

Racism

What It Is & How to Fight It

**John Tully, Tony Iltis
& Susan Price**

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Racism a ‘Poisoned Shroud’

Racism is only the poisoned shroud that the oppressor uses in order to disguise the pure evil intent of the ruling class to brutally strip powerless people of their final humanity. The ruling class is not driven by the need for money, land or standing — the ruling class is consumed by the crude lust for power and the need to crush, dominate and deny.

From the mindless rednecks who look at me and my grandchildren with eyes that see only primitive creatures from the bottom of the evolutionary scale, to the political thugs that use the houses of parliament to launch waves of attacks against our people and our communities, they will be forever be blinded by their own hatreds and base needs. I do not fear them. They are empty shells with no spirit or true hearts. What they say with their words and what they carry in their eyes are blunted weapons that can never pierce the armour that was given to me by my grandmothers ...

— *Sam Watson*



Sam Watson (1952-2019) was a Murri activist and Socialist Alliance national spokesperson for Aboriginal rights. Sam was an author, film-maker and playwright, of the Munnenjarl and Biri-Gubba nations, with blood ties to the Kalkadoon and Mapoon peoples through traditional adoption.



Top: Aboriginal Day of Mourning protest in Sydney, January 26, 1938.
Bottom: Far -right “Reclaim Australia” rally, Melbourne, April 3, 2015.



From the First Fleet to Stopping the Boats: Racism & Resistance

By John Tully

1. The Origins of Racism

When the First Fleet sailed into Port Jackson on January 26, 1788, it carried more than the physical paraphernalia for European settlement. Along with tools, agricultural implements, chains, handcuffs, the cat-o'-nine-tails, gunpowder and other such stuff, the colonists brought with them an entrenched world-view. A key component of this was the fast-crystallising ideology of modern, so-called “scientific” racism, which had been spawned by slavery and the needs of the infant capitalist system. This ideology was to shape the social landscape of the new colonial-settler state and was to assume a form so virulent that by 1933 the British fascist leader Oswald Moseley could claim,

I always thought it remarkable that Australia, without studying the fascist political philosophy and methods, so spontaneously developed a form of fascism peculiarly suited to the needs of the British empire.

In fact, 1930s Australia was not a fascist state like Mussolini’s Italy or Nazi Germany. It was a bourgeois democracy with elected governments, the separation of powers, opposition parties and civil society. Leftist parties and trade unions were not illegal. That being said, Moseley’s self-aggrandising claim does contain a kernel of truth because Australia boasted the kind of racist legal and political framework that Hitler would have endorsed. The major political parties, unions, churches and business groups supported both the White Australia Policy and the deprivation of the Aborigines

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of their national, civil, political and social rights.

The White Australia Policy and much of the state apparatus for the repression of Aborigines have since been dismantled, but racism is still deeply embedded in Australian society. Here, and in other capitalist societies, it remains a key component of what Karl Marx called the “ensemble of social relations” that oppress people within the framework of class society. Whatever progress has been made is because of the struggle of Aboriginal people themselves and the agitation of white anti-racist activists. Some examples are outlined later in this pamphlet.

What is racism?

At the outset, we should remember that there is no such thing, objectively, as separate **raees**. ~~There is only the~~ *human race* in all its diversity, in which, as the Black American poet and civil rights leader Maya Angelou reminds us “there is beauty and there is strength”. Although there are still some debates among scholars, recent studies of mitochondrial DNA and the anthropological analysis of ancient human specimens have confirmed the monogenic or “out of Africa” hypothesis; that all human beings are descended from African ancestors.

While Europeans and Asians have between one and four per cent of Neanderthal DNA, and this is lacking in Africans, this does not equate to separate racial origins, nor to innate differences, let alone notions of racial superiority and inferiority. Variations in skin colour, hair, eye shape and so on are due to adaptations to different environments, not to polygenic racial origins as was once widely supposed. Race is a *social construct* rather than a biological category or taxa and we all share a common humanity.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines racism as “prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against someone of a different race based on the belief that one’s own race is superior”. This tells only part of the story. By this definition, the ancient Greeks were racist because they considered the Persians or Egyptians as “barbarians”; peoples of supposedly “inferior” culture. But this, arguably, was chauvinist cultural prejudice rather than racism.

While modern racism includes a whole constellation of mutually reinforcing beliefs of superiority and inferiority, of bigotry, prejudice, stereotyping, xenophobia and so on, what the *OED* definition lacks is any consideration of the structural economic dimensions and roots of racism, which translate into unequal power relations between the “races”. Further, modern racism is based on the false belief that racial differences are innate, or biological, not just cultural or acquired. Such beliefs derived from the economic imperatives of the early capitalist system and have continued ever since.

Around the world, racist ideology has allowed the “masters of the universe” to divide and rule the working class; to delude poor whites that no matter how lowly they are, there are people who are their inferiors; to scapegoat ethnic minorities for the ills of capitalism; to whip up fear of foreigners and minorities using “downwards envy”; to pit the powerless and downtrodden against one another — in sum to prevent the oppressed from uniting in common cause against their exploiters.

One need look no further than the Northern Territory Intervention legislation against Aborigines and the demonisation of asylum seekers for evidence that racism is alive in Australia. While there has been some general progress — for instance the passage of the Racial Discrimination Act so hated by the likes of Tony Abbott and Andrew Bolt — in other ways, the “dead hand of the past” still weighs heavily “on the brains of the living”. Racism is thus an ideology, part of the “superstructure” of capitalist society and as such sometimes has a life of its own separate from its economic base.

In recent times, the “sleep of reason” has begat monsters such as Reclaim Australia and a host of other far right and fascist splinter groups. In the 1990s, Pauline Hanson’s racist One Nation was for a time Australia’s third largest party in terms of votes cast. Hanson claimed to represent everyone except the Asians who were “swamping” Australia and the “Aboriginals” whom she cast as a privileged race. The spectrum of extremist racist ideology also extends into the Coalition parties, with rabidly Islamophobic MPs such as Cory Bernardi and George Christensen operating without rebuke from their leaders. Former Prime Minister John Howard not only refused to condemn Hanson’s racist policies but in fact adopted them; in particular the offshore processing and detention of refugees and asylum seekers. Nor should we forget that it was the Hawke-Keating Labor government that introduced the policy of mandatory detention, and that the Labor Opposition supported the Howard government’s Northern Territory Intervention Act.

On a global level, racism acts to divide workers. Today, as Terry Eagleton reminds us in *Why Marx Was Right*, the world’s largest class is the working class — perhaps two billion strong — and if we add to this the huge numbers of precariously employed Third World slum dwellers and peasants, between them they form the overwhelming bulk of humankind. Together, they could destroy the vile system that now sees 62 individuals own more wealth than the bottom half of humanity. The international working class remains divided, however, by barriers of race, caste, gender, nationality and religion; the recipe for a race to the bottom. Marx and Engels’ ringing call to action, “Workers of the world unite!” was never more urgent than it is today, when globalised capitalism disregards national boundaries and plunders the planet.

Racism, capitalism & slavery

By 1788, when the First Fleet arrived in Australia, most Europeans already took it for granted that they were superior to people with darker skins. Two centuries earlier — at the dawn of the modern age — such attitudes had not been so entrenched. Thus, Shakespeare’s Moorish hero Othello is portrayed despite his dark complexion as an admirable, if tragically flawed figure. This is not to discount the existence of ethnic and/or religious prejudice, such as medieval anti-semitism, which figures in another of Shakespeare’s plays, *The Merchant of Venice*. Religious anti-semitism, also led for example, to the Strasbourg pogrom of 1349. In this frenzy of hate, the city’s Jews were blamed for the Black Death and 2000 of them were burned to death. Such irrational prejudices undoubtedly did provide well-mulched soil in which modern, biological racism could flourish.

By the time the First Fleet sailed from Portsmouth, xenophobia — the fear, mistrust, and scorn of foreigners as a barbarian Other — had transmuted into a doctrine of the innate biological superiority of one part of humankind over others. The roots of the change can be found in the economic base of the new capitalism and its attendant imperialism. As Eric Williams argues in his 1944 book *Capitalism and Slavery*, the slave trade spawned modern, “scientific” racism, and this was reinforced by the growth of industrial capitalism. In a sad irony of history, racist ideology was refined and justified by the writings of a number of the philosophers of the Enlightenment, which will come as a shock to those accustomed to seeing figures such as Locke, Voltaire and Kant as steadfast advocates of universal human rights.

