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Australian Scene

The recent elections returned the Chifley "Labor" Government with a slightly reduced majority. There can be little doubt that the main reason for the continued support of the Australian Labor Party is the belief that it will be able to avoid the next depression. Mr. Chifley made no specific promises, and he harped on this fact. He promised, however, such nice things as "progress, justice and a fair deal" and went even so far as to picture a "golden age" for the Australian workers.

Coupled with the elections, a Referendum sought to transfer powers of social services, marketing, and employment to the Commonwealth. The Social Service question was the only one carried. Although the other two received an actual majority of votes, the majority of States did not endorse them.

Already we can hear the "Labor" press telling us not to expect a "bed of roses." The main issue at the moment of writing is the demand by the Australian Council of Trade Unions for a rise of 1 pound per week in the basic wage, and for the 40-hour week. This demand was first put forward in June 1945 and since then the Australian Arbitration Court has heard evidence, evidence, and more evidence on this question. At the time of writing, the arguments in favor of this reform have just been concluded and the arguments against it have begun. The court has stated that much of the early evidence is "obsolete" by now, so it would not be surprising if the farce starts all over again, once both sides have been heard.

There is no doubt that the States, themselves, could long ago have introduced the 40-hour week since all except So. Australia have Labor Party Governments. However, it is obvious that the Government is trying to create as many obstacles as it possibly can.

The Trade Union Movement has proved once more that its reliance on the capitalist state prevents it from even gaining such meager reforms as it might otherwise achieve on the industrial field. In February 1946, the "ultimatum" given to the Chifley Government on this issue expired, but after a secret conference between the T. U. bosses and the Government, nothing more was heard about this "ultimatum." Now, after the elections, direct action is being forced on the unions by their rank and file. Melbourne has had a 24-hour train and tram strike, and is likely to have further ones. Engineers, wharfies, foundry workers, etc., are also no longer satisfied with promises and are considering direct action.

The reply of the employers and Arbitration Court has been that under the wage pegging regulations, their hands are tied. When ap-

proached by the unions to abolish wage pegging, Chifley's reply was that it would interfere with the Government's economic policy. In view of the general industrial unrest, further negotiations between Mr. Chifley and the A.C.T.U. can be expected to produce some sort of worthless "compromise."

The Political Scene

Some of these incongruous and tortuous moves can be explained by the make up of the Australian Labor Party. On the one hand, it is supported by many trade unionists as the "political party of Labor"; on the other hand, it has the support of large sections of small manufacturers, big brewery interests, and the Catholic Hierarchy. The latter has its own group within the Trade Unions — "Catholic Action." There is a remarkable similarity between this group and the Stalinist cells within the T. U.'s. Neither represents working class interests; both are composed of active young men and women who take advantage of the prevailing apathy to capture control of the unions, both accuse each other of being "sectarian," and finally, both are tightly knit, well-organized groups with a religious basis. For there can be no argument: Stalinism has its hierarchy and its pope, just as Catholicism.

While it would be hasty to generalize, it can be said that the Labor Party mainly (in and outside the unions) relies on the "old stalwarts" and has up to now failed to attract the younger generation. Its attempt also to organize "industrial groups" in the unions has not been very successful, as yet.

Politically speaking, the Australian "Communist" Party is of no great importance. It derives its significance from its hold on the trade unions. In the last elections, the C. P. vote fell, though not considerably, but it would be optimistic to predict an immediate

eclipse of this anti-working class organization. Though it has suffered some defeats in the unions in the last few months, its influence is still strong. Naturally, the worldwide turn of the party line to the "left" has helped in this and the Stalinists are now urging the workers to fight for some of the conditions and awards they themselves helped to water down during the war years.

As for the Conservatives—known as the "Liberal" Party — they are an obviously anti-working class party with big business associations. Saddled with the personal unpopularity of their "leader," Mr. Menzies, they have made little headway in the elections and their policy of laissez-faire is out of line with the development of Australian capitalism. This development, tending towards greater state interference and control, in an attempt to smooth out the booms and busts inherent in the system, is, of course, by no means confined to this country. But, by reason of the relatively weak development of industry here before the war, and its hot-house growth during the slaughter, the tendency is somewhat less gradual than in other countries. One in every four Australians is employed by the Government — another factor which acts in favor of the Labor Party.

Apathy

In a country with but little tradition, and a relatively "recent" capitalism, a country, where, moreover, the rural economy still plays a considerable role, it is not surprising to note the absence of any great interest in politics. There is some room for ordinary capitalist expansion and the exploitation of New Guinea, etc. There is also the fact that Australia is rather isolated from the mainstream of ordinary capitalist "civilization." These, and other factors, are reflected in a general distrust of theory. Lectures

and meetings are badly attended and it is to the credit of the Socialist Party of Australia that it has been able to keep going with lectures and an audience bigger than that of the Victorian Labor College, in spite of the fact that this college has plenty of money and the backing of the trade unions.

Apart from the Labor and Liberal Parties and the Stalinists, no other political organization of more than local significance exists. A couple of Trotskyites knock around in Sydney — but that's about all. Attempts have been made to bring the "benefits" of "culture" to the Australian workers, but they have all flopped rather badly. The Stalinists, with their big financial resources, had to discontinue their "cultural" monthly, "Progress", because it didn't sell.

