

AFTINET Bulletin No. 135

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Previous AFTINET Bulletins and resources are available at <http://www.aftinet.org.au>.

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1. AFTINET campaigner job share opportunity

There is a great part time campaign job opportunity available with AFTINET! We have decided to expand our current campaigning capacity to five days per week, with our current campaigner job sharing with second campaigner, who will work for two days per week.

Trade justice campaigner, 2 days per week – job share. Please visit the website for the job description and application details.

2. Global Day of Action to stop Free Trade Agreements, April 19

Members of the Our World Is Not For Sale network (of which AFTINET is a member) and participants of the World Social Forum have identified the issue of Free Trade Agreements as a key area of concern for trade justice campaigning.

A Global Day of Action to stop Free Trade Agreements has been called for April 19, 2007. AFTINET plans to do media, research, and possibly a small activity to participate and support this Global Day of Action along with community groups from all over the world.

For further details, or to get involved, please contact Michele Freeman at the AFTINET office.

3. 'Free Trade, Fair for Workers?' public forum event, April 28

AFTINET will hold a public forum event during the **Fringe Program for the ALP conference at 1pm on Saturday the 28th of April**. The event will examine the potential impacts of the China Free Trade Agreement on labour rights, human rights and the environment, and in the lead up to the federal election, attempt to determine – what is the ALP policy on this important issue?

Speaking at the event will be:

Julius Roe, National President, Australian Manufacturing Workers Union

Dr Pat Ranald, Australian Fair Trade and Investment Network

Fair trade, human rights speaker (TBC)

The forum will be held from **1 – 2pm on Saturday the 28th of April** at the Unions NSW Building, 377 Sussex St (a short distance from the ALP conference venue).

We hope that AFTINET members and their friends will join us at the forum, which will critically examine the impacts of the China FTA both in Australia and in China, and consider the question of ALP policy on this issue.

For further information, please feel free to contact Michele Freeman at the AFTINET office.

4. 'Back on Track - A Way Forward for Australia'

'Back on Track' is a socially progressive policy report that has been prepared by the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union; Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers' Union; Community and Public Sector Union, Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union and the Australian Education Union.

The paper presents a way forward for Australia and outlines a number of key policy areas, including, affordable housing, education, fairer taxation, as well the need for alternative policies on trade as opposed to the current neoliberal, free trade economic model.

The introduction of the report can be read below, and further details about the project can be found at www.backontrack.asn.au

'Back on Track - A Way Forward for Australia'

The response of working people to the ACTU's Rights at Work campaign has demonstrated the important role that unions and socially progressive leaders play in representing the needs of Australia's working families.

After 10 years of the Howard government, working people are confronting problems not just with their rights at work, but with their family lives, their access to education, health, childcare, and good jobs, and their children's future. They want to see an alternative vision, not just on IR, but across all of these key areas.

Together, we represent over 700,000 of these Australians.

This paper outlines issues across the key areas of working people's lives where, under Howard, vision is lacking, and solutions are needed. This paper sets out a vision that delivers for Australian families, no matter where they live and work.

It is a vision based on access to opportunities, education, and health and secure jobs in high skill and high wage industries. It is an alternative to the dog eat dog society nurtured under Howard.

This document sets out positions on a number of key policy areas. These set the foundation for a nation building agenda which can drive Australia on a high skills-high wages road with more secure employment, strong, universally available, public health and education services and greater social equity. This agenda stands in stark contrast to the Howard agenda of competition based on reduced wages and conditions, a race to the bottom, insecure employment, privatisation and greater division between rich and poor.

At different periods in history, an organised and motivated Left has been able to improve society. Over the last 20 years, an often disjointed Left has failed to combat the well-resourced and concerted attacks from the Right. We have failed to deliver a strong and popular alternative.

For the past 20 years the Left has been unsuccessfully fighting a rear guard action, with limited strategies for the future.

We have been incapable of delaying and resisting advances from the Right that have stripped away many of the conditions, benefits, rights and privileges of a modern society. Our lack of vision has allowed the economic rationalists both outside and within the Australian Labor Party to go unchallenged.

Instead of articulating an alternative economic vision for Australia, some members of the Left have fallen over themselves to talk the language of privatisation, deregulation, competition policy, public private partnerships, and free trade.

This has been a foolhardy strategy. The massive disaffection with the changes made by the Right demands a leadership with a different agenda. It is our responsibility to articulate a vision not just to the industrial relations changes, but to other key areas including 'free' trade agreements and the gradual transfer of public resources to the private sector especially in health and education.

If we offer only token resistance to the neo-liberal ideologues of the Liberal Party, their corporate allies and their fellow travellers within the ALP, we are doomed to irrelevance and failure.

The time has come for progressive forces to present the coherent vision that working people are demanding.

We must provide alternatives for Australians in areas including healthcare, childcare, education, industry development and trade.

If we build our vision as strategically and effectively as we have on IR, we can be successful in these areas as well.

