

Congratulations! AIDEX Protesters

The success of the demonstrations against AIDEX show that where there is a bit of fight it will have results and get support.

The protest got wide support from unions, churches, political, aid and student groups. The protesters were united in two common aims:

- to close down AIDEX
- to draw attention to the government's militaristic policies with a view to forcing change.

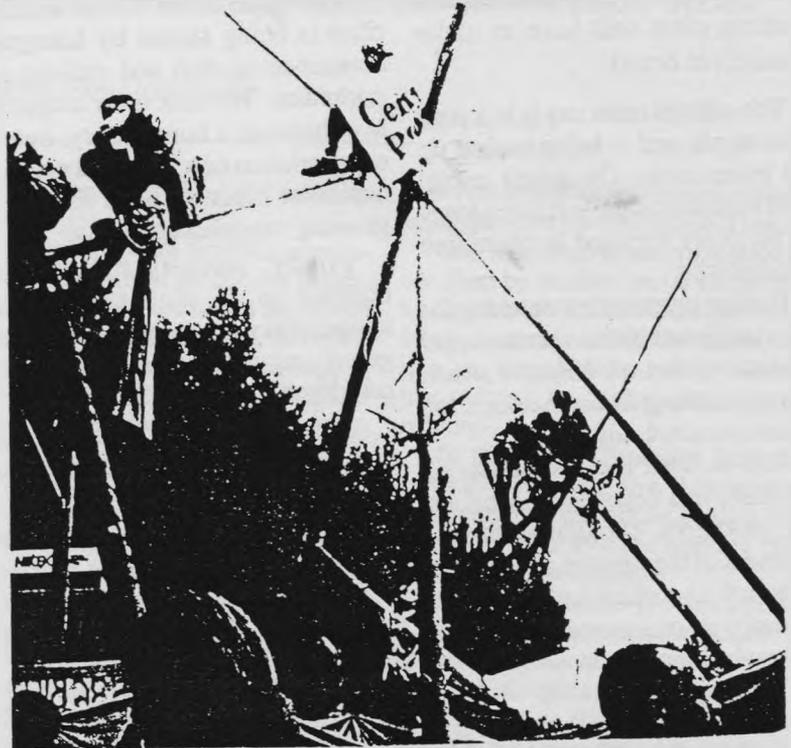
Opposition to AIDEX began with an official ACT Trades and Labour Council picket. On the 23rd November a 24 hour protest and vigil was established opposite the gates to the exhibition site. The vigil was kept going for a week until the end of AIDEX.

During that week protesters picketed and blockaded the gates to the site successfully obstructing the delivery of equipment and the traffic of clients. Months of preparation had gone on around Australia, largely co-ordinated by the Renegade Activist Action Force in Sydney, and the Campaign Against Militarism in Melbourne.

In Melbourne, Trades Hall Council and the ACTU opposed AIDEX, along with many individual unions. In late September an Anti-AIDEX Coalition was convened by the Campaign Against Militarism which organized many educational, fundraising and protest activities in Melbourne leading up to the exhibition.

Busloads of activists from all round the country descended on Canberra and set up a well organized camp which took care of security, provision of food and water, legal help and information.

Meetings were held every morning at the campsite to decide on the days actions. The usual debate between violent and non violent forms of action emerged. The strength of this division was not as marked as in previous years however, largely because both sectors of the protest community left each other



to their own forms of protest.

A new tendency to emerge in AIDEX 91 was the International Socialist's Organization. Full of fervour in the wake of the Gulf War, their constant call for mass actions only resulted in limiting the diversity of protests, as compared to the much smaller AIDEX 89 protest.

The mass action tactic, while appropriate as one of many tactics, seemed to quickly become their strategy. It left little room for more militant tactics (which by their nature need to be secretive and smaller); less militant tactics to cater for people fearful of being handled by the police and was opposed to the women's march on the women's day of action.

The two years of solid organizing since AIDEX 89 paid off. The demonstration was enormously successful and was several times as large as its predecessor. The publicity which followed the Dili massacre exposed the brutality of militarism providing a vivid example of the repressive use of weapons.

The media was quick to pick up on this link and made it a focus. Media coverage in general was unexpectedly favourable.

Scenes of police violence were not edited out of news footage and news paper editorials, while not condoning protester militancy, did question the morality of an arms exhibition.

The success of the protest is that an exhibition like AIDEX is unlikely to happen again. This year there were only 138 exhibitors, compared to more than 200 in 1989. Client attendances were low, and the atmosphere inside was subdued. Exhibitors are questioning whether they will return. The ACT government has already precluded the possibility of another AIDEX happening in Canberra.

Protesters against AIDEX must claim this as a victory.

However, AIDEX organizers are already talking of changing the name of the exhibition to remove the word "defence", and of moving interstate, or onto army land. The battlelines against the military industrial complex need to combat these subterfuges.

The Soviet Union: Which way forward?

Since the last issue of *ReD* we've watched the aftermath of the August coup and the restoration of capitalism is even further down the track. It's not an easy road and the working class still have to make themselves heard.

