

Youth rates still an issue to fight

UP UNTIL 2007, those aged 16 or 17 had a lower minimum wage than those who were older. In mid-August of that year, after sustained industrial and protest action by thousands of youth and their supporters, a law proposed by then-Green MP Sue Bradford was passed in Parliament which saw youth rates abolished, and a single minimum wage was created for all workers regardless of age. That's how the story goes, anyway. Sadly, the truth is not so clear cut.

The struggle to end youth rates was fought bravely by young workers and students all over the country. Fast food workers, members of the Unite union, led the struggle, going out on repeated strike action (predominantly in Auckland, although in other parts of the country too). For most of the workers, it was their first time taking industrial action. Meanwhile, a group called Radical Youth was organising in several Auckland high schools, culminating in a walk-out against youth rates of up to 1000 people. Support for the struggle from older workers was also present, with many helping to publicise the issue, attending pickets and protests and more.

In the end, young workers nationwide calling for an end to wage discrimination based on age were sold out by Parliament, as so many workers have been before. After Bradford's bill was passed, and after Unite signed contracts with the fast food chains, the campaign against youth rates was ended. But Bradford's bill did not end youth rates at all. Workers ages 16 and 17 still have a lower minimum wage for the first 200 hours or 90 days of their employment (soon to increase to \$10.40 per hour, while the adult minimum wage goes up to \$13). Workers under the age of 16 still have no minimum wage at all.



High school student walk-out against youth rates, Auckland, 2006

The 90 day hire-and-fire law, which came into effect on April 1, will further hit these young workers. The law means that any worker can be fired within the first 90 days of employment for any reason whatsoever (or no reason at all), without any legal recourse. In theory, 16 and 17 year olds could be bounced from job to job every 90 days without ever moving up to the full adult minimum wage. Young workers continue to be treated like shit by both parliament and bosses. But even this isn't enough for those in power.

Ever since Bradford's bill was passed, various think-tanks, bosses groups and MPs have pushed for the reintroduction of full youth rates, rather than just the euphemistically titled "training minimum wage". Last year, ACT MP Roger Douglas put forward a private member's bill in Parliament, while the Retail Association

and Hospitality Association pushed for youth rates' reintroduction in January this year. They claim that it would help young people find jobs, but the reality is they just want another way for their members to lower costs during a recession. As more and more people are finding themselves on the dole or other benefits, the bosses are still stealing massive profits from us.

The reintroduction of full youth rates must be fought, but it cannot be fought in isolation. The myth that they were truly abolished must be smashed, and equal minimum wages for all, regardless of age or length of employment, must be won. The struggles of youth are often ignored in our society, and this cannot continue. In 2007 they showed us their organising power in the workplace and in schools. Let's work towards a day when we can see it again.

Egypt's new rulers step up repression

THE EGYPTIAN GOVERNMENT has moved to ban strikes and other forms of protest following the successful rebellion against the dictator Hosni Mubarak in which strikes, occupations and other industrial struggles played a crucial role.

The new law, which was ordered by the Egyptian cabinet on the 23rd of March, stipulates that anyone calling for or organising a protest can face jail time and/or a fine of 500,000 Egyptian pounds. A significant amount in a country where the minimum wage is a mere 35 pounds, or

just under \$8NZ, a month. Essentially this means any militant workers face the risk of life long debt (on top of the threat of torture and imprisonment) should they try to resist their bosses.

Class struggle has been on an upswing in Egypt since around 2007, since then barely a single day has passed without a strike or some other industrial struggle being reported. Indeed it was the militancy of the Egyptian workers which was instrumental in finally bringing down Mubarak.

However Egypt's workers have not given up their struggle for revolution; a new federation of trade unions has been formed and includes health workers, government workers, pharmaceutical workers, workers involved in iron and steel production as well as the notoriously combative Mahalla textile workers. No doubt this new law is indicative of the fact that, faced with an increasingly confident and unified working class, Egypt's newly anointed rulers are fearing for their own feeble grip on power.

