

# the BEACON

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SEEK THE TRUTH AND SERVE HUMANITY

## Remember this Face!

**R**emember this face, because this man stands for everything that is truly Australian – loyalty, commitment, determination, mateship, courage, and for these very traits he is going to be jailed for six months.

If we allow this to happen then we can truly say there is little hope for an Australia that believes in a better world. If we allow this to happen then there is no decent future for our children and grandchildren. Freedom of expression, of association, of civil rights, of social justice or fairness in this country of ours will be dead.

Sometimes you need to say 'a pox on both their houses'. Many are asking what the difference is between the Australian Labor Party and the Liberal Party, and in the case of this unionist, we have to say 'no difference'.

This man, Noel Washington, is to be jailed in 21st century Australia and what is his crime? He hasn't sold drugs, committed a murder, stolen goods, he hasn't committed an act of terrorism; he just refuses to do on his workmates. Under criminal-type legislation introduced by the previous Howard government who established the Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC), this is a crime.

It was the ABCC that banned the flying of the Eureka flag on union sites.

*What is Noel's crime?* He attended a lunchtime rally of 500 construction workers objecting to the sacking of their shop stewards. As the company refused to allow a meeting to be held on site, the meeting was held in a nearby park.

As the union official present, Noel was ordered to attend an interview with the ABCC to reveal who spoke at the meeting, what was said, who said it. He was ordered not to tell anybody about the prospective



interview (which he did not attend) and that if he did, even his wife could be jailed. Is this fascist Germany or democratic Australia?

***In 1943 Winston Churchill said, 'The power of the executive to cast a man into prison without formulating any charge known to the law, and particularly to deny him the judgement of his peers is in the highest degree odious and the foundation of totalitarian government'.***

Federal minister, Julia Gillard, has the capacity to intervene and limit the powers of this fascist-style body (ABCC) but has failed to do so and the Rudd Government, which was elected to abolish Howard's anti-worker legislation, has said it will re-examine it in 2010. The ABCC receives \$33 million to continue its unacceptable repressions even though ALP policy calls for its abolition. Prosecutions, or rather persecutions, have continued and indeed increased and 85 building workers have been questioned under its powers.

Apparently, in Australia today under an ALP government – a government born of the trade union movement – failure to do on your mates is now a crime punishable by six months jail. This outrage cannot be tolerated. Unitarians and indeed every democratic Australian must express their outrage to the government.

EDITORIAL

# Trident Tested

*There are many ways of saying no to nukes.*



**Angie Zelter** tells the inside story of one of the most inventive.

**O**n the beautiful and rugged western coast of Scotland is an exceptionally deep natural harbour called Faslane. It is home to a British naval base and four Trident submarines equipped with up to 200 warheads. Just one of these has the capacity to deliver eight times the destructive power of the bombs that flattened Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

This corner of Scotland has also been the setting for a year-long rolling protest, which involved thousands of people giving up several days to oppose, physically, a programme to upgrade Britain's weapons of mass destruction.

The Big Blockade started on 1 October 2006. By the end of the year the base had been successfully blockaded for 189 days which led to 1,150 arrests.

*'We piled out of the van and ran towards the North Gate,' recalls Lavinia Crossley. 'We lay down in the circular formation we had practised, interlocked our arms and super-glued our hands together. It worked a treat! The banner we had made summed up our action nicely: 'Sticking Together For Peace'. We remained stuck there for three hours, as the Strathclyde police gently prized our flesh apart.'*

The youngest to get arrested was 13-year-old Catherine Holmes who locked on to her teddy bear with her Edinburgh group. The oldest was Betty Tebbs who, at 89, thumb-locked herself to others from Manchester and lay down in the rain, with the midges biting, blocking the south entrance to the base. A group from York came dressed as Vikings, pointing out: 'The Vikings slaughtered tens of thousands of people but they did so over half a millennium. Trident could do the same in a minute.'