The official economy is in a state of paralysis, and is being broken up and given away. Organised crime, small businesspeople and bureaucrats are furiously engaged in 'primitive accumulation'

Foreign investors are watching for opportunities as Yeltsin institutes the Russian version of Walesa's shock therapy, cashing in his memoirs for his first personal million.

This is what the restoration of capitalism in a degenerated workers state looks like. The drastic impoverishment of the workers and the rise of racism and chauvinism are the outcomes of counter-revolution not workers' struggle.

While we welcome the overthrow of stalinism, we cannot be blind to the fact that it was overthrown by a bourgeois counter-revolution.

The voice of the Soviet working class is being stifled by bourgeois counter-revolution and stalinist opportunism. The task is no longer the overthrow of a bureaucracy, but the expropriation of a large and growing capitalist class with its roots in a growing capitalist economy.

Firstly, workers should have nothing to do with the stalinist apparatchiks who are fighting a rear guard action to defend their rotten privileges.

Secondly, workers should support the break-up of the Soviet Union into its constituent parts.

The Soviet Union was created by the voluntary union of the workers across the former Czarist Empire to make and defend the October 1917 Russian Revolution.

The Soviet Union was maintained after the rise of Stalin by means of national oppression. This state has now proved incapable of defending the working class and nationalised property and has fallen into the hands of capitalist restorationists.

The only prospect for the working class to defend itself is to lay hold of national pieces of the state, subject them to working class control and reorganise on the basis of their own political and economic struggle, independently of unemployed stalinist bureaucrats.

Thirdly, on the basis of this struggle a new leadership must be built. This can only be done through the political solidarity of workers across the various republics, and across the world.

Only in this way can Soviet workers come to understand the real significance of the Russian Revolution and overcome its betrayal by stalinism.

Polish Elections: Shuffling Deck Chairs on the Titanic

The recent elections in Poland speak volumes for the effect of Walesa's 'shock therapy'. 29 parties competed and 18 have seats in the new parliament, with no party having more than 14%.

Only 40% bothered to vote — the lowest turn-out in any generalelection in Europe this century!

The largest vote was for the Democratic Union, co-led by the Catholic former Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki and the anti-Stalinist left Jacek Kuron. The Liberal Democrats who have administered the 'shock therapy' finished sixth, and the main Stalinist party finished a close second.

Under these conditions, Lech Walesa,

who remains President, is expected to demand dictatorial powers. Democracy it seems needs a firm hand!

Throughout the post-war period Poland has shown the future for the other nations occupied by the Red Army. Riots in Poznan in June 1956 put Gomulka in office and were soon followed by the Hungarian uprising in 1956. After the crushing of the Hungarian Revolution, Gomulka did not dare to defy Moscow.

Further rioting in 1970 saw Gomulka removed and a decade of resistance followed culminating in the rise of Solidarity in 1980, ultimately leading the way back to capitalism and the collapse of capitalism across Europe.

In Poland, the organised working class has always held the leading posi-

tion, even in the restoration of capitalism under Walesa's leadership.

The 60% abstention in the election, and the failure of any party to attract more than 6% of the eligible voters certainly indicates that the future will bring considerable crisis.

The honeymoon is over. It is a healthy sign that the euphoria accompanying the downfall of Stalinism is gone.

The working class has not yet embraced any program. For the moment it is paralysed, but all the conditions for class conflict exist.

Inevitably those class interests will find a more coherent political expression. The political arena is wide open.

Beyond the Unhappy Marriage of Nationalism and Class

With the downfall of the Stalinist states of Eastern Europe, the USSR, Africa and Asia, the world is dominated by questions of nationality, self-determination, secession, ethnicity.

LYNN BEATON looks behind this development.

The demands of national groups for greater independence from the political, economic and social unions in the East has given the national independence movements in the west of Europe a shot in the arm.

We now have the Basques and the Catalans making claims to be free of Spain, Brittany and Corsica becoming more restive about their French yoke, South Tyrol wants out of Italy and the Welsh and the Scots want out of the UK.

At the same time as people united by ethnicity are seeking independent nationhood and the break up of the nation states which were such an important part of the development of capitalism, all of Europe is being brought closer together by the European Community.

The two tendencies are linked.

It is the very possibility of EC membership which makes the emergence of many of the states a possibility. Until the last year many small European nations wanting to secede had no chance of economic self-sufficiency. The EC provides the potential for tiny states to secure an economic viability.

At the same time fascism is gaining strength in western Europe as the economic crisis deepens.

What questions do these trends pose?

While we have traditionally supported the right of groups with national identity to self-determination, what position do we take when so many of the driving forces include facism, racism, monarchism and a host of other religious and political viruses revived after years of freeze drying under stalinism?

This is no doubt partly indicative of the economic crisis all of Europe faces. We all know that racism erupts when the going gets tough, the easiest

target is someone who talks and eats differently.

