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**Communist
policy
on the**

*Aborigines
of
Australia*

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(Draft For Discussion)

Published Nov 1963.

15 AUG 1967

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*"There is no such thing as a backward people —
only people kept backward." — Paul Robeson.*

COMMUNIST DRAFT POLICY ON THE ABORIGINES OF AUSTRALIA

The Aborigines of Australia are an oppressed national minority, scattered throughout the continent, with the great majority now living in Queensland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia.

Their numbers have never been properly counted, but it is estimated that there are nearly 100,000 of them, or about 1 in 100 of the Australian population.

About half of them have no citizen rights other than the recently-granted right to vote in Federal elections.

PROBLEMS DIFFER

The problems of the people differ from place to place. A few hundred still live in primitive tribal conditions in remote areas, but the great majority have been converted into underpaid, underprivileged workers. Some are free, others strictly controlled, some of pure Aboriginal descent, others of mixed origin. Living and working conditions differ in different industries, towns and areas. The outlook of town workers differs from that of those employed under near-slave conditions on cattle stations or segregated in Government and Mission settlement areas. There are differences in law and even in the definition of "Aborigine" from State to State. But all Aborigines are oppressed, to a greater or lesser extent, by Acts of the Federal and State Governments, and by discriminatory practices, arising from false and irrational prejudices which have been officially cultivated among white Australians for generations.

Their problem is a twofold one: the problem of workers suffering exceptionally bad conditions and the problem of a people fighting for the right to exist.*

Basing itself on science, which rejects the view that there are naturally superior and inferior peoples, the Communist Party upholds the right of the Aborigines to exist and develop as a people, to live on their own lands or in the general community, according to individual desires, to social equality with other Australians and full citizen rights.

The Party demands for them equal opportunity of employment, with full trade union rates and conditions, and calls for large-scale Government grants to enable them rapidly to overcome the handicaps imposed on them by more than a century of savage exploitation.

The Party opposes both enforced segregation and enforced assimilation of the Aborigines, and advocates their integration, as a people, with Australian society as a whole.

ORIGIN OF "PROTECTION"

In the course of the colonisation of Australia by European settlers, the Aborigines' land has been seized and their social organisation disrupted and largely destroyed. Shooting, poisoning, disease, starvation and degradation had, towards the end of the last century, reduced their numbers to such an extent that official policies towards them were based on a belief that they were dying out.

This was the starting point for the "Protection Acts" introduced by the various State Governments before Federation. These Acts, among which the Queensland Act

*The 6,100 Torres Islanders, who are under Queensland control, are a separate national minority, under a separate Act. However, their position is similar to that of the mainland Aborigines. To avoid repetition, the word "Aborigines" should be read as "Aborigines and Torres Islanders" throughout this statement.

is the most oppressive, remain substantially in force today, though some amendments have been made and others are proposed.

Regarding the Aborigines as a dying, sub-human race, the framers of the Federal Constitution adopted in 1901 specifically excluded pure Aborigines from the Australian population. "Half-castes", as people of mixed European and Aboriginal origin were contemptuously and unscientifically called, were regarded as destined to disappear in the white population.

"Protection" has meant in practice exploitation and persecution of the Aborigines under State and Federal laws. It has been the excuse for depriving thousands of defenceless people of elementary human rights, segregating them in isolated Settlements under white control, destroying their ancient culture and customs and replacing these with none of the advantages of modern civilisation. It has provided the means of supplying cheap labour to cattle-properties.

REFUSED TO DIE OUT

Herded into sub-standard Government and Mission Settlements, denied land ownership, forbidden to organise and control their own individual and social affairs, deprived of up-to-date educational and health services, denied privileges and safeguards enjoyed by other members of the Australian community, or treated as second-class citizens when free of the Acts, the Aborigines nevertheless succeeded in maintaining their identity as a people. They refused to die and, at least since the early 1950's, their numbers have been increasing.

For many years, devoted individuals pleaded for recognition of the human rights of the Aboriginal people, publishing scientific and other materials demonstrating their high intelligence and ability, and exposing many cases of merciless exploitation of them.

But because the Aboriginal people had been broken and divided, with detribalized elements scattered around the

towns and the majority segregated in remote settlements, and because racialism was fostered in the Australian labour movement during the long period of absolute domination by Rightwing theories, no mass movement could develop around the needs of the Aborigines until recent times.

The formation of the USSR following the great October Revolution of 1917 showed the way for the development of national independence together with international solidarity.

