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THE ABOLITION OF THE QUEENSLAND LABOUR TRADE: POLITICS OR PROFITS

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INTRODUCTION

APPROXIMATELY 65 000 Pacific Islanders were imported into Queensland between 1863 and 1904, to work in the sugar industry. The abolition of this labour trade, by an Act of the Federal Parliament in 1901,¹ had wide-ranging ramifications in Queensland's economic, social and political history. Given its significance, there is a surprising amount of agreement as to the origins of abolition, for previous writers attribute it exclusively to political factors and, in particular, to the emergence of the White Australia policy.² Beyond descriptions of the political, constitutional or legislative development of the policy,³ explanations are couched in terms of Australian racial prejudice. In this latter context, there are two major arguments. Some writers assert that the White Australia policy was the culmination of racist attitudes to non-Europeans throughout all sections of Australian society.⁴ This racism stemmed from a belief that all coloured races were inferior to Anglo-Saxon people and the desire to build a society which was culturally and ethnically homogenous. Without denying that they were racist, other writers lay the blame for the White Australia policy at the feet of the working class, who organised against coloured labour out of economic motives.⁵

This essay takes issue with the extant literature on several levels. Firstly, it questions whether the abolition of the Queensland labour trade was exclusively political. The ending of Pacific Island immigration, it will be argued, was connected intimately with the change in the sugar industry from plantation production to farm-based central milling. Through this transformation, the need for large numbers of imported field workers was eliminated, a factor further reinforced by the increasing supply of unskilled white labour in Queensland by 1900. In this sense, the abolition of the trade cannot be divorced from the political economy of Queensland sugar production.

At the same time, political factors cannot be ignored. This analysis,

however, removes the issue of abolition from the generalised context of the White Australia policy and focuses attention on the origins of political opposition to the immigrants in Queensland. To this end the interdependent structural and ideological underpinnings of working class antagonism to the Pacific Islanders are examined in detail. Using this method, the essay questions the view that abolition was merely the culmination of Australian racial prejudice.

I

For the purposes of analysis, the growth and development of the Queensland sugar industry can be divided into several distinct periods.⁶ In its incipient phase, 1862-7, the industry was confined to the Brisbane area and the relatively small amount of sugar cultivated in the period was produced on small farms using primitive machinery. Between 1868 and 1878, the industry experienced its first major growth period during which sugar production moved into the northerly districts of the colony and plantation production emerged as the dominant form. In 1874, a natural disaster struck Queensland sugar cane in the form of downey mildew or 'rust', causing the withdrawal of credit from industry and a period of depression which lifted in 1879. In that year a number of factors, including the election of a Government in Brisbane within which planter interests were influential, and the lowering of interest rates to the unprecedented levels of between 5 and 7 per cent, led to a period of explosive growth in Queensland sugar production. This speculative phase was marked by a quadrupling of cane acreage over the period, an increase in the number of operational mills in the colony from 68 in 1878/9 to 166 in 1884/5, and the consolidation and extension of the plantation system. The entry of large-scale capital and a concomitant increase in the number and average size of plantations meant that plantations accounted for at least 85 per cent of Queensland's total cane acreage by 1887/8. For a number of reasons to be discussed below, the industry was plunged into a protracted depression between 1884 and 1892. But from 1893 to 1906, during its third major growth period, Queensland cane acreage expanded by a factor of 2.42. Significantly, this rapid growth in production was associated with the complete reconstruction of the industry on the farm-based central milling system. Statistically this is indicated in the dramatic fall in operational mills over the period from 166 in 1884/5 to 51 in 1906 and a concomitant rise in the number of cane farmers from 208 in 1887/8 to 3280 in 1905. The phase ended in 1906 with the massed repatriation of Pacific Island labour, the core of the plantation labour force.

Because the transformation from plantation production to farm-based central milling was fundamentally important in the subsequent abolition of the labour trade, its economic and political determinants are worthy of examination. In brief, the supplanting of plantation production was caused by the inability of the industry to cope with rising costs in the face of falling sugar cane prices and, to a lesser extent, the success to cane farmers in

mobilising the State to attain their objective of a cane market less controlled by big mill-owners.⁷