The Enlightenment was contradictory. To the left of Kant were people such as the Alsatian writer and abolitionist Victor Schœlcher and England’s Mary Wollstonecraft, who was labelled “a hyena in petticoats” for her feminism and support of the French Revolution. The “burning voice of France” also inspired Toussaint L’Ouverture to lead a revolution against slavery in Haiti in the French West Indies, whereas Thomas Jefferson, a minor figure of the Enlightenment as well as a leader of the American Revolution, was a slave owner. Toussaint sought Liberty, Fraternity and Equality for both black and white. Wollstonecraft demanded it for women as well as men.

Africa: ‘a warren for the hunting of black skins’

The Atlantic slave trade was enormously lucrative at a time of the “primitive accumulation of capital” for the burgeoning Industrial Revolution. From the 15th century, up to twenty million African slaves were transported, first to Portuguese islands in the Atlantic, and then across the ocean to the Americas. By 1788, the trade was an integral part of the European economy and Africa had become what Marx was

to call “a warren for the hunting of black skins”.

For many parts of Africa, the trade was a demographic and economic catastrophe from which, argues Walter Rodney in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, they have never fully recovered. Slaves were commodities in a trade, but, Rodney continues, “when one tries to measure the effect of European slave trading on the African continent, it is essential to realise that one is measuring the effect of social violence rather than trade in any normal sense of the word”. The resulting debilitation of their societies was then taken as further evidence of African racial inferiority.

The trade was brutal and inhuman. People were bought or captured in the African interior and marched in chains to coastal “slave factories”; places so foul that as C.L.R. James writes in his book *The Black Jacobins*, “no European could stay in them for longer than a quarter of an hour without fainting”. Next they were loaded aboard slave ships for the infamous “middle passage” to the Americas. Perhaps two million died in these floating hell-holes and the survivors were sold on the auction blocks of the slave ports. Once sold, they were put to work as forced labourers in the mines and plantations, or in the houses of their European owners. Contracts spoke of “tons of slaves” and slaves were referred to as “thinking property”. In the sugar plantations of Jamaica, masters debated whether it was more economical to work a slave to death in two, three or five years before buying a replacement.

The produce of the slaves’ labour was shipped to Europe aboard the same vessels that had brought them from Africa. Once “home” in Liverpool, Bristol, Nantes and other ports, their cargoes of cotton, coffee, sugar, molasses, rum, tobacco, indigo and other tropical produce fetched a fine profit. The ships were then re-loaded with manufactured articles for sale in Africa and the American colonies. Together, this three-pronged Atlantic traffic was known as the Triangular Trade.

Capitalism & slavery

The Trade provided much of the seed capital for the Industrial Revolution. C.L.R. James, in his study of the slave colony of Sainte-Domingue (today’s Haiti in the West Indies) argues that slavery was “the economic basis of the French Revolution”. Entrepreneurs seeking capital with which to build the new factories could not suck it from their thumbs. Much of it was provided by revolutionised domestic agriculture, but as Marx pointed out in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, slavery, too, was indispensable during the period of primitive accumulation of capital and beyond:

Direct slavery is just as much the pivot of bourgeois industry as machinery, credits, etc. Without slavery you would have no cotton; without cotton you have no modern industry. It is slavery that has given the colonies their value; it is the colonies that have

created world trade; and it is world trade that is the pre-condition of large scale industry. Despite the best efforts of right-wing historians, Marx's analysis is affirmed by recent research. In his magisterial book *The Making of New World Slavery*, the English Marxist Robin Blackburn estimates that in 1770, during the formative years of the Industrial Revolution, profits from slavery provided between 20.9 and 55% of Britain's gross fixed capital formation. The prosperity of whole cities depended on it, as illustrated by C.L.R. James:

It was a common saying that several of the principal streets of Liverpool had been marked out by the chains, and the walls of the houses cemented by the blood, of the African slaves, and one street was named "Negro Row". The red brick Customs House was blazoned with Negro heads. [Said an actor hissed by a Liverpool audience]: "I have not come here to be insulted by a set of wretches, every brick in whose infernal town is cemented with an African's blood".

And as for Liverpool, so for Bristol, Nantes, and other slave ports, and the former American colonies themselves.

Britain abolished the slave trade in 1807 and slavery itself in 1833. British industry, however — and in particular the Lancashire cotton trade — continued to depend on slavery in the American plantations (and collapsed during the American Civil War). The prosperity of the non-slave states of the US also depended in large part on the sale of commodities to southern slave plantations, and, noted Frederick Engels, "the world trade of the United States was limited mainly to import of immigrants and industrial products, and export of cotton and tobacco, i.e. of the products of southern slave labour".

The Enlightenment & racism

While Europeans generally accepted slavery, it nevertheless sat uneasily on their consciences. How could one justify inflicting such cruelty on fellow human creatures? How did "the Peculiar Institution" sit with the Christian doctrines of the universality of souls? How did slavery square with Enlightenment doctrines, which held that *all* human beings had the right to "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness"?

While hypocrisy and cognitive dissonance helps explain the contradiction, a more satisfactory, materialist, explanation is that the economic system gave birth to the ideology of "scientific" racism. Africans could in good conscience be enslaved *as they were cast as being not fully human*. Voltaire and other key Enlightenment figures proposed a polygenic theory of origins of humanity; arguing that the different "races" did not share a common ancestor. A character in Voltaire's *Candide*, for example, is horrified by the treatment of an African slave, but consoles himself with the belief that

he is not fully human — that he is innately inferior to the whites.* Even after chattel slavery disappeared, racist ideology clung on in the brains of subsequent generations.

The late-17th-Century political philosopher John Locke is revered by many on both sides of the Atlantic as “the Apostle of Liberty”, as the father of political liberalism. Yet Locke served as secretary of a North American slave company and he embroidered on the ancient legal doctrine of Terra Nullius to justify the dispossession of the American Indians. He argued that land did not need to be “empty” and could only be legally owned if it was fenced off and used “productively”. The Indians, who had no concept of private property in land, could have it taken away from them.

The philosopher Immanuel Kant is regarded as a father of modern human rights. Yet in his 1775 book, *On the Different Races of Man*, he identified four separate races — whites, blacks, Kalmucks and Hindustanis — and ranked them from whites downwards in terms of their alleged abilities. Although he later retreated from his more extreme positions, Kant nevertheless clung to the polygenic hypothesis, which held that these races had separate ancestors. Even the great Swedish botanist and zoologist Carl von Linnaeus subscribed to the polygenic hypothesis, but Stephen Jay Gould argues in mitigation that he did not rank them. Nevertheless, support by so many of the Enlightenment “greats” for the hypothesis, and for the ranking of the putative races, did provide a “scientific” underpinning for the new racism.

These theories were further elaborated on throughout the 19th Century and came to form a dense matrix of mutually reinforcing beliefs, texts, dogmas and theories that came to be accepted as fact. The Palestinian writer and activist Edward Said described the resulting discourse as “orientalism” in his book of the same name. Racist ideology was to contribute directly to immeasurable human suffering, including the Irish famine of 1847 and the colonial catastrophes related in Mike Davis’s *Late Victorian Holocausts*; the unspeakable Belgian atrocities in the Congo; and the early 20th century genocide in German South-West Africa, which David Olusoge and Casper Erichsen in *The Kaiser’s Holocaust* argue was a pre-echo of the Nazi genocide in World War II. In Australia, white settlement spelled disaster for the Aboriginal peoples. ■

* For an absorbing discussion of the French Enlightenment and attitudes to Africans, see William B. Cohen, *The French Encounter with Africans: White Response to Blacks, 1530-1880* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003).

2. Australia's Racist History

The white colonists in Australia after 1788 might never have heard of or cared about Voltaire, Kant, or Locke, but their mental universe owed much to them. The government in faraway London might have prescribed vague fair treatment for the Aborigines, but no treaties were ever signed, and Australia was in any case far distant from London. The Aboriginal peoples were regarded as not greatly different from the continent's fauna; as barbarians who did not use the land properly and could therefore with good conscience be evicted from it. Eventually, they were seen in Social Darwinist terms as a dying race unfit for life in the modern world.

It is difficult to exaggerate the disaster that befell the Aborigines. For them, as for the indigenous peoples of the Americas, white settlement was "a horror story, not an epic". The population declined steeply as a result of hardship, disease, alcohol, heartbreak at dispossession of their country and loss of family, forced labour, and massacres.