While capitalism survives, competition will drive the productive forces. While the productive forces are driven by competition there will be no equality of wealth or access to economic well-being and while great inequalities continue to exist discontent will splatter into racism at a moments notice.

While the capitalist world has been rejoicing at the collapse of stalinism, mistaking it for the collapse of all resistance to capitalism, attention has shifted from the problems which capitalism faces internationally.

At this stage it seems that class questions have been thrown out of the window as national questions have occupied every space. But capitalism is about classes and the class questions

won't disappear no matter how free all ethnic peoples are in a national sense.

The vital issue is the oppression of one class by another, and if the speedy victory of the national independence movements means that the class question can once again come to the fore that can only be a step in the right direction.

In the end a Ukrainian boss has more in common with a Russian boss or a Scottish boss with an English boss than they have with the working class of their own nationality.

Capitalism cannot provide a peaceful and harmonious patchwork extending the spectrum of the multitude of the national identities of its peoples.

Internationalism as a political strategy becomes more important than ever.



**Crime wave —
what crime wave?**

Over recent months the police and media have propagated the idea that we are in a crime wave.

In reality, high-profile crimes such as the Karmien Chan abduction and a number of attacks on women have been used by the police to excuse many of their actions, while at the same time demanding more police powers and resources.

The most common crime against children is incest. Similarly, women are far more likely to be raped by someone they know than by a stranger.

If we want to tackle violence against children we have to tackle the social organisation, the nuclear family that creates it.

If we want to stop men raping, we have to tackle their sexist attitudes.

As for property and other related crimes, most of these are committed by marginal groups like the unemployed faced with the decision to steal or starve.

It is true that the real solutions won't be found under capitalism, with its sky rocketing unemployment and institutionalised patriarchal relations.

But the very least we can do is to start pressuring for mechanisms to make the police more accountable.

This also means contesting the power of the police to define types of crime and their responses to them.

Most all we should be making it clear that we aren't going to be happy with window dressing schemes, while the real issues—poverty, sexism, racism, go unchallenged.

Police shootings not just the

Between March 1987 and April 1989 two men were shot dead by police.

23 year old Jedd Houghton and 24 year old Gary Abdallah, were both being sought by police in relation to the 1988 Walsh Street murders.

A coronial inquiry, part of a wider inquest into police shootings in Victoria, currently being held into the shootings has heard allegations that the two men were executed by a police.

Is it a case of the rules breaking down or is their more involved? ReD investigates.

It was the police killing of Graeme Jensen by police in Bendigo on October 11 1988, which many believe sparked off this series of events.

Approximately 13 hours later, police constables Steven Tynan and Damian Eyre were murdered in Walsh Street, South Yarra, by unknown assailants. The police eventually charged four men with the killings, but they were acquitted by a Supreme Court Jury earlier this year.

It has been alleged that the police killings of Jedd Houghton and Gary Abdallah were motivated by revenge for the murder of Tynan and Eyre.

Jedd Houghton was shot three times by two members of the police Special Operations Group (SOG), armed with shotguns, when they burst into a cabin he was staying at with his girlfriend on November 17, 1988.

The shots were all fired at close range, the fatal shot being fired at a distance of about two inches. Houghton was shot within seconds of the SOG members entering the cabin.

Houghton's girlfriend was immediately thrown to the ground, her head covered with a jacket and her hands bound behind her back. She was left hooded for half an hour.

Hooding is a sensory deprivation technique, extensively used on IRA suspects by the British army until an inquiry on the use of this led to its banning by the British army.

Police said it was a standard practice to hood and bind people during SOG raids. The only people to escape this treatment are pregnant women, young children, the elderly and the disabled. One does not escape the hood by not resisting or being a suspect in a crime, people are assumed to be a threat until proven otherwise.

Police had been seeking Houghton in relation to the killing of the two police officers. They claim they had a search warrant for firearms.

Prior to his death the only information the police had linking him to the police killings, apart from anonymous phone calls, was information given to them by 17 year old Jason Ryan.

At the time Ryan gave the information, he himself was charged with the killings. When the SOG were given a briefing about Jedd Houghton, they were told the information linking him to the police killings was very "high grade".

After Houghton was killed, three people gave statements to the police implicating him in the killings of the two police officers.

One of these people later said that at the time he made his statement to the police he was prepared to go along with anything the police said because he had been badly beaten by them.

In a situation similar to police activity in the Tim Anderson case, the

in Victoria — rules breaking down!



other two, were facing criminal charges at the time they made their statements, raising the possibility that they made the statements in order to receive favourable treatment from the courts.

Despite the lack of reliable evidence linking Jedd Houghton to the police killings, legal council to the police referred to Houghton as a "police killer".

Throughout these investigations the police have constantly made statements to the media, vilifying the deceased and arguing that to the effect that the police were completely innocent of any wrongdoings.

Victorian police death squad alleged

Similar circumstances surrounded the 1989 police shooting of Gary Abdallah.

