

VIGILANCE

maritime
workers
newsletter

■ For rank & file control of the MUA ■ Nationalise the maritime industry under workers' control

No. 31, February 21, 2007

Robert Coombs: Bump me into parliament

Last year Santa came early to the house of Sydney MUA Branch Secretary Robert Coombs.

NSW Labor Premier Morris Iemma has handed the safe Labor seat of Swansea to Coombs after sacking disgraced former minister Milton Orkopoulos, who was involved in a child sex and drugs scandal.

Coombs has been installed under Labor's infamous N40 rule, which rules out any rank-and-file preselection of candidates by local ALP members.

Coombs was so confident of victory that he has taken "extended leave" from the MUA, moved back to Swansea and started mailouts to local ALP members before the decision was even finalised.

As a NSW MP, Coombs will earn a minimum \$110,000 a year (\$210,000 if he makes minister) and be entitled to generous electoral allowances and expense entitlements worth a minimum \$20-30,000 each. NSW MP's retire on 75% of their salary as well.

With Labor holding Swansea by a margin of 17 percent, Coombs has scored himself a job for life.

Some in the MUA argue that Coombs' preselection to Swansea means that the MUA will have a voice in the NSW parliament. But this is no victory for the MUA.



**Goodbye union official,
Hello NSW Labor MP.**

From Premier Iemma and Michael Costa to unknown MPs like Greg Donnelly, Ian West and Tanya Gadiel; the NSW parliament is littered with former union officials, organisers and research officers.

For decades union officials and organisers have used their jobs as a stepping stone to a career in parliament. The interests of the workers they are supposed to represent have always come a poor second.

Iemma is no voice for bank staff. Costa is no voice for State Rail workers. And Coombs will be no voice for us.

Coombs has used our union to further his political career and jumped ship at the first hint of a Labor seat.

"Bump me into parliament" [some lyrics from a ninety-year old International Workers of the World (Wobblies) song]

*Some very wealthy friends of mine
Declare I am most clever
Some can talk for an hour or so
Why I can talk forever . . .*

*Oh yes I am a Labor man
I believe in revolution
The quickest way to bring it on
Is taking constitution . . .*

*Bump me into parliament
Bounce me any way at all
Bump me into parliament
On next election day*

MUA 2007 Quadrennial Elections: April 16 - June 14

All financial Sydney MUA Branch members are eligible to vote for all National and Sydney Branch officials.

Nominations for election candidates close on March 20 at 5pm.

Voting by postal ballot opens on April 16 and closes on June 14 at 5pm.

Exercise your right to vote. Ensure that a) you are currently financial b) the Sydney Branch has your current postal address. If in doubt, contact the Sydney MUA Branch on (02) 9264 5024 before March 30.

Pay your way, have your say!

Treasurer Costello vs. Venezuelan President Chavez

Why has the President of a country that most Australians know nothing about suddenly become the target of attacks from the *Daily Telegraph* and Liberal Treasurer Peter Costello?

The paper's February 6 issue described Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez as a "power-crazed bully".

In parliament a week later Peter Costello chimed in. According to him, Chavez is the "Bolivarian dictator" that has called the US president a genocidal killer and the devil.

Yet this so-called "Bolivarian dictator" has won numerous national elections since first winning office in 1998. The most recent took place last December, when he was re-elected President with 63% of the vote. All elections have been free and fair - a fact that even former US President Jimmy Carter has acknowledged.

Attacked for helping the poor

So why has Chavez come under attack? Because he has acted in the interests of the poor majority by reversing privatisation and using the country's vast oil wealth to help end poverty.

Before the left-wing president and former paratrooper came to power, the rich siphoned off the wealth from the state-run oil industry while 80% of the population lived in poverty.

In 1999 the "Bolivarian Revolution" (named after Simon Bolivar, who freed much of Latin America from colonial Spanish rule) began. A new constitution that banned oil industry privatisation and guaranteed the right to education and health-care was adopted.

In 2001 oil company taxes were raised and idle land was given to the poor.

Surging oil prices in 2003 saw Chavez and the army establish various social programs ("missions") covering health, education and subsidised food supermarkets.

Over 1.5 million people have been taught to read. Around 20,000 Cuban doctors provide cheap healthcare to Venezuela's poor. Resource-poor Cuba receives cheap oil in exchange.

Bankrupt and closed-down factories, such as the Venepal paper plant, have been nationalised and placed under joint government-worker management.

Last month Chavez re-nationalised US-owned telecommunications and electricity companies that were privatised in the 1990s.

U.S. Government moves against Chavez

All of this, along with opposition to US domination of Latin America and the Middle East, has made Chavez the target of a US campaign of destabilisation.

In 2001 business leaders and the heads of the corrupt union federation (CTV) organised anti-Chavez strikes.

In April 2002 Chavez was briefly overthrown in a US government backed military coup. Within 48 hours, a mass uprising of the country's poor and a revolt of pro-Chavez soldiers returned Chavez to power.

Late in 2002 the right-wing opposition tried to sabotage the oil industry with a bosses' lockout and a "general strike" of oil industry managers and technicians.

Millions of workers and poor replied by taking over the oil industry and dozens of other closed down factories and running them themselves.

In August 2004 the pro-US opposition forced the holding of a referendum on whether or not Chavez should remain president (ironically using the democratic provisions in the 1999 constitution). Chavez won with an almost 60% vote.

Chavez has recently started talking about building "socialism in the 21st century". Exactly what he means by this and how it will be achieved remain uncertain.

But there is no doubt that the "Bolivarian Revolution" has made real progress in the fight against poverty and US-enforced neoliberal policies.

The rich see a country that uses its resources for the benefit of the poor and a country that refuses to bow down to the US empire as a dangerous example. Little wonder then that Costello and the *Daily Telegraph* have Chavez's "Bolivarian Revolution" in their sights.



President Hugo Chavez