The peculiarities of Australian labour

By Martin Thomas

"Generations of reformists pointed to this continent: Workers, look at Australia! See what can be done without revolution..."

AND Australia has had exceptionally strong trade unions, entrenched through an elaborate system of arbitration of industrial disputes. This edifice, eroded by the last 13 years of Labor government, now faces a direct assault from the Liberal government elected on 2 March. What are its origins, and what does its history tell us about the prospects for resistance?

The Sydney stonemasons were probably the first workers anywhere in the world to win an eight-hour working day by strike action, in 1856. The eight-hours movement had developed in Melbourne and Sydney as Australian capitalism boomed following the discovery of gold.

The transportation of convicts from Britain to New South Wales had ceased in 1840 and Tasmania in 1853 (although it continued to Western Australia until 1867). Free settlers had been arriving in substantial numbers since the 1820s. Since the available land was monopolised by large owners, they mostly became wage-workers.

Chartists and rebels were numerous among the settlers. James Stephens, leader of the eight-hour day movement in Melbourne, had taken part in the Chartist uprising in Newport in 1839. When in 1854 gold miners at Ballarat, near Melbourne, formed the Reform League, they demanded, besides redress of local grievances, the same six points as the Chartist movement in Britain, centred round the right to vote — which was soon granted.

With labour constantly in short supply, a weak local bourgeoisie, and no entrenched traditions of authority, the early trade unions, mostly of craft workers in Melbourne and Sydney, piled up successes. From the 1870s union organisation developed among the miners, the seafarers, and the shearers. In 1884 women clothing workers in Melbourne organised what was perhaps the first strike and the first union of women workers in the world.

Several socialist and syndicalist groups became active between the 1880s and World War 1. Broader Labor parties grew in the 1890s. In 1899 Queensland got the world's first parliamentary labour government (for six days); after the six British colonies were federated into an almost-independent Commonwealth of Australia in 1901, the Australian Labor Party (ALP) took office in 1904, 1908, and 1910-13. By 1914 Australia had over half a million trade-unionists in a workforce of little over a million.

Reformists in Europe pointed to Australia as a "workers' paradise" achieved through peaceful, parliamentary means. Lenin wrote a short comment in 1913; though Lenin explained in the article that he had cribbed it all from "an English correspondent of a German labour newspaper", the Australian Communist Party would later reprint it dozens of times as the authoritative Marxist statement on Australia.

According to the "English correspondent", the Australian Labor Party was really only "a liberal-bourgeois party" representing " *purely* the non-socialist trade-unionist workers", because, firstly, Australia was "populated by Liberal English workers", and, secondly, Australia being a young capitalist country, "the Labor Party has to concern itself with developing and strengthening the country... what in other countries was done by the Liberals".

What was *special* about the ALP, however, was nothing liberal. It was its stated primary objective — "(1) the cultivation of an Australian sentiment based upon the maintenance of racial purity..." — and the first points of its platform: "1. Maintenance of a White Australia; 2. Compulsory Arbitration..."

By 1901 the Australian liberals, too, supported such measures, and would legislate them, together with protective tariffs for industry and old age pensions. But Australian labour's racism did not come from its right-wing leaders' accommodation to the liberals — rather the contrary.

Most of the militant socialists and anarchists were also for a White Australia. The Australian Socialist League (ASL) (influenced by the American Marxist Daniel De Leon) made "exclusion of undesirable races" the *first point* of its electoral platform in 1901.

There were dissenting voices, although very few. The International Socialist Club split from the ASL when it adopted the exclusion demand, argued instead for an eight-hour day and a minimum wage for *all* workers, and was one of the forerunners of the Australian Communist Party. When the British Fabian Beatrice Webb visited Melbourne in 1898, the Australians were certainly not the worst racists: it was Webb who scorned the local socialists' "nondescript body of no particular class, and with a strong infusion of foreigners; a Polish Jew as secretary and various other nationalities (among them a Black) being scattered over the audience."

But on the whole White Australia had been a primarily working-class cause since the first faltering of the gold boom in the late 1850s. According to the Labor leader J C Watson, speaking in 1904, "a few years [actually, decades] ago business men looked upon the Chinese or other coloured undesirables as men who could be very well tolerated, because they took the place of labourers... not quite so cheap; but when it was found that these Orientals possessed all the cunning and acumen necessary to fit them for conducting business affairs, a marked alteration of opinion took place among business men..."

Chinese immigration had been virtually banned since 1888, and in 1901 the new Commonwealth of Australia's first major law excluded all non-European immigrants. Another law decreed that the Pacific-Islander workers in Queensland, once numerous, must be deported by 1906.

