

SOCIALIST STANDPOINTS

ABORIGINES are the most oppressed group within Australian society.

They face racial hostility, poverty and 50 percent unemployment. Various governments have announced programs which were supposed to rectify their plight, but with little effect. Even during the Muirhead enquiry, Aborigines continued to be killed while in police custody.

Naturally they've fought back, and the central demand of their struggle is land rights. Socialists support this demand, and sympathise with the ideas of black sovereignty which have recently emerged.

Yet at first that might seem like a contradiction. Socialists argue for uniting all the workers and oppressed people. We insist that only by changing all of society can any one group achieve liberation. How then can we endorse one group demanding the right to separate landholdings? Isn't the call for Aboriginal "sovereignty" divisive?

To understand the socialist view, we need to consider some history.

Aboriginal society was developed over some 50,000 years of hunting and gathering on the Australian continent. All aspects of Aboriginal life — clan organisation, food gathering, culture and religion — depended upon an intimate understanding of huge areas of land.

MODERN day Aboriginal oppression began when white invaders seized this land from 1788 onwards.

The British war of conquest killed the black population quickly with guns and disease, and more slowly by destroying traditional food supplies. The war was driven by the profit motive.

Wherever Australian land could produce profitably for the home or world market, farmers, pastoralists or industrialists seized it.

Although the blacks resisted, and fought well, they could not win the war. By 1850, Europeans had settled more or less every cultivable area of NSW. The Aboriginal population of NSW had been reduced from about 100,000 in 1788 to about 6000 in 1850.

Those who remained had been driven to the geographic and economic fringes of Australian society. People from diverse areas were rounded up, dumped on reserves and force fed on the bible. Later in the 1950s, mining in remote areas



Scene from *How the West Was Won*. Aborigines reenact the 1946 Pilbara walkout.

The long struggle for land rights

was made profitable by new technology. Aborigines in these areas got the shove once again. They ended up living on the fringes of towns or in big city ghettos like Redfern in Sydney.

A third of Australia's Aboriginal population now lives in capital cities, but that doesn't mean the land has ceased to be a vital issue for them.

Most urban blacks have friends and family in outback areas. Others are themselves only temporarily in the cities. And urban Aborigines march repeatedly for landrights, so it clearly still matters to them.

BUT ISN'T this just nostalgia? Why don't socialists, who pride themselves on arguing practical strategies, just urge Aborigines to forget their origins on the land? Why not urge them to become part of today's society, and join the fight to build tomorrow's better world?

Firstly, Australia's black population is already integrated into the worst aspects of modern capitalist society. They live in capitalist slums, get arrested by capitalist cops, die in capitalist jails. They have a disproportionate share of that peculiarly capitalist institution, unemployment.

Secondly, for a long time the official government policy was "assimilation". Local and state governments did — and still do — withhold services from Aboriginal communities living on former reserves, hoping to pressure them to move elsewhere to "assimilate". The result is communities with no electricity or sewerage.

Thirdly, Aborigines are well aware that a large section of white capitalist society is hostile to them.

Under these circumstances it would be the height of arrogance for socialists — most of whom are white — to tell Aborigines they'd be better off merging themselves into the social mainstream.

OUR CONCEPT of socialism includes self-determination. The working class can, by liberating itself, also create the conditions for the liberation of other oppressed people. But that doesn't mean we ram our notion of liberation down other people's throats. And it doesn't mean we ask oppressed people to sit back and wait while the working class carries out its appointed task.

We support self-determination so people in oppressed communities can choose to join an international workers' movement. Aborigines must have the

right to their traditional lifestyle, to which the land is central, before they can be asked to choose the possible benefits of modern society.

We also support the struggles of oppressed people for their own demands because, although we believe the working class is central to socialism in the long run, workers can also learn a great deal from the struggles of the oppressed.

Take the strike for higher pay by black workers in the Pilbara from 1946 to 1949. This was probably the hardest fought industrial dispute in Australian history. Then there were the militant strikes by the Gurindji people in the Northern Territory, which won equal pay for Aboriginal pastoral workers and government employees in the 1960s.

These struggles, together with political actions like the demonstrations at the Canberra Tent Embassy in 1972 and the "Invasion Day" mobilisation a year ago show how militantly Aborigines can fight.

It is important, not just for their sake but for ours, that Aborigines should be part of the fight for socialism. But for that to be possible, socialists have to make the demand for land rights a non-negotiable part of our own program.

— Eric Petersen

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