SOLIDARITY

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A CLASS QUAKE

TRAGICALLY, a major earthquake hit Christchurch on 22 February. Much of the city has been destroyed, including about one-third of the Central Business District. At the time of writing, sadly 166 people have been confirmed dead, with the death toll expected to rise to 200. The quake has caused massive damage, estimated at somewhere between \$10 to \$20 billion. Possibly 10,000 houses need to be destroyed and 100,000 need to be repaired. These distressing details have been covered extensively by the media in a sort of spectacle-driven frenzy. But it hasn't captured so well the human cost – in destroyed lives, homes, lost jobs, and widespread trauma – costs which cannot be measured. Further, it has neglected how the quake has hit, and will continue to hit, working class people the hardest.



Another quake hits Christchurch, this time more devastating. Many buildings like this Cathedral were brought down.

WHY HAS THE QUAKE hit people unequally? Why has the quake affected working class people disproportionately? Why have official relief efforts mainly focussed on the central business district, and not devastated working class areas that have been without water, sewerage and electricity? The answer is simply that it was what has been termed a 'class quake', and that the government cares more for putting business back into business than for working class people.

Quakes are natural hazards. But the natural event, namely the rupture of tectonic plates, starkly reveals the human-made structural inequalities and class divisions present in capitalist society. Simply put, those with less income and resources are more vulnerable to trigger events such as quakes, and find it harder to recover from them.

This is obvious in places like Haiti, where quakes have killed huge amounts of the urban poor, especially those living in densely populated and poorly constructed

shantytowns (which often are located on marginal and more vulnerable land, such as steep hillsides). All up somewhere over 200,000 people died. Yet in Christchurch working class people, although far wealthier than those in Haiti, were still more vulnerable than those higher up the class system.

Capitalism has built unsafe buildings so as to cut costs and maximise profit. Many office and central city workers were highly vulnerable to the quake, as they worked in unsafe high rise buildings built before stricter quake building regulations were brought in during the 1970s for non-residential buildings and in the 1980s for buildings with reinforced concrete. Many lost their lives when their office buildings were destroyed. Additionally, if they were outside during the quake (which hit during lunchtime), they were at risk from falling masonry, buildings and poorly built shop awnings. And in particular, people in Eastern Christchurch, which is a predominantly working class

area, have been badly affected. This is because much of Eastern Christchurch is built on poor quality land – such land is cheaper for capital to develop – land that was once alluvial flood plains, or swamps and marshes that have been drained, and thus prone to massive liquefaction after a quake. Much of this land has a loose sandy and silty soil that is below the watertable, and hence during a quake much of the soil is compressed and the water, along with some soil, is forced to the surface. In contrast, areas with clay soils and soil that is above the watertable won't liquefy. This liquefaction has caused substantial damage to infrastructure, residential properties and to the foundations of homes.

For sure, many in wealthy suburbs, such as the cliff-side suburbs of Sumner and Redcliffs, have been hit just as hard, with many houses destroyed and people killed. Yet these people will generally recover from the quake much easier than working class people in other Eastern suburbs, such as Bexley, New Brighton and Aranui

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NO APRIL FOOL’S JOKE

ON APRIL 1, a raft of new pro-capitalist, anti-worker employment laws came into effect. Timid union bureaucrats from the Council of Trade Unions called off holding planned rallies and possible stopworks against the new laws on April 1 and then again on May Day. The CTU have comprehensively failed to put up any real resistance to the government’s austerity policies. Hundreds of thousands of people are pissed off with worsening living conditions under these policies. And this will get worse under the new laws.

Yet the CTU has not tapped into this anger. It has yet again gone out of its way to avoid industrial confrontation. Their campaign has been spineless and symbolic. Instead of trying to make the new laws unworkable through industrial action, for example by calling for pickets whenever somebody is fired under the new 90 day fire at will law, the CTU aims to put all their energy into getting Labour elected. Yet there is little difference between Labour and National: under Labour governments of the last 25 years, profits have soared while the standard of living for the vast majority of us has plummeted.

BRUTAL BENEFICIARY BASHING PLOTTED

ON 22ND FEBRUARY 2011, the Government appointed Welfare Working Group reported to the Government. Their report recommended a range of punitive changes that would punish those of us who are on benefits for the tough circumstances we are forced into by capitalism.