This was something more than a carry-over of prejudices widespread in Britain at the time. In the early years of the gold rush, most diggers accepted equal rights for all races. Working-class racists did not equate the Chinese with the Aborigines — who had been dispossessed, slaughtered, in some areas exterminated, in the early years of British settlement, but by the 1850s were not seen as a threat. Excluding the Chinese was seen as a move parallel to stopping transportation of *(British) convicts* — as ▶

Chronology

1788: First British settlement in Australia consisting of convicts and guards.

1820s: Free migration starts.

1840: Britain stops transportation to New South Wales (and to Tasmania in 1853; to Western Australia in 1867).

1850s: Gold discovered; Australia's white population increases from 400,000 to 1.2 million; Victoria and New South Wales get local elected governments.

Late 19th century: Wool boom. Number of sheep in Australia increases from 21 million in 1861 to 107 million in 1891.

1870s onwards: Trade unions organised among shearers, miners, seafarers.

1890-4: Major strikes — all defeated. Growth of Labor Parties.

1901: Federation.

1904: First federal Labor government.

1916: Labor Party splits — the Labor Prime Minister, W M Hughes, having failed to push through conscription for World War 1, joins the bourgeois parties.

1932: Slump, huge unemployment. Labor government in New South Wales sacked by the Governor when it proposes stopping debt payments to the London banks.

1949-72: Uninterrupted conservative government.

1972: Reforming Labor government — sacked in 1975 by the Governor General.

1983-96: Labor returns to office, pushes through tariff cuts, deregulation, privatisation, cuts.

another measure to build an equal society in Australia, without any slave class. It was taken as a fixed fact that Chinese workers would undercut European wages and conditions.

But this "trade-unionist" response fed a wider ideology, which eventually cut against the basic principles of the trade unionism that had generated it. The Australian Workers' Union (AWU) and other major unions barred Chinese and Pacific-Islander workers from membership (though the AWU offered free membership to Aborigines), and when Chinese and Pacific-Islander workers formed their own unions and conducted their own strikes — as they did sometimes — the "white" unions did not support them.

A racist nationalism tied Australia's supposedly socialist party, the ALP (it formally adopted socialism in 1921, in a parallel to British Labour's 1918 Clause Four), to submerge itself in "developing and strengthening the country", to an extent perhaps paralleled only by the Israeli Labour Party. It was "permanent non-revolution", so to speak, an inside-out version of the process whereby bourgeois tasks were subsumed into a socialist revolution by Lenin's Bolshevik Party in Russia in 1917.

Australian labour saw its cause as that of the Australian working class, or (interchangeably) the Australian nation, counterposed to the "Money Power" (in the British banks and their compradors in Melbourne and Sydney) and the "Yellow Peril". And to focus on the "Yellow Peril" was, of course, the line of least resistance.

Yet neither E W Campbell's *History of the Australian Labor Movement: A Marxist Interpretation*, nor Brian Fitzpatrick's *Short History of the Australian Labor Movement*, even mention the struggle for exclusion in more than a couple of noncommittal words. For decades the Communist Party claimed Australian nationalism for its own. In 1963 its leader Lance Sharkey declared: "The Communist Party takes pride in saluting the 175th anniversary of Australia's foundation, because Australia has been built on 175 years of the untiring labour of the working people. First it was forced (convict) labour... then 'free' wage-labour under colonial rule... then labour as the leading force in the long struggle for an independent and democratic Australia". Not only Campbell (a CP hack), but also Fitzpatrick (never a CP member, and widely influential), had their views coloured by this ideology.

It paralleled the official ideology of the ALP, expressed in 1909 by W G Spence, founder of both the miners' and shearers' unions: "Unionism came to the Australian bushman as a religion. It had in it that feeling of mateship which he understood already, and which always characterised the action of one 'white man' to another".

In the 1970s these orthodoxies were challenged, notably by Humphrey McQueen in his book *A New Britannia*. He argued that Australian labour was dominated by an "inheritance of class passivity" before 1890; that "Australian nationalism is

the chauvinism of British imperialism, intensified by its geographic proximity to Asia"; that Australian radicalism in the 19th century was entirely petty-bourgeois; and that "the Labor Parties that emerged after 1890 were in every way the logical extension of the petty-bourgeois mentality and subordinated organisations that preceded them. There was no turning point".

Yet to claim that "the ALP was the highest expression of a peculiarly Australian petty bourgeoisie", is to write the Australian workers' strikes and socialist agitation out of history. And they existed! The Australian workers were not a petty bourgeoisie, but a *labour aristocracy*.

The term "labour aristocracy" generally denotes a *section* of a national working class — skilled, higher-paid workers. But over and above the differentiations in the Australian working class — which exist and existed, though perhaps smaller than in many other working classes — the whole working class was differentiated as a better-off "aristocracy" both from the working class from which it came (the British) and from the workers of Asia.