On April 9, 1989, Abdallah was killed by police in his Carlton Flat. Police claimed that he was taken there to be questioned over the 1988 Walsh

Street murders, on information they had also received from Ryan

Abdallah is said to have produced an imitation pistol, prompting one of the police, Senior Constable Clifford Lockwood to shoot him six times in self defence.

In the current inquiry, Abdallah's family allege that an execution had been ordered by Detective Inspector John Noonan, head of the Ty-Eyre task force. The family has claimed Noonan ordered the execution because he believed Abdallah was involved but couldn't get enough evidence for a conviction.

In particular, listening devices planted in Abdallah's flat had not produced any useful information and had been closed on the morning of the shooting.

The inquiry head forensic evidence that Abdallah was kneeling with his hands behind his head and was shot in the back at least four times.

Counsel for Abdallah's family allege the imitation pistol was planted. It also alleged that there had been no need for police to go to Abdallah's flat, because he had been reporting three times a week to Coburg police station on probation.

Much like the Houghton shooting, there have also been claims that the Victorian police media liaison had feed the media inaccurate information about the shooting, and had tried to link Abdallah with violent crime to reduce public sympathy for him.

There were reports that for some time before his death Abdallah feared that police were out to kill him. Debbie Stewart, Abdallah's long-time girlfriend, said at the inquest into his death that during raids on houses and hotel, police had left messages that Abdallah "would be going in a body bag".

Community made into a "war zone"

In the wider Flemington/Kensington area, these incidents have led to an a complete breakdown of trust by the local community in the police force.

After the killing of the two police officers, the Ty-Eyre taskforce set up to investigate the killings launched a series of raids, including many in the Flemington and Kensington area.

The point of the raids had been to stir up Melbourne's underworld. But as one resident described it, they turned the area into, a "war zone".

Residents described having guns held to their heads, being randomly assaulted by police and walking in the early hours of the morning to the sound of doors being smashed in and waking up to see armed police running through their homes.

According to the Flemington and Kensington Community Legal Service, during the course of the coronial inquests into the shootings, many people in the area who had described being assaulted by the police said they did not complain because they thought nothing would be achieved.

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police killings, continued.

The attitude of many of the police to the local community was summed up by one officer who gave evidence that he thought being working class and a criminal were linked. He said that one of the factors that made him decide he was in a "crooks" house was that the occupants were working class.

Another police officer gave evidence that these "crooks" were stopped and searched whenever they were seen.

Failure of internal police investigations

After the Abdallah shooting, the Flemington and Kensington Legal Service, families of the dead men and people who had been raided organised a public meeting into the police's actions.

This meeting called for a judicial inquiry into the shootings and the lack of police accountability.

Their feelings have since been reinforced by what many see as the complete failure of the Police Internal Investigations Department (IID), who had the responsibility of investigating the investigations into the police shootings.

In the case of the Houghton shooting, the only thing IID did, apart from attending the scene of the shooting, was to write a report the morning after the shooting. An IID officer agreed that he took it "on trust" that everybody was doing their job properly.

The final IID report into the Houghton shooting concluded that po-

lice had acted properly.

The homicide squad also completely failed to investigate the Houghton shooting properly. They failed to make a video re-enactment of the shooting (usually standard practice) failed to interview the police involved immediately after the shooting, and failed to pick up on a number of serious inconsistencies in the statements of the police involved, just to name a few.

No doubt the same casual approach would not have occurred had it been a civilian shooting of police.

The coroner's final findings will not be released until later in 1992, but there is little doubt that many of the facts pointing to a spate of systematic police terror in Victoria will not be taken up.

National Wage Case Ruling: The Gloves Are Off

With the agreement of the Labor Government, the Opposition, employers and the ACTU, the Industrial Relations Commission has abandoned its role in determining wage rises and with it the centralised wage fixing system.

ANDY BLUNDEN looks at what the decision means.

The recent decision means that the Commission will endorse employers making productivity agreements with employees in an enterprise or section of an enterprise, with or without union involvement.

While there is no upper limit to the wage rise that can be negotiated, the Commission retains the power to over-rule rises that are not matched by productivity.

At the same time, 'enterprise' or 'sections of an enterprise' are

not defined. The ruling thus leaves the door open to employers making deals with individual employees or groups of workers which may rapidly undermine existing award conditions and wages.