Perhaps the most conspicuous characteristic of plantation production in Queensland was its low productivity. It was estimated in the period that the profitable production of sugar cane under this system required a yield of at least 1½ tons of sugar manufactured per acre of cane crushed.⁸ Average yields, however, exceeded this limit in only three seasons between 1862 and 1885. This inefficiency was due to the nature of plantation production and, in particular, to the low level of mill technology and the inadequate cultivation techniques practised in the Queensland system. Before 1885 the average capacity of mills did not exceed 267 tons of sugar manufactured per mill per season. Contemporary observers attested to the generally primitive technology of both crushing mills and the sugar manufacturing plant during the era of plantation production.⁹ Cultivation practices were similarly backward, there being a complete absence of proper drainage and irrigation schemes till the late 1880s, a lack of the extensive deep ploughing necessary for productive cane growth, and a neglect of systematic fallowing and crop rotation.¹⁰ Evidence suggests that even routine cultivation practices, such as weeding and cane trashing, were not carried out on some plantations.¹¹

At the same time the labour-intensive nature of plantation production contributed to the low efficiency of the system. It is clear that planters did not invest in expensive machinery which would have raised plantation productivity while production was catered for through the employment of immigrant labour. Moreover, the supply of Pacific Islanders, who dominated the plantation labour force, was never sufficient to meet the needs of efficient cultivation, and the quality of the labour was low. Poor diets, long hours of labour, inadequate accommodation, and an absence of proper medical care on plantations led to appallingly high death-rates amongst this class of labour and seriously affected the capacity of the immigrants to labour productively.¹²

Against this background of low productivity must be placed the rising costs of plantation production to 1889. For the labour-intensive plantation system the most problematic of these overheads was labour costs. In order to understand how these costs operated, it is necessary first to delineate the three major categories of Pacific Island labour. The largest section of the workforce till the 1890s were 'first contract' workers or 'new introductions'. These people were recruited in the islands, and were indentured for three years labour on sugar plantations in return for a minimum wage and various payments in kind: food, clothing, accommodation, and medical care. A second category of workers were called 'time expired', 'walking about', 'overtime' or 'free' labour. These workers had finished their first contract and were thus free to change employers for higher rates of pay, shorter contract periods or to return home. 'Ticket of leave' Islanders comprised a third category within the immigrant population. This category arose as a result of a law passed in 1884 which confined all Pacific Islanders to labour in tropical industrial agriculture.¹³ Migrants who had been in the colony for at least five years prior to September 1884 were eligible for exemption from

the occupational restriction of this law and, upon application, they received a certificate or ticket to that effect. This group was quite small, however, and since for the most part they found employment outside the sugar industry, they are relatively unimportant in the following discussion.

The largest single component of the planters' labour overheads was the cost of importing new-introduction workers. Recruiting charges embraced the fare of the recruits, the cost of trade or bonus payments made to the workers or their families to induce the immigrants to sign indentures, and the ship-owners' profits. Called in the trade 'passage money', this category of costs rose from approximately £5 per recruit in the early years of the labour trade to as much as £30 per recruit by the late 1880s.¹⁴ This dramatic rise was caused by many factors, not the least of which was the excess demand for labour in Queensland, which was exacerbated by the steadily decreasing supply of workers in the islands. This caused longer voyages by the recruiting ships which, by the latter 1880s, often returned to port with only partially fulfilled quotas. At the same time, the immigrants were able to capitalise on the diminished supply of labour in the islands by demanding higher trade or bonus payments, and the predominantly Islander ships' crews were able to manipulate their wages upwards for the same reason.¹⁵

In addition to the recruiting costs of new introductions, employers had to meet two other major liabilities, the cost of the passage of workers who wished to return home at the end of their agreements and Government capitation fees. The return passage charge rose from about £3.10.0. in 1868 to about £10 in 1889.¹⁶ Compulsory capitation fees were levied against the employers because, throughout the period of the labour trade, the Queensland Government refused to bear any of the costs of supervising the system. The compulsory fees, set at 10s per indentured labourer in 1871, had risen by 1884 to 60s per head.¹⁷ Intensified administration of the labour trade, in response to national and international humanitarian pressure on the Queensland Government, was responsible for this rise. For the same reason, Pacific Islander Hospitals were established at Mackay, Geraldton, Maryborough and Ingham between 1884 and 1890. To meet the cost of these institutions, planters in the relevant districts were compelled to pay an additional per capita levy of 10s per annum, a fee which rose to 20s in 1885.¹⁸