Pete Abel dressed as a squirrel with a placard saying 'Nuts to Trident'. He gleefully remembers the reaction of the police 'when they realized that they would have to arrest a seven foot furry squirrel, thumbcuffed to two other protesters at the North Gate. And that he was not going to "go quietly!"' The Bishop of Reading, for his part, was on hand to bless the peacemakers.

## People's disarmament

Faslane365 was a recent manifestation of Britain's 'People's Disarmament' movement, initiated in 1961 by Bertrand Russell, who argued: 'If all those who disapprove of Government policy were to join massive demonstrations of civil disobedience they could render Government folly impossible.'

A group of us had launched 'Trident Ploughshares' in 1998 to disarm Britain's nuclear weapons system in a nonviolent, open, peaceful and fully accountable manner. We did not see the destruction of fences and equipment as violent, or criminal damage, or a breach of the peace, but as practical and lawful. Of course, the Government did not see it that way and there have been over 2,200 arrests leading to 500 trials. Myself, Ellen Moxley and Ulla Roder disarmed a multi-million pound research barge that maintained the 'invisibility' of Trident; we emptied the contents of the laboratory into Loch Goil. After five months in prison and a trial where we argued that we were entitled to do this under international law, a brave Sheriff and jury acquitted us, causing a legal furore.

By 2005 I had become increasingly concerned that the peace movement was not exerting enough influence. The trickle of disarmament actions, the one-off mass blockades were easily dealt with.

We were horrified that a new nuclear arms race was starting and the British Government was committed to replacing Trident. They were so busy wasting our money and the world's resources that they were failing to address the real mass destruction that threatens our security: the oil-and-industry-driven heating of the planet; destruction of our habitat and environment; and the institutionalised poverty that destroys hope and lives. We needed to escalate our disarmament efforts, to provide the political pressure for change in a year when the Scots would hold an election that might bring an anti-Trident party into power for the first time. So the idea behind Faslane365 was to encourage and support more people to engage in civil resistance by organising blockades on a daily basis over a whole year.

## Scotland: officially anti-nuke

The variety of people blockading, the day-to-day disruption to the base, and the diversity of messages against Trident built up the people pressure in the run-up to the Scottish elections. On 3 May 2007 the Scottish National Party (SNP) – a party long-committed to making Scotland nuclear free – won a historic one-seat majority. Opinion poll data showed that for Labour voters who switched to the SNP, opposition to Trident was a major factor. Six weeks later, a resolution opposing Trident replacement was resoundingly carried by 71 to 16.

We are now giving the Scottish Parliament time to remove Trident. Although under the terms of devolution they are not supposed to interfere in 'foreign policy' issues and must defer to the British Government, they can reject Trident based on international law as well as moral grounds. We know that if Trident is removed

from Scotland there are no alternative secure locations in England or Wales to base the submarines and store the nuclear warheads. The British Government would either have to find a non-submarine alternative or give up nuclear weapons altogether. We must remain vigilant and may need to return to sustained people's disarmament. If we do, then we will need thousands of people to commit to nonviolent disruption on a massive level. It is up to us.

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**Angie Zelter** is a campaigner specialising in nonviolent direct action. She has been arrested over 100 times and served 16 prison sentences. In 1996 she and three other women disarmed a BAE Hawk Jet bound for East Timor, causing \$3 million worth of damage. A jury found them 'not guilty'. Her book *Faslane 365 – a year of anti-nuclear blockades* (Luath) will be launched in June 2008.

by (Rev) Dave MacMillan

Mount Rainier MD

# Shooting in Knoxville

I have spent the last couple of hours weeping on and off over the news of yesterday's lethal attack at the Sunday services of the Unitarian Universalist Church in Knoxville TN by a vengeful conservative. The shooting erupted as a children's play was in progress during the service. Two died, seven were wounded.

As a Unitarian Universalist parish minister for over twenty years, I must have introduced from the pulpit dozens of such children's plays and pageants during that time. And as often helped organise the social justice activism that was the target of yesterday's shootings.

Having counselled families who have lost members to such violent death, I know that the psychic scarring from yesterday's violence will be passed down for generations to come; that none of the children present will ever be the same; that decades of therapy and nightmares lie ahead for most probably all of them; that the same will be true for the adults present.

