

FIGHT FOR THE ABORIGINES

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A Conference was recently held in Canberra of representatives of six nations, to deal with the economic and social welfare of 1,700,000 South Pacific natives who come under their jurisdiction. One million of these natives come under the control of the Commonwealth of Australia. At this Conference, which concluded on February 6th, the Australian Government came forward as the wouldbe leader; but the Australian Government has no qualifications for such leadership, as has been demonstrated by its treatment of the Aborigines.

Surely Marx must have had Australia in mind when he said: "The native races know us chiefly by our crimes." Recently there appeared in the Sydney "Sun" a series of articles on the Aborigines by Dr. Donald Thompson of the Department of Anthropology, Melbourne University. He quoted the statement of Deputy Prime Minister Forde when he attended the United Nations Conference in San Francisco: "The Australian Government argues that the Charter of a World Organisation should recognise that the main purpose of the administration of dependent or undeveloped territories is the advancement of the people of those territories." Dr. Donald Thompson asks: "Why this curious discrepancy between domestic and external attitudes towards natives?"

He gave a concrete exposure of the actual position of the Aborigines in Australia and their ill treatment, and raised a demand which, except by ourselves, is never raised on behalf of the Aborigines, and that is that surviving native tribes should have ownership over the hereditary lands.

The series of articles by Dr. Donald Thompson was replied to by Professor Elkin of the Sydney University, who attempted to belittle Dr. Thompson in authority and claimed that his information was out of date. Professor Elkin exposed his wrong approach to the question of the Aborigines when he stressed that in parts of Australia the squatters depend on the Aborigines and that, therefore, because they were dying out, some measures were necessary so that this source of labor for the squatters would not dry up. He denied that ill-treatment continues, boosted the missions, and then attacked the idea that the Aborigines should have their own territory, put forward by Dr. Thompson, condemning this as a policy of "segregation" that would be harmful to the natives themselves.

Dr. Thompson is correct, and Professor Elkin, the chief anthropological adviser to the present Government and their predecessors, is wrong, and in the course of the fight on behalf of the Aborigines we find ourselves in conflict with the views of Professor Elkin.

In the early days of White settlement the Australian Aborigines were not even regarded as human beings. A resolution was carried at a public meeting in Sydney to the effect that the Aborigines had no souls and consequently it was not murder to kill them, and they were killed in large numbers. So, today, out of a population of hundreds of thousands at the time of white settlement, there are only 47,000 full blooded Aborigines left in Australia.

In a recent "Sydney Morning Herald" there was a cable item about a booklet published in England, "Black Chattels." This booklet gives a thorough exposure of the situation of the Australian Aborigines and in my opinion its circulation should be assisted by us. It is in line with our own views on this question. The cable item gave a quotation from this booklet: "If progressive organisations and individuals here..."

(that is in Great Britain)... “will let the Commonwealth Government know that they cannot accept its claim to be regarded as a spokesman for democracy until it accords human rights to the natives of its own country, they will be speeding the day when the Aborigines cease their miserable forced march to extinction.”

The picture given in this booklet, like the picture given by Dr. Donald Thompson, is a picture not of ill-treatment and bad conditions of year ago, but conditions as they exist right at this very moment. It is quite correct to say that the natives when they are used as labourers, are really slaves; in the main they are not wage workers, not real proletarians, they are, as the booklet says, “Black Chattels.” In some cases they receive no money payment at all. They receive food of poor quality, and of inadequate quantity, and, on the little allowance they get, they have to keep their dependents.

There is also brutal treatment, not only in regard to housing and health, but also actual physical violence. This booklet “Black Chattels” states: “To most aborigines Australia is the absolute police State.” That is correct. It seems to me the main purpose of the policy in the North and North West of Australia is to act as slave masters for the black population. There is a terrible condition in regard to health, they are still dying off very quickly, not only because of ill-treatment and starvation, but because of the inroads of disease.

Unfortunately the ill-treatment of the aborigines is due not only to the property owners and the policy, but includes also the workers who live in those areas, workers who have been poisoned with the chauvinism and ideas of the “inferiority” of the Aborigine population fostered through the whole period of white settlement. The white employees of stations are usually single men, and it is the common practice to make sexual use of the native women. The native women are often infected with venereal disease which not only brings premature death but makes the women barren, and so helped the process of extermination. When the native women have half-caste children, the father has no responsibility for them and the State usually takes them away from their mothers.