Rising wages further exacerbated the cost burden of Pacific Islander employers during this period. First contract workers were guaranteed a minimum wage of £6 per annum, but this figure, by the late 1880s, had been steadily manipulated upwards to an average of between £8 and £10 on most plantations, and some new introductions, possibly indentured workers, were able to command as much as £15 per annum.¹⁹ The most dramatic wage increase, however, applied to time expired labour. Within this category of Pacific Island worker, wages varied, according to cyclical or seasonal characteristics, from as low as 5s per week to as high as 30s per week, in addition to the provision of accommodation and rations.²⁰ A survey of plantations and farms during the depression years of the late 1880s suggests that free labour was receiving wages of around 25s per week, even in such adverse times.²¹ The overall significance of these wages is not simply their

high rate compared with the first contract workers, but the increasing proportion of time expired labour in the plantation work-force through the 1880s. At the beginning of the decade, 'time expires' comprised approximately 10 per cent²² of the workforce whereas by 1888 the numbers within the two categories of immigrant labour were about equal.²³

The important structural change within the industry's work-force derived from a decreasing supply of new recruits to the plantations against the continued expansion of cane acreage and the shortage of unskilled labour in Queensland. Planters were thereby forced to induce workers to re-engage at the end of their contracts in order to maintain the size of the plantations' labour supply. Despite the higher wages commanded, however, time expired labour was regarded as being more useful than first contract workers. Employers did not have the expense of passage money or capitation fees when they engaged free labour, their employment could be confined to the six months of the cropping season, and the experienced worker was more productive than the new introduction. As one contemporary explained, 'for the first twelve months, the South Sea Islander is of very little use and requires great care and consideration'.²⁴ By the late 1880s, the relevance of this factor was reinforced by increasing numbers of young or infirm workers being introduced into the labour force. At this stage one planter summed up the difficulties of importing new recruits as follows:²⁵

The class of Kanakas is not as good as it ought to be, nor can we get sufficient of them; the supply is too uncertain. The way in which they are recruited does not seem to be satisfactory. A great many of our boys are of poor physique and under-age; the consequence is that a great many of them die. Out of one lot of seventy-eight boys that we got last year, twenty-three were dead within ten months after they came. That, of course, is a very heavy loss to us. We lost their labour and what we had to pay for them in the beginning.

II

Faced with the crucial problem of rising labour costs, planters invoked a wide range of strategies to counteract the impact of this central constraint on profits. Recruiting costs were lowered by some employers through chartering or buying vessels in the labour trade to carry out their own recruiting and by passing the burden of some of the compulsory fees onto their workers.²⁶ It proved possible to lower wages during depressions. In 1874 and 1884 for example, wages were cut by 10 per cent, and workers were sacked.²⁷ In some areas, planters colluded to set a maximum price for labour rather than compete against one another.²⁸ Workers' subsistence costs proved to be another very flexible sphere of plantation overheads. Since the provision of clothing, accommodation, medical care and food did not directly affect the production process, planters cut down ruthlessly in this area.²⁹

In addition to manipulating their overheads downwards, planters tried to raise alternative supplies of labour. Aborigines were mobilised to a small

extent in the northerly sugar districts and laboured generally in clearing operations or minor field work tasks, but they did not prove to be a satisfactory source of labour. Forced out of gold-mining after 1875 by a series of restrictive laws, local Chinese workers sought employment on sugar plantations. But this category of labour proved very expensive to hire and following the enactment of anti-Chinese immigration laws, the number of Chinese available to the industry fell off dramatically. An expanding European immigrant population in Queensland during the 1880s led to the increased employment of skilled workers, but they commanded excessively high wages, up to £300 per annum in some cases. Unskilled white workers were employed in field and factory work, although at this level, wages were often little better than the earnings of the best-paid coloured labour. At the same time, these unskilled whites had the reputation amongst planters of being 'unreliable' because of their tendency to organise or abscond at will.

In addition to the varied forms of local labour employed on Queensland plantations, limited numbers of workers were imported from countries as diverse as India, Ceylon, Canton, Singapore, Java, Malaya, Germany, Scandinavia, Japan, Italy, Malta and Portugal. None of these overseas sources proved a serious alternative to Pacific Island labour. In the first place, the newly-imported workers proved unsatisfactory, for they absconded, went on strike, or simply refused to work on allotted tasks in response to the bad working conditions to which they were subject. Secondly, all attempts by the Queensland Government to formalise labour treaties with foreign governments failed, thereby cutting off countries such as India and some European centres, as lucrative sources of cheap labour.