We need strong integrated policies on taxation, education, healthcare, childcare, trade, industry development, infrastructure, migration, affordable housing, aged care, public accountability, skills, vocational education and training and global warming. A process to develop these policies has begun, but we invite you to get involved. A series of policy papers are or will become available on the topics highlighted in this document. Through a united effort we can rejuvenate the Australian Left and provide a coherent, spirited and effective alternative to the dominance of neoliberalism.

5. 'Rudd set for brawl with the left'

The Australian, Steve Lewis, Chief political correspondent, Tue 27 Mar 2007

KEVIN Rudd has risked a brawl with Labor's Left by placing economic growth and free trade at the core of a new policy platform.

The Opposition Leader's proposals, obtained by The Australian, would denounce passive welfare, embrace the casualisation of the workforce, boost business grants and formally bury Mark Latham's disastrous Tasmanian forests policy with support for logging.

The draft platform, which also embraces public-private partnerships to fund roads and other infrastructure, ensures a showdown between Mr Rudd and powerful Left unions at next month ALP national conference.

Seeking to win over swinging voters, Labor's new policy platform dumps previous positions on welfare and indigenous affairs as Mr Rudd shifts to the middle ground.

While Labor remains firmly opposed to the Government's workplace reforms, the new platform recognises the growing march of independent contractors. It also jettisons previous discomfort with the casualisation of the workforce in a move that will alienate left-wing unions, which favour government encouragement of full-time work.

The Australian last month revealed a plan by five powerful Left unions to push their alternative economic plan at the conference. They want Mr Rudd to muscle up to big business and abandon free trade deals.

But the new ALP platform places a much stronger focus on wealth creation and free trade, under plans to lock in the high levels of public support for Labor seen in opinion polls.

"Labor is committed to building a modern economy that competes successfully in global markets for agriculture, resources, manufactures and services," the draft platform says.

"With the economic fundamentals in place, Labor's key priority is to raise the incomes and living standards of the Australian people by building an economic climate of enterprise and innovation."

The policy blueprint — which will be voted on by 400 delegates at the showcase ALP event — rejects the heavy hand of government intervention, or a withdrawal from free

trade deals. Instead, the Labor leadership argues that long-term prosperity ensures Australia is “able to sustain high-quality public services and a generous safety net for those in need”.

It locks Labor into keeping “taxes as low as possible, consistent with maintaining a sound revenue base to fund quality public services”.

Fearful of another interest rates campaign at the election, Labor will pledge to preserving low inflation as the “key to maintaining low interest rates”.

Amid a concerted government attack over Labor’s plans to raid the Future Fund, the ALP platform backs new measures to build superannuation savings.

Labor also wants to build national savings by introducing “new programs and incentives to encourage families to save for their children’s future”.

The reform push comes as Mr Rudd has ditched Labor’s “hit list” of public schools and won caucus approval to overturn the ALP’s historic opposition to selling off Telstra.

In a move that will be endorsed by the powerful Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union, Labor will also formally dump Mr Latham’s 2004 policy to lock up hundreds of hectares of old-growth forests in Tasmania.

Announced just days before polling day, the forestry policy was blamed for Labor’s loss of two Tasmanian seats: Bass and Braddon.

In the new policy, Labor says it now supports “sustainable economic, environmental and community outcomes for Tasmania’s forests”.

While Mr Latham blindsided the CFMEU - and the Tasmanian Labor Government -Mr Rudd has committed to consulting with unions, industry and the state Government on a “sustainable” forestry plan.

This will involve no loss of jobs in the forestry industry and support for the existing Tasmanian Community Forest Agreement, announced in May 2005 by John Howard.

Labor is committed to overhauling the policy platform by placing economic policy at the heart of a new blueprint.

Labor will go to the election with a commitment to boosting levels of business research to “above” the OECD average - and consider a tariff freeze for the textile and clothing sector - as part of a new industry plan.

It will establish an independent authority, Infrastructure Australia, to oversee a national plan to build roads, rail and ports infrastructure. But it will also challenge the big Left unions by recognising the “legitimate role” of public-private partnerships in financing roads and other infrastructure.

In a historic shift, the draft platform recognises the “legitimate role” of PPPs, which have been controversially used to build road tunnels and other costly infrastructure.

6. Deadline for Doha under Bush's 'fast track' expires! AFTINET media release

March 31 is the deadline for a Doha Round agreement to be reached in time to use President Bush's current Trade Promotion Authority. However, WTO Director General, Pascal Lamy, has been deceptively promoting June 30th as the deadline. And in any case, there has still been no major breakthrough in the negotiations, which Lamy claims is now causing 'anxiety and frustration'.

Campaign pressure has been stepped up around the globe to keep the round deadlocked, and community groups are calling on the US Congress not to renew the Trade Promotion Authority. AFTINET media release below.