In the last couple of hours I have been led in several directions in response to this.

The most compelling is to urge you to let into your souls the full implications of this event. To receive it as a wake-up call to the reality that the majority of us have been lulled into a state of political denial about the deadly danger we are in as a nation.

Like abusive families everywhere we have retreated into denial about what is transpiring in our midst. We are standing by as it continues. We want to just continue our lives as usual in the faint hope that the next election cycle will cure this situation. The cancer in our body politic is much more advanced than that.

One response to these shootings would be to observe how the corporate media are instinctively trying to

spin this as an economic frustration crime, not as the conservative political hate crime that it unquestionably is. You can count on this story being quickly swept off our nightly 'news'.

Another direction would be to realise the comparable impact on the families of those innocents who have died much more violent deaths in Iraq, again at the instigation of the same hateful conservative movement here in the US. Most reliable sources suggest these violent deaths in Iraq are approaching one million. Not combatants, but civilians like those that died yesterday in Tennessee.

But the direction that has emerged as central for me is the realisation is that this guy yesterday merely 'jumped the gun'. That this kind of lethal hatred is being deliberately and diligently cultivated, principally through the medium of right wing talk radio. Right wing radio has become the collective premeditation of such murders.

In a larger sense it is Rush Limbaugh and his radio thug colleagues who should be charged with this crime. Such right wing radio served the same purposes in Kosovo, Rwanda, El Salvador and anywhere that a right wing totalitarian movement is seeking to consolidate power.

Some of you may be thinking I am having an emotional overreaction. Emotional, yes. But informed by a sustained examination of right wing radio.

Three or four years ago I began resisting a persistent call to begin working on some kind of progressive religious talk radio to counter that of the religious right. Jesus tells us to love our enemies, not to pretend they are not our enemies. To love is to know. So I began for the first time listening to right wing talk radio. It is much, MUCH worse than you think.

Hi, I came across this poem yesterday - written years ago by my mate, Bill Yates, a Beacon subscriber. It is just as potent today and I have his permission to send it to you. **Jim Stevens**

# The Boat People

By C W (Bill) Yates

*Tear-stained children's faces to the compound fencing pressed.  
A fretful baby clutching at its mother's shrunken breast  
Just a part of welfare's flotsam cast up by a restless sea  
To lie and rot in holding camps, was this Man's destiny?*

*Products of a random harvest, winnowed as the grain,  
Displaced and left to wander with the suffering and pain,  
Remnants of a happy people, now a gypsy phantom band,  
Ever searching for survival in a wasted barren land.*

*They do not seek an answer, have no political dissent,  
The struggle for a living allows no room for malcontent,  
Let each person bear some burden, let each one show his worth,  
These people are created in His image, and wasn't man to inherit the earth?*

*Reach out a hand in friendship, show them an open heart.  
They have lived their hell on earth and have earned another start.  
No time now for racial tension, our white empire has passed.  
Just take them to your bosom, Australia, and give them peace at last.*



# Court in the act

Bush's attempts to squash apartheid compensation lawsuit scuppered by judges' corporate ties

President Bush has failed to halt a \$400 billion dollar lawsuit against BP, Barclays, Coca-Cola, Ford and many other transnational corporations, for their activities in South Africa during the apartheid years. The ambitious case was launched in 2002 and is being led by South African lawyers John Ngcebetsha and Dumisa Ntsebeza. The latter, who was chief investigator in the post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission, sees suing foreign firms for reparations as part of the Commission's 'unfinished business'.

The lawsuit was filed by victims of human rights abuses and their families. One of the plaintiffs is Dorothy Molefi, whose 13-year-old son Hector Pieteron was murdered by police during the Soweto uprising in 1976, and whose image became iconic for the anti-apartheid movement. Another is Lungisile Ntsebeza, brother of Dumisa and sociology professor at the University of Cape Town, who spent six years in prison for his anti-apartheid activism. The plaintiffs claim that more than 50 major companies were complicit in 'the single worst human rights violation in history' by doing business in South Africa in contravention of the US's Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act.

