



On the Waterfront ...

DILEMMAS RAISED BY THE MUA DISPUTE

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The furore caused by the dispute between Patrick Stevedores and the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) has all the ingredients of a traditional 'industrial capitalism' recipe: (i) a naked political confrontation between capital and labour, with a government prepared to act openly in close conjunction with capital at the expense of labour; (ii) blatant manoeuvrings by a powerful monopolistic conglomerate (except for Sea Land in Adelaide, two companies, Patrick and P & O Ports, currently control stevedoring in Australia); and (iii) the continuing pressure of technological change in which labour is got rid of (current euphemism, 'downsizing') or re-organised and worked more intensively (current euphemism, 'flexible restructuring') as capital equipment is upgraded in order to enhance productivity in the labour process.

As has frequently been the case in the history of industrial capitalism, the strategy adopted by both the Federal Government of John Howard and Patrick has been to shine a spotlight almost entirely on the productivity of labour in order to present a supposedly 'imperative',

* I wish to thank Gavin Kitching, Evan Jones, Dick Bryan, Frank Stilwell and Gabrielle Meagher for reading initial drafts of this article and for making a number of helpful comments and corrections. I also wish to thank Don Ross of the Sydney Ports Corporation for his highly informative and detailed interview and for copies of a number of useful documents. The responsibility for the interpretation I have placed on his material is entirely mine. I would like to dedicate this piece to Norma and Bruce Hawkins. I visited the picket at Botany with them both two weeks before Bruce died of lung cancer. They are an inspiration.

economic argument as the justification for their 'hard' attitudes towards wharf employees. Those who are unclear about what is at stake politically for ordinary working people - which is most of us - or who do not think about nor reflect upon their own history are frequently persuaded by this narrowly argued position.

The 'new right' economic agenda of governments, particularly successful in the USA, UK and New Zealand over the last fifteen years and now, it seems, in Australia, has bludgeoned a majority of their populations into submission and has bought the rest off. The Deputy Prime Minister in Australia is said to have described the current dispute as 'our Wapping'! (ACTU, 1998) Wapping, (for those who didn't follow the many assaults on the labour movement in Britain during the 1980s), was the site of the installation of entirely new print technology at Rupert Murdoch's News International using a newly recruited workforce in the mid 1980s. This finally ended the fight of the print workers' union (representing the compositors whose jobs became technologically redundant) resisting the installation of that technology.

Two types of dilemma have been brought into sharp focus by this dispute. The first dilemma occurs as the skilled manual worker (overwhelmingly male) base disappears. This base has, until the last 15-20 years, formed the political core of the labour movement in all OECD countries. The second dilemma is considerably more complex. It arises out of the dominance of an ideology of 'economic efficiency' in government policy. This phenomenon is described in a number of ways: 'economic rationalism', 'new right' economics or 'neo-liberalism' (the latter being the term preferred in the USA and the UK). This paper considers what this agenda has come to mean for the work environment in our societies.

Scarred Landscapes and Ruined Social Edifices: MUA and 'Blue Collar' Work in Historical Perspective

Until quite recently, men on the wharves (or in the mines or the steelworks) had to live with the physical brutality of the work they performed¹. The notorious 'bull' system meant that when men gathered to be selected for work it was on the basis of brute strength and, sometimes, compliance. "The bull system forced wharf labourers to compete against each other for work, even at the expense of their own health...and existed until World War II". (Beasley, *Sun Herald*, April 12, 1998). The fight for decent conditions and decent wages on the wharves has always been part of a highly 'masculinised' tradition which built a working class culture on the basis of masculine physicality. In the transformation of an urban landscape, from the wharves of a working port to a 'pleasureland' at Sydney's Darling Harbour, for example, all this is forgotten.²

This, then, is a political battle, a battle in which the main aim of the government and the employers is to bust the union. Of course, busting a strong union makes any subsequent battles that much easier. Political solidarity from those who, to 'use a currently unfashionable Marxian phrase, 'have only their labour power to sell', is necessary in the fight to