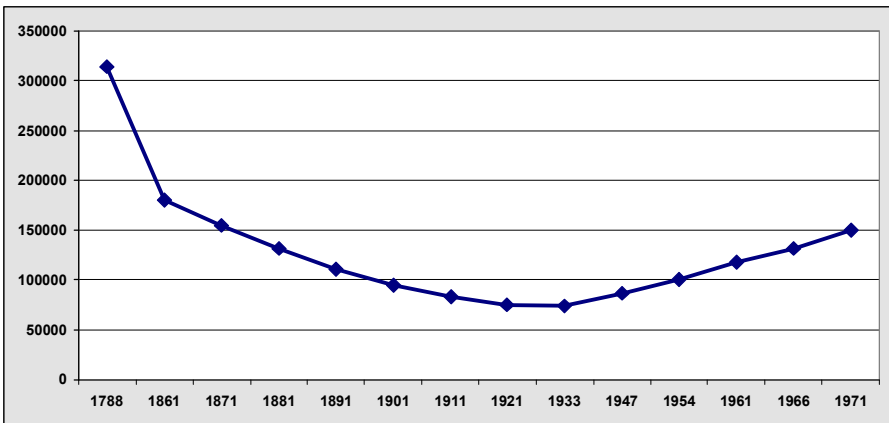
While most massacres went unrecorded, a short list includes: Cape Grim, Tasmania, 1828; Convincing Ground, Victoria, 1833-34; Pinjarra, WA, 1834; Waterloo Creek, NSW, 1838; Murdering Gully, Vic., 1839; Campaspe Plains, Vic., 1839; Gippsland, Vic., 1840-50; Flying Foam, WA, 1868; Mowla Bluff, WA, 1916; and Forrest River, WA, 1928. The Myall Creek massacre in NSW in 1838 was unusual in that seven of the white murderers were hanged. In other cases, the perpetrators got off scot-free and the authorities were often involved, including at Convincing Ground, where up to 200 Aborigines were murdered by settlers under the direction of the governor.

The first recorded massacre of the 20th Century took place at the Mowla Bluff station, near Geegully Creek in the remote Kimberley district, some 140 kilometres south of Derby, in 1916. One day, exasperated by the station manager's brutality and perhaps chafing at the second-rate wages and conditions and daily humiliations they endured, a group of Aboriginal stockmen turned on their tormentor and beat him up. In response, an armed white mob, which included government officials, rounded up between 300 and 400 local Aboriginal men, women and children and shot them to death. Only a handful escaped. No one was punished.

Ten years later, on the Forrest River in the Kimberleys at a place the Aborigines call Oombulgurri, a second mass murder took place. Earlier, two returned white servicemen had been granted a farm on land excised by the state government from an Aboriginal reservation. By 1926, the region was in the grip of severe drought. With game in short supply, the Aborigines took to spearing the whites' cattle in order to survive. The land had been theirs, but they were forbidden by law from entering it. In the course of an altercation with the Aborigines, one of the white graziers, a man called Hay, was killed. A pogrom followed, with armed police and vigilantes rounding up any Aborigines they came across. Many were shot down in cold blood and although there are conflicting estimates of the numbers, at least twenty Aborigines were killed. This time, a Royal Commission investigated the killings but once again nobody was charged for the crime.

Another massacre of Aborigines took place near Coniston Cattle Station in Central Australia in the summer and autumn of 1928. After a white dingo hunter called Fred Brooks was killed as a result of a personal dispute with an Aboriginal man, the station manager, Randall Stafford, embarked on a bloody purge of the locality. When the killing ended, the official death count stood at 31. Stafford himself claimed twice the number and other estimates vary between 110 and 170.

Estimates of the Aboriginal "contact population" in 1788 vary from a low of around 314,000 to 750,000 or even one million, but whatever figure one chooses, the steep decline in numbers meant that a holocaust occurred. Although many deaths were due



Minimum estimates of the Indigenous population of Australia, 1788-1971. (Source: <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/3105.0.65.0012006?OpenDocument>.)

to imported diseases such as smallpox, measles, influenza — and even chickenpox against which Aboriginal people had no resistance — these deaths took place within an overall context of dispossession, poverty, debilitation and despair. By the 1920s, there were perhaps 21,000 Aborigines in the whole country and governments and the press waffled sanctimoniously of “smoothing the pillow of a dying race”. The chart on the previous page illustrates the size of the catastrophe, bearing in mind that the contact population estimate is very conservative.

Resistance

Yet we should be wary of seeing the Aboriginal peoples simply as victims. They resisted as best they could in an unequal struggle against much greater numbers of people armed with vastly superior weaponry. One incident in the frontier wars has received widespread attention: the Cullin-la-ringo Massacre or Wills Tragedy that took place in 1861 in Queensland, in which 19 settlers lost their lives. The settlers had arrived on Aboriginal land in an enormous bullock train with a flock of 10,000 sheep. After the massacre, the police and vigilantes killed 60 to 70 of an Aboriginal band of up to 300, only desisting from the slaughter when ammunition ran low. In Van Diemen’s Land, the Aboriginal peoples waged a guerrilla war between 1826 and 1831 and only accepted peace terms after a negotiated settlement that historian Henry Reynolds argues in his book *Fate of a Free People* amounted to a treaty, alas never honoured.

It is a testament to the resilience of the Aboriginal peoples that they did not die out as forecast — and probably hoped for — by the white authorities. Instead, from the 1920s to the present, their numbers have steadily grown and the spirit of resistance has never died — a point to which we shall return later in this narrative.

‘Roll up! Roll up! No Chinese!’

Thieves tend to worry lest someone stronger comes along to rob them. A leitmotiv of paranoia has always run through white Australian society. Early fear of the French faded, only to be replaced by terror of the “Yellow Peril” from the 1840s when Chinese immigrants began to appear in Australia. Many of the early arrivals came as indentured labourers, imported by employers wishing to undercut existing wages and conditions. The Chinese were accused of “stealing jobs” that properly belonged to white men. Whites were also worried about the apparent industriousness of Chinese miners working on the gold diggings. Soon, there were disturbances of the Victorian and NSW goldfields. At Lambing Flat west of Sydney in 1861, mobs of whites drove Chinese miners from the diggings, imbued with venomous racial hatred, chanting “Roll up! Roll up no Chinese!” (and waving the Eureka flag, it should be noted).

While the Eureka Rebellion of 1854 on the Victorian goldfields is generally remembered as an impetus for democratic government it was also a pivotal event in the development of the White Australia Policy. By the 1850s, there were 40,000 of the 150,000 people on the goldfields were Chinese, and they faced rising race prejudice. As is well-known, in 1855, after the rebellion, the Gold Fields Commission recommended extending the voting franchise to licensed miners. Forgotten, however, is the Commission's view that the Chinese were "a pagan and inferior" race whose presence had contributed to the white miners' revolt.

Such sentiments led to the call for the restriction of Chinese immigration and for their exclusion from the institutions and rights of white Australians. Not surprisingly, the early labour movement was not immune. "Non-whites" were forbidden membership of trade unions — most notoriously the Australian Workers' Union (AWU) from its formation in 1890 — and Chinese were excluded from "white" jobs. The justification was that "non-whites" would work for substandard wages and conditions, as in Banjo Paterson's doggerel verse,

I asked a bloke for shearin' once along the Marthaguy:

"We shear non-union here", says he: "I call it scab" says I.

I looked along the shearin' floor before I turned to go —

There were eight or ten dashed Chinamen a-shearin' in a row.

From its inception in 1890, the AWU was a "whites-only" outfit and in 1911 it prevailed upon Labor Prime Minister Andrew Fisher to grant "absolute preference" to white unionists and to call on employers to sack non-whites. In 1878, the Seamen's Union of Australia waged a bitter strike for the exclusion of Chinese labour. Such demands had nothing to do with maintaining wages and conditions and were motivated solely by racism. The strikers gained wide public support, with tens of thousands flocking to rallies. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that

public meetings have been held in Sydney, and in various towns in the interior, and resolutions, disapproving of any influx of Chinese into the colony, have been passed, with others, which have lauded the action of the seamen in breaking their agreements with the ASN [Australasian Steam Navigation] Company, and leaving their ships, as that of men who were leading ... a great struggle against the liberties and distinctive British character of the Australian people being destroyed by the introduction of an alien and inferior race.