Apart from attempts to alleviate their labour problems, planters were forced to adopt other strategies to make plantation production profitable. One of these, the manufacture of rum, to cut down on the wastage of molasses, was not an enduring practice. It required costly, skilled labour and machinery beyond the means of most small producers, and the demand for rough rums had collapsed by the mid-1890s, as the larger distillers had by that stage taken over the market. Some success was achieved through the introduction of new canes to the industry which were more disease-resistant and produced greater yields; and within the parameters of their limited finances, planters attempted to improve the technologies of their mill and cultivation processes. This latter range of strategies was, however, confined mainly to a limited number of big capitalists who entered the industry during the speculative phase. Other planters diversified into such products as brewer's crystals, fruit growing and even beef production.

Nevertheless, any success which planters achieved through their cost minimising strategies was challenged in 1884 by a crucial determinant of profitability which could not easily be manipulated, the falling international commodity price of sugar. In that year, it fell dramatically on the London market from 19s 0d per cwt to 13s 3d per cwt.³⁰ The immediate reasons for this lay with the burgeoning European beet-sugar industry. Following the blockade of French ports during the Napoleonic wars, Napoleon's scientists developed a technology for the manufacture of sugar based upon the beet

root. To encourage farmers to turn to this crop, the State subsidised the cultivation of sugar beet. As a result, the proportion of beet sugar to cane sugar on the international market rose from 7 per cent in 1840 to 50 per cent in 1880. During the 1880s this proportion increased further because the European market was flooded with cheap, prairie-produced American wheat. This forced European wheat-growers to turn to subsidised beet cultivation and a chaotic crisis of over-supply developed, resulting in the dumping of huge quantities of beet sugar on the British market. This in turn produced the dramatic fall in sugar prices which was to dominate the industry for the next thirty years.

This fall in price, plus the other cost factors already discussed, plunged the Queensland industry into a protracted depression, a plight which was further exacerbated by other factors. During the speculative phase, planters added huge tracts of land to their holdings. In the northern areas of the colony alone, more than one million acres of land were selected and another 250 000 acres were held in freehold, of which only 67 000 acres were under cultivation.³¹ This meant that the industry carried a heavy mortgage burden which, in addition to working expenses, was entirely chargeable to a small area of cultivated land. During the 1880s depression, the financial institutions aggravated this problem by increasing interest on outstanding loans and refusing further advances. In addition, the marketing system governing the disposal of sugar on Australian markets seriously disadvantaged Queensland producers. Just at the point in the harvesting season when planters disposed of the bulk of their sugars, the price of the commodity on the Sydney and Melbourne markets tended to drop. Middlemen were able to capitalise on this feature by purchasing sugar from planters at low prices and by holding onto it for disposal when the prices rose again.³² At the same time, a cartel arrangement between the two major sugar shippers passed high transport and insurance costs on to the Queensland producers.³³

III

The condition of rising costs against falling prices forced Queensland planters and the State to re-assess their strategies, for it became clear that the problems facing plantation owners were not temporary. In the widest terms, the crisis was rooted in the plantation system of production and its structural features of excessive labour costs and production inefficiency. To that extent, plantation production in Queensland had, by the late 1880s, approached its quietus, and the remedy was comprehensive structural change. To that end, the industry was reconstructed over the next twenty years on the principle of central milling and farm-based cane cultivation.

This system offered many advantages. Firstly, it proved possible under central milling to increase the productive capacity of mills and improve their technology, a factor which brought considerable economies of scale to the industry. At the same time a system of cane cultivation based on small farms considerably lowered labour costs. In the immediate changeover

period, for example, it was estimated that the labour necessary to cultivate a standard forty-acre farm was half the number of workers that the equivalent plantation acreage required.³⁴ It also obviated the extremely expensive item of supervision so necessary in plantation production. But while it is true that fundamental economic determinants forged the central milling system in Queensland, the political role of cane farmers cannot be ignored.

Cane farmers argued for a State-funded co-operative central milling system. These demands arose out of the subordinate role they held in the sugar industry, for the cane farmer was entirely dependent upon the mill owner to buy and crush his cane. This dependency was reinforced by the peculiar nature of sugar manufacture which demands that cane be crushed within twenty-four hours of harvesting. Because of transport limitations farmers *had* to dispose of their cane to the nearest miller. The consequent lack of competition between millers resulted in greatly deflated prices for farm-produced cane. Moreover, mill owners gave the top priority to their own plantation-cultivated cane in good years and frequently repudiated contracts for farm cane in bad years. Naturally, this state of affairs meant that farmers led a precarious existence and it produced a great deal of conflict between the two groups. Farmers believed that they would benefit by fair prices and reliable cane purchases in a co-operative central milling system.