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- 1 See for example a series of documentaries that were produced by the Waterside Workers' Federation in Sydney between 1953 and 1958 (The Waterside Workers' Federation amalgamated with the Seamen's Union in 1992 to become the Maritime Union of Australia). These are: 'The Hungry Mile' (1952), a reference to men tramping from the Huddart Parker wharves in the north to Druitt Street in the south in search of work (see Gaby, 1974:4); 'November Victory' (1955) and 'Four's a Crowd' (1955).
 - 2 In 1953 Rod Shaw had the idea of painting a grand mural celebrating the struggles of the wharfside workers. The mural took nearly a decade to paint in an "open-ended, freely creative process" shaped by Shaw's original designs. "They just let it go...They were happy to...because there were plenty of wharfies painting there...Wharfies watched us working. We were working in their canteen. They'd say, "what are you going to do with him?", and all this, you know, make jokes. But they liked it...It's their mural". (Reeves, 1992: 3). The mural has now been moved from the canteen in the old building at 60 Sussex Street to the MUA's new offices at 61-63 Sussex Street, and can be seen there.

ensure that everyone, not just a few, has the chance to live relatively decent and secure lives.

But the first dilemma is this. We must at the same time acknowledge that the content of skilled manual jobs and the technologies associated with such jobs, across a range of basic manufacturing industries, has changed out of all recognition in one lifetime. What used to be called 'blue collar' work is in massive decline in all the older industrialised countries of the OECD. With this decline, the 'working class' culture that has long been associated with a socialist politics is now so attenuated that the media can have a field day with jibes like 'Chardonnay sipping socialists'. Some writers use the term 'deindustrialisation' to describe this process. For example Bluestone and Harrison define it simply as "...a widespread, systematic disinvestment in the nation's basic productive capacity" (1982: 6). 'De-industrialisation' is probably too simplistic a notion. Industry does not simply 'shut down' without a battle. At the heart of that battle is the conflict between labour and capital - whether labour's productivity can be increased sufficiently quickly and cheaply to keep industry viable. Labour may be lost, but if capital investment continues to ensure high productivity, the industry continues to be viable. As that battle is fought across a range of industries, in all 'advanced capitalist' countries, there emerge patterns of industrial change, some countries retaining high productivity industries on a general scale, others finding that the number of viable manufacturing industries is diminishing. This is broadly what is happening across a range of Australian manufacturing industries (steel, mining, textiles, clothing and footwear or the wharves) as elsewhere.³

3 Sutcliffe (in Crow and Thomas, 1994:6) uses three criteria or tests as a means of understanding the process of industrialisation. These are: (1) At least 20% of the total population should be employed in primary and secondary industries; (2) At least 25% of GDP should be obtained from primary and secondary industries; (3) At least 60% of industrial output should be in manufacturing. This allows him to develop a set of categories A, B, A/B, C, D, E, O in which A is a fully industrialised country passing all three tests, B a country which passes the first two tests; A/B is borderline between A and B; C countries which pass only the first or third tests (for example, a large 'enclave' sector such as oil or mining, affects the population widely, but manufacturing is weak); D, countries passing only the second test; E, countries which pass on the 25% GDP test; and O, those

We could cite many parts of the industrialised world - in the USA, or in the UK for example - which are now industrial wastelands: communities destroyed, unemployment at record levels. Sheffield in Northeast England, previously a steel making town (the setting for the film 'The Full Monty') points to a scenario soon to be repeated in Newcastle, Australia when BHP closes its steel plant there (or as has already occurred in Wollongong through massive job loss). Thus we must all confront the consequences of a post-modern or post-industrial future as towns such as these become ...what? - industrial museums to be visited by coach loads of tourists? In Sheffield, in the wake of the film's success, tourists are already being taken to the disused canal (is it to be kept carefully, and permanently, stinking and refuse-filled?) - and to the shabby hillside overlooking run down council estates in which one of the characters in the film first contemplates and then attempts suicide. Ex steelworkers and their wives could well be running the coach tours (or the Harley bike tours), the cafes (with stark black and white photos of disused factories on the wall) and the hotels or the gift shops selling T shirts and Sheffield memorabilia. This is one possible post-industrial future.

The demise of such industrial cities decimates one of the major sites for recruiting people to a progressive 'social democratic' or 'socialist' political agenda in countries in which material living standards have risen dramatically in the post war period. What is to take the place of such a 'working class' (or blue collar) culture has been widely debated in Europe over the period in which the new right agenda has become prominent. That type of discussion (and practical action) has still to

countries which fail all three tests. Australia (with Canada and Norway) is moving from being in a fully industrialised country (category A) to being a country (category C) which pass only the first and third of these tests.

begin in Australia - the view that 'we are all middle class now'⁴, the 'fair go' society, is pervasive here in a way it is not any longer in 1990s Britain⁵.