The report noted that coalminers in Newcastle were "unanimous" in their support for the strikers. (We should remember, however, that the Australian miners' and seamen's unions were later to take principled internationalist, anti-racist stands.) Thereafter, state governments legislated to exclude Chinese workers. One example of this was the

1906 Licensing Factories and Shops Act in Victoria, against which the Chinese barrister William Ah Ket tirelessly, but fruitlessly agitated.

Sometimes the justification is offered that “everyone was racist back then”, but this is refuted by the example of such unions as the United Mine Workers of America. Formed in the same year as the AWU, the UMWA’s constitution declared that “No local union or assembly is justified in discriminating against any person in securing or retaining work because of their African descent”. Not surprisingly, such miners were among its most militant members, belying the claims of racist unions that they were natural scabs.

The Australian unions’ colour bar included Aboriginal workers. Until the Darwin Communist Party activist George Gibbs won the leadership of the North Australian Workers’ Union in 1946, the NAWU excluded all “coloureds”, including Aborigines, from membership. They were thus condemned to work for a fraction of award wages — and then condemned by those who excluded them for doing so!

Blackbirding

Racist dogma also insisted that whites could not perform heavy manual labour in the tropics. This presented something of a conundrum for white employers and they cast their eyes overseas for a source of cheap labour. From the 1860s, some 60,000 South Sea Islanders — the so-called Kanakas — were brought to Queensland from the Solomons and other islands as indentured labourers to work the sugar cane fields. The system was known as “blackbirding” and the human traffickers as “blackbirders”.

The indentured labour system was common across the colonial world, from the Guianas to Mauritius, and from Vietnam to New Caledonia and the Dutch East Indies. Introduced after the abolition of direct chattel slavery to provide cheap and powerless workforces, it was, as Frederick Engels observed, “little more than disguised slavery”. Labourers were bound by contract to work a certain number of years for stipulated pay rates before they were theoretically free to leave. They were forbidden to form or join trade unions (even if they would have been admitted) and often had the price of their passage deducted from their miserable wages. This frequently resulted in them having no choice but to sign on again after the expiration of their contracts. Work discipline was harsh, living conditions poor, and hours long.

Many of the Islanders brought to Queensland were tricked or taken by force aboard the blackbirders’ ships. The trade ended, ironically, because of the White Australia Policy. White unionists campaigned against it not out of solidarity but because they believed the indentured labourers were taking their jobs and forcing down wages. No thought was given to the possibility of recruiting the islanders to the unions. After

the Pacific Islands Labourers' Act was passed in 1901, most of the islanders were repatriated to their homelands, although some 4000 of their descendants remain today, mainly in the Bundaberg region.

New Guinea: 'Really rather like slavery'

Australians have always been remarkably reluctant to admit that their former possessions in New Guinea were colonies, preferring to use circumlocutions such as "overseas territories" instead. Similarly, apart from knowing a little about battles against the Japanese along the Kokoda Trail during the Second World War, Australians are largely ignorant of the facts of Australian rule on the island. In 1906, the British ceded control of Papua — "the first grandchild of Empire" — to Australia. In 1914, Australian troops occupied German New Guinea and administered it thereafter as a League of Nations "mandate".

Although apartheid is generally associated with the white supremacist regime in South Africa, Australia earlier imposed it in Papua and New Guinea. Papuans were subjected to a battery of racist laws and ordinances. As this writer has noted elsewhere, these included "a strict curfew; a prohibition on singing, dancing, playing cards, and gambling; a ban on the consumption of alcohol and kava and staying overnight in towns; [and] the institution of whites-only parks, beaches, swimming pools and cinemas." Further, there were bans on marriage or sexual relations across the "colour line" and even prescriptions on what clothing "natives" could wear. Papuan law-breakers suffered much harsher penalties than whites for the same offences. The Europeans referred to Papuan children as "monkeys", women as "Marys" and men as "boys", although when they reached 40 or so they morphed into "grandfathers". The system was not dismantled until the early 1960s at the insistence of the United Nations and because Canberra feared embarrassment at the hands of the Soviet Union.

The Papuan colonies were rich in minerals and other raw materials, but employers found it impossible to recruit Papuans for work in the mines and plantations. As in Queensland, racist dogma prevented whites from performing heavy, unskilled work and the White Australia Policy forbade the importation of Asian "coolies". Sir Hubert Murray, the first Australian Lieutenant-Governor of the colony, decided that the "lazy natives" would be compelled to work. He achieved this by means of a head tax imposed on all adult Papuan males.

As the Papuans lived largely outside of the cash economy, they would either have to produce cash crops for export or work for the whites on fixed-term contracts to raise the money to pay the taxes. By 1941, almost half a million tax-bonded labourers were toiling for the whites. In an address to the Anti-Slavery Society in London,

Murray admitted candidly that the tax bondage system was “really rather like slavery”. Remarkably, his listeners gave him a round of applause and commended him for his honesty.

The labourers’ living and working conditions were governed by a draconian Native Labour Ordinance, which mandated heavy penalties for “absconders”, insubordination, combinations for better pay, and so on. Papuan labourers could not leave their employers’ service without permission. In many cases, they were paid in worthless trinkets. The head taxes were of course deducted from their wages and paid directly to the colonial government, which used them to develop the colonies for the benefit of the whites. As the taxes were payable for the working lifespan of the Papuan men, they had little choice but to sign on again and again after the expiration of their contracts.

The system devastated traditional Papuan society. Historian John Decker observed that the coming of the Europeans “has been followed by the pathetic melting away of the native population” and the anthropologist Pitt-Rivers sorrowed at the “profound loss of interest in life” among the villagers; an apathy that had never existed before white rule. The effects of the cruel system remain to this day.

The White Australia Policy

The examples given above demonstrate beyond doubt that modern racism has its roots in the economic system of capitalism. Racism is not mere prejudice or xenophobia—the dislike of people from another culture. It is an ideology based on maintaining unequal power relations between what are seen as “races”. That ideology was officially codified in Australia in one of the first acts of the new federal parliament, meeting in 1901. Racism was a central plank, along with industrial arbitration system, of the social compact drawn up between representatives of the Australian employing class and the white working class.

At the core of that accord was the Immigration Restriction Act. Colloquially known as the White Australia Policy, it banned or restricted “non-white” immigration into the country. Out of fear of offending Japan, then a British ally, the act was less than explicit in words but the meaning was clear. It provided that immigration officials could exclude from entry any person they deemed to be insufficiently white by administering to them a dictation test in any European language. Officials also sometimes ruled on a person’s race by putting a pen in his or her hair; if the hair was woolly and the pen remained in place, the would-be immigrant could be deemed non-white and excluded.

Less well-known is the underlying reason why Australia has never had a constitutional bill of rights. As former High Court Judge Michael Kirby reminds us, a

proposal for such a bill was defeated by 23 votes to 19 at a constitutional convention before federation. The delegates feared that “a due process provision in such a bill of rights would undermine the discriminatory powers of the law ... including practices which disadvantaged Aboriginal people and the Chinese in Australia.”

From time to time, Italians and Maltese were deemed insufficiently white by the equivalent of today's Border Force. In 1934, farcically, the anti-fascist Czech activist and writer Egon Kisch, who spoke a number of languages fluently including English, was barred entry after he failed a dictation test in Scots Gaelic. Four years later, on the eve of the Second World War, the conservative federal government denied entry to all but a token number of Jewish refugees frantic to escape Hitler's Germany. The Australian delegate to the 1938 Evian Conference on Jewish refugees, Trade Minister Colonel Thomas White, declared that Australia could not take in a horde of “unassimilable Hebrews”. White could not have foreseen the Nazi death camps, but he abandoned Jewish asylum seekers to whatever fate Hitler chose to inflict on them. How much has changed today, when a new crop of politicians continues to treat asylum seekers as criminals?

The White Australia Policy was finally dismantled in 1973 and a number of laws passed to outlaw racial discrimination. Multiculturalism became official policy during the Whitlam government 40 years ago. It was only after the 1967 referendum that “aboriginal natives” were counted as inhabitants of their own country. In 1965, they were finally allowed to vote in Queensland state elections. In 1975, Labor Prime Minister granted the Gurindji people freehold to a portion of their ancestral lands, and this was followed by land rights legislation. In 2008, Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd officially apologised to the Stolen Generations at a parliamentary sitting boycotted by six Coalition MPs and Senators. In 2011, far-right commentator Andrew Bolt was found guilty of breaching the Racial Discrimination Act.

