decades has also sparked the emergence of a peasants' international, La Vía Campesina. Rooted in 56 countries across five continents, this alliance has mounted a sustained and spirited defense of peasant cultivation, community, and control of food production.

Annette Desmarais's book on *La Vía Campesina* has given us a probing and perceptive account of the world peasant movement's origins, outlook, and activities. ("La Vía Campesina" means "Peasant Path" or "Peasant Way." See "Peasants or Farmers?" at the end of this article.)

The movement began as a response to globalization, which Mexican peasant leader Alberto Gomez has defined as "a global offensive against the countryside ... against small producers and family farmers" whose existence poses a barrier to "an industrialized countryside."

Such coercive industrialization involves "delinking" food production from consumption through the intrusion of agribusiness corporations that usurp different stages of production: provision of inputs, food processing, transportation, and marketing, Desmarais says. Industrial products replace farmer inputs: chemicals in place of manure, hybrid seeds in place of farmers' seed stocks. Many peasants are shackled to corporate production contracts, which, Desmarais notes, now control about 90% of U.S. poultry farms.

"Farmers are no longer considered producers of knowledge," Desmarais says, but rather as consumers of the marketed wisdom of agribusiness, mere cogs in the gears of corporate industry.

Meanwhile, neoliberal trade policies have destroyed institutions and tariff barriers that provided farmers with market leverage, leaving them isolated victims of profiteering by gigantic worldwide agribusiness concerns.

The entire process recalls capitalism's "de-skilling" of industrial workers, which replaced independent skilled craftsmen by assembly-line labourers. The logical end point would be replacement of the family farm with factory-style capitalist estate farming.

But this has not happened.

### **Peasant survival**

Family farming, Desmarais reports, has remained a prominent form of cultivation, in rich and poor countries alike. She cites data from the U.S., where farm technology is most advanced. There, family-owned farms made up 85% of all units in 1990s, although a significant proportion

of them are dependent on wage labour. There is growing evidence, she says, “that small farms are more ‘efficient’ than large corporate farms” and are more “sustainable.” Indeed, ” ‘re-peasantization’ is going on as the absolute number of peasants grows.”

Farmers have survived – but have been subjected to extreme levels of corporate exploitation. Indeed agribusiness has learned to take maximum advantage of small-scale farmers, who carry the costs and risks of farm production but are robbed of almost all the proceeds. Added to that is predation by the banks, whose mortgages suck the lifeblood from farms before ultimately destroying them.

Even harsher exploitation is imposed on agricultural workers, concentrated in labour-intensive fruit and vegetable farms.

Desmarais reports National Farmers Union (NFU) findings that farmers in Canada earned just 0.3% return on equity in 1998, while “agribusiness corporations earned 5%, 20%, 50%, and even higher rates.” Since then, the situation has worsened. In 2004, the NFU reports, farmers in Canada could not even cover basic costs from their product sales.

In this context, peasants have both motivation and means for concerted resistance. The neoliberal era has in fact seen a revival of peasant activism, much of it coordinated by La Vía Campesina. Desmarais chronicles the dramatic intervention of Vía Campesina contingents in protests at successive World Trade Organization (WTO) gatherings. Among their achievements: “After having all but disappeared ... over the past 25 years, agrarian reform is now back on the agenda.” Moreover, Vía Campesina has succeeded in maintaining unity of member organizations in both the richest and poorest countries of the world.

The Vía Campesina website reports member organizations’ activities in the first four months of this year in no less than 17 countries, nine of them in the Global South. Among these were a series of initiatives on behalf of the farmers and other citizens of Gaza under assault by Israel.

The peasants’ alliance has gone beyond defense of members’ immediate economic interests. It advocates the “right of peoples to define their agricultural and food policy,” which it terms “food sovereignty.” This program defends the interests of peoples of the Global South under pressure from the world’s richest states, while providing some key elements of a platform to unite working people and the oppressed both as producers and as consumers of food.

Food sovereignty embraces the principle that food is a basic human right, demands sustainable management of natural resources by those who work the land, and asserts the need for genuine agrarian reform.

In addition to calling for food self-sufficiency and strengthening family farms, La Vía Campesina’s original call for food sovereignty in 1996 included these points:

- Guarantee everyone access to safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food in sufficient quantity and quality to sustain a healthy life with full human dignity.

- Give landless and farming people – especially women – ownership and control of the land they work and return territories to indigenous peoples.
- Ensure the care and use of natural resources, especially land, water and seeds. End dependence on chemical inputs, on cash-crop monocultures and intensive, industrialized production.
- Oppose WTO, World Bank and IMF policies that facilitate the control of multinational corporations over agriculture. Regulate and tax speculative capital and enforce a strict Code of Conduct on transnational corporations.
- End the use of food as a weapon. Stop the displacement, forced urbanization and repression of peasants.
- Guarantee peasants and small farmers, and rural women in particular, direct input into formulating agricultural policies at all levels.