In *Wage Labour and Capital* Karl Marx argues that the poverty of the working class is always *relative* to the wealth of the bourgeoisie. "A house may be large or small... But let a palace arise beside the little house, and it shrinks from a little house to a hut... however high it may shoot up in the course of civilisation, if the neighbouring palace grows to an equal or even greater extent, the occupant of the relatively small house will feel more and more... cramped..."

> "The whole working
> class was
> differentiated as a
> better-off 'aristocracy'
> both from the
> working class from
> which it came (the
> British) and from the
> workers of Asia."

Not all Australian workers, by any means, had the house and garden which later became standard for their class. But they had a chance of getting it; it did become standard. And they could compare it to the London slums of a hundred years ago, or the huts of Chinese and Pacific-Islander workers. The palaces were more remote, less familiar.

Despite the well-known and scathing polemics by Lenin on the "labour aristocracy" as the base for pro-war policies by the socialist parties in World War 1, there is no warrant in general Marxist theory to consider "labour aristocracies" as irredeemably

Keating's anti-working class policies in the '80s and '90s paved the way for Labor defeat

anti-socialist. Better-off, better-educated workers are, in most times and places, the mainstays of labour organisations both right-wing and left-wing. Their *tendency*, however, is towards a slogan popular with Australian trade unions in the 19th century, "Defence, not Defiance" — defence (sometimes militant) of their relatively satisfactory position, rather than battle to change the whole social system.

This tendency dominated among Australian workers for several reasons. One, indicated by Lenin's "English correspondent", was the poverty of socialist culture in the Britain from which they migrated. Another, noted by McQueen, was to do with Australia's extreme *distance* from Britain. The Australian workers felt at risk from Asia.

Distances within Australia have maybe also played a part. Australia's land area is almost as great as Europe or the United States, but in 1891 it had only three million people, and it still has only 17 million. It has always been a highly urbanised society: as early as 1911, 38 per cent of the population lived in the seven capital cities. But those cities are scattered round 12,000 miles of coastline — and the remainder of the population spread in small towns and settlements over a vast area. The cities themselves are now the most sprawling in the world, with working-class suburbs many miles from the city centre.

Australia's New Unionism of the 1870s and '80s — unlike its parallel in Britain — was bush, not city, unionism. The main "bush" union, the Australian Workers' Union, which grew out of the shearers' union, was Australia's biggest union for many years, is still one of the biggest, and has long had great weight in the ALP.

Other working classes have had their high points of struggle in their major cities — St Petersburg, Berlin, Paris... Australian

labour's heroic moments have been in more remote areas — Ballarat, Barcaldine, Broken Hill. The big strike movement of November 1995 hinged on a dispute in Weipa, two thousand miles from the nearest big city.

The huge distances cause difficulties even now: how much greater must they have been in the days before telephones, faxes, e-mail, and mass air travel! A direct working-class seizure of state power must necessarily appear remote and improbable to dispersed workforces and working-class communities. They can be extremely tough and combative in day-to-day struggles. For broader issues they must tend to depend on a remote labour officialdom, dealing with an equally remote bourgeoisie.

They will, as a result, be ill-placed for big set-piece class battles, where the bourgeoisie brings its centralised state power into play. In fact, *every one of the great class confrontations between 1890 and 1917* — the maritime strike of 1890 (which also involved miners and shearers), the Queensland shearers' strikes of 1891 and 1894, the Broken Hill miners' strike of 1892, the Broken Hill lock-out of 1909, the Brisbane General Strike of 1912 and the New South Wales General Strike of 1917 — *ended in total defeat for the workers.* That the workers emerged from all these defeats lacking in revolutionary exuberance, and ready to look for amelioration to a tradition of state economic intervention established well before the rise of the labour movement, should cause no wonder. The remarkable thing is the tenacity and toughness which kept the labour movement intact, and always ready to regain lost ground, through it all.

There was much left-wing agitation in the trade unions and the ALP between 1916 and the early 1920s, and the then-revolutionary Communist Party (only a few hundred strong) briefly won the right to affiliate to the ALP in 1923-4. Soon, however, the CP was isolated.

In the early 1930s, Australian workers' relative prosperity suddenly crashed. The CP grew rapidly, and, surely, would have grown more rapidly and solidly if it had not been pursuing the same "Third Period" policies, dictated by Stalin, which led to CPs losing members rapidly in many other countries. When the Labor premier of New South Wales, the populist demagogue J T Lang, was sacked by the Governor (the representative of the British Crown) in 1932 for proposing to stop debt payments to the London banks, the CP stood aside, dismissing the ALP as "social fascist".

After 1935 the CP turned the revolutionaries recruited in the early 1930s towards a new policy, also dictated by Stalin, of "unity against fascism and war". They supported World War 2, made racist anti-Japanese propaganda, and draped themselves in the colours of Australian nationalism. All the chances opened up in the 1930s for transforming the Australian labour movement were wrecked by