In political terms the farmers' arguments had great appeal. With the rapid growth of towns, industry, and agriculture in Queensland between 1860 and 1890, political activity was split broadly between two camps. On the one hand conservative or bourgeois parties were dominated by big pastoralists, planters, city bankers and middlemen. Against these stood the working class and petit-bourgeois elements including shopkeepers, prospectors, small farmers and other small producers. At first this group was active under the mantle of liberal politics, but parts of it regrouped later into the Labor Party. In Queensland, the franchise was universal and by the late 1870s, the liberals controlled the colonial Government. Throughout the 1880s, the number of cane farmers steadily increased, a fact which was mirrored in the formation of Agricultural Associations distinctly serving farm interests. The emergence of farmers' pressure groups and a viable political party to serve those interests resulted in the establishment of the first co-operative central mills in Mackay in 1885. By the late 1880s, the political appeal of central mills was reinforced by the economic considerations which have already been outlined.

And it was not lost upon the State, that central milling was a system which stabilised the sugar industry's labour force. The reconstruction of the industry around small farms turned agricultural workers into farmers. Attracted by the opportunity to own land and acquire a stake in the profits of sugar production, the farmer became effectively tied to his occupation as a cane cultivator both by the obligation to pay off his newly acquired debts and the need to subsist. To that extent, the mills were guaranteed a reliable supply of cane and the industry was presented with an operable basis for its future development.

It was in the context of these circumstances that the Queensland Govern-

ment enacted *The Sugar Works Guarantee Act of 1893*,³⁵ which encouraged the co-operative manufacture of sugar by companies, the members of which undertook to grow specified areas of cane and shared in the profits of manufacture. With loan funds freely available from the State, companies of farmers were quickly established and, by 1894, thirteen co-operatives had been set up under the Act in the Moreton Bay, Burnett, Mackay, Bowen, Wide Bay and Cairns districts.

The reconstruction of the industry was achieved very rapidly. Between 1888 and 1905 the number of cane farmers in Queensland rose from about 230³⁶ to nearly 3500.³⁷ Concomitantly, there was a rapid decline in the number of plantations such that by 1905 there was a mere handful in operation, mainly in the most northerly districts of the state. Over the same period Queensland cane acreage tripled, and sugar output expanded at an even faster rate due to the increased efficiency of central milling.

Since the massed repatriation of Pacific Island labour took place at the point where plantation production had all but been supplanted by central milling, it is evident that reconstruction, was itself a crucial factor in the final abolition of the trade. The *raison d'être* of the trade was the supply of cheap labour for plantation production. When plantations passed, so did the need for the large scale importation of field labour. But to explain the decision solely in such terms would be to ignore the origins and role of important political determinants of the abolition.

IV

Until around 1890, unionists' opposition to cheap labour in Queensland had been confined politically and locally to specific industries within which the employment of cheap labour had posed a direct threat to the wage levels or job security of white workers.³⁸ The major opposition to the Chinese, for example, came from miners, shearers, seamen, and skilled workers such as those in the furniture trade.³⁹ In contrast, there was no movement aimed at ousting the Chinese from such pursuits as market gardening, tropical fruit growing, or service industries. In some sectors, a Chinese presence was positively encouraged.⁴⁰

Similarly, before the 1890s, worker opposition to Pacific Island labour in Queensland was small scale, sporadic, and confined to groups of workers adversely affected by the employment of immigrant labour. For the most part, organised opposition to the Islanders in Queensland was confined to periods of high unemployment in the sugar districts.⁴¹ Indeed, the absence of general working class opposition to the immigrants was a source of great irritation to the humanitarian groups who were opposed to the labour trade.⁴²

During the 1890s, however, the opposition of the labour movement to Pacific Islanders in Queensland became at once more organised, fervent and widespread, expressing itself at all levels of labour organisation. In 1890, the General Labourers Union of Mackay, the Amalgamated Shearers Union

and the Sydney Trades and Labour Council expressed their opposition to the cheap labour.⁴³ Similar sentiments even became incorporated into the constitutions of some unions.⁴⁴ During the same period, Queensland trade unions were organising politically, and moved towards the capture of political power in confrontation with the State and industry. Opposition to cheap labour, as one of many working-class demands, became incorporated into the platform of the early Labor Party.⁴⁵

As early as 1892, the question of Pacific Islander immigration had emerged as a clear issue in Queensland politics. Sparked off by the declaration by Premier S.W. Griffith in 1892,⁴⁶ that the introduction of indentured labour would continue for at least another ten years, the working-class opposition to the enabling act was extremely vigorous, resulting in the election of working-class members to the Queensland Parliament. By 1899, the Labor Party had enough members in the lower house to secure the overthrow of the Government and to form a ministry, the first (albeit short-lived) Labor Government in the world.