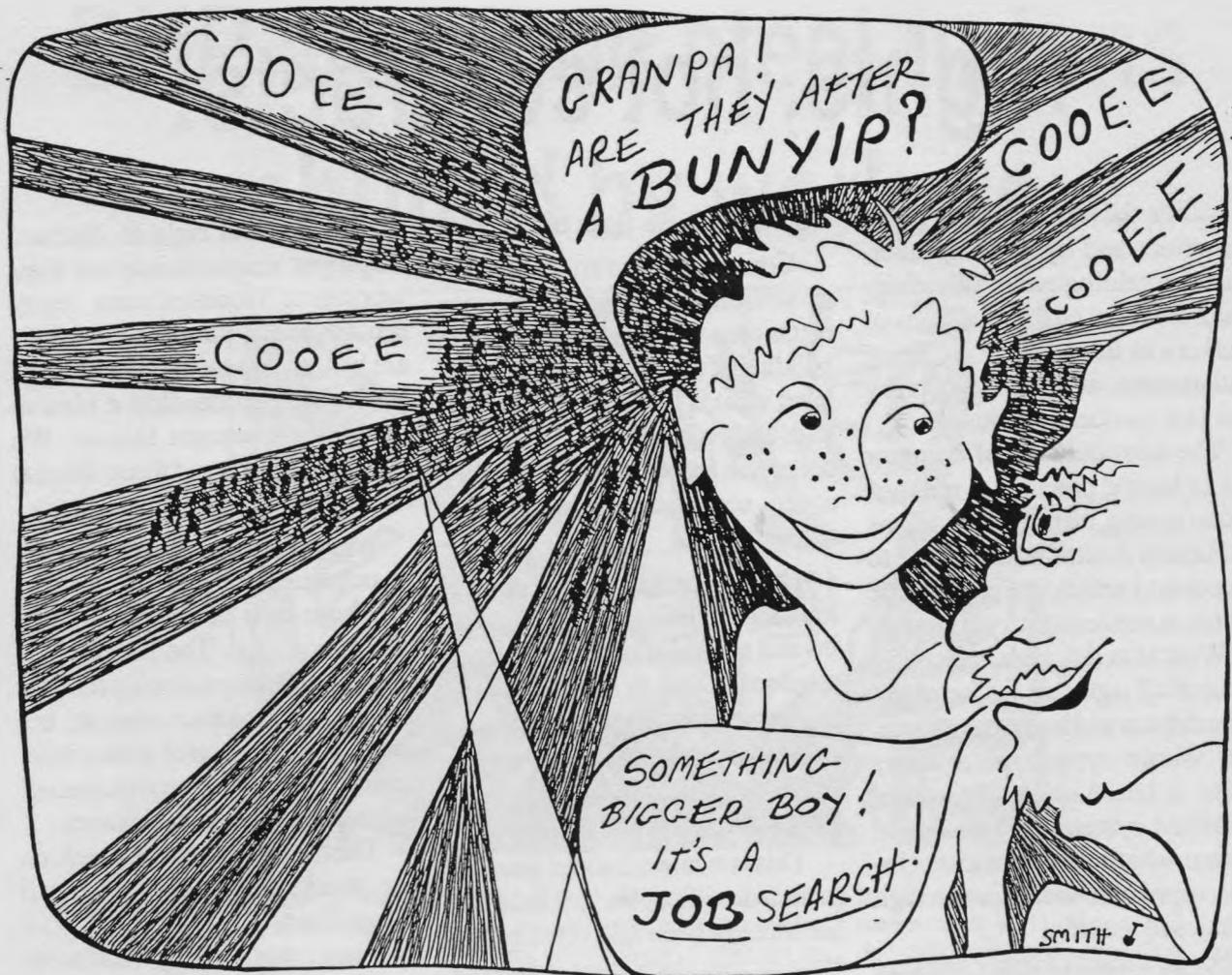
Award restructuring may be used for increases of up to 2.5% only. Reductions in ordinary time earnings or annual leave entitlements are ruled out.

There is considerable scope left for employees to be pressured into negotiating away a

wide range of conditions and penalty rates. However to do this they will have to use industrial action to force an employer to agree.

Those lacking industrial strength will no longer pick up a national wage rise automatically, and those outside the award system will face further depression of wage rates.

The de-regulation of the wages system has come after the failure of the government or the ACTU to overturn the Commis-



sion's 2.5% ruling last year. This put an end to the ability of the Accord to pretend to be able to deliver anything.

For 6 years real wages have been cut by deals stitched up between the bureaucrats of the ACTU and ALP, with the rank-and-file of the unions having been left without any role to play.

This led to a situation where the base of the union movement had been eroded to such a point that the ACTU was incapable, even with the support of the government, of forcing the Industrial Relations Commission to approve an acceptable national wage rise.

Trade union membership, especially in the private sector, has

plummeted to new lows and union bureaucrats have been more preoccupied with fighting each other for the remnants, than with organising or recruiting new members.

Even the strongest unions have found it more and more difficult to organise effective industrial action.

Under these conditions, anti-union legislation, like that being introduced by Greiner in NSW, and the 'New Zealand model' proposed for the next Liberal-National federal government, pose an enormous threat, by denying the unions the right to use the traditional methods of union organisation, the only real means of fighting the employers.

It is not coincidental that the move to 'enterprise bargaining' comes at a time of record high unemployment. The AIRC decision gives the go-ahead for relatively unmitigated class struggle at a time when unemployment is very high and the unions disorganised and misled.

On the other hand, it is a return to reality. The working class got nothing out of the Accord and it must now learn again how to defend itself using its own organised strength.

For that it will have to bring forward a new generation of leaders prepared to build up and utilise that strength.

Rights, not contracts!