But while some things have changed, we should not overestimate what has been achieved, and we are in grave danger of sliding ever backwards. Twenty-three years ago, Paul Keating delivered his famous Redfern Speech “just a mile or two from the place where the first European settlers landed” on this continent. White settlement had brought “devastation and demoralisation to Aboriginal Australia” he said and admitted that “it continues to be our failure”. It is not the only continuing failure.

Mandatory detention: designed to degrade & oppress

The world today faces the greatest refugee crisis since the Second World War. As of June 2015, some 59.5 million people are either internally displaced or have fled their homelands. The greatest single source of refugees and asylum seekers is the Middle

East, from which millions of people have fled war, famine, terror and genocide.

In 2003, the “Coalition of the Willing”, invaded Iraq, alleging that the Saddam Hussein regime was plotting to use weapons of mass destruction and was allied to the Al Qaida terrorist gangs. Millions of people around the world protested what was a massive war crime and warned that the invasion would lead to an endless spiral of war and destruction. They were right. At least a million Iraqis died and millions were displaced. The state collapsed and the Islamist terrorists, who had had minimal support prior to the invasion, spilled over the border into Syria and have metastasised into a global threat.

Questioned about his role in the criminal invasion, former Australian Prime Minister John Howard has refused to accept any blame for the ongoing disaster. Worse still, successive Australian governments have demonised asylum seekers, many of whom have fled the Middle East. This is in violation of the United Nations Convention on Refugees to which Australia is a signatory. The convention states that it is not illegal for persons fleeing persecution to seek arrive and seek protection, but both major parties have treated asylum seekers as criminals, and have adopted the Pauline Hanson One Nation policy of indefinite offshore detention and permanent exclusion.

According to the Australian Human Rights Commission, as of November 30, 2015, there were 1852 people in immigration detention centres, along with 585 in “community detention” in Australia. There are also 543 detainees in the Nauru camp (including 70 children) and a further 926 on Manus Island. Some 426 asylum seekers and refugees have been in custody for over two years. The government has also illegally turned back an unknown number of asylum seeker boats, refusing to give any details of “operational on water matters” to hide what amounts to piracy and infringement of the law of the sea.

Since 2014, doctors and other health workers in the camps have been unable to fulfil their ethical and professional obligations to report ill-treatment of detainees. To do so, they risk prosecution and imprisonment for up to two years. Doctors and other professionals, unsurprisingly, have slammed conditions in the camps and pointed out that they are *designed* to humiliate and punish detainees.

This antipodean gulag and the “turn back the boats” operations are directed by a “three-star general” (whatever that may be), with a revamped staff known as Border Force. The system threatens to poison the Australian body politic. In August 2015, Border Force attempted to mount a search and detain operation outside Melbourne’s Flinders Street station. Novelist Richard Flanagan expressed the anger of many when he wrote,

this goon squad — formerly public servants, lately militarised at considerable taxpayer

expense, given guns, the power to detain people, vaguely fascistic uniforms and a mandate that seems to not recognise the laws of their own country — were, we now told, mounting a large operation on Melbourne CBD streets, “speaking with any individual we cross paths with”.

The goons’ operation was disrupted by angry demonstrators who responded to calls on social media to converge on the city. The chances are that Border Force will be back. Meanwhile, the suffering of asylum seekers continues despite the replacement of brutal hard-liner Tony Abbott with the allegedly more humane Malcolm Turnbull as prime minister.

Two individual tragedies

Two recent individual tragedies illustrate the continuing cost of Australian racism.

In August 2015, a 22-year-old Aboriginal woman, known only as Ms Dhu at her relatives’ request, died in a police cell in Port Hedland. She had been detained for non-payment of fines and became seriously ill while in custody. She was denied the medical treatment white Australians take for granted and she died. She was the latest victim of a national disgrace.

Between 1980 and 2007, 379 Aborigines died in custody; or 18% of all such deaths; a grossly disproportionate figure given that Aborigines make up only 2.3% of the total Australian population. In 1987, the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody made 330 recommendations for change. Very few have been implemented and the deaths continue as part of a wider picture of oppression and neglect. Despite the politicians’ glib rhetoric, Aboriginal people to this day suffer Third World conditions in a rich First World country. In 2007, the federal government implemented the Northern Territory Intervention Act after suspending the provisions of the Racial Discrimination Act, ignoring the criticism of the United Nations and global human rights agencies.

In the second individual tragedy, six months before Ms Dhu’s lonely death Reza Barati, a 23-year-old Kurdish asylum seeker from Iran died following disturbances at the Australian government’s detention centre on Manus Island. By all accounts, Reza was a gentle and courteous young man who had offended no one. He had fled persecution in Iran and had arrived by boat, asking for protection, as was his right in international law. Instead, he was locked up like a criminal and kicked to death by camp guards.

A key witness to the murder, detainee Benham Satrah, fears for his life after being stalked by G4S guards at the camp. Whether justice will be done remains to be seen, but in any case the root cause of the blame lies with successive Australian governments

who have incarcerated thousands like Reza and Benham over the past 20 years under the illegal, bipartisan, and racist policy of mandatory detention. A Senate enquiry concluded that Reza's death was "eminently foreseeable" and that the Australian government had "failed in its duty ... to protect Reza Barati".

'Pardon me for being born into a nation of racists'

Reza and Ms Dhu's misfortune was to have been born without the "right" complexion and culture. Aboriginal activist Gary Foley's words at a 1971 anti-apartheid protest still have grave resonance: "Pardon me for being born into a nation of racists".

Today, the leaders of both major parties, along with public opinion makers, are touting constitutional recognition of Aboriginal people as a panacea for the ills facing Aboriginal people. Messrs Turnbull and Shorten have not asked the Aboriginal people what they want and they studiously avoid all mention of the blindingly obvious need to start to redress past and present wrongs by negotiating under international supervision a just and binding treaty, or treaties, with Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. It is a matter of sovereignty, not vague recognition. We have gone full circle from the White Australia Policy and "smoothing the pillow of a dying race" to "stopping the boats". African slavery, the economic imperative that spawned modern racism, has gone, but the ideology is tenacious. ■

3. Aboriginal Resistance

Man is the highest being for man, hence with the categorical imperative to overthrow all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved forsaken, despicable being — conditions which can hardly be better described than in the exclamation of a Frenchman on the occasion of a proposed tax upon dogs: “Wretched dogs! They want to treat you like men!” — Karl Marx, 1844

After 1788, Aborigines waged a dogged struggle against the European settlers and officials who took their land. It was an unequal fight, but resistance has continued down through the generations. By the early 20th Century, Aboriginal numbers had declined to such an extent that Europeans predicted extinction, coating the ugly reality with saccharine words reminiscent of a hospice. Had the Aborigines died out, it would have been a self-fulfilling prophecy of the Europeans. As we have seen, in 1916 and 1928, three appalling massacres of Aborigines took place at Mowla Station and Forrest River in West Australia, and Coniston in the Northern Territory, either led by local police or with their connivance. The killings — which went unpunished — might have discouraged resistance, but in 1946 Aboriginal stockmen in the Pilbara went on strike and this was followed by other strikes across northern Australia supported by white socialists.

In 1938, the sesquicentenary of the First Fleet, the Aborigines’ League declared a Day of Mourning. From 1992, Aborigines have scorned Australia Day in a series of Invasion or Survival Day events. From the 1960s, Aborigines and their white supporters staged a series of Freedom Rides through racist country towns to demand justice and equality. In 1975, following a nine-year strike, the Whitlam Labor government granted freehold title to the Gurindji people at Wave Hill on a portion of land bought in 1914 by Lord Vestey. The first Land Rights Act was passed in 1976 and in 1992 the Mabo decision by the High Court overturned the legal fiction of Terra Nullius, which had held that Australia was an empty land at the time of white conquest. None of this would have been possible without the dogged persistence of Aboriginal activists, but despite their achievements, the struggle for justice continues.

The Pilbara Strike of 1946-49

On May Day 1946, over 800 Aboriginal workers walked off the job on 27 sheep stations spread over 10,000 square kilometres of the remote Pilbara region of northwest Australia. They were joined by other Aboriginal workers in the towns of Port Hedland and Marble Bar. The date of the walk-off, which coincided with International Labour Day, was significant, for it was only the second recorded instance of industrial action by an indigenous workforce since 1788. The Pilbara strike was to prove an epic struggle, which only ended in August 1949 in a partial victory. Even then, a number of strikers refused to return to work for the white man.