The foundation of the Communist Party of Australia in 1920, with its aim of bringing Socialist consciousness to the mass movement, opened the way for a new, working-class approach to the problem of the Australian Aborigines.

From the beginning, the Party fought against all forms of racialism especially those contained in the "White Australia" policy, and supported efforts to improve the lot of the Aborigines.

The publication in 1939 of Tom Wright's pamphlet "A New Deal for the Aborigines" marked a big step forward.

PLIGHT REVEALED

The great war against Fascism raised sharply the fundamental questions of human rights, and revealed the hideous consequences of racialist theories as practised by the fascists. The plight of the Aborigines became known to thousands of Australians, largely through the movements of the population compelled by industrial and military needs, and through the great contributions by Aborigines and Torres Islanders to the war effort.

In the course of the postwar years, the great national-liberation movements of the peoples of Asia and Africa and the worldwide struggle against colonialism in all its forms made an increasing impact on Australia. Those fighting for Aboriginal rights began to gain more sup-

port. Criticism by the Soviet and other progressive UN delegates of official Australian policies towards the peoples of New Guinea and the Aborigines helped Australians to realise that the conditions forced on these peoples are among the worst in the world.

The great postwar immigration compelled Australians to learn to live with people of various national origins. The inhuman treatment of the Aborigines became even more obvious when contrasted with official attitudes to "New Australians".

Since the war, there has been a very big expansion of air and road transport. Radio and other means of communication have been greatly improved. Formerly remote areas have been systematically explored in search of oil, uranium and other minerals. Inland mines and settlements have been developed. Military activities, including establishment of rocket ranges and siting of bases, have ranged over big areas.

This has improved public knowledge of hitherto concealed facts about the conditions of the Aboriginal inhabitants of sparsely-settled areas. At the same time, many Aborigines and their friends have been made aware of the destructive effects of monopoly invasion of their remaining homelands.

MONOPOLY INVADERS

Revelations of the squalid conditions forced on the people on most Government and Mission settlements have led to demands for drastic improvements from many sections of the community.

State and Federal Government handovers to monopoly of millions of acres of land formerly reserved for Aboriginal occupation have underlined the fact that the Aborigines have no title to their ancestral lands, and that long established settlements can be destroyed and the people forcibly removed at short notice.

Their right to collective and individual land ownership has thus been made an urgent and immediate question.

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Hence, during and since the war, a deeper and wider awareness of the situation of the cruelly-oppressed Aboriginal people has developed in Australia.

The conditions of the Aborigines are becoming recognised as a threat to all working conditions and a disgrace to Australian democracy.

Consequently, in recent years, the movement for Aboriginal rights began to assume a new quality.

It is becoming an organised, growing *mass* movement, in which capable Aboriginal representatives are beginning to take leading parts, with the working class, through a number of trade unions, playing an increasingly important role, together with other organisations of the people.

In 1963, for the first time, the ACTU Congress adopted a sound basic policy, which can open the way for much stronger participation by the unions.

The former handful of devoted individuals has expanded into a network of organisations fighting for Aboriginal rights, with centres in all States and linked together in a strong Federal movement.

The organisations have made a systematic study of the conditions of the Aboriginal people in all parts of the Commonwealth and formulated sets of demands.

Trade union representatives, members of the ALP, Communist Party, various churches, women's organisations, professional people and other progressive individuals convey the views of this movement to many sections of the people.

ACTIONS WIN RESULTS

Actions have been undertaken against particularly glaring injustices, with considerable success, and Governments have been compelled to pay serious attention to a problem they had thought successfully buried.

The right to vote in Federal elections has been gained, and some concessions have been won in the States, particularly in N.S.W. The Queensland Government is over-

hauling its legislation, though as yet evading demands for an open inquiry into the conditions and needs of Aborigines in that State.

A profoundly important development is the fact that wherever the Aboriginal people feel the strength of the growing movement and can feel sure that they have reliable friends in the white community, they are beginning to stand up for themselves and produce their own leaders in their struggle for freedom.

This means that a true movement of the Aboriginal people themselves is beginning. The era of the broken, degraded tribal remnants and "fringe-dwellers" is beginning to come to an end. It is essential that the importance of this be clearly recognised. The task of Communists and others really desirous of assisting the Aboriginal people is to give them fraternal aid in their struggle for emancipation, not to act as paternal "benefactors".

The Aboriginal movement has already defined its main objectives.