Since its launch, the case has been batted about between various courts. The Bush Administration intervened last October, asking the Supreme Court to stop the lawsuit on the grounds that it 'would interfere with [the Government's] ability to employ the full range of foreign policy options when interacting with regimes the US would like to influence'. Other governments, including those of Britain, Germany, Switzerland and South Africa itself, also expressed their opposition, and many of the American and European companies implicated in the case filed their own appeal.

With such powerful players working against them, it had seemed that the apartheid victims' voices were destined to go unheard. It simply remained for the Supreme Court to rubber-stamp the US Government's request.

However, in an ironic twist, the close links between government, judiciary and the private sector have scuppered their attempts to sabotage the lawsuit. Federal law requires at least six of the nine Supreme Court justices to hear review cases. But four of them have been forced to withdraw because of 'conflicts of interest': they all have financial or personal connections with some of the companies on trial, including Nestlé, Hewlett-Packard and the Bank of America. One of the judges, Samuel Alito, is a particular favourite of George W Bush. In 2005 Bush nominated him for the



The iconic photograph of Hector Pieteron, fatally injured in the Soweto uprising. Photo: Sam Nzima

post, calling him 'a thoughtful judge who considers the legal merits carefully and applies the law in a principled fashion'. These words – and the appointment – have now come back to haunt him: it turns out that Alito holds stock of up to \$250,000 in one of the accused companies, ExxonMobil. Arthur Hellman, Law Professor at the University of Pittsburgh, commented: '[Alito] has a very powerful position and I don't think it's too much to say that he shouldn't own stock in a corporation like Exxon.'

Lacking the necessary number of judges, the Supreme Court had no choice but to announce in May 2008 that it is allowing the lawsuit to continue. Should it be successful, it could prove to be a milestone in international human rights law, triggering a wave of similar suits against multinationals operating in countries with poor human rights records. For this reason alone, the proceedings will be monitored with concern not only by the corporations themselves, but by governments which, until now, have been able to turn a blind eye to abuses perpetrated by their companies overseas.

# WORKERS' RIGHTS MUST BE FOUGHT FOR

# WORKERS RIGHTS



Speech delivered by **Len Cooper**, Victorian Secretary and National President,  
Communications Division CEPU, at the Unitarian Church, 18 May 2008

**We need to remind ourselves about some of what the Howard government did in relation to the working class and other sectors of the population. Firstly, in relation to the labour laws.**

The Howard government:

- destroyed arbitration as an effective institution
- diminished and almost eliminated the right to strike
- rendered the right to challenge an unfair dismissal by an employee as very difficult or impossible in most cases
- banned the right of employers and unions to make agreements on certain issues (union right of entry, limit outsourcing, etc.)
- severely limited the effective right of entry by union staff into workplaces
- provided the framework to force employees onto individual contracts including so-called Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs), thus removing workers from collective protection

- savagely cut conditions such as penalty rates, overtime pay, annual leave loading, shift penalties, lengthened hours of work
- In the building industry, no worker or union official called for interrogation by the Australian Building and Construction Commissioner (ABCC) has the right to silence. Refusal to attend an interrogation may result in 6 months imprisonment and the interrogations are secret, punishable by law if breached. You may not be able to choose your own lawyer and you can talk to no one, except the lawyer, about what happened to you – not even your partner or your best mate.

Australian unions say these kinds of laws are totally unacceptable. They treat construction workers like second-class citizens and worse than common criminals. They break international labour conventions. They are leaving ordinary workers and their families – who have done nothing wrong – living in fear.

Here are some statements from building workers so affected:

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*‘I was scared I was going to jail. I wasn’t able to speak to anyone outside the courtroom, wasn’t able to use a phone. It was pretty daunting’.*

**Brodene Wardley, crane operator and single mother, interrogated by the ABCC over a safety incident already long resolved.**

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*‘I’ve been working 25 years on the crane and never felt the pressure I had today. For me it was terrible’.*

**Frank, interrogated about a union meeting he’d attended 12 months before.**

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Over 50 ordinary men and women have been forced to attend secret interrogations by Howard’s ABCC enforcers. If they refuse to answer questions – about issues like what happened at a union meeting – they can be jailed for six months.