Through the Australian Labour Federation, and supported by liberals like Edmund Barton, who wanted to obtain the backing of the labour movement, working-class opposition to cheap labour in every form became an important issue in the arguments for a federated Australia. While it must be stressed that it was by no means the only factor in the movement for Federation, it is significant that the White Australia issue was a prime concern in the referendum on Federation held in Queensland in September 1899. Despite a solid 'No' vote in the south of the colony, the sway of 'Yes' votes in the northern districts, where coloured labour was concentrated, resulted in the affirmation of the referendum with a clear majority. In the following federal election, Queensland sent five out of its seven members to the new Parliament, avowed to support the White Australia policy.⁴⁷

But why, in stark contrast with its previous position on Pacific Island immigrants, did organised labour's antagonism to the labour trade become so concerted and effective after 1890? In answer to this question, the evidence suggests that the fervour, organisation, specific goals and expression of trade union opposition to Pacific Island workers, articulated directly with the transformation of the sugar industry from plantation production to the farm-based central-milling system.

During the era of plantation dominance, Pacific Islanders were employed almost exclusively as field workers in the cultivation of sugar cane. While the immigrants were confined to unskilled tasks and under the restrictive conditions of indentured labour, they posed no serious threat to the wages and conditions of white workers in the northern districts of Queensland. While their numbers remained few and their privileged position in the plantation's hierarchy was maintained, white workers absorbed the planters' ideology which stated, on the one hand, that hard labour in tropical conditions was harmful to whites, and on the other, that the employment of immigrants on menial tasks created jobs and elevated the position of white workers.⁴⁸

As the basis of sugar production changed during the 1890s, however, so

did the structure of immigrant labour employed in the industry. The dramatic increase in the number of cane farmers in this period was accompanied by an almost parallel rise in the number of employers of Pacific Island workers. While the population of Islanders remained relatively stable throughout the 1890s, the ratio of employers to Pacific Islanders rose from approximately 1:44 in 1892 to 1:7 in 1899.⁴⁹ These figures suggest a remarkable shift in the Islander workforce from plantation labour to farm work.

Just as significant was the change in the internal structure of Pacific Island labour. Whereas in 1888 the number of first contract workers and re-engagement or 'free' workers in the immigrant population were about equal, the proportion of new introductions comprised barely 20 per cent of the contracts entered into by 1898.⁵⁰ Because of their influence in the labour market, the remaining plantations monopolised the cheaper but diminishing proportion of new contract workers, leaving re-engagement labour to farm employment. As has already been suggested, the high wages which this latter category of workers commanded meant that their employment was increasingly confined to the peak period of the season.⁵¹ In the slack season, Pacific Islanders sought employment in other industries such as timber-cutting, fishing and contract fencing or, as it was called in Queensland, 'walked about' taking odd jobs when the need arose.

The transformation of Pacific Island labour from indentured plantation workers to the higher paid status of seasonal farm worker, in turn precipitated a new attitude on the part of the increasing numbers of white unionised workers in the north of Queensland, for the immigrants were no longer the 'generators' of employment but direct competitors with white workers for jobs, and potential strike breakers. In 1882, during the period of plantation dominance, a meeting of white workers at Mackay protested at the proposed introduction of coolies on the grounds that it was 'premature... there being sufficient Kanaka labour available for plantation work', and even suggested that more vessels be put into the labour trade.⁵² By 1895, *The Worker* complained bitterly that the unemployed in the sugar districts were offered 'wages and conditions on a par with those paid to inferior aliens'.⁵³

As part of this changing attitude on the part of the white workers, the predominant popular racial stereotype of the immigrants as expressed in the press, pamphlets, general literature and political rhetoric, underwent a remarkable change. Before 1890, such a worker was perceived largely as:

... a peaceable, law-abiding, kindly disposed savage, wonderfully responsive to any act of benevolence, suited to the work for which he was imported, moderately industrious, astonishingly faithful to those who gained his confidence and with no ambitions in regard to inter-marriage with the white race.⁵⁴

During the 1890s it emerged that the typical Islander was '... a pronounced blackguard—truculent, addicted to gambling and frequently to drink... (and a) great social menace'.⁵⁵

These views were not, as at least one writer has claimed, an accurate or real description of the so-called 'early' immigrant as against the 'late' ones,⁵⁶ but rather were ideas rooted firmly in the prevailing ideologies, inasmuch as they were historically specific ideas which justified, legitimised or ex-

plained a course of social or political action. The former stereotype was projected mainly by employers of Pacific Island labour, to legitimise the importation of cheap labour supplies.⁵⁷ The view of the immigrant as a 'social menace' derived from, and served the cause of, the white worker's opposition to the Islanders. The generally acknowledged predominance of one stereotype over another after 1890 simply reflects the increased fervour of working class antagonism to the workers and its expression through a growing range of publications which served the labour movement's cause.⁵⁸ Interestingly, the historically specific and ideological nature of their ideas was recognised by elements of the labour movement for, as *The Worker* observed at this time:⁵⁹

To despise a man on the basis of his skin is opposed to every principle of fraternalism, humanity and justice. Only we are entitled to safeguard our standards of social living . . . Coloured skins happen to coincide with low wages and still lower morality. When the coincidence no longer exists, the Chow and Jap will be welcome to our shores and we will fold the Polynesian to our bosoms.

Explantations which concentrate on the racist content of worker resistance to coloured labour or which see it simply as a defence against the potential lowering of wage levels, gloss over an equally important facet of the class conflict which this opposition represented.

In short, the employment of coloured labour in Australia was considered inimical to the very existence of the trade union movement. This view was bound up directly with the issues in the fierce conflicts between labour and capital during the 1890s which led to the formation of the political wing of the labour movement. In this period, the growing ranks of organised labour struggled to establish recognition of unionism against the concerted attempts of the state and industry to crush the fledgling unions.⁶⁰ To counter unionists' claims to the closed shop, union rates of pay, and a united labour movement, the employers invoked strategies which turned on the principle of freedom of contract, the importation of large numbers of workers to flood the labour market, the mobilisation of non-union labour and eventually, the outlawing of trade unions.⁶¹ In the context of this conflict, unionists believed that the importation of coloured labour was central to the employers' tactics.

In general terms, coloured labour was cheap, plentiful and, in the words of V.G. Childe, 'seemingly non unionisable'.⁶² Moreover, the immigrants were immutably associated with forms of unfree labour. With the exception of some types of apprenticeship indentures, the Australian trade union movement was implacably opposed to all forms of bonded or indentured labour. Contract labour was perceived to be a form of class oppression and, especially in the case of the notorious Masters and Servants Acts, an instrument designed to frustrate the development of unionism.⁶³ The connection between coloured workers and unfree labour was considered so close that in the constitutions of some unions, protests against bonded labour were included in the same clause as the expression of opposition to coloured labour.⁶⁴ One of the principal objects of the Queensland Workers Political

Association was the 'exclusion of coloured, Asiatic and contract of indentured labour'.⁶⁵ As the ditty which was published in *The Worker* proclaimed:

Its just as clear as fygars
Sure as one and one make two
Folks as make slaves of niggers
Want to make slaves of you.⁶⁶

Of all the categories of coloured immigrant labour, Pacific Island labour in Queensland represented, par excellence, forms of unfree labour. In contrast, with say, Chinese immigrants, Pacific Island labour entered Queensland *only* under the contract of indenture. Even at the end of their agreements, the immigrants were obliged by law to re-engage under contracts of at least six months duration, and after 1884 this employment was confined exclusively to unskilled tasks in the sugar industry. For these reasons, working-class opposition to Pacific Islanders was as much a struggle to establish the integrity of the trade union movement as antagonism to the immigrants on the grounds that they were direct competitors in the labour market.

V

In addition to its structural and political underpinnings, subsequent economic factors contributed to the abolition of the labour trade. Throughout the 1890s and early 1900s the costs of Pacific Island labour continued to rise over the high levels of the late 1880s. Wages and subsistence overheads steadily increased, as did the costs of introduction. After 1893, the recruiters became increasingly dependent upon the Solomon Islands for labour supplies and this consistently involved long, costly recruiting voyages. Furthermore, in 1902, British administrators in the Solomon Islands began to levy heavy charges against the recruiters and imposed conditions on the ships which added an average of three weeks extra to each voyage.⁶⁷ The changing internal structure of Pacific Island labour in Queensland, which has already been discussed, carried with it increased wage costs.

At the same time, the supply of unskilled labour in Queensland was increasing throughout the period. Indeed, by 1906, the argument that Pacific Islanders were vital to the sugar industry because of a lack of local labour supplies, was no longer true. The evidence of a Royal Commission in that year amply demonstrated that there were more than adequate numbers of local workers to service the industry after the repatriation of the Islanders.⁶⁸

Another writer has suggested that the new Federal Government was anxious to dispose of the system because of its potential drain on State finances.⁶⁹ In 1887, the London Premiers' Conference agreed that the colonies should accept responsibility for part of the prime cost and maintenance of the Australian squadron. Since the squadron was engaged in duties related to the labour trade, the new colonial commitment represented a subsidy on the costs of recruiting Pacific Island labour for Queensland.

Abolishing the labour trade meant, therefore, a substantial reduction in state expenditure on policing the South West Pacific.

Commercial development in the South West Pacific also warranted the end of the Queensland labour trade. Anglo/Australian and other companies had, by the end of the 19th century, made substantial inroads in a wide range of trading, agricultural and mining activities in the region. It was argued that in abolishing the labour trade, a large, experienced labour force would be made available to these concerns for their future growth and development.⁷⁰ This was particularly important to the needs of settlers in the New Hebrides. Here, depopulation, restrictive legislation and fierce competition for workers between the Queensland and Fiji labour trade and French and German inter-island recruiters, meant that, by the turn of the century, commercial development in the group was severely hampered by inadequate local labour supplies.⁷¹ It was envisaged that Queensland repatriates would be accommodated into the New Hebridean economy in two ways. Firstly, it was suggested that 'respectable planters' be invited to inform the Resident Deputy Commissioner of their labour requirements and that he would direct the returned Islanders to the areas of greatest labour need.⁷² Secondly, 15 000 acres of land in the group were set aside to establish a 'farming settlement' so that the returned workers could engage in cash cropping and food production.⁷³ These proposals were designed specifically to promote and consolidate Anglo/Australian imperialism in the New Hebrides, but the argument was used also to defuse the humanitarian criticism that the deportation of Pacific Islanders from Queensland would deprive the workers of essential personal income.

CONCLUSION

Hitherto, the abolition of the Queensland labour trade has been attributed exclusively to political factors or to the rise of Australian racism. In contrast with the former works, this analysis has sought the explanation for abolition in the complex interplay of conflicts and change which took place in sections of the economy and society of colonial Queensland.

Fundamental to the analysis is the reconstruction of sugar production during the 1890s, on the foundation of farm-based central milling and the concomitant withering of the system of plantation production. This change, combined with an adequate supply of white labour in Queensland at the end of the century, supplanted the economic need for the importation of Pacific Island immigrants to work in the sugar industry. That is not to deny the role of white working-class opposition to the Islanders in the abolition of the system. On the contrary, the antagonism of the labour movement to Pacific Islanders emerged and developed as farms displaced plantations and as the immigrants were transformed from their status as indentured plantation workers into short-contract farm labourers. But working-class opposition to the Pacific Islanders did not arise only because the immigrants increasingly represented a threat to the conditions or job security of white

workers. Pacific Islanders were bonded workers and the emerging labour movement was resolutely opposed to unfree labour on the grounds that it was a form of production relation which threatened the growth and development of trade unions. Opposition to the Islanders, therefore, was part of the trade union movement's struggle to establish its integrity. The racist expression of the white workers' antagonism to the Islanders was ideological. By stereotyping the immigrant as a 'social menace', workers were invoking an idea which justified or legitimised the expulsion of Pacific Islanders from Queensland, and thereby the achievement of their immediate economic and political goals. Other, less significant, factors including the needs of Australian imperialism in the south-west Pacific had, by 1900, been added to the formidable grounds for the abolition of the Queensland labour trade.

The instructive lesson in this episode of Australian history is that no one element of the historical process can be isolated from the others and be ascribed as the exclusive cause of events. For in the last analysis it was the interrelationship and interdependence of the economic, structural, ideological and political components which forged the final downfall of the labour trade. There is much in Australian historiography which requires re-evaluation in these terms, and the plethora of writing on the history of Australian racism might be a good place to begin.

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