MAIN OBJECTIVES

Chief among them are:

1. Full citizen rights within the Australian community.
2. Special benefits to counter the effects of more than a century of oppression and to enable the people rapidly to assume their rightful place, equipped with the education, trade and professional training, health, housing and other facilities necessary to make equal rights a reality, not merely formal.
3. The right to control their own affairs as a distinct national minority within the Australian nation, to preserve and develop their own culture including language, inalienable possession of their remaining tribal areas, of the lands now set aside as Government or Mission Settlements, or of better land where these are unsuitable, ownership of mineral and other natural wealth located on their lands, and economic aid to enable them to develop rapidly as modern communities.



- The right to receive and control the full amount of wages earned.
- Abolition of the system of unpaid labour on Government settlements and Missions.
- The right to own land, collectively or individually.
- Compensation for lands already alienated and an end to the process of handing over Aboriginal lands to mining and other monopolies.
- Abolition of special Aboriginal Courts and of the dictatorial powers of Settlement and Mission superintendents.
- Repeal of all repressive sections of Acts denying controlled Aborigines elementary human freedoms in such matters as marriage, movement, and residence, communication, etc.
- All social services to be made known and available to all Aborigines.

CHANGE POWERS, THEN USE THEM

While supporting the national petition for amendment of the Commonwealth Constitution to enable the Federal Government to assume powers to deal with Aborigines on the same terms as other citizens, the Communist Party points out that the main direction of the struggle is against the oppression sanctioned by the existing State and Federal laws.

The Party warns that the taking over of powers by the Federal Government is not enough in itself. A bitter struggle will have to be waged to compel the Federal Government to utilise those powers for the benefit of the Aboriginal people, including the provision of ample

economic and technical aid for the period necessary to enable the people to develop fully.

This would, incidentally, go far towards solving the so-called problem of peopling and developing North Australia. The thousands of vigorous, skilful Aborigines and Torres Islanders already in the North can, with adequate assistance, transform it rapidly.

PART OF WHOLE PEOPLE'S STRUGGLE

In making this statement, the Communist Party is acting in accordance with its Constitution, which proclaims that it has no interests separate and apart from those of the working class.

The majority of the Aboriginal people have been converted into a particularly oppressed section of the working class. Their economic problems are therefore the direct concern of the whole working class.

Their problems as an oppressed national minority are also the concern of the working class, which is called on by history not only to emancipate itself but, in so doing, to emancipate all other oppressed sections of the people.

The struggle for the rights of the oppressed Aboriginal minority is, in a very real sense, part of the struggle of the Australian people against monopoly, for peace, national independence, democracy and Socialism.

Those who benefit chiefly from the wage-robbery of Aboriginal workers and from the theft of Aboriginal lands are the big (mostly foreign) pastoral and mining concerns. It is the power of these and other monopolies over State and Federal Governments that stands in the way of the liberation of the Aborigines, prevents abolition of the backward state of life forced on them and denies them land ownership and control of their own affairs.

Victory in the struggle for Aboriginal rights therefore, will constitute an important component of the coming

victory of the Australian people over monopoly and its governments.

For this reason, the fight for Aboriginal rights should be regarded as an important aspect of the whole political struggle in Australia, not a matter for a few well-wishers, but one to be taken up by all progressive people, all true patriots, headed by the organised working class. We call on all Communists to play their part in it, in unity and co-operation with other progressives.

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**(The Central Committee of the Communist Party of Australia decided in October, 1963, to invite discussion of this draft by interested organisations, groups and individuals, and the return of suggestions and criticisms to : Central Committee, C.P.A., 168 Day Street, Sydney.)**

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The way in which these demands are answered reveals clearly the sharp differences in the attitudes of the main classes in Australian society.

REJECT "ASSIMILATION"

In 1951, the State and Federal governments, reflecting the views of the capitalist class, proclaimed "assimilation", or the absorbing of the Aborigines into the white population, as their official policy.

This has since been reaffirmed on a number of occasions by meetings of responsible Federal and State Ministers, most recently at Darwin in July 1963.

In practice, however, little has been done to make it possible for most Aborigines to be "assimilated", even if that were a correct policy. The great majority of Aborigines are still forced to live under conditions which make it impossible for them to acquire the knowledge and experience necessary for them to enter the major Australian communities on equal terms. In North Queensland and elsewhere, a deliberate policy of enforced segregation on backward settlements is pursued.

"Assimilation", however, is not the way forward. Stripped of pretence, it means in practice the elimination of the Aborigines as a people, through enforced absorption into the general population of Australia.