Many more are being threatened with \$22,000 fines and loss of pay if they stop work for any reason – even over safety.

One hundred and fifty enforcers are employed and 33 million taxpayers’ dollars are spent annually to continue this intimidation of ordinary construction workers. Their aim is to reduce support for unions and union membership on construction sites. They harass construction workers at their jobs sites and with phone calls and notices at their homes.

Leaving aside workers’ rights, what else did Howard leave us?

- a two-tier education system, based on capacity to pay and huge handouts to the schools of and for the rich

- a grossly under-funded health system, more and more becoming a two-tiered system (one for the rich and one for the poor)
- a welfare system which turned the victims into perpetrators
- under the cloak of fighting terrorism, laws which provided the basis for restricting and/or removing the peoples most basic rights e.g.
- the right to silence when questioned
- the right to not be detained without evidence or charge
- the presumption of innocence
- the right to representation by someone of your own choosing
- unfair, unwelcoming, discriminatory and inhumane laws for refugees and other migrants to this country
- a return to the paternalistic days of Aboriginal affairs
- total subservience to US imperialism in foreign policy and disgraceful support for the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq
- cover-up of the acute crisis of global warming and a stubborn refusal to act in the interest of saving the planet

and many, many more.

The working class and many other sectors of the people were left poorer, divided, unrepresented and headed down a road of poor pay, poor conditions and few rights.

The defeat of the Howard government was a tremendous victory for the Australian people, led by the organised working class through their unions.

The union mobilisation, demonstrations, paid media advertising and campaigning in every marginal electorate defeated an incumbent government in a situation where there was no economic crisis and with a new opposition leader – this was no mean feat.

Where are we today in the light of that victory?

We have a new government, a Labor government that gives the impression of:

- wanting to tackle Aboriginal disadvantage
- wanting to tackle global warming
- wanting to tackle the vital areas of education, public health and social welfare in the interests of the people
- wanting to reform the federal/state structures of government
- wanting to improve industrial relations and workers’ rights
- wanting to withdraw from Iraq and at least open up some space between Australian and US imperialism, and so on.

Only time will tell what it is capable of and what it is prepared to do on these issues.

However, on industrial relations the most defining issue in the recent election campaign, we have a reasonable knowledge of what it will and what it will not do:

- It will prevent new AWAs in the longer term. It has already legislated for this.
- It will allow a new form of individual contract called an ITEA – an individual contract with a stricter no-disadvantage test. (ITEAs will only exist until December 2009.)
- It will favour collective bargaining and ‘good faith’ bargaining in law.
- It will codify in law a set of minimum employment conditions covering overtime pay/penalty rates/leave, etc.

These are in the main important and necessary reforms and are to be welcomed.

What it appears they will not do is:

- restore the right to strike
- restore a realistic right of entry into workplaces for union staff
- restore full arbitration rights
- restore the complete rights that previously existed to challenge an unfair dismissal for all workers

For example there is the ILO convention No. 87 Freedom of Association and the Right to Organise Convention (1948), and the ILO convention No. 98, Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention (1949). Both were ratified by the Whitlam government in 1973 and are binding. Their status was further highlighted by the ILO Declaration on the Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work in 1998.

The ILO also emphasised their principle position on the right to strike back in 1983 with the following declaration:

‘The right to strike is one of the essential means available to workers and their organisations for the promotion and protection of their economic and social interests. These interests not only have to do with obtaining better working conditions and pursuing collective demands of an occupational nature but also with seeking solutions to economic and social policy questions and to labour problems of any kind which are of direct concern to the workers’.

