



● We welcome your letters for our next issue. As a general rule, letters should be no longer than 300 words and, preferably, should be typewritten. *ALR* reserves the right to edit letters down to this length.

● authors' addresses and a contact phone number should be included, although, naturally, they will not be printed. The deadline for letters is four weeks prior to the month of publication.

Nihilistic blatherings

I never thought I'd read in *ALR* the eccentric ramblings that flowed forth in *The Dags of the Left* printed, sad to say, in issue number 107. Such venomous play-acting has no place in progressive left journals such as *ALR*, notwithstanding token editorial disclaimers. As usual with such shallow writers, the face at the bottom of the well is their own — only dags cry "dag".

ALR columnist Diana Simmonds tried to suggest that: the Left is decrepit; *Capital* is stuffed; Marx and Gramsci were egotistical old bastards; we live in a post-capitalist world; and all "isms" have had it. This script is more worthy of a trendy TV comedy show seeking ratings above all other considerations.

We all know the left has problems. One major problem is that the left is flyblown with whingeing jeremiahs like Ms Simmonds who constantly wail about terrible Murdoch, Abeles, and Bond, and how the Right threatens to engulf us all, and so on, and on, and on! They draw some comfort from networking or brainstorming such trivia and then become totally incapable of working in a scientific way to overcoming present difficulties.

Instead, "videotronic", "post-capitalist" Diana wants to urgently seek the antithesis of the statement "that absolute power corrupts absolutely" (no joke).

I wish her luck. Such superficial endeavours are normally associated with the more insufferable elitism of pseudo-intellectual dags, dangling on the fringes of any of a dozen self-opinionated cliques spawned in the warm waters of the new left since the 'sixties.

If Marx once said: I have seen the future and I'm glad I'm dead, he must have been talking about Ms Simmonds and those of her ilk.

For the future we need less nihilistic blatherings and more serious analysis of present circumstances.

Chris Warren,
Dulwich Hill, NSW

Thanks, Di.

Thank you, Diana Simmonds! At last someone on the left owns up to what a pompous, complacent lot we've become. If I read one more head-in-the-sand, self-righteous dirge about the deepening crisis of world capitalism and the inevitability of socialism, I think I'm going to have an ideological seizure. Perhaps it's about time some people on the left admitted that we *don't* have all the answers, and begin looking not just at why not, but at why we thought we did in the first place.

Sue Buckingham,
Sutherland, NSW.

From Kollontai to Madonna

Recently, while fossicking through my wardrobe, I came across an issue of *ALR* from the late '70s. A mixture of nostalgia and curiosity caused me to flick through the articles on Alexandra Kollontai, a reprint from the *Cambridge Journal of Economics* on theories of the capitalist state and a review of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution, with, it must be added, a page of suggested readings if you wished to pursue the matter further!

An unavoidable comparison with the *ALR* of today followed.

It seemed that the strength of the old *ALR* was that it tried to provide a general sort of theoretical guide, a way of interpreting the world, or rather a world, as it often ignored the breadth of popular issues encompassed in the *ALR* of today.

Thus, Kollontai has been replaced by either Madonna or, in more sober moments, the likes of Jane Singleton; analyses of the capitalist state have given way to tepid support for the Cain government; and any notion of revolution, permanent or otherwise, is now limited to reviews of *Dirty Dancing*. And there's no suggested reading.

But this is not as surprising as it may seem: rather, it is consistent with moving away from a general marxist theoretical journal to a popular left magazine. Although there may be some understandable resistance to this move, it does mark at least an attempt by part of the left to move beyond the traditional and, in some way certain, areas of concern, and into the field of popular culture, which is, after all, where most of us actually exist. Hogan is indeed better known than Hegel. And while Marx may ultimately be as well known for his durability as his surplus value, he unfortunately has none of the present currency of Madonna or even Minogue.

Jane Edwards,
Alphington, Vic.

No conspiracy?

In *ALR* 107, Jock McCulloch dismissed as a fantasy of the "fundamentalist left" the notion that a corporate conspiracy took place to conceal the truth about asbestos in the pursuit of profits. McCulloch wrote, "there is no evidence that either CSR or James Hardie ever succeeded in making money from their asbestos mines and, if any criticism is to be made of those firms, it is that they were incompetent rather than malevolent capitalists" Incredibly, he described these two corporate giants as "casualties" of asbestos.

It is absurd to suggest that CSR and James Hardie did not profit hugely from

asbestos. CSR now claims it closed the Wittenoom mine in 1966 because it "became uneconomic" - after twenty-three years' continuous operation. But the profitability of Wittenoom is really irrelevant since the big money was made from the manufacture and sale of asbestos products. For example, James Hardie, which started making asbestos sheets in 1916, admitted that, as recently as ten years ago, 97 percent of its products were "dependent on the use of asbestos".

The AMWU has established that at least 67 employees from the James Hardie factory at Camellia in Sydney have died from asbestos-related diseases. No doubt other Camellia workers who are now dead were also asbestos victims. Still others will die from asbestos diseases not yet apparent. The Camellia plant stopped making asbestos products in December 1983. When did the company know it was killing its workers?

In a document issued to foremen in November 1967, James Hardie admitted the hazards while attempting to downplay them, stating: "Asbestos, a unique and indispensable material, can only be a risk to health if substantial amounts of airborne asbestos dust are inhaled over a period of several years - say ten or more."

This was a double lie: asbestos is not indispensable and, as the company would have known then, exposure over even a

brief period can kill. But even this information was withheld from the workers most exposed to the fibres.

Dozens of Camellia workers have testified that, even into the 'eighties, the factory was filthy with asbestos and they were frequently covered in the stuff. Workers say they were never told it was dangerous, there were no safe-handling instructions and safety gear was either unavailable or inadequate.

Compulsory X-rays were instituted from 1969 but results were often withheld. "They just kept telling me I had bronchitis" is a common complaint of James Hardie asbestos victims. Materials used at the Camellia plant were coded rather than fully labelled, so workers often did not know what they were handling. Consumers were also deceived: products were sold under misleading trade marks such as "K Lite" with "85 percent magnesia" but no mention of asbestos.

The number of deaths was also the subject of a cover-up. In 1978, James Hardie chairman John Reid told the press James Hardie did not know how many of its employees had died from asbestos. This was not true. The company was in receipt of statistics from the NSW Dust Diseases Board that, from February 1968 to March 1978 alone, 116 employees had been certified as having contracted "disabling asbestosis" and of deliberately understated medical

these 29 had died, with 22 of the deaths attributable to asbestos diseases. Hardies had been receiving this information from at least 1975.

Finally, asbestos victims seeking compensation are frequently the objects of conspiracies between asbestos companies, insurers and lawyers to drag out legal proceedings in the hope that the plaintiff will die before settlement or judgment. The aim often is to reduce the amount paid to the victim's family who are not entitled to be compensated for pain and suffering endured by a deceased breadwinner.

The asbestos companies covered up the facts about their multi-million dollar industry in order to continue making and selling asbestos products and avoid or reduce payments as a result of litigation. The story is being repeated with human-made mineral fibres. Strong medical evidence suggests that fibreglass in some forms can be just as deadly as asbestos. The efforts of this union and other concerned organisations to publicise the dangers of fibreglass and force companies to act have met with the same conspiracy of silence, misinformation and deceit that contributed to the deaths of thousands of workers through asbestos.

Chris Ray,
Federal office,
Amalgamated Metal Workers' Union,
Sydney.



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