While the unions debate amalgamations and try to tie up enterprise bargaining and productivity deals the most basic conditions of workers in this country are being undermined around the country and in a number of industries.

The introduction of contract labour has the potential to remove, in one swoop, all of the conditions workers in Australia have come to expect and which are responsible for our so-called 'lucky country'.

What is at risk here is the most basic of all rights of workers, that is the right to work as an employee. Our whole system of workers rights is based on the Industrial Relations system and the award system which are its bricks. Unions represent workers through changes to awards.

For an award to apply workers must be employees. Employees without awards still have basic entitlements to minimum wages, overtime, paid leave, workers compensation and superannuation entitlements. Workers who are not

employees have none of these.

Contractors who are designated as self-employed have no more rights than workers did before the building of trade unions. They only have what is in the contract. With high unemployment some of those desperate for work will inevitably accept contracts which offer less and less.

Once a contract is signed it is a long legal battle to have it proved invalid and the mood of industrial relations courts at the moment is that they won't judge the contracts invalid or return workers to the rights as employees that they have fought for.

This is while a Labour government is in office, the groundwork has already been laid for the Liberals to introduce their industrial relations policy which threatens to have the same disastrous affects as its predecessor had in New Zealand.

One week after the decision to grant the body-hire agency Trou-

bleshooters the right to disclaim employer responsibility for their workers a Troublesooter representative was hired as a consultant by the owners of the Wodonga Meatworks to develop a plan to introduce contract labour. We know the results and threat this has been to the whole meat industry.

More recently BHP tried the same tactics.

These two developments are something else. The building industry has always employed large numbers of contract workers, but meatworks and steel works have traditionally been the employers of large and militant workforces.

These moves are an attack on the working conditions of all Australians.

They must be fought and to do so effectively we need to know how the struggle is developing.

George Petersen provides ReD with a detailed account of the battle waged at BHP by workers trying to resist the introduction of contracts.

BHP dispute in brief

Between 31st October and 9th November the BHP steelworks at Port Kembla, the largest in Australia, were the scene of a major confrontation between workers and bosses, involving about 9000 workers.

The issue was the employment of contract workers in a section of the plant where about 1300 unionists are employed.

Workers who returned to work believing that they had won the dispute soon found that BHP was not going to surrender without a further struggle. During the month of November BHP were engaged in continual disputation with union officials on the most petty points of the settlement.

BHP management refused to restore pay roll deductions for union dues. When an Industrial Commission judge ordered them to restore pay roll deductions, they sent two fork lift vehicles out of the plant for maintenance. When workers declared them black unless they were repaired in the factory, the management brought them back. They argued interminably about what constituted pre-strike conditions. Finally they got back to the original cause of the dispute, and it is now back in the Industrial Commission for determination.

This strike occurred at a most appropriate time. After 8 years of the Prices Income Accord, and four years after defeat on the issue of the last State Labor government's destruction of the workers compensation system. Steelworkers have gained from this strike a confidence in their own strength. Whatever the Commission determines, the struggle will continue.

BHP attack on steel unions rebuffed by workers



It was no coincidence that it happened at the same time as Greiner's Industrial Relations Bill passed through State Parliament.

The recent steel strike at Port Kembla over 10 days was the product of a deliberate attempt by BHP to smash unionism in the steel industry.

BHP's tactic is to get rid of workers either by natural attrition, by offering them redundancy payments, or by forcing them to transfer to other jobs not filled by regular wage workers, but performed by contract casual labour which can be easily terminated because these workers are employed, not by BHP, but by a person who has a contract with BHP.

Between 27 June and 4 July 1991 1300 workers employed in BHP's Sheet and Coil Products Division (Lysaghts) were on strike over the issue. They had returned to work confident that they had won a victory, and that they had won their demand that contract labour not be employed.

BHP Management was merely biding their time.

When steel industry union officials heard that BHP had actually let contracts for crane maintenance and cleaning of washrooms at Lysaghts, a

meeting of steel industry delegates resolved unanimously on 5 September 1991 that employment of contract labour on these jobs would be followed by an immediate stoppage of the whole steel works.

The recent strike was the result of that resolution.

Dispute history

A picket line was established on 5 October 1991 outside the Sheet and Coil Products Division of BHP (Lysaghts) at Port Kembla by the Ironworkers and Metalworkers unions, to prevent the employment of contract labour to replace regular wage earners in the cleaning section, in the yard gang and in mechanical services.

On the morning of Wednesday 30 October there was a derailment in the yard causing damage to two of the three sets of railway tracks. Labour contractors were called in to do the work.

Strike

The reaction of the workers was immediate. They stopped work and held a meeting at the gate which decided to stay out until a meeting of all steelworkers could be held on Friday 1 November. Their action was endorsed

by the night shift which was to commence work at 11.20 pm. and by the day shift meeting the next day.

In accordance with the delegates' decision of 5 September all sections of the steelworks (about 9,000 unionists) stopped work from 11.20 p.m. on Thursday 31 October but only about 2000 turned up at the showground on Friday 1 November.