These proposals included: threatening to cut benefits completely for people who

don’t meet the work-test requirements three times; reducing all benefits – including the sickness and invalids benefits – to one jobseeker rate; a requirement that all mothers on a benefit look for work when their youngest child is three; and if you already have a child and are on the DPB, a possible requirement that you look for work when that child is 14 weeks! The Government rejected the final proposal, part of a convenient strategy to make their other drastic changes seem more reasonable. We all know there aren’t jobs out there. It’s more important than ever that we struggle together (wage workers and unwaged beneficiaries) in the workplace and in our communities.

THE ‘ACCIDENTAL’ DEATH OF A WORKER

21-YEAR OLD NATHAN DODKIN, a Taranaki Fastway Couriers driver, died in a car crash on 6th January 2011 on State Highway 3 between Inglewood and Stratford. His courier van collided head-on with a truck. “An accident,” we are told.

However, thanks to Nathan’s workmates, some of the realities of being a courier driver are coming out into the open: having to drive 13 hours a day, covering up to 500km with no breaks, long working hours, high stress levels, a lack of regulation and all of that for only \$80 per day! Does that still make it just another accident?

If we look at statistics for 2009, there were 213,000 claims for work-related injuries to ACC. Between 2002 and 2008, the number of ACC claims for fatal work-related injuries fluctuated between a low of 86 in 2008 and a high of 103 in 2006. The 2009 provisional figure was 89. Workers

face unsafe workplaces across the country every day.

Accidents do happen. However, in order to survive, couriers need to ignore speed limits everyday. This ‘accident’ seems to have been inflicted on the worker by terrible working conditions in an industry that doesn’t value safety conditions at all. The stance taken by Nathan’s workmates is encouraging. They are publicly shaming Fastway Couriers for appalling workplace safety. You have our full support!

[T]ERROR TRIAL CONTINUES – WITHOUT JURY

THE COURT OF APPEAL recently turned down an appeal from people facing charges stemming from the nation-wide ‘terror raids’ on 15th October 2007. They wanted to be tried by a jury; the court decided they will be tried by a judge alone. The state is keen on getting the verdict they want: ‘The Crown prosecutor has convinced the Court that the case will be too long and complex for a jury to handle. The Crown is genuinely worried that real jurors would see through the ridiculousness of the allegations and drop the charges,’ said defendant Valerie Morse.

The raids have largely been about suppressing political dissent and creating a climate of fear, rather than any notion that we have terrorists in this country. Indeed, no charges have been brought under the ‘Terrorism Suppression Act’. In the biggest political trial for some time, the state simply wants to put away some unruly Tuhoe and anarchist activists as an example to the rest of us. Whether by jury trial or trial by judge alone, all charges ought to be dropped.



Student Volunteer Army cleaning up liquefied silt

(it should be noted many Eastern suburbs contain a high proportion of Maori and Pacific people, as well as beneficiaries). As Piers Blaikie and others in their interesting book *At Risk: Natural Hazards, People’s Vulnerability and Disasters*, wealthy people are far less at risk from natural hazards because they have many assets, insurance, cash reserves, access to credit, and can hence quickly resume income earning activities after the impact of the hazard. Additionally, they may own land or possess other resources in other locations not affected by the hazard. Working class people in contrast generally have high debt, few if any assets or cash reserves, and find it difficult to access credit, particularly those at the bottom of the class pyramid (such as beneficiaries) – their poverty means they are often considered ‘credit unworthy’. They find it much harder to recover and rebuild.

Even working class people who own a house, which is still reasonably common in Christchurch, and part of the NZ traditional class compromise -- a deal whereby a family slaves away for 40-50 years of wage slavery in return for a paltry ¼ acre section and house -- can be hit hard because their home is their only major asset. If it is badly damaged (requiring tens of thousands of dollars of repairs) or destroyed, their major asset is simply gone. In contrast, capitalist and ‘middle class’ people often have many other assets, and can afford to repair and rebuild, even if their luxury home in Sumner has fallen down a cliff.