Support for the MUA in its conflict with Patrick and the Federal Government is based on an historical understanding of industrial change. But it is also based on a contemporary struggle to secure income and security required in order to live; and in this respect, the conflict on the waterfront portends a more pervasive conflict between labour and capital over living standards and job security.

Governments and unions can, and should, 'slow things down' in such a way that people can be 'properly' retrenched and retrained. Governments could also be imaginative in their approach to high levels of unemployment by shortening working weeks, taking seriously job-sharing or part-time work, or by retiring people earlier than is now the case. This broadly has been the response of 'social contract' countries such as Germany and France and is to be contrasted with policies adopted in the UK and in the USA.

4 Widespread improvements in living standards which, in part, have been supported by an effective welfare 'net' detract attention from continued inequality in income (and wealth) distribution. Baekgaard (1997:63) notes that "...the wealth of Australian families is heavily concentrated in the upper end of the distribution - about 95% of total wealth owned by the richest 50% of families. The top 10% of the families own about 43-44% of total wealth, with the richest 1% owning about 12% alone. There is [also] a strong relation between household income and wealth with the families who have the highest incomes also on average being the richest in wealth". A recent calculation contained in the Human Development Report shows just how staggeringly unequal income distribution is on a world scale - "Today the net worth of the 358 richest people, the dollar billionaires, is equal to the combined income of the poorest 45% of the world's population - 2.3 billion people". (UNDP, 1996:13)

5 An example is the co-option of Hazel Hawke to describe as un-Australian the antics of Patrick in the waterfront dispute - "divide and rule is not the Australian way" (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 2nd May, 1998). This makes the battle lines in the current dispute, in some respects, much harder to define. What is atypical in this Australian dispute is the extent to which so many different groups (civil rights activists, churches, a broad spectrum of other unions, 'greens' and so on) have supported the MUA. There was no such political coalition at Wapping.

But it is also important to remember that industrial change is driven by both global change (cheaper foreign production) and the competitive imperative of technological change in search of profit. Australians do not lose their manufacturing jobs because Chinese and Indian workers undercut them. It matters that labour is relatively expensive here, but capital accumulation in a competitive world market ensures that ever-more sophisticated technologies will be adopted no matter what labour strategies are attempted to stop it, and whether cheaper workers elsewhere are employed to do jobs made obsolete here or not. In that sense, the current action can almost be seen as a kind of late twentieth century Luddism. Nevertheless, and even if this is right, it still matters enormously what type of response is made.

Thus, as we support the MUA, we must also confront the fact that these kinds of jobs can no longer be protected by nationally-based alliances of blue collar workers. This is a contradictory and therefore uncomfortable stance to have to take. It suggests, moreover, that defensive unionism must, wherever possible, be turned into pre-emptive unionism. Those already struggling to live with the uncertainties of 'flexible labour markets' (read, casual, often hourly paid, jobs; no proper sick leave or holiday pay and no employment security) are frequently critical of actions such as that of the MUA, arguing that their monopoly power secures privileges not enjoyed by workers generally. But an attitude which asks "why should they have what we can't have?" is futile. The real question is whether Australia will become another UK or USA, both of which, in the name of labour market flexibility, now have virtually no floor to the wage rates of low paid workers. In those countries, there is 'plenty' of work, but you may need two or three jobs to live. In terms of labour practices this is a 'race to the bottom'⁶. Union strategy must be one which recruits from the new casualised workforces in the tertiary sector, above all women working in poorly paid jobs⁷. Unions should also aim to recruit from the 'middle class' whose material prosperity is increasingly fragile as 'user pays' substitutes for state-provided services.

6 Britain did not sign the European Community's 1989 Social Charter on workers rights. See Council of European Communities (1992: 196-97).