The end result of such policies, Desmarais believes, will be to build and strengthen rural communities, which she views as “sites of diversity, differences, conflicts, and divisions” among people “engaged in the same argument” about “the common things in their everyday lives.” The Vía Campesina model, she states, “does not entail a rejection of modernity, or of technology and trade,” but insists that they must be inserted in a model “based on certain ethics and values in which culture and social justice count for something.”

La Vía Campesina was born out of collaboration of farmers’ organizations in several parts of the world, with Canada’s NFU playing a prominent role. Nettie Wiebe, based in Saskatchewan, was the only woman member of Vía Campesina’s initial coordinating committee. She spearheaded the formation of a Women’s Commission to develop women’s participation and leadership, a high priority for Vía Campesina, and led this commission until 2000.

In 2004, Vía Campesina recruited an energetic Quebec component, the Union Paysanne, dedicated to “a human-scale agriculture and vibrant rural communities.”

### **Struggle for independence**

For 60 years, the world’s dominant farmers organization has been the International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP), which functions mainly as a lobbying agency within international institutions such as United Nations affiliates, the World Bank, and the WTO. Desmarais describes IFAP as “reformist or conformist,” and as “representing the interests of larger farmers primarily based in the industrialized countries.”

The NFU has stayed outside IFAP because it “simply did not represent the interests of smaller farmers,” Desmarais says. With the onset of capitalist globalization, IFAP – despite internal divisions – mostly lined up in support of trade measures favourable to agribusiness. During the process of forming Vía Campesina, there were efforts to involve IFAP, but these broke down over such differences. “Dialogue was not possible,” writes Vía Campesina activist Nico Verhagen.

In Desmarais' view, "the very existence of the Vía Campesina is clear evidence that not all farmers speak with the same voice."

Indeed, the Vía Campesina experience confirms that agricultural producers are divided in terms of their relationship to agricultural production. On the one hand are owners of large-scale operations dependent on exploiting wage labour, and those who identify with this model. On the other hand are working farmers utilizing mostly family labour, who are victims of corporate exploitation. The fact that the working farmers now speak through their own international organization is a historic accomplishment, going beyond what non-farm workers presently have at their disposal.

### **Escaping the NGO embrace**

During its formation process, Vía Campesina came into contact with a variety of groups from what is often termed "civil society," that is, non-governmental actors. The term embraces everything from an indigenous Zapatista community in a Mexican forest to richly funded corporate research institutions. Quoting Catherine Eschle, Desmarais notes the "hierarchical and oppressive relations that exist within civil society."

Among "civil society" groups, it was the NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) that posed a special challenge for the nascent Vía Campesina. NGOs exist to channel contributions from governments, corporations, and others to development projects. They vary widely – good, bad, and ugly – but mostly tend to reflect the agenda of the state and corporate agencies that provide most of the funds.

"In general," says Desmarais, "NGOs have different aims, purposes, interests, organizational cultures and structures, and mechanisms for decision making and accountability than peasant organizations." She quotes the stinging comments of James Petras and Henry Veltmeyer, who term NGOs a "neo-comprador class" that is "not based on property ownership or governmental resources but derived from imperial funding and their own capacity to control significant popular groups."

NGOs claim to "speak for those without a voice," Desmarais notes. Unfortunately, "many NGOs have not been comfortable with what the 'formerly voiceless' have to say" and "have not learned how to keep quiet when appropriate."

For example, Wilson Campos, a Costa Rican peasant leader and founding member of Vía Campesina, commented in 1994, "We don't need all those NGOs.... We farmers can speak up for ourselves. Already too many people have been taking advantage of us, without us getting any the wiser for it."

In its formative stages, La Vía Campesina endured a concerted effort by an influential NGO, the Paolo Freire Stiftung, to take control – particularly by defining the alliance's purpose in terms of research rather than militant action and promoting an orientation toward large landowners. The

stakes were high, since NGOs represented the main potential funding source. Desmarais provides a vivid account of the ensuing struggle, which ended in a parting of the ways.

### **A web of alliances**

The sweeping vision of La Vía Campesina includes concepts that link the interests of working farmers to those of all victims of neoliberalism. Among them:

- *Food as a human right.* Back in 1974, a United Nations' World Food Conference proclaimed with much fanfare that within 10 years "no family will fear for its next day's bread." Since then, amid evidence that hunger is growing, world bodies have retreated from the 1974 pledge, in part because of U.S. insistence that the right adequate food is merely a "goal" or "aspiration." In 2002, Desmarais reports, a World Food Summit abandoned any promise of the right to food. This commitment is central to the Vía Campesina program.
- *Down with junk food!* Vía Campesina's French affiliate won worldwide attention to its concept of malbouffe (bad grub). Its leader, José Bové, won fame when he was jailed in 1999 for his role in a protest that dismantled a McDonald's outlet then under construction in the rural town of Millau. Malbouffe is "food from nowhere," Bové explains, food that has been stripped of "taste, health, and cultural and geographical identity ... the result of the intensive exploitation of the land to maximize yield and profit."
- *Land stewardship.* For Vía Campesina, Desmarais says, agrarian reform means not just land distribution but a transformation of agricultural systems to favour small-farm production and marketing. "Land is a good of nature ... and cannot be a marketable good that can be obtained in whatever quantity." She quotes João Pedro Stédile, a leader of Brazil's landless tenants: "We want an agrarian practice that transforms farmers into guardians of the land, and a different way of farming that ensures an ecological equilibrium." Some Vía Campesina groups, Desmarais notes, favour taking land off the market "and practicing the principle of social ownership of the land, whereby families who work the land have usufruct rights (the right to use the land without ownership)." This system, which has shown its worth in Cuba, provides a foundation for ecologically sound and sustainable agriculture.

### **The challenge of government**

Annette Desmarais's book does not take up how farmers can achieve a government that represents them and responds to their demands. In this regard, her book reflects the character of Vía Campesina itself, which states that it is politically pluralist and non-aligned.

Yet the great rallies against oppressive trade treaties in which Vía Campesina has participated show us how the question of government can be addressed. Mass demonstrations like that in Quebec City in 2001 bring together militant farmers, labour activists, ecologists, Indigenous peoples, feminists, human rights advocates – a wide alliance of social movements.

Over the last decade, such alliances have been able to install popular governments in several Latin American countries, especially Venezuela and Bolivia, which brought to a standstill the plans for a hemispheric “free trade” treaty.

The case of Bolivia shows what peasants can achieve on a governmental level. A militant peasant movement, one of whose leaders was Evo Morales, gave birth to a broad people’s political instrument, the IPSP by its Spanish acronym. It now governs the country (as the MAS, or Movement Toward Socialism) under Morales’s presidency. Victory is by no means complete, but much has been achieved for a peasants’ agenda close in conception to that of Vía Campesina. Moreover, drawing on its Indigenous-peasant roots, the Bolivian movement has now adopted a vision for social transformation, which it terms “communitarian socialism.”

Annette Desmarais has provided us with a gripping account of Vía Campesina. Her book can help awaken labour, socialist, feminist, and ecological activists to the importance of farmers as allies and protagonists in the world struggle for social justice.

### **“Peasant” or “Farmer”?**

“When Vía Campesina was formed in 1993,” Annette Desmarais tells us, “delegates from Great Britain objected that the literal translation [of its name] – ‘Peasant Road’ or ‘Peasant Way’ – would be inappropriate not only because of the derogatory connotation attached to the term ‘peasant’ but also because peasants did not actually exist in the British countryside.”

The dictionary distinction between “peasant” and “farmer” is indeed sharp. Peasants are defined as small-scale cultivators, who are “coarse,” “boorish,” “poor,” and “uneducated.” The dictionaries politely omit another connotation of the term: “non-White.” Farmers, by contrast, are defined to include rich entrepreneurs who personally never work the soil.

In the 1993 Vía Campesina debate, many delegates objected to dropping the term “peasant.” Ultimately, a compromise was found: the term Vía Campesina would not be translated into English.

Nettie Wiebe, a leader of Canada’s National Farmers union and also of Vía Campesina during its first decade, believes English-speaking farmers must reclaim the term “peasant,” pointing to its origin in the French word paysan.

“If you actually look at what ‘peasant’ means, it means ‘people of the land,’ ” Wiebe says. Are we Canadian farmers ‘people of the land’? Well, yes, of course. And it’s important to take that language back... We too are peasants and it’s the land and our relationship to the land and food production that distinguishes us.”

According to Desmarais, “reclaiming the meaning of peasant is perhaps one of the Vía Campesina’s most important achievements.”

She quotes Karen Pedersen, NFU women’s president from 2002-2005, who notes that the term “farmer,” too, has now become derogatory, carrying “the connotation of inefficiency” and obsolescence. “Well, I am a farmer and I am a peasant,” Pedersen says. “Through my

participation in the Vía Campesina I learned that I had much more in common with peasants than I did with some of my agribusiness neighbours... Being a peasant stands for the kind of agriculture and rural communities we are striving to build.”

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**Further reading: *Socialist Voice* on Farming**

Fidel Castro on Global Warming, Biofuel, and World Hunger

Harvest of Injustice: The Oppression of Migrant Workers on Canadian Farms, by Adriana Paz

Food Crisis: World Hunger, Agribusiness, and the Food Sovereignty Alternative, by Ian Angus

The Myth of the Tragedy of the Commons, by Ian Angus,

Farmers Seek Defenses Against the Giants of Agribusiness, by John Riddell

Venezuela Responds to World Food Crisis, by John Riddell and Suzanne Weiss

The Epic Struggle of Indigenous Andean-Amazonian Culture,