Blaikie forgets to mention the tremendous impact the quake will have on workers, not just working class communities. Thousands will lose their jobs as businesses are shut or layoffs are made (casualised workers seem particularly

vulnerable to this), and of those who retain their jobs, they will not have their wages paid until businesses are up and running again (although the government has offered some minimal assistance for this). Furthermore, many face difficulties receiving benefits and special grants from the government. “Many Christchurch people are likely to be suffering post traumatic stress disorder after the quake. This means that they qualify for a Sickness Benefit, rather than the Unemployment Benefit that it would seem that they are being offered,” says Kay Brereton of the Wellington People’s Centre. One-Off Civil Defence payments require people to provide bills proving they live at a residence, which is difficult in a time when tens of thousands have left Christchurch, and difficult too if you are not the bill payer.

A word about the relief effort. While Eastern Christchurch was neglected by officialdom for two weeks after the quake, those suburbs have again seen the ‘spirit of the blitz’ where people have come together to help each other out and meet each other’s immediate needs; this community self-help or mutual aid has provided immense support to people in removing silt, cleaning up, providing water and food, digging toilets and so on. To give some idea of the scale of these efforts, we mention the efforts of the thousands strong ‘Student Volunteer Army’ in cleaning up silt, the ‘Christchurch Baking Army’ in providing free baked goods, ‘Comfort Crusaders’ providing free emergency kits and food, the numerous community based food kitchens, distribution centres and ‘info points’ that have sprouted up (sometimes on people’s front lawns), and free water drops by community groups. Even normally conservative capitalists, namely farmers

from North Canterbury, the ‘Farmy Army’, provided relief in the form of helicopter drops of thousands of cooked dinners in East Christchurch. Websites such as the Christchurch Recovery Map and quakeaid.co.nz have attempted to coordinate these community based efforts, ‘connecting those in need with those who can help’. All of this has occurred from the bottom up.

Finally, we realise these are generalisations. Some working class areas in Western Christchurch such as Hornby and parts of Halswell, which are built on more solid land, were not as badly affected. However, these people still face job losses, trauma, poor income, the loss of the city centre, and damage to their houses and infrastructure. So overall our analysis holds true: working class people in all parts of Christchurch will generally find it more difficult to recover and rebuild. As capitalist vultures called property developers and their mates in the National Government look forward to rebuilding Christchurch in their own interests and for their own profit, we hope that people put forward a different vision of a city, one where buildings are built safely and soundly for the needs of people and not profit. Capitalism needs, and profits from, destruction. Capitalism kills.

RALLY FOR CHCH

Between 70-100 attended a ‘Rally for Christchurch Community Assembly’ on April 2 organised by Action for Christchurch East and Beyond Resistance. They went away inspired, energised and motivated to organise in their communities, building on the solidarity and links made in the weeks following the quake.

What was special about the day was the absence of politicians and officials speaking at people, but really not saying anything at all. Ordinary people verbalised their experiences and concerns, and shared their thoughts and issues freely, in an open forum.

Serious concerns that were brought up and discussed included issues around sewerage, housing, heating, public transport, health and especially the authoritarian nature of the Government and the Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority (CERA)...

The next ‘mass community assembly’ will be on Sunday 17th April at 1pm in Linwood Park.

Solidarity will be needed across the country and we need to link this to the wider issues of austerity measures, cut backs in the public sector and the most recent attacks on workers through changes to the ERA and Holidays Act.

- thanks to Beyond Resistance, <http://beyondresistance.wordpress.com/>

What is AWSM?

The Aotearoa Workers Solidarity Movement (AWSM) is an organisation working towards a classless, stateless society: anarchist-communism. We are a small national organisation with members in Wellington and in a few smaller cities and centres.

As class-struggle anarchists our priority is active involvement in workplace struggles and industrial action as well as community based campaigns in our neighbourhoods. We are currently involved in a variety of struggles, including protests against National’s proposed industrial legislation and more. We encourage working class people to organise themselves against capital and the state. We do not seek to paternalistically organise people from the top down.

To become a member of AWSM, you must agree with our Aims & Principles (available at <http://www.awsm.org.nz>), and be involved in the life & activity of the group. If you’re interested in joining or just finding out a bit more about us, e-mail or write to us – see our contact details in the next column. We look forward to hearing from you!

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