Since the 1800s the employers and various governments have sought to impose penal laws against the right to strike. It was not until the 1993 ALP Keating government that labour laws were enacted which included some freedom for unions when bargaining collectively on behalf of workers at an enterprise level, to access a



- restore the rights of building workers (They have pledged to keep the current oppressive regime until 2010 and perhaps beyond.)
- provide a mechanism to allow workers to get out of a current AWA, even if they were tricked and deceived into an AWA, and even if they are disadvantaged; they can only remove themselves from an AWA when the AWA expires.

Most of these issues they will not act on are ILO conventions (rights accepted by the world).

Let us look at the ILO conventions at this point.

The ILO, the International Labour Organisation, a formal body of the United Nations, is a tripartite organisation made up of unions, governments and employers.

The Australian Government is party to most of these conventions.

What do they say about workers’ rights?

The International Labour Organisation, the ILO, has over time established certain minimum standards that form the basis for union and worker rights.

limited right to strike. It was called ‘protected action’ (i.e. protected against the common law and statute law so workers could not be legally punished in specific circumstances).

WorkChoices virtually extinguished the right to strike. Workers need collective rights to exercise economic pressure through promising to, or actually undertaking, industrial action (often as a last resort), in order to balance the unequal bargaining powers between employers and workers. Workers and their unions in dispute are now in twenty-first century Australia liable to be ordered back to work, fined, sued and even criminalised, with extremely high penalties.

Mordy Bromberg, a prominent human rights lawyer said last year that:

*‘Australia is out of step with the rest of the world on workplace rights.’*

*In a landmark 6-1 decision with implications for the current debate in Australia about WorkChoices, the Supreme Court of Canada has confirmed that the human right of freedom of association includes a right of workers to collectively bargain in good faith with their employers.*

*The court acknowledged that human dignity, equality, liberty, respect for the autonomy of the person and the enhancement of a democracy are all values that are complemented and promoted by the protection of collective bargaining provided by Canada's Charter of Rights.*

*The Canadian decision demonstrates just how far out of step with the rest of the world Australia is in relation to the protection of fundamental rights at work'.*

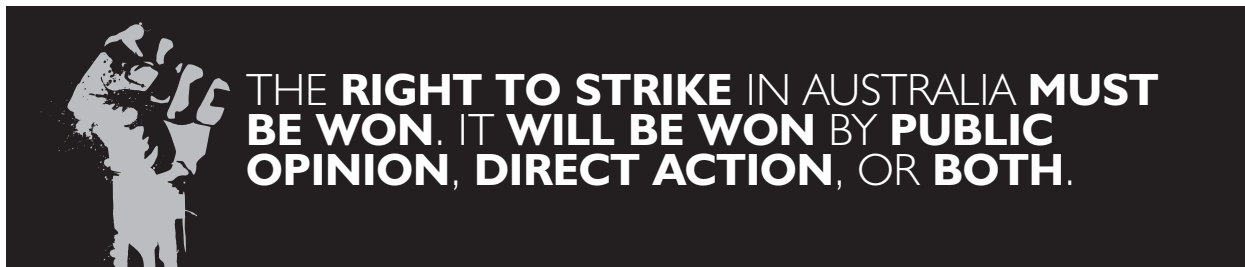
We can no longer accept the fact that workers in Australia are denied the right to strike and denied other rights. What sort of system is it that ensures that neither of the political parties that can reasonably expect to form government will guarantee one of the most internationally recognised, basic human and democratic rights for workers, and that is the right to strike?

This cannot be tolerated. Some of the most vocal critics of totalitarian systems in various parts of the world, places where unions and the right to strike have been crushed, are suddenly enthusiastic supporters of the 'no strike' policies in Australia. The right to strike is ultimately the most fundamental right distinguishing whether a worker has dignity, rights, and a reasonable standard of life, or must live on their knees begging for fair treatment.

children, caring for the sick and aged and contributing to the collective wellbeing of our communities. Ultimately, the conditions of working people's lives and society as a whole are determined by their relationship to their work – wages, union and workers' democratic rights in the workplace, working conditions and entitlements.