The meeting was addressed by Graham Roberts, Secretary of the Port Kembla Ironworkers Union, Steve Quinn of the Metalworkers, and Paul Matters, secretary of the South Coast Labour Council.

All three stressed their opposition to the reintroduction of what amounted to the old system of casual labour.

Graham Roberts quoted from Company documents to show that it is BHP policy that BHP will in future employ staff only on what they define as core production where continuity of labour is essential. He said that as time goes on what they call core production embraces less and less of the workforce.

The meeting overwhelmingly carried resolutions condemning the use of contractors, calling for contracts to be withdrawn, supporting continuation of the picket line, and demanding an im-

mediate meeting with the Chief Executive Officer of BHP.

The final resolution banned work done by scab labour and staff on the railway tracks. This meant that two of the three railway tracks were barred from use, and this ban considerably hampered factory operations.

After resuming work the workers at Lysaghts found that BHP was determined to have a confrontation with the unions.

All Lysaghts workers when they resumed work on 31 October or 1 November were called to meetings and told that if they went on the picket line in their own time they would be sacked.

Two train drivers were suspended by refusing to break the ban on the use of the rail line partly repaired by contract labour.

In response, a meeting of 70 steelworks union delegates on Sunday 3 November called a stoppage of all steelworkers.

Most unionists accepted the delegates' decision but about 100 members of the Electrical Trades Union rejected the stoppage call and went to work on Monday.

Intimidation

About 3000 workers attended the mass meeting on Monday November 4.

Those employed at Lysaghts had all received a letter signed by the Works Manager, and delivered either by courier, or personally at their homes by foremen, telling them that employees who did not return to work by 12 noon on Friday 8 November, 1991, would be summarily dismissed.

Steve Quinn of the Metalworkers pointed out that unionists were not opposed to contractors and their employees doing work of an intermittent nature.

What the unions were opposed to was the replacement of permanent employees by casual workers with no rights.

After considerable discussion the meeting almost unanimously carried a resolution that they remain on strike until 10 a.m. on Thursday 7 November to hear the report of a conference with Mr. McNeilly, boss of BHP's steel division; that all work cease in the steel industry (i.e. including all work being performed by contractors of all kinds), and that the Federal bodies of the unions involved be called upon to initiate a national campaign on the issue.

Delegates meeting

On Wednesday 6 November a three hour meeting was held in Wollongong of about 200 job delegates from all unions affiliated with the South Coast Labour Council.

Graham Roberts gave a detailed report of BHP's efforts to employ only contract labour on rolling stock maintenance, crane maintenance, and in the bathrooms and yards, and that when the issue had been taken up in the Industrial Commission, Deputy President McMahan, (formerly President of the NSW Labour Council at the time of the 1987 workers compensation betrayal), had refused to listen to union representatives and had fully sided with BHP.



His intransigence exactly matched that of the Lysaghts Works Manager, Ian Thomas, who had told a meeting of staff employees on 20 March 1991 that debate is considered to be over on this issue.

Graham Roberts also reported how the foremen at Lysaghts were telephoning or calling on all workers at their homes giving them the message to return to work by Friday or be sacked.

Paul Matters, secretary of the South Coast Labour Council recounted other disputes on the South Coast in the past 12 months of the same type as the present dispute.

He also pointed out that workers could not just return to work. It won't be easy to go back like it was in the 1980s. There has been a fundamental change in the way employers treat workers. Even if most workers did go back there would be no jobs for the delegates or for those who had been active on the picket line. The question was whether we supported those

workers or not. All workers must make a choice as a matter of principle.

In the following discussion many workers contributed their experience. They revealed a constant pattern of harassment and intimidation by BHP, urging employees to break union principles and scab on the strike.

Paul Matters pointed out that many employees of contractors were joining the strike, for example, the canteen workers in the Liquor Trades Union who feared their replacement by casual workers on hourly hire.

After a further long discussion the chairperson submitted a resolution to be recommended to the mass meeting the next day. It suggested that these points be discussed with BHP:

- * Return to the status quo without contractors,
- * Threats of dismissal and the picket line to be withdrawn simultaneously,
- * The parties negotiate on the issue,
- * The parties appoint an agreed outside person to determine the issue, necessary.

If the company agrees to the proposal an immediate return to work, not an indefinite stoppage.

Mass meeting

The mass meeting of 3000 steelworkers on Thursday November 7 was the turning point of the strike.

Graham Roberts reported that he had taken the terms of the resolution carried at the delegates' meeting to the local senior executives and they had rejected it outright. This left no alternative but an indefinite strike.

Neil Marshall reported that he had discussed the resolution with a senior national executive of BHP and had been told bluntly that it was the prerogative of management to make decisions, not the unions.

The prospect of an indefinite general strike did worry a lot of workers. This was manifested in an undercurrent of hostility to the union leaders.

Other questions were asked on what guarantees the union officials could give that workers could get their jobs back. It was explained that no guarantees could be given.