So far as justice is concerned, there is no real justice for the Aborigine when they infringe the white man’s law. On the other hand when a white man is charged with ill-treating Aborigines there is practically no chance of having punishment inflicted. If a white man is charged with a serious offence, white property owners constitute the jury and there is little chance of securing a conviction. Where a conviction is recorded there is usually only a nominal penalty imposed. The system of “justice” helps cover up the crimes that come to light.

Where the Aborigines are charged with offences, for example when a property owner says the natives have killed one of his bullocks for food, it is these property owners who are the dispensers of “Justice” as well as being the accusers. Furthermore the representatives of the judiciary who deal with the most important cases are themselves so lacking in understanding of the Aborigines as to be incapable of dealing justly with Aborigine “offenders” and are even prejudiced against them and on the side of the white prosecutors.

The Federal Labor Government has absolutely no policy of its own on the Aborigine questions. They have simply taken over the policy their predecessors were operating. There is no member of Parliament who has ever spoken intelligently in public on the question of the Aborigines, and the administration of the Aborigines under a Labor Government continues as previously, it is left in the hands of the permanent state official, of the Department of the Interior, and any new appointments that are made are chosen by the full-time State officials apparently assisted by their

advisers of the Sydney University. There is a very close link-up with the church, and it is unfortunate for the natives that even where Government stations are established, they are really camouflaged missions.

The more enlightened of the missionaries have said that their task is really only to "smooth the dying pillow" of the Aborigines.

Basically the official policy is to accept as a fact the inevitability of the complete dying out of the Aborigine population of Australia. They profess also the opinion that in the course of the "passing" there will be a development of a substantial half-caste population. In the place of the Aborigine many of them see or hope to see this substantial half-caste population. This is another aspect of Government policy, that they do not regard the sexual use of native women by whites as altogether an evil as it promotes the "inevitable" extinction and replacement by mixed bloods. Although there are regulations against the sexual use of native women by whites there is never any question of punishment, unless in exceptional circumstances. The authorities take away the half-castes who may result from these alliances to bring them up as "useful citizen," in other words to make them useful for the station owners.

And so I repeat one aspect of official policy is to permit this sexual use of native women and exterminate the Aborigines in this way. We are entirely opposed to such a policy.

The Aborigines do not constitute a nation, they constitute tribes and within the tribe the clan is the unit. The hereditary lands belong to the clans. If we spoke of the natives as a "reserve of the proletariat" we would also be making a wrong approach. It is true that in the North and North West of Australia they constitute a majority of the population, and that their welfare is of great importance to the working class in those areas, but if we speak about our movement as a whole we cannot say that the Aborigines represent a reserve of the proletariat. We take up the fight of the Aborigines because they are oppressed, as oppressed as any people in the work, and our task is to fight for all the oppressed.

There have been some important developments in recent times, for instance last year there was a strike of natives employed by stations in the Pilbara area of West Australia. This strike was led by a D. McLeod, a white who champions the cause of the Aborigine. The strike had some measure of success in the face of severe persecution. Following that strike there has been a second example, just the other day, in Darwin. This strike appeared to have taken place without the prior knowledge of any of the whites or of the North Australian Worker's Union. Apparently the Aborigines obtained some information about the strike in W.A. and they themselves, mainly municipal workers in the town of Darwin, came out demanding the same conditions as the whites, and the right to handle their own money; because where money payments are given it is not only a very small amount, but a proportion is retained by the authorities.

Following the strike in W.A. a large number of these natives, under the leadership of McLeod, have started a co-operative enterprise at Port Hedland. It will be extremely difficult for this movement to succeed, as they have the government, squatters and Policy in Western Australia out to destroy it, but nevertheless they have started to work for themselves in obtaining pearl shell and other activities, and their effort should be given attention and assisted.

There has also been the recent agitation concerning the proposed rocket testing area. The Australian Government, because of its foreign policy, has decided it will undertake, in conjunction with the British Government, big expenditure in the testing

of rocket weapons and that the range for testing these weapons will be a belt from South Australia through to the coast of North West Australia. The indications are that the agitation against this proposed rocket range, because of the harmful effects it would have on the Aborigine population, received very widespread support, and the Government has given some assurances the natives will be protected. However if this are is going to be used as a rocket testing ground, there will be various centres established, the authorities will use native labor, and there will be a number of depots and points of disintegration established among the remnants of the aborigine race in this part of Australia. Despite the decision already made by the Government we should continue our agitation against this rocket range.