Under these circumstances, the fight for socialism and the spreading of propaganda is even more difficult than, say, in the U. S. A. Results are slow indeed and mediums of propaganda very restricted. It is all the more to the credit of the Socialist Party of Australia that it has managed to keep going, let alone produce a monthly printed paper, "Socialist Comment."

The Future Outlook

The coming depression will find the Labor Party as helpless as it would have found the Liberal Party. Capitalism has made great strides in Australia, and the effects of the depression are likely to be more severe than last time. No doubt attempts will be made to "isolate" the Australian economy, but in spite of its geographical position, it has not been able to escape from the world-wide ramifications of rival political and trade groupings. Torn between reliance on the "mother country" — England — and on the U. S. A., it seems that its precarious position will be severely shaken and some of the illusions engendered by this peculiar position are bound to

be shattered. The ruling class is already anxious over the possible loss of markets in the Pacific, and thus an Australian - U. S. A. "bloc" would be built on shifting sands.

We must also remember that attempts will be made, by the more far-seeing sections of the capitalist class to at least capture part of the future Japanese and Chinese markets, and thus the native industrial development will bring about a more aggressive policy.

It will therefore be interesting to watch the future of the U. S. - Australian relations and to look behind the maneuvering for Pacific and Far East rule which is bound to develop.

On the whole, one can expect some minor reforms by the Labor Government, under trade union pressure, which will leave the workers no better off; a further integration of the trade union movement with the capitalist state; and a short lived "boom" with profits soaring for the bosses, while the workers get the crumbs.

How quickly the socialist movement will make headway will not only depend on our efforts, but on the destruction of illusions about the position of the Australian working class, illusions which capitalist development itself will help to destroy.

HENRY HOLMES

(Socialist Party of Australia)

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December 17, 1946

Since sending you the "Australian Scene" article: Big wave of strikes, transport, waterfront, gas-workers, etc. Result: Wage pegging relaxed to a certain extent, Arbitration Court increases basic wage by 7 shillings weekly. This is an interim judgment only, demand of ACTU and many unions is for 1 pound a week extra. 7 shilling raise is designed to "keep them quiet" for a while. They will delay final judgment as long as possible.

two days before the supposed-ly "impartial" court delivered judgment, a Melbourne and Sydney Daily announced the figure! And, strange coincidence, though the counsel for the ACTU said it was "embarrassing" to come here when the press announces increase before they are granted, and the judge murmured about contempt of court, the papers had been quite right! The living standards here, at a very conservative estimate, have fallen at least 35-40% since before the war, so the 7 shillings a week is just plain eyewash. It remains to be seen whether the unions will be taken in. Anything is possible under a "Labor Government."

FROM OUR MAIL-BOX

(Continued from page 2)

MIAMI FLORIDA: "I attended the All-Florida Industrial and Agricultural Exposition last night and saw how vegetables can be grown in tanks without soil and just by using plant food. With all the latest developments, vegetables can be grown in abundance and under varying conditions, but, in a commodity society, cannot be utilized in the interest of society as a whole. Socialism will remedy that. There were several booths relative to trade with South America and one booklet issued by the Pan American World Airways well depicts the efforts being made to capture the South American markets, and it is also a further lesson in capitalist hypocrisy."

FROM A SOLDIER IN GERMANY: Here is an excerpt from a letter which I received from a friend of ours now in Germany. Although realizing its limitations in the past, he always thought that something could be done for society within the framework of the capitalist system and is a member of the Democratic Party. He now writes: "Five months have elapsed since I entered upon the Nuremberg scene and I don't feel that any progress has been made . . . here, too, there is an abundance of hypocrisy and tongue-in-cheek platitudes

. . . here, too, all the old hatreds are being revived and a shiny new international game has been evolved. The three so-called 'powers' are now engaged in a mad race to rebuild German economy and channel its hatred toward the other fellow . . . it presents a rather ugly picture . . . shades of Chamberlain . . . everybody is playing his game now and the cesspool is filling up fast . . . by an official McNarney decree as of a few weeks ago, we no longer hate nor distrust the Germans . . . as of Christmas, 1946, again by decree, any former Nazi with less than six or seven thousand marks in the bank, has been granted amnesty and is officially absolved of all sin . . . the slate has been wiped clean and everybody can start over again . . . our GI's have found a basis of understanding with the flower of German womanhood, the 'fraulein' . . . they agree with each other that sex is here to stay and that we must all hate the Russians; . . . and in the center of the whole thing, a few idiots like myself are trying to convince each other that what we are doing here has some importance. . . I am neither optimistic nor pessimistic . . . but quite confused . . . of one thing I am certain . . . there can never be any peace within the framework of the profit system."

And still there seems to be almost a 100 percent opinion surrounding us that the worst thing that could happen to this world of ours, is getting away from the "free enterprise" system.

LONDON, ENGLAND: "Our second full-time propagandist has been touring round Manchester, Liverpool, Birkenhead and the surrounding area. He continues his work there and so far good prospects have been reported. The past twelve months have witnessed the rapid growth of Manchester into a virile, active Branch. In the year ahead we expect to rouse the whole Midland area, centered on Manchester and Birmingham.

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