

The market, planning and socialism

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It seems that opinion polling carried out by both the Liberal and Labor Parties in preparation for the Australian federal election has revealed widespread concerns in the electorate that a plan be developed to meet growing economic uncertainty.

Armed with the latest results, Howard mentioned the word "plan" no less than 12 times in his statement announcing the calling of the election, while Labor Party leader Kim Beazley repeats at every opportunity that Labor is offering "a plan to build a nation".

Opinion polls at the best of times provide only a very limited idea of mass sentiments. And they are undertaken not to implement the concerns of voters, but to manipulate them in accordance with the requirements of financial markets, big business and the banks.

Howard's insistence that he has a "plan" has nothing to do with meeting the aspirations and needs of voters but is part of a strategy devised by the pollsters to try and win support for the long-standing corporate demand for shifting taxes off income and capital and on to the consumption spending of ordinary families through the imposition of a goods and services tax.

Irrespective of the intentions of the pollsters, the fact that so many of those sampled indicated a desire for a coherent plan has wider significance, especially when viewed against the strident campaign waged by the ruling class and its political representatives over the past decade proclaiming the triumph of the market over economic planning.

Confronted with the daily reality of the market--the never-ending job cuts and closures, cuts in health, education and other facilities, and the general disintegration of social conditions--millions of people feel that their lives are being driven by forces outside of their control. Hence the desire for a plan, a social and economic strategy.

Such a goal, however, can never be realised through

the existing political set-up, nor implemented by any of the capitalist parties. This is because they all stand for the maintenance of the system of private ownership of the means of production and private profit, the source of the destructive anarchy of the market.

Notwithstanding his claims that the world economy would not go into recession--issued on the eve of last Monday's 500-point fall on Wall Street--neither John Howard nor any other capitalist politician is able, in any fundamental sense, to control the market, let alone institute an economic plan.

Indeed, the very terms employed to describe the crises of the global capitalist system--storm, tidal wave, meltdown and earthquake--suggest a process out of control.

And this is confirmed by the chiefs of the world financial system who admit that they have great difficulty even understanding what is taking place, let alone controlling it. The most recent report by the Bank for International Settlements, sometimes known as the bankers' bank, explains that recent events have "underlined the need to adapt the 'architecture' of the world financial system, which is increasingly beyond the reach of national regulatory powers."

Does this mean planning is impossible, that the desires of ordinary working people for stability, security for their families, and a future for their children cannot be realised? No, it simply means that to secure this goal the problem must be tackled at its source.

While it operates like a force of nature outside of control, the economic system is nevertheless a creation of man. The vast masses of capital which circulate the globe in the endless drive for profit--resulting in job cuts, the slashing of social services and even the bankrupting of entire national economies--are in the final analysis the financial expression of the productive labour of workers all over the globe.

The reason that the forces of production created by

the labour of working people appear before them as a destructive alien force is to be found in the system of private ownership of the means of production which forms the basis of capitalist economy. While all wealth is created by the labour of working people, whether in the factory or the office, it passes out of their hands and is appropriated by capital.

This means that planning--utilisation of the productive forces created by humanity for the benefit of humanity--requires the replacement of private ownership by social ownership on an international scale.

This is the program of the Socialist Equality Party and the Fourth International. On this day, the 60th anniversary of the founding of the Fourth International, it is appropriate to recall the perspective of its founder, Leon Trotsky.

The task of socialism, he wrote, is to assure a decent standard of life to all humanity and free it from the operation of the blind forces of the market.

In words that could well have been written just yesterday, Trotsky explained: "The present world crisis testifies in especially tragic fashion how man, who dives to the bottom of the ocean, who rises up to the stratosphere, who converses on invisible waves with the Antipodes, how this proud and daring ruler of nature remains a slave to the blind forces of his own economy.

"The historical task of our epoch consists in replacing the uncontrolled play of the market by reasonable planning, in disciplining the forces of production, compelling them to work in harmony and obediently serve the needs of mankind. Only on this new social basis will man be able to stretch his weary limbs and--every man and every woman, not only a selected few--become a citizen with full power in the realm of thought."



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