Earlier, in 1936, Torres Strait Islanders working on pearl luggers had struck. Their demands were twofold: cash wages instead of payment in Queensland Aboriginal Protection Board scrip, and self-government for the Torres Strait and the Papuan colonies. The Queensland authorities responded with mass arrests, despite Australia being a signatory to the ILO charter, which supposedly guaranteed freedom of association and the right to strike.

Until the 1920s, Aboriginal stockmen in West Australia were paid entirely in kind, with rations of tobacco, flour, sugar, tea, clothing, and other domestic necessities. Under government regulations, they were supposed to receive free medical care, but the provision was seldom enforced. Housing was provided by the employers but it was of an abysmal standard: corrugated iron humpies with dirt floors, no lighting, running water, sanitation, cooking facilities or furniture. After the 1920s, payments in kind were supplemented for some workers by a small wage. This wage was set at a fraction of the wage for white stockmen performing exactly the same work. *Indeed it was illegal for Aboriginal workers to receive equal pay and it was illegal for them to leave their employment.* In short, they were forced labourers, despite the fact that the British Empire had formally abolished slavery in 1833 and in spite of ILO principles by which Australia was supposedly bound.

By 1942, the Pilbara workers had had enough. The representatives of the workers met secretly at Skull Creek — the site of yet another massacre of Aborigines — and debated what could be done. The meeting was a masterpiece of what would later be called multiculturalism, with speakers of 23 different languages present. Also invited was a remarkable white man called Don McLeod, who was regarded as an “honorary blackfellow” because of his support for Aboriginal rights. They decided to strike, but with remarkable forbearance they agreed to postpone the action until the war was over, probably out of fear that the government to claim that the strikers were sabotaging the war effort.

Don McLeod was 38 years-old at the time the strike began. A former miner, he

was AWU delegate on the Port Hedland wharf and, significantly, a member of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA). McLeod was born in the outback and early in life developed a burning passion for justice for the Aboriginal people, and sustained it throughout his long life. As the National Museum's Jan Richardson writes McLeod "lived out his commitment in the very harshest of physical and political environments, and developed phenomenal powers of endurance while mostly existing at the subsistence level of the Aboriginal community that he joined for the long struggle".

Initially, the police, the Native Affairs Commissioner, the pastoralists and the state Labor government in faraway Perth refused to take the strike seriously. Blinded by racist contempt, they believed that "the Abos" were incapable of organising over so vast an area. In one instance, the police invaded a strikers' camp near Marble Bar and shot their dogs; a common "sport" for the racist constables.

McLeod's dedication was matched by that of the Aboriginal organisers, who included Peter Coppin, Clancy McKenna and Dooley Bin Bin. With Dooley acting as a travelling organiser, McLeod agreed to act as chief negotiator. When it dawned on the authorities that the strike was solid, they responded by arresting the key leaders. McKenna, Dooley and McLeod were clapped in the Port Hedland gaol but the police let them go when 400 strikers converged on the town.

McLeod was arrested over and over again, reviled as a "commo" and a "nigger lover", but his commitment, and that of the strikers as a whole, did not falter. An attempt by the State government to buy off the strikers with a small wage increase also failed, and they settled in for the duration in a strike camp at Twelve Mile Creek. Support for the strikers spread to white trade unionists. The Seamen's Union black-banned all Pilbara wool, and seven federal unions and four state Trades and Labour Councils backed the strikers. Mass meetings of support were held in Perth to pressure the government to negotiate.

In March 1949, there were mass arrests and predictable red-baiting, but the strike had become an embarrassment to the authorities. In August the Native Affairs Commissioner backed down and agreed to grant the strikers a number of their key demands. This ended the longest industrial strike in Australian history to that point.

The progressive role of the Communist Party

The CPA had played an important part in the Pilbara strike. Not only was Don McLeod a central leader on the ground, but the party worked tirelessly to build support for the strikers in the trade unions and the general community. The party had also played a key role in support for the Torres Strait Islanders' strike in 1936 and was again to do so in industrial disputes at Berrimah and elsewhere between 1950 and 1955. The trade

unions had long refused to admit Aborigines, but CPA activists strove hard against the colour bar.

A breakthrough came in 1946, when a left ticket headed by CPA members won control of the North Australian Workers' Union (NAWU), changed the rules to admit Aborigines and vowed to fight for equal pay and conditions and to "abolish discriminatory Aboriginal ordinances". In the same period, CPA activists in the NSW and Victorian Trades and Labour Councils, individual unions and the ACTU fought hard for an end to discriminatory policies. They had an uphill battle against conservative Labor Party politicians and union officials, who remained wedded to the White Australia Policy and whites-only unions. The NAWU was rebuffed when it approached the Chifley Labor government in 1946 to end discrimination and the Arbitration Commission upheld the status quo regarding Aboriginal pay and conditions.

Bob Broughton has pointed out there was a strong correlation between anti-communism and racism in Australia. Many years later, the party's role in the Aboriginal struggle has been downplayed by liberal academics and "mainstream", pro-ALP writers. Indeed, the *Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia* has no entries for the CPA, communism or communists and even when individuals who were members are listed, their party membership is not mentioned.* They have fallen into a "memory hole" that would not be out of place in Orwell's dystopian classic, *1984*. In fact, the CPA — along with smaller Marxist organisations — played an honourable role in the struggle for racial justice. Despite the stain of Stalinism that disfigured the party, it swam courageously against the racist current — something that cannot be said for the conservative ALP politicians and union officials of the day. In this, the CPA broke with earlier leftist groupings such as the Australian Socialist League and the Victorian Socialist Party, which had been lukewarm in their anti-racism and included many racists in their ranks.

From its foundation in 1920, the CPA was committed to anti-racism — although the term was not used at the time. From the mid-1920s, the party newspaper, *Workers' Weekly*, attacked the ALP's racism and drew attention to the bloody history of white settlement and ongoing deprivation, forced labour and other ills. When Jock Garden and the other Sydney "Trades Hall Reds" affiliated the Labor Council to the Pan-Pacific Trades Union Secretariat, whose membership embraced "non-whites" in China

* Bob Broughton, "The Communist Party of Australia's involvement in the struggle for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' rights, 1920-1970", in R. Markey (ed.), *Labour and Community: Historical Essays* (Wollongong: University of Wollongong Press, 2001), pp.263-294. I am indebted to Dr Broughton for information in this section of this booklet.

and other countries, ALP union officials were shocked and angered. The CPA was a century ahead of its time when, in 1928, it insisted that Aborigines were not just a subset of the Australian population, but an oppressed nation. Three years later, the party platform included the following progressive demands: the abolition of forced labour; the abolition of the Aboriginal protection boards and similar; equal pay and conditions; an end to the colour bar in trade unions and other organisations; and the creation of independent Aboriginal republics and sovereignty for Papua and New Guinea.

The Wave Hill or Kalkarindji Strike

Seventeen years after the Pilbara strike, and 38 years after the Coniston massacre, 200 Gurindji stockmen and domestic servants walked off the Wave Hill station. The strike, which was to last until 1975, became one of the most celebrated industrial struggles in Australian history. The Gurindji people had grievances similar to those of the Pilbara strikers. They had been forced off their traditional homelands as early as 1883 to make way for white cattle stations. The new owners denuded the land of game as it reduced feed for their livestock, which also polluted the waterholes. The Gurindji's food stocks ran low but they faced brutal frontier "justice" if they dared kill and eat any of the white men's cattle. They had little choice but to work on the station for little more than their keep.

In 1914, the British businessman Lord Vestey bought the land and soon gained a reputation even among hard-nosed outback employers as a brutal exploiter of Aboriginal workers. Wave Hill was remote so Vestey's could get away with paying even below the rock-bottom legal wages for the Aboriginal staff. In contrast, Vestey's white workers lived in comfortable houses and were paid vastly higher wages.

On August 23, 1966, the Gurindji, led by Vincent Lingiari and with the assistance of the NAWU's Aboriginal organiser, Dexter Daniels, walked off the job. They were able to muster formidable support "down South", particularly after the communist writer Frank Hardy published his famous book, *The Unlucky Australians*, to publicise the strike.