7 For a sustained argument on this see Moody (1997).

The Trade-off Between 'Economic Efficiency' and an Humane Work Ethic

I realise that today many people on the average wage, with a nice fat mortgage and a late-model car in the garage have turned their backs on their Labour roots and consider themselves eligible for the conservative ranks. I meet them everyday talking the 'me language'...The country is full of dole bludgers. Wharfies earn \$80,000 a year for doing nothing. Unmarried mothers shouldn't get the welfare. I'm paying too much tax.." Well let me say to my working-class capitalist friends - enjoy it while you can, because the real capitalists think we are all having it too good and the breaking of the unions is the first step in putting us back in our places.....Do you think for one moment [MNCs] will take less profits, or the shareholders poor dividends to make themselves more competitive?...Real wages and working conditions will go first... (McKeown, letter to *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15.4.98)

The question of 'economic efficiency' or, more narrowly in this dispute, 'productive efficiency' is tirelessly promoted in the push towards 'economic rationalism'. There is really no way to counter the economic logic of this position - except by broadening the terms on which the argument is conducted.

Unions such as the MUA have no choice but to fight a rearguard battle on the matter of 'productivity' since it is competition which drives the need for continuing capital investment and a high rate of return on that investment. The main agenda is always how far workers can be pushed to work without physically collapsing (unions have primarily been about improving working conditions to the point where, no matter what the job, it is relatively comfortable to do it) and how much more effectively time and motion can be collapsed to enhance productivity⁸. As the current new right ideology has become dominant, large sections of the middle class have accepted the need for constant attention to productive and allocative efficiencies. If workers can't be *made* (a stick, the threat

8 For a sophisticated and historically informed discussion of this point see Thompson (1967).

of job loss) or *organised* (the carrot, involve workers in 'quality circles' or tell them they're being 'multi-skilled' or, in the case of bureaucracies, provide 'the best service' for its 'customers') to do work faster, quicker and better, then there will be a search for a machine which can be substituted for them.

Unions, then, have no choice but to argue the 'productivity' case. The MUA has done its best to debunk the dual myth that productivity at Australian ports is below international standards and that the Maritime Union is the cause of low productivity.

The waterfront has changed enormously in the last 10 years. The workforce has been reduced by 50%, but the volume of cargo handled has increased. Container lift rates have increased by approximately 20% in the 5 years to 1997. The union has worked for change, but it must be co-operative, not imposed.

Productivity is determined by a number of factors, *most of which are not controlled by the union [my emphasis]*. In many terminals, the equipment is twenty years out of date and there are too few cranes to achieve international productivity levels. The size of the ships and the stowage are also limiting factors on productivity.

In bulk handling, such as grain, coal and iron ore, Australian docks are amongst the best in the world. The bumper 1997 Australian wheat crop of 19 million tonnes was loaded in record time.

Some companies, such as Sea Land, who provide up to date equipment and negotiate with the union, have productivity rates which are equal to those at any similar port around the world. ABC Radio's 30 January interview with Sea Land's Captain Andy Andrews included a frank statement of this: Reporter: "You use maritime union labour. Are you saying it is possible to run an efficient waterfront business in Australia using MUA labour"? Andrews: "Without a doubt, yes". (MUA, 1998.)

An article in the *Sun Herald* (April 26, 1998) makes similar points:

... the international benchmark for Australian ports was 19.1 containers an hour because an average of only 40% of a ship's cargo was loaded or unloaded - the exchange rate - each time it docked....Dr. Hamilton (The Australia Institute) said the Government's figure of 25 container lifts an hour could be achieved only when 100% of a ship's cargo was exchanged at a single port. The benchmark of 25 movements per hour recently proposed by the Federal Government is unattainable without radical changes in the structure of stevedoring in Australia. The current figure for the five main container ports in Australia is 18.5 containers per hour, therefore Australian productivity levels are very close to the international benchmark.

Complex 'logistical chains' make up the industry in which stevedoring is embedded. Other institutions/organisations in this chain are: (1) the Federal and State governments which regulate or control import/export procedures. A number of state governments, including New South Wales, are shareholders in the newly created Ports Corporations, which are now expected to act commercially and 'turn a profit'; (2) trade and industry organisations; (3) freight forwarders; (4) ships agents and shipping lines; (5) customers' brokers; (6) the managers of road and rails transport to and from ports; (7) container parks managers; and last but not least (8) the Ports Authorities. (Sydney Ports Corporation, 1997:2) These structures do far more to determine overall productivity than the performance of the wharf side workers alone. What this suggests is that the waterfront dispute is primarily about the profitability of the Patrick company (and other stevedoring companies). The focus in the current dispute must therefore be on the conditions of profitability of the Patrick company (and other stevedoring companies). Stevedoring as an industry has high capital barriers to entry and it is a relatively low profit industry⁹.