Several union members from the Slab and Plate Division (the main steelworks) questioned whether it was their fight too. Graham Roberts told them that it was. They were next if the Lysaghts workers were defeated.

Finally it all seemed to get under the skin of a Macedonian worker who

pointed out that on Monday they were all full of fire. He asked rhetorically, "Where is the fire now?", and then made what sounded like a very passionate speech in Macedonian, which raised a great burst of laughter and seemed to turn the tide.

He was followed by workers who raised the significance of Greiner's Industrial Relations bill and the struggle of the meatworkers in Victoria on a similar issue.

Paul Matters moved the resolution for an indefinite strike, plus a resubmission to BHP of the recommendation from the delegates meeting on November 6. He pointed out that the era of fair deals and nice discussions with employers is over.

Robynne Murphy, who had led the fight over ten years ago for the employment of women in the steelworks, was applauded when she stated that 100 women workers had stopped work in support of the largely male workers at Lysaghts and that she was looking for their support when the women workers came under attack in the near future.

When the resolution was put it was carried overwhelmingly with no more than 12 voting against it.

Graham Roberts announced that there would be a further delegates meeting the next day at 5 p.m.

Surprise

A full page article in the *Illawarra Mercury* of 8 November showed what workers had to fear.

Ironworkers Union delegate at Lysaghts, Bill Beaumont, showed a letter in which he was threatened with the sack for being on a picket line. In addition vandals have smeared human faeces on his garage door, destroyed mail in his letter box, made nuisance telephone calls, smashed his front lawn garden, and ordered taxis in his name.

When the meeting opened a number of messages of support were read out. The most exciting message was from Newcastle. It reported a steel delegates meeting offering to raise strike funds, and resolving that, failing a satisfactory resolution of the dispute, Newcastle steelworkers would take industrial action in support of the Port Kembla workers.

Graham Roberts reported that after he had faxed the terms of the mass meeting resolution to BHP he received a phone call asking him to attend a meeting with three BHP representatives, a senior national executive

member Les Gore, the local Lysaghts works manager, Ian Thomas, and Brian Beauty the local industrial officer. He went to the meeting with Steve Quinn of the Metalworkers and Warwick Tomlins of the ETU. After a long repetitive discussion that seemed to get nowhere the three union representatives went home to bed.

To his great surprise he received a phone call at 5.30 a.m. from Les Gore asking for a further discussion. He indicated that BHP were prepared to accept the terms of resolution passed at the delegates meeting on Wednesday and at the mass meeting on Thursday, provided an Industrial Commission judge recommended the package, in-



stead of the unions.

The union leaders then approached the Industrial Commission. After discussion a recommendation was issued to the parties concerned in these terms:-

- * that the position applying immediately prior to the entry by contractors to the disputed areas be returned to,
- * that the threat of dismissal and warnings and the picket line be withdrawn simultaneously,
- * that a conference be held between the parties to negotiate resolution of the present and the position to apply in future regarding the letting of contracts,
- * that issues outstanding after conferences are to be referred to the commission and the parties are to co-operate in their prompt presentation.

For most of the delegates present the reports produced a feeling of euphoria. The workers might not have won but BHP had suffered a defeat. The remaining questions concerned matters of detail, tidying up the loose ends to make sure that there was no victimisation.

Final mass meeting

The final meeting on Saturday 9 November was an anti-climax. The recommendation from the delegates meeting was carried virtually unanimously.

The question must now be asked as to how secure is the decision.

Will BHP now try again to use contractors to take the place of regular wage workers? The *Illawarra Mercury* of 9 November may well be right when they headlined their strike story 'Steel strike uneasy truce'.

Critical to forcing BHP's decision was the overwhelming vote of the Thursday mass meeting to continue the strike, despite reservations expressed by some workers, could hardly be disregarded.

Also important were the hundreds of Lysaghts workers who turned up on the picket line in the last few days must have been very impressive, particularly after the vigorous campaign of intimidation waged by the foremen and supervisory staff. management.

Steelworkers and their supporters must have reservations about the actual wording of Judge Bauer's direction. The final decision on employment of contractors rests in the hands of the Industrial Commission.

All judges have noted what happened to Commonwealth Industrial Court judge Jim Staples, when he dared to make rulings that were not in accord with the Commonwealth Labor government's policies. Greiner has not been backward in making threats to judges of the NSW Industrial Commission - and the Commission is due for restructuring when Greiner's notorious Industrial Relations Bill becomes law on 1 January 1992.

The situation will be no better when Labor gains office in NSW. During the strike Paul Matters of the South Coast Labour Council several times reminded workers that all strikes are illegal under State and Commonwealth law. No Labor government has ever made strikes legal.

The true nature of the NSW ALP was made quite clear in 1987 when the overwhelming majority voted in caucus to destroy the NSW Workers Compensation system.

When the crunch really comes, what happens in the future depends on the strength of the working class in the steel industry. These workers demonstrated that they will not be shuffled around like mere pawns at the behest of BHP.