It soon became apparent to Hardy and others that the strike was not purely about substandard wages and conditions. Lingiari told Hardy, "I bin thinkin' this bin Gurindji country. We bin here longa time before them Vestey mob". This was a fight to reclaim their stolen land. Lingiari appealed to the governor-general to intervene, but was rebuffed. Peter Nixon, the minister for the interior at the time, told the Gurindji that if they wanted land, they should save up and buy it! This prompted Vincent Lingiari to sit down with the white singer Ted Egan to write the famous song "Poor Bugger Me", which contains the stinging riposte:

Poor bugger blackfeller Gurindji
 Suppose we buyim back country
 What you reckon proper fee?
 Might be flour, sugar and tea
 From the Gurindji to Lord Vestey?
 Oh poor bugger me.

The strike concluded on August 16, 1975, when Labor Prime Minister Gough Whitlam famously poured a symbolic handful of earth into Vincent's hands and stated "this land will be in the possession of you and your children forever". It was the fitting end to a struggle that shook the white establishment and turned a blinding spotlight on the curse of racism in Australia.

Racism: an ugly curse

Racism is ugly. It degrades, exploits and humiliates those it deems racially inferior. It also debases the perpetrators and corrupts the societies in which it thrives; by denying the humanity of the oppressed, the oppressors negate their own humanity. We have, as Karl Marx would term it, a categorical imperative to struggle against such a cancer on the planet. In this regard, the revolutionary left can hold its collective head high. Long before white liberals discovered the oppression of Aborigines, communists such as Don McLeod were struggling against it in concert with Aboriginal rebels such as Clancy McKenna and Dooley Bin Bin. Their struggle continues. In Dorothy Hewett's deceptively simple, but inspiring words:

Clancy and Dooley and Don McLeod
 Walk by the wurlies when the wind is loud.
 And their voice is new as the fresh sap running,
 And we keep on fighting and we keep on coming.*

Indeed we will. ■

* Dorothy Hewett, ed. William Grono, *Collected Poems, 1940-1995* (South Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1995). Wurlies are Aboriginal huts made of bark, branches and leaves.

Where Does the Threat of Racism Come From?

By Tony Iltis

On the weekend of July 18 and 19 there was another round of right-wing Reclaim Australia (RA) protests.

The stated aim of RA and its offshoot, the United Patriots Front (UPF), was to defend what they call “Australian values” from the threat of “Islamicisation”.

According to their placards — to the extent that they could be deciphered from the comically mangled and misspelt English that seems to be the trademark of the speak-English-or-die brigade — Australia is under threat from “creeping Sharia law” manifested in companies being allowed to get food Halal certified and from “terrorism” manifested in Muslims being allowed to live in Australia.

“Political correctness”, the left, the ABC and the term “racist” being used to describe people opposed to non-white immigration were also on their list of threats to the Australian way of life.

As was the case at previous national protests in April, they were heavily outnumbered by anti-racist counter protests. While in April this was mainly due to a large turnout of anti-racists in Melbourne, this time the anti-racists were in the majority in most big cities.

Police bias in favour of racists

One thing that shocked many counter-protesters was the blatant partisanship of the police in favour of the anti-Muslim protesters. This was despite RA and UPF supporters having made their intention to be violent clear on social media, to the extent of boasting that they would bring weapons to the protests.

In Melbourne — where the counter-protests were largest, outnumbering the RA/UPF by about 20 to one — police reserved the steps of parliament house for the racists. Frequent attempts by RA/UPF to charge the anti-racist crowds with the intention of starting brawls were mainly unhindered by police, who were photographed cavorting with the racists.

At the same time horse charges, snatch squads and indiscriminate use of pepper spray was used against the anti-racists. They even sprayed the Melbourne Street Medics who were attempting to provide first aid to those already injured. In one incident police sprayed medics and a protester they were attempting to treat who was already unconscious as a result of having been sprayed.

In Sydney, police were less violent but the same bias was apparent. After being forcibly moved from the top of Martin Place, with five protesters arrested — most of them Aboriginal activists — the anti-racists were effectively kettled by police and prevented from moving in the general direction of the RA/UPF protest. This was also the direction of the nearest train station.

However, racist provocateurs, who tried to charge through the anti-racist crowd, were assisted in doing so by police.

Media racist bias

Equally partisan was the mainstream media coverage. RA/UPF claims to represent the concerns of “ordinary Australians” were taken at face value, despite their blatantly racist placards, some of which were adorned with neo-Nazi symbols, and the documented links between RA and UPF with known neo-Nazi groups and individuals, some of whom sported swastika tattoos at the protests.

Media coverage focused heavily on the presence of non-white migrants in the RA crowd. These were members of the Catch the Fire/Rise Up Australia movement. This outfit is in fact not racist — their bigotry is religious.

They are an extreme Christian fundamentalist group, who despise feminists and LGBTI people as well as believers in non-Christian religions such as Islam. They are famous for blaming natural disasters such as floods and bushfires on people not sharing their prejudices on sexuality. However, the media had no shame in presenting them as opponents of religious extremism.

This bias from the police and the media is not surprising. Police racism in Australia is hardly new. The anti-Aboriginal racism of the Australian police forces and judicial system is reflected in rates of Aboriginal over-representation in jail and deaths in custody that are an international scandal, and these rates are getting worse. Aboriginal people in Australia are significantly more likely to be targeted by police and imprisoned

than African-Americans or even black South Africans under Apartheid.

But it is not just Aboriginal people. The racial profiling by police of African-Australians in Melbourne's west and north west is well documented.

In the media, the Murdoch tabloids pump out a relentless stream of Islamophobic hysteria, along with other racism. All the tropes of RA — such as Islam being synonymous with terrorism and the Australian way of life being threatened by “creeping Sharia”, Halal certification and a non-existent “invasion” by refugees — are staples.

The ravings of Murdoch tabloid columnists such as Andrew Bolt are indistinguishable from those of the neo-Nazis in the UPF. Other media are less strident but the message is the same.

The prejudices on display from RA come from the top. It is no anomaly that Coalition MP George Christensen was free to speak at an RA rally while government politicians are banned from appearing on the ABC's *Q&A*. It has been labelled as “soft on terrorism” because an Islamist was once allowed to participate — as an audience member, not a panellist.

The Murdoch tabloid's racism does not exist in a vacuum. It goes along with obsessive hostility towards environmentalists and trade unions and blatant partisanship in favour of the governing Liberal and National parties.

That police are at best half-hearted in combating domestic violence, which has killed 52 women in Australia so far this year, while devoting unlimited resources to fighting Islamist terrorism, which has killed no-one in Australia, is not the result of police culture or lack of awareness training. It is official policy.

That police are used against trade unionists that attempt to enforce workplace safety rather than against employers who have allowed 83 people to be killed this year in workplace accidents is also policy.

While RA/UPF are not short of wannabe Führers, it is not these nasty and violent clowns who pose the threat of racist tyranny in Australia. The real threat is from those already in power.

Government racism

Every time his popularity flags in the polls, Prime Minister Tony Abbott speaks to the Australian public with a display of flags that outdoes any speaker at an RA rally. The message is the same.

Under the guise of defending “the Australian way of life” from Muslims and foreigners, the government has instituted national security laws that allow for imprisonment without trial, conviction in secret trials without due process and the ability of the government to remove someone's citizenship on a whim.

State espionage on citizens is institutionalised.

Refugees are killed through boat turn-backs and illegal deportations justified through totally false claims by the media and politicians that “illegal arrivals” are swamping Australia.

While the neo-Nazis affiliated with the UPF may dream of putting “inferior races” in concentration camps, the government is already doing so. In the “offshore” refugee detention centres in Manus Island and Nauru, adults and children are subjected to medical neglect, torture, rape and sometimes murder. Whistleblowers exposing such abuse can be imprisoned for two years.

Meanwhile, Aboriginal communities are being ethnically cleansed for the benefit of mining companies, with racism again providing the justification.

The official opposition — the Australian Labor Party — has failed to oppose any of these policies.

Implications for anti-racists

This has important implications for anti-racists and anti-fascists. The danger that RA poses is that it is an attempt to create a mass movement in support of racist and tyrannical government policies. The success of the counter-protests is that they have exposed the neo-Nazi and Christian extremist core of the movement, mobilised larger numbers of anti-racists and forced the media and the state apparatus to reveal their bias.

It is missing the point to see the only aim of the counter-protests as depriving fascists of space. The posturing “patriots” of RA and UPF are not about to seize power and to think that the threat of racist tyranny can be defeated by driving them off the streets is simply mirroring their own fantasies.