⁹ Interview: Don Ross, Sydney Ports Corporation, 19.5.98. "How come there are only two main stevedoring companies in Australia?" [well]... "P & O is a British company [doing] shipping and stevedoring and its strategy is to get target trading countries and establish a presence. The markets in Australia are not large compared to overseas and it's difficult to attract more than two stevedores. The stevedores are not getting a great return on their investment - so there's a fairly low return over time because the investment is huge. Patricks committed to

According to Don Ross of Sydney Ports Corporation,

... you need to get in there and work out what need to be done in the whole chain... the efficiency of the chain is not just dependent on the efficiency of the stevedore's crane rates

It's probably argued that efficiency boils down to crane rates a lot of the time. It doesn't - it is one of the important elements. You need to clear the cargo from a vessel because ships cost a huge amount of money being delayed in port or waiting for something to happen. So crane intensity, the number of cranes [you've got] is important. When there are two ships in at the port and you've only got two cranes at the port, then you can only use one crane per ship at a time. In Singapore the port can put 4 cranes on it at the same time and load and unload the ship in record time. If you go to Singapore you hardly see containers sitting at the port and so you think nothing's happening, nothing's moving. But everything's happening and they're moving it so quickly [it's all out of there]. If you go down to Sydney, to Botany and you go round the terminals and there's huge delays with trucks just waiting to get in or out of the terminals. It takes something like an hour for a truck to go through the gate, pick up the containers and get out of the gates [so] we're talking about despatch efficiencies...the truck loading intensity is also important and if you can carry two containers at a time - so you take 2 in and you take 2 out so in theory that's four each round trip. We're operating on about 1.2 containers per round journey.... (Interview, 19.05.98)

spending \$100 million dollars at Port Botany - you must have a decent return to invest that kind of money. P & O recently committed to spend \$ 60 million - both in the last two years. There is no doubt that the technology that Patricks and P & O have is good. Yes, you will find examples of better around the world, because there's much larger volumes to handle. They're installing computer systems and to some extent new container cranes - container cranes cost something like \$10 million. In Australia, in Sydney, we use 1 or 2 container cranes per ship while in Hong Kong or Singapore, you'll have 4 cranes working each ship just purely because of the volume that can justify more container cranes and the quicker you can move the cargo off the ship the better". "What has affected crane technology". "Longer reach, more capacity..."

Therefore, the question of 'efficiency' is not as clear-cut as has been suggested by the Federal Government's dogged insistence on the necessity for 'waterfront reform', with the spotlight turned entirely on wharf side workers. The story of what has happened to the Ports Authorities themselves in Australia over the last 10 years is also an important factor, for the Authorities, arguably at the hub of the industry, have been substantially restructured. In NSW, the Maritime Services Board (founded in 1936 and responsible for all the ports of NSW) was accused

... of being monopolistic, bureaucratic and inefficient and at its peak in 1985 ... employed nearly 3,400 staff. In 1995, the MSB was dissolved and new commercial corporations were set up (the Sydney Ports Corporation and similar corporations in Newcastle and Port Kembla). These corporations are expected to compete with each other and it is claimed that there has been more efficient and competitive provision of port services; separation of regulatory and commercial activities; improved performance - operating expenditure reduced by over 40% (staff levels have been reduced to around 200); port pricing reduced by over 45%. (Ross. 1997:4)

However, Ross further argues in the same paper that there is 'little' correlation between productivity levels and [type of] ownership.

For example, the world's nine busiest and most productive container ports are all controlled and operated by state owned port authorities [and]... the actual number of corporatised and privatised ports are still few in number, and the largest number of privatised ports is in the UK. (Ross. 1997:8)

In short, Australia has chosen to go the 'privatised', corporatised route primarily in line with the current political ideology. It is most ironic that the port of Singapore,

said to be among the world's most efficient, is operating with almost no private operators ... whilst Hong Kong, which performs neck and neck with Singapore, is heavily regulated with the maximum number of operators". (Ross. 1997:8)

How best to challenge the hegemony of the ideology that accompanies such supposed imperatives - a challenge that itself becomes imperative as 'social democratic' values are eroded? There is a human and ethical dilemma which affects all but the few who are in a position to 'buy out' of the problem. Misleading catch-all words such as 'productivity', 'efficiency', and 'world's best practice' mask the changes in all our lives that are the result of the same old pressures of capital accumulation, with the global pace of change 'hotting up'.