The conditions gained by unions and their members include: the 8-hour working day, health and safety on the job, rest breaks, sick leave, paternity leave, carers' leave, annual leave, job security, long service leave, superannuation, redundancy provisions and the right to work in an environment free of harassment and bullying by employers. All these have led to improvements in family life for all members of our community. Union activities protect working people and the wider community from the extreme excesses of employer exploitation and alienation. Without unions and the collective action of their members' child labour, low wages, long working hours and 19th century working conditions would still be with us.

Inadequate wages, job insecurity, long working hours and oppressive and unsafe working conditions produce stressed and fragmented families struggling to survive under the pressure of financial hardship.



The employers have the right to invest or not invest, the right to introduce or not introduce new technology, the right to hire and fire, the right to create conditions of fear and insecurity at work, the right to establish or continue with unfair, unrealistic, performance measuring and enforcement systems, the right to refuse to negotiate with or recognise workers' unions and so on.

Without the right to strike, workers have few rights at all and must ultimately submit. What sort of a system is this?

The right to strike in Australia must be won. It will be won by public opinion, direct action, or both.

Unions are central to making the society a better place.

For more than 150 years Australia's trade unions have been the main driving force in establishing and advancing decent working conditions and living standards in this country. Unions and their members continually strive to achieve decent wages, workplace rights and conditions that protect and improve work and family life balance, provide a secure environment for raising

Unions by their very nature are collective organisations of working people pursuing common economic and social interests of the whole community, and countering the cutthroat competition of self-serving and selfish individualism.

The Victorian union movement has decided to continue the Rights At Work campaign – the campaign that won the election for the Rudd Government.

Within that campaign it has decided to:

- establish a workers' rights coalition, which would be a coalition of community groups and unions which are active around human rights, democratic rights, and welfare rights amongst others
- mobilise around the full extent of workers' rights, including the right to strike

Workers' rights and protection of workers' rights must ultimately be enshrined in the fabric of Australian society, must be guaranteed in the day-to-day activities of Australia regardless of the government in power.

**This is our challenge.**

# from our readers

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## Dear Sir

I often don't find myself in total agreement with some of the articles in *The Beacon* but I appreciate the fact that, whether I agree with them or not, the articles are well written and thought provoking, with very few exceptions.

I could just read the copy that the Adelaide Church receives, but for \$20 I would rather have my own.

Best wishes.

**B. Brummitt SA**

## Dear Editor

My subscription for 2008 is enclosed. I wouldn't want to miss an issue. Thank you so much for your journal. Keep up the good work so much needed in these difficult times.

Yours sincerely

**J. Good, Vic**

## Dear Editors

### Euthanasia Debate in the Victorian Parliament

On Sunday 27 July 2008, Dr Rodney Syme, Vice-President 'Dying with Dignity Victoria (DWDV)' addressed the congregation of the Melbourne Unitarian Church on the important but still controversial subject 'Is it rational to want to die?'

He felt compelled to form the DWDV group when one of his patients, who suffered from excruciating spinal cancer pain, was deemed ineligible under existing Australian laws to receive satisfactory relief i.e. an assisted peaceful death.

Dr Syme quoted the well-researched statistic that 5% of terminally ill persons in Australia, afflicted by incurable diseases such as advanced cancers of the nervous or respiratory systems, die from overwhelming distress and physical exhaustion induced by unbearable pain, rather than from the actual disease syndromes. The only realistic option open to doctors in such cases is to induce a permanent coma until death.

Thus, for this tragic group of patients there is no magic wand for relief of their pain and suffering. The frequently aired assurances that palliative care will render all terminally ill 'comfortable' until a peaceful death ensues can now be truthfully exposed as a complete myth. Those who still hold this view on palliative care, including a few politicians, church leaders and even medical professionals, would seem no longer credible.

Dr Syme's address induced strong emotions in me personally. My beloved mother spent the last 4 months of her 91-year long and giving life enduring intolerable pain from spinal cancer. Both at home and later in hospital she was being promised that effective painkillers would be administered to make her comfortable. Although she never complained I well remember her bravery and her pleas to me to assist in ending her ordeal saying: 'I would never let you suffer like this!'