The North Australian Workers' Union has commenced to take up the fight of the Aborigines. The North Australian Workers' Union officials demanded that they be given representation at the Conference which the Department of the Interior held in Alice Springs on the 8th January. This conference was to discuss the question of the conditions of employment of Aborigines. The Union very correctly demanded that it should be represented, but this was refused. It was refused not only because the Minister for the Interior is the President of the A.W.U., which is hostile to the N.A.W.U., but also because the policy of this Government is to allow the permanent officials and the clerical advisers to continue in absolute control.

The published report of the proceedings of the Alice Springs conference, which was held in camera, indicates that there is no intention of doing anything really substantial to improve the conditions of the Aborigines. Decisions were made about wages for the qualified Aborigines and smaller payments for the "inefficient" Aborigines, which means there was no real sincerity in the declared intention to bring about improvements for the Aborigines.

The N.A.W.U. reacted to this incident by planning to organise a conference to which they would invite representatives from all interest organisation throughout the country. They have selected individuals in the various States to act as convenors, and plans are in hand which should receive all the support we can give.

Recently the Sheet Metal Workers' Union adopted a resolution demanding: "That a Royal Commission to be appointed to enquire into the position of the full blood Aborigine population and to make recommendations for ensuring its survival and development. The scope of the inquiry to include:

1. The numbers and distribution of the Aborigines according to tribe, and the locations of the territory of each tribe.
2. The best area of each tribe's territory to be made an inviolable reserve of the tribe with full legal ownership of the land and its mineral and other resources.
3. The establishment of special native courts, with a new approach to native defendants, based on consideration of native laws and customs.
4. The organisation of a complete medical service for the Aborigines.
5. The administration of the Native Affairs Department and of all Government and mission establishments concerned with the Aborigines. The suitability of present personnel.
6. The best means to secure supervision and centralised control of native affairs for the Commonwealth Government, and a complete scheme of organisation for all necessary contact with the Aborigines, and for training suitable personnel of both sexes for service in the Administration.
7. Such additional questions as the Royal Commission may consider of importance to the Inquiry."

This resolution went from the Sheet Meal Workers' Union to the A.C.T.U. and should be endorsed by that body. We should take up a campaign for its adoption by the Government.

In addition to the Aborigines there are 25,000 persons of mixed blood in the Commonwealth. In our work we have endeavoured, without being completely successful, to impress on our members, and others who are working for the Aborigines, that the problem of these half-castes, who live in Sydney, Melbourne and other centres, is to the Aborigine question at all. One of the demands of the Party is that the terms "Aborigine," "Aboriginal" and "native," used in the various Acts and ordinances, should not apply to persons of mixed blood. However we find people of mixed blood, particularly in N.S.W. and Victoria, who think it is necessary and correct to represent themselves as Aborigines in conducting a campaign for full civic rights. These persons of mixed blood confuse the fight of the Aborigines with their own problems, which is not the Aborigine fight. In Victoria, there are probably not more than 50 or 60 full blooded Aborigines, and there may be about seven hundred persons of mixed blood. In New South Wales there is a somewhat similar situation, a small number of full blooded Aborigines and comparatively large number of half-castes or persons of mixed blood.

The "Tribune" recently had an article about the position of the half-castes at the Moree settlement, and the main question here is that of full citizen rights. The "Telegraph" had a picture of a half-caste who would not vote in the liquor referendum because he is not permitted to go into a hotel. These people are discriminated against in a way that is barbarian and completely unjustifiable. They live in depressed areas, in houses of the worst possible kind, and the ramshackle huts; they do not get proper education, are excluded from some schools or find it very difficult to get into them. To demand citizen rights for these people is absolutely correct and we must also demand special measures for rehabilitation and assistance, but many supporting this fight generalise from this, that the demand for citizenship rights is the demand for the Aborigines, as well as the half-castes.

To demand citizen rights for half-castes is one thing and to demand it for Aborigines has a different significance entirely. For the Aborigine the main demands must be for ownership of their hereditary lands for each of the tribes, inviolable reserves, medical services, various forms of assistance to develop economic activities under their own control, etc., as set out in our programme.