These matters do not just affect the wharf-side workers who have the type of job with readily quantifiable 'output' where it is easy to bring pressures about 'productive efficiency' to bear. These same pressures are being brought to bear across all types of 'blue' and 'white' collar work. Such pressures have radically altered the relatively secure work environment which was fought for after World War II. A number of writers are now starting to give attention to what has been called the 'precariousness' of work, and to use empirical research to demonstrate that this is occurring across many different types of job throughout OECD countries (OECD, 1997; Burgess and Campbell, 1998: 5).

The following quotation from a case study of the Fremantle Ports Authority well illustrates what is at the heart of the problem of 'efficiency' vs. an 'humanly-oriented' work environment:

Staffing practices also appear to have contributed to the Fremantle Port Authority's (FPA) financial problems. The Port Authority's permanent staff has had a tradition of long and loyal service with internal promotion to executive positions. They were employed on the same basis as public servants. Promotion was usually based on seniority rather than merit, which caused some ambitious staff to leave in frustration. The Engineering Division, which accounted for over one half of the FPA's total staff, included such anachronisms as a joinery shop making furniture, a blacksmith's shop making bolts and small steel components and a fibreglass shop producing customised items. In most cases, these items were produced at much greater cost than if they had been obtained from outside the FPA. Office furniture, for example, was sometimes double the cost of equivalent furniture purchased from outside. The maintenance workshop was so overstaffed that it performed excessive

maintenance on cranes and other machinery. Rather than lay off surplus staff in the vehicle maintenance workshop, they were employed servicing the private vehicles of FPA staff. The rationalisation was "it is better to get some revenue to offset the cost of retaining staff than to pay the staff to be idle". (Review of the Fremantle Port Authority, 1991, pp. 31-4). Such overstaffing suggests that the employees had some ability to use the FPA as a source of economic rents themselves and was undoubtedly one cause of the financial crisis experienced in the late 1980s. The FPA was forced to use its reserves (leave and superannuation provisions) to meet financial obligations. The reserves stood at \$13.02 million on 1 July 1990, but by 31 December, 1990 had plummeted to \$5.61 million. (Tull, 1997:38-39)

Who, rationally, could dispute the need for 'reform'¹⁰ in this case? Reform becomes a kind of 'imperative', for competition tends to improve efficiency and provide a solution to the problem of 'free riding' and associated 'economic rent-seeking', as 'economic rationalists' argue. But there is no necessity in the bureaucratic case to privatise (or corporatise) and commercialise the operation. Ross argues that "regardless of who the owner is, the quality of management will be the factor that determines the success of otherwise of the port". The moot question is how that 'quality of management' can be achieved. In concentrating *only* on the economic imperative, we lose sight of much larger questions to do with the kind of society we would wish to construct.

10 Contrary to the impression given by the Government that 'reform' is yet to be achieved in Australia by the wharfside workers, from 1967-1987 over half of all waterfront jobs were lost. 'Reforms' between 1989 and 1992 resulted in a loss of another 4,800 jobs, this time accompanied by huge workload increases. It is these workload increases - which lead to an enormous amount of overtime - which inflate the basic salary rates for a 35 hour week. The base rate for a grade 3 worker is \$30,000 and for a grade 6 worker, \$36,650. "In the biggest container terminals, it is only the high grade staff, working 70-80 hours per week, every week, all hours of the night and weekend who can earn high wages". (MUA, April 1998)

Conclusions

In the current circumstances the pursuit of efficiency cannot be avoided, but it must be done through strategies that recognise people as people rather than labour as just another factor of production. Therefore, the pursuit of efficiency must always be accompanied by consultation, negotiation, creative strategies to maximise employment, provision of state support for re-training, decent unemployment benefits, and so forth.

However, there are many on both the political left and on the right who feel that the time for this kind of socially humane twist to 'economic rationalism' has passed, and that we face a world of brutal choices. In this scenario, the pressures of globalisation leave no time or opportunity for the kinds of humane reconstruction of the processes postulated. Such pressures also render states less and less able to support the social safety nets that this humanity pre-supposes. If this is the case, we must either 'go with the flow' of this process, irrespective of its human costs, or we must exit completely the economic system whose increasing efficiency requires ever greater indifference to its human consequences. I have used the word 'dilemma' in the title to this paper precisely because there seems to be no simple way forward despite plenty of ways to fight.

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