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Illawarra Unity: Editorial & Contents 2012

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Illawarra Unity: Editorial & Contents 2012

Abstract

“Some will rob you with a six-gun, And some with a fountain pen.” (Woody Guthrie) This year marks the one hundredth anniversary of Woody Guthrie’s birth. Guthrie sang for the people of America and the world, for he was both a patriot and an internationalist. He honoured the working man, the outcast and the refugee. He sang of ruthless bosses and a system designed to crush the hopes of ordinary people. He also sang of dreams and desires for a better world. His great song “This Land is Your Land” was sung at Obama’s inauguration by Pete Seeger, Bruce Springsteen and others. Their version included the often missing verses about unemployment and private property. Sadly the spirit of the song was not taken up by the Obama administration and the system in America remains a plutocracy rather than a democracy. Sadder still, Obama has become yet another President of War, issuing executive orders authorising even the assassination of American citizens. Drone attacks on “terrorists” and civilians have grown dramatically under Obama’s watch and guidance. Drone warfare, in a sense, is his preferred method of killing – perhaps a chilling way to put it but we should not put a smile button on high-tech murder. Meanwhile, as traditional means of war have yet to be made redundant, America’s military presence on Australian soil will increase, letting our neighbours know yet again what the term “lackey of Yankee imperialism” actually means (apologies to those who recoil from nostalgic leftism).



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Editorial

“Some will rob you with a six-gun,
And some with a fountain pen.” (Woody Guthrie)

This year marks the one hundredth anniversary of Woody Guthrie’s birth. Guthrie sang for the people of America and the world, for he was both a patriot and an internationalist. He honoured the working man, the outcast and the refugee. He sang of ruthless bosses and a system designed to crush the hopes of ordinary people. He also sang of dreams and desires for a better world. His great song “This Land is Your Land” was sung at Obama’s inauguration by Pete Seeger, Bruce Springsteen and others. Their version included the often missing verses about unemployment and private property. Sadly the spirit of the song was not taken up by the Obama administration and the system in America remains a plutocracy rather than a democracy.

Sadder still, Obama has become yet another President of War, issuing executive orders authorising even the assassination of American citizens. Drone attacks on “terrorists” and civilians have grown dramatically under Obama’s watch and guidance. Drone warfare, in a sense, is his preferred method of killing – perhaps a chilling way to put it but we should not put a smile button on high-tech murder. Meanwhile, as traditional means of war have yet to be made redundant, America’s military presence on Australian soil will increase, letting our neighbours know yet again what the term “lackey of Yankee imperialism” actually means (apologies to those who recoil from nostalgic leftism).

The American wars abroad are, as always, also wars at home against its own citizens. Think only of the FBI’s COINTELPRO programme that targeted radicals in the Sixties in order to entrench the power of the national security state. More recently, Homeland Security has stepped up its systematic harassment of activist citizens in the USA. In that context, Julian Assange’s concerns about possible extradition to the USA are perfectly legitimate. Let us not forget also Bradley

Manning whose conscience propelled him into a nightmare world of imprisonment and torture.

The great American critic Dwight McDonald once wrote amusingly about a small radical magazine in America that headlined its issue in standard terms “What Can be Done?” but answered most unusually “Nothing, absolutely nothing”. We need, of course, to remind ourselves of Romain Roland’s maxim, borrowed by Antonio Gramsci, “pessimism of the intelligence, optimism of the will”. Thus it was that a movement came out of almost nowhere last year to challenge the entrenchment of privilege and power in America and throughout the world. The Occupy movement placed significant issues on the agenda. It was, if only for a brief moment, a critical contribution to the sort of social protests we have also seen in the (perhaps over-hyped) Arab Spring, student protests in England and especially Chile against education cuts and privatization, rallies against draconian policies in Greece and Spain, workers’ protests in China and also in Wisconsin. Things can be done and these struggles remind us of the important role we have in looking at our past and present through a lens fashioned by both critical thinking and militant activism. We should never be blind to the difficulties, sometimes even the impossibilities. Yet we also need to keep alive a radical imagination that lies at the core of “optimism of the will”. In one way or another, all the articles, notes and reminiscences in this issue of Unity remind us that this radical imagination is indispensable.

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July 2012

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