As the South Australian Minister in charge of Aboriginal Affairs (Mr. Pearson) has put it, assimilation means that the Aborigines "are called upon to make the changes, to learn our language, our ways, our food, our laws, our customs and our sophistications."

MUCH TO CONTRIBUTE

But there are many undesirable features of Australian capitalist society and many things of great value in the experience accumulated over centuries by the Aborigines.

In their own environment, the Aborigines have developed unique skills and arts, great courage, initiative and intelligence.

They have much to contribute to Australia and the world from their own social and cultural heritage. "Assimilation" would destroy what they have to give to mankind, as well as denying them the fundamental right of all peoples to preserve their identity and develop along their own lines.

Striving to foster the false concept that gradual assimilation is the only possible and desirable policy, the Federal and State Governments try to induce various organisations to advocate it.

In Queensland, the Liberal Government combined with NCC-QLP elements to form a pro-assimilationist organisation known as OPAL (One People for Australia League) to combat the influence of the Aboriginal Advancement movement. With the aid of Government subsidies, this organisation engages in some welfare work, as do other organisations. It is suggested that it may be extended to other States.

The organisations working for liberation of the Aborigines do not oppose welfare work. They find it is possible and desirable to work with well-intentioned people in the organisations dispensing charity, including OPAL. The best elements among these become convinced, in the course of activity, of the need to assist the basic struggle for liberty.

Assimilationist propaganda cannot disguise or solve the basic cause of the problems of the Aborigines—denial of fundamental human rights.

The ruling class policy of "assimilation", or destruction of the Aborigines as a people, must be vigorously opposed and swept aside in the struggle for a full and proper place for the Australian Aborigine.

WORKING CLASS VIEWPOINT

Over the last decade or so, much serious work has gone into the formation of a correct working class policy on

the Aboriginal question. In pamphlets and magazines, in conferences at town, State and National levels, there has been intense discussion of factual data and different views. A considerable body of theory has been developed and tested in practice.

The Communist Party has contributed to this development by the adoption of a fundamental policy on Aborigines as part of its National Programme, by the publication of numerous articles in Tribune and the two Guardians and in the Communist Review, and through the active participation of Communists in organisations and actions connected with the struggles of the Aboriginal people. Much work has still to be done but the main lines of a correct policy are becoming clear.

The correct working class viewpoint is the opposite of that of the ruling class. Proceeding from the fundamental principles of the right of all peoples to self-determination and the duty of developing international solidarity, it recognizes the right of the Aboriginal people to full Australian citizenship, equal wages and other award conditions, together with such special aid as may be needed to enable them to enjoy equal rights, and also to exist and grow as a distinct national minority.

Upholding this viewpoint, the Communist Party of Australia declares that the Aboriginal people must have full citizen rights, and be able to live either as members of the general Australian community or in their own autonomously-controlled communities, according to individual choice.

Strict legal guarantees against any form of discrimination are required. Racialism must be treated as a serious crime, as it is in all Socialist countries.

In the towns the shameful "fringe settlements" of sub-standard dwellings must be eliminated and replaced with adequate modern houses, available to Aborigines on terms of completely equal opportunity with all other citizens.

Creation of such equal opportunity will, in many cases, require special financial assistance for Aborigines.

Secure and inalienable titles to definite areas of good community land and local self-government are essential for the development of Aboriginal communities. Adequate economic and technical assistance must be provided by State and Federal Governments to enable the people to develop their lands along modern lines, to become educated and trained to the highest standards, and to establish modern towns and industries.

INTEGRATION, FULL EQUALITY

This is a policy of integration of the Aboriginal minority with the European-descended majority of the Australian population, as a separate entity, enjoying complete social and economic equality with all others.

This policy is opposed to both compulsory assimilation and enforced segregation. It means that Aborigines should be free to live as they choose, in wholly or predominantly Aboriginal communities or in the general Australian community, and to move freely from one to other as they wish.

The Communist Party fully supports the struggles now proceeding to win elementary rights for the Aboriginal people. The Party calls on all its members to give active assistance to them, to work in a spirit of co-operation and unity with all who are engaged in them, to inspire still stronger participation in them by the trade unions and other people's organisations, and to combat vigorously all the false, reactionary and racist ideas about the Aborigines.

Chief among the immediate demands now being raised are:

IMMEDIATE DEMANDS

- Granting of full citizenship rights to all Aborigines.
- The right of all Aborigines to organise, and to full trade union wage-rates and award conditions.