Always a strong and determined advocate of justice for humanity, and for animals as well, and never with fear or currying favour, I know she spoke truthfully and rationally from an ever-loving and caring heart. For me the whole affair was, and is continuing to be, a heart-wrenching experience.

Hopefully, the present debate on euthanasia in the Legislative Council of the Victorian Parliament will result in legalising best practice procedures that will enable people of sound mind to realise their final wish to end their pain and suffering, after thorough personal and professional reviews of the truthfulness of their circumstances. Whether demonstrated before or during their terminal illness, the wish for an assisted peaceful death ought to be respected and granted when life has become unbearable and with no prospects for improvement.

Actions of this kind are not suicidal practices. Instead they symbolise not only a profound sense of humanity and empathy, but also reflect a much-needed service to the community. Victoria could become Australia's vanguard for such humane actions to be enshrined in new legislation. It would provide the terminally ill, their families and friends with the necessary protection against criminal intent, and also with peace of mind and assurances that euthanasia, within a framework of well-reasoned legal, medical and social safeguards, is proper and in full accord with democratic principles and freedom of rightful choice.

I trust that all responsible citizens who believe in the need and justification for 'dying with dignity' to communicate their views to local members of the Legislative Council. It would signal the community's strong interest and concern and assist our law makers in their current deliberations for achieving an outcome that would better serve the people of Victoria and ultimately the entire Australian nation.

**Meredith Neumann together with husband Fred.**

## Dear Editor

I find the articles in your journal informative and stimulating.

**K. McEwan Vic**

# from our readers



## Dear friends

China has a little while ago responded to criticism of its actions on Tibet by saying that it rejects the right of others to interfere in China's internal affairs. The same should apply to Tibet I suppose and it is accepted by all that no country can unilaterally force change on what it seems is another country's internal policies.

Every country, including the USA it seems, claims that immunity. My question is 'Can the world stand by and do nothing about the human rights violations being perpetrated in another country?' Hitler seized power in Germany in 1933 and imposed a fascist dictatorship on the nation with all its consequences.

Shouldn't we look upon that as a lesson for the future and demand NOW that all governments observe the rights of every human being on the planet, and create a mechanism via which that can be enforced under International law. How do we enforce it? I would suggest that any offending country be isolated by all countries by ending any diplomatic, cultural, tourist, military and trade relationship, etc. with it until it mends its ways.

Beacon readers I am sure will have other ideas on what can be done to protect all peoples from oppression, mass murder, genocide, concentration camps and military dictatorships. Of course, if every country were disarmed, none could defy international law and democracy would be safe everywhere.

Yours truly

*J. Forward NSW*

## Dear Editorial Board

Thank you so much for *The Beacon*. Sorry it has taken me so long to acknowledge your fine publication.

After I read *The Beacon* I pass it around to members of our First Unitarian Universalist congregation and they unanimously agree the articles are very timely and often provide news we in the US do not get! I so enjoyed the articles by our own Michael Parenti about the history of Tibet, 'Our Unitarian Heritage – relevant or redundant', by Peter Abrehart and 'Why I am a Humanist' by Des Young, just to mention a few recent articles.

'Iraq: Australia's nice little earner ...' explains the way the CPA 'organised Iraq's economy. We in the US Peace Movement hope that ordinary Americans realize the truth about this invasion. Doesn't it seem odd that we who protested in the streets KNEW that it was about oil, but it appears many, including some of our own representatives, did not believe it until recently when it became clear, and while we are in the 6th year of this immoral and unnecessary war? This war and occupation made billions for the US weapons industry and other multinational friends of our administration, while thousands of innocents have been murdered because of our disastrous military 'adventures.'

Thank you for this wonderful journal, which I will renew. Please let me know when that will be.

*Dolores Priem*

*First Unitarian Universalist Society of San Francisco, USA*

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### Beacon Editorial Board:

Peter Abrehart  
Marion Harper  
Jack Woodhams  
Julie Stafford

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