The counter protests to RA need to be seen as just the start. What is needed is to build sustained mass movements in defence of refugees, against Islamophobia, in solidarity with Aboriginal people defending their communities and against the “anti-terror” laws and other attacks on civil liberties. This is a serious and difficult task. ■

Building the Anti-Racism Campaign

Reclaim Australia (RA) is arguably the most significant attempt to build a far-right movement in Australia since the early days of Pauline Hanson's One Nation party almost 20 years ago.

RA has organised a number of protests targeting mosque developments and Muslim communities. These have attracted some support, but have generally been matched or outnumbered by anti racist mobilisations.

Reclaim Australia and the neo-fascist groups within it such as the United Patriots Front (UPF) have been emboldened, in part, by the neoliberal attacks by successive governments (both ALP and LNP).

The impacts of neo-liberalism, including rising unemployment (up to 25% in areas like Broadmeadows), the crisis in housing; cuts to social services and attacks on workers' rights, provide fertile ground for the far right to organise, if left unchallenged by the progressive movement.

An increase in "official" racism via attacks on Aboriginal communities, refugees and migrants, combined with the "war on terror" has given confidence to RA to seek to organise.

One factor limiting the ability of groups like RA to gain a foothold has been a growing level of support for the rights of refugees and against Aboriginal community closures. Recent refugee and Aboriginal rights protests have attracted hundreds and in many cases thousands of people. Public opinion opposing the government's treatment of refugees and asylum-seekers has also grown.

Another factor is that while RA tries to distance itself from its neo-fascist affiliates, neo-Nazi insignia are worn openly by protesters at their rallies. In addition, while RA

like to promote themselves as average “mums and dads” in the media, on a number of occasions, weapons have been found on RA or UPF members on their way to protests.

Anti racist activists and organisations on the left have also been “outed” and attacked by RA/UPF members on social media. Intimidation and violent incidents have occurred, including a run-through by RA/UPF goons at Melbourne’s 3CR studios and the Melbourne Anarchist Club. In Sydney, the Black Rose anarchist bookshop was targeted. In Melbourne, an anti-racist female activist was physically assaulted by a member of RA on the street.

These violent incidents are very concerning, but they also undermine RA’s attempts to build legitimacy and support in the mainstream, despite sympathetic media coverage.

It is worth noting that in the aftermath of the recent terrorist attacks in Paris, RA has not experienced growth in attendance at their rallies.

However, RA members are attempting to make inroads within unions. Some union delegates have openly identified themselves as members of RA to other workers. There are reports that RA members have approached unions for support for their rallies, while at the same time anti racist groups have sought their support for counter protests. This has resulted in some unions refusing to endorse anti racist protests on the basis that they have members “on both sides”.

On the positive side, there have been union speakers at anti Reclaim Australia rallies in Perth, Sydney and elsewhere. The ETU Qld and Northern Territory branches recently produced an anti racism video aimed at educating ETU members, called “Stand Up Against Racism”, and the CFMEU has produced an anti racism t-shirt.

Our approach

Socialist Alliance’s approach to countering racism and the rise of the far right is as follows:

We need to resist the official racism of “mainstream” Liberal and Labor governments. The more success that governments have with racist policies such as mandatory detention of refugees and attacks on Aboriginal rights, the more fertile will be the soil in which far-right movements can grow. By contrast, the more we can beat back these policies, the harder it will be for the far right to gain traction.

Equally, the specific arguments and mobilisations of the far right need to be answered. To adopt an attitude towards groups like RA of “ignore them and they will go away” would be a fatal mistake. Our response should include powerful counter-mobilisations when RA organises a public presence and other activities aiming to challenge the racist attacks by both governments and the far right.

Such a movement should be broad, inclusive and democratically organised. It

should aim to mobilise the largest numbers instead of seeing physical confrontations as the goal. It should be organised around concrete anti-racist demands and should seek to organise maximum unity of the anti-racist forces. As well as mobilising in the largest numbers, a key goal of the movement should be to politically counter the racist arguments of groups like RA. This movement could also organise to defend communities that come under attack from groups like RA.

It is essential that this movement be built in the unions. Unions have a significant role to play in influencing and mobilising workers. RA also knows this, which is why they are seeking to make inroads into the labour movement. As socialists, we need to be arguing in our workplaces and union bodies for our unions to come out strongly against the threat that groups like RA pose.

Tactics

There are no permanent tactics in the movement against racism and against the far right. These should be determined according to the balance of forces and local conditions and factors (e.g. the role of police and the media and their tendency to protect the far right and attack the left; the fear felt by members of communities under attack in mobilising publicly; etc). In general, the tactics that are adopted should have the aim of building the movement, not demoralising or isolating it.

We disagree with some on the left who fetishise the tactic of physical confrontation with the far right, but this is not the same as adopting a pacifist attitude to the violence of the far right. We believe in the right to self-defence, and we also demand that the police defend our protests against attack and defend migrant communities from attacks by the far right. ■

Racism: Understanding Who Our Real Enemies Are

By Susan Price

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the introduction of the Racial Discrimination Act in Australia, yet we still live in a country where racism runs deep.

Legislative change, which was won as a result of the movements for black liberation and for women's liberation, was a step forward. However, legal changes alone cannot undo centuries of oppression. For this to be lasting we have to continue to campaign and organise against racism. We need to tackle the system that gives rise to it.

Economic development in Australia has been bound up with racism, through the dispossession and exploitation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, which still continues.

The Australian pastoral industry was founded on unpaid or underpaid Aboriginal labour, and the resource industries on the theft of Aboriginal land. Australia was built on inhumane and exploitative policies towards successive waves of migrants and, more recently, refugees.

Today, the rise of Islamophobia and the targeting of migrant communities is being fuelled by the so-called "war on terror". Attacks by al-Qaeda and ISIS have been used by governments, the media, the police and the military to foster fear and division and to promote the narrative of a "clash of civilisations".

Capitalism's economic crises and the erosion of the welfare state have created rising inequality, poverty, exploitation and erosion of workers' rights. This has also provided fertile ground for a rise in racism.

You see it in the racial profiling and racist policing of migrant and Aboriginal youth in the cities, and the way economic insecurity fuels fear of overseas workers. When

unemployment is on the rise, it is convenient to blame “others” for taking away “our” jobs.

These racist divisions suit the interests of the corporations and the government. When the government wants to cut public spending, rather than taxing the wealthy and corporations, they go for the most vulnerable and marginalised first. When employers want to lower wages they pick off vulnerable overseas workers or international students first. A lack of solidarity makes their job easier.

Racist groups like Reclaim Australia and their affiliates such as the neo-fascist United Patriots Front (UPF) do not appear out of thin air — they have been given confidence because of the actions of the government, politicians, employers and corporate media.

That is why campaigning against these racist policies and against the attacks on working people, on our services, and entitlements is crucial to undermining the ability of groups like Reclaim Australia or the UPF from winning an audience.

We need political leadership from the labour movement on this front, so racist groups like Reclaim Australia and the UPF cannot get a foothold. Some union delegates have openly identified themselves as Reclaim Australia members.

That is why it was encouraging to see union leaders such as Rita Mallia from the NSW CFMEU, Danny Cain from the WA MUA and other unionists address anti racist protests on November 21. The Electrical Trades Union Queensland and Northern Territory (ETU Qld and NT) has produced a video showing that racism has no place in the Australian community and is anti-worker.

Unions need to show leadership, to educate their members about the divide and rule tactics of employers and to not capitulate to nationalism and racism. They need to explain that it is greedy employers, not overseas workers or migrants or Muslim communities who are the problem.

The slogan "touch one, touch all" is as true today as it ever was. Building internationalism and class solidarity is about demonstrating in practice that more unites us than divides us and understanding who our real enemies are. ■

Modern racism has its origins in the development and global eruption of Western colonialism. An ideology was needed to justify the inhuman exploitation, enslavement and dispossession of entire peoples in the Americas, Africa, Asia and Australia. Racism — the idea that the colonised peoples are inferior to the white European colonisers — was constructed to do the job.

In Australia, racism justified the settlers' murderous takeover of Aboriginal lands and the destruction of their society. It underlies the brutal, bipartisan 'Stop the boats' mantra in force today against refugees. And now we see the emergence of a far-right movement seeking to divert popular anger over capitalist neoliberal policies against some of the most vulnerable sections of our society.

This pamphlet explains the origins and rise of modern racism globally and in Australia. It also suggests what we must do today to effectively fight against it.

Resistance books