Fair Trade celebration – Doha deadline passes

Today fair trade supporters celebrate the failure to conclude the disastrous Doha Round of negotiations in the World Trade Organisation in time to use George Bush's current Trade Promotion Authority.

In order for the Doha Round to get through the US congress, an agreement needed to be reached by March 31st, and that date has passed without an agreement even in sight. WTO Director General, Pascal Lamy, has been caught in an outright lie claiming that negotiators had until June 30th 'to grasp the window of openness' for talks to conclude.

President Bush's Trade Promotion Authority, which gives him the authority to make trade deals that can be sent to Congress for a simple yes-no vote with no amendments, does in fact expire at the end of June, but because Bush must give *90 days notice of intent to sign* an agreement, *after* an agreement is completed, March 31st is the real deadline.

WTO Director General, Pascal Lamy, has been running a pressure campaign with this deceptive June 30th deadline, trying to get developing countries to make more concessions in the already highly unfair WTO negotiations.

Developing countries dub the Doha Development Round of negotiations as 'Everything but Development Round' because, as the 2005 World Bank Report states, under the likely Doha scenario the Middle East, Bangladesh, almost all of Africa and Mexico, would face net losses.

It is with great relief that we witness the passing of this deadline with no conclusion to this unfair agreement in sight.

The failure to conclude the Doha Round in time for the expiry of Bush's current Trade Promotion Authority should be seen as an opportunity to develop a new vision for global trade - a global trading system based on satisfying the economic and development interests of the majority. We need a trade system developed in the context of democracy, human rights, sovereignty, and environmental sustainability.

7. 'Fair terms must come before free trade' – Pat Ranald letter to the editor

The following letter by Pat Ranald was published in the Australian Financial Review (AFR) on the 29th of March.

Heather Ridout (AFR 24/3/07) rightly says that the China FTA negotiations are going badly and that the Australian Government should consider withdrawing from them. Australia already has a strong trading relationship with China and we have little to gain and much to lose from another lopsided free trade agreement.

But there is more at stake here than demanding better access to Chinese markets than the Chinese government has been prepared to offer so far. Neither the Australian or Chinese governments are prepared to commit to implementing basic United Nations and International Labour Organisation Agreements on labour rights and the environment.

Basic rights like freedom of association, the right to collective bargaining and to health and safety at work are being violated in China as workers are pressured to work long hours in unsafe conditions with no effective bargaining rights to fulfil contracts for transnational corporations which accept the lowest bids from Chinese firms. The right to collective bargaining is also increasingly violated in Australia under Federal Industrial Relations legislation that allows employers to make individual contracts a condition of employment for new employees. Temporary migrant workers here under Visa 457 are even more vulnerable, as they are tied to one employer, can lose their visa and can be deported if they complain about mistreatment. Yet the expansion of categories of workers under Visa 457 is one of the issues on the table in the FTA negotiations.

Preferential trade agreements in this context accelerate a race to the bottom in regulatory standards. Australia should not be negotiating such an agreement with China or any other country without clear commitments to the effective implementation of labour rights and environmental safeguards by all parties.

8. Japanese farmers visit AFTINET

AFTINET was approached to help coordinate a visit from a group of Japanese farmers and researchers to Australia to learn about Australian trade policy and agriculture, in light of the current negotiations of a Australia – Japan Free Trade Agreement.

The group include members from the Family Farmers Movement Hokkaido, Sapporo Freedom School, Family Farmers Movement of Hamanaka and the Pacific Asia Resource Centre.

AFTINET convened a network meeting for the group, with representatives from Greenpeace, APHEDA, and the Food Fairness Alliance. The group shared information and concerns about trade policies, agriculture, sustainable agriculture, and food security.

The Japanese had particular concerns about how an Australia - Japan Free Trade Agreement would impact on farmers in Japan, particularly in the region of Hokkaido. Small farmers in this region rely heavily on government subsidies, which already fall well short of what is needed, and this would only be exacerbated under a free trade agreement.

The Japanese felt that free trade and WTO policies were not leading to benefits for Japan, or for farmers around the world. In visiting Australia they hoped to learn more about Australia's experiences of these policies and trends, and to expand their international solidarity network.

The meeting was a useful insight into the local situation in Japan, and an interesting lesson in the differences and similarities regarding agriculture, sustainability and trade policies in Australian versus Japan. AFTINET will maintain contact with these groups, and an opportunity for continued networking and support around these issues has been established.

AFTINET also organised for the group to visit members of the Network of Concerned Farmers in Young, NSW. The Japanese farmers hoped to gain some insights into Australian agriculture, establish networks with farmers sharing similar concerns, and experience the workings of a 'traditional' Australian farm.

The Network of Concerned Farmers reported that the visit to Young was a great success, and that the Japanese group looked at dry dams, kangaroos, shearing sheds, tractors, machinery and a very parched and barren farm! The two groups had very good discussions about the similar woes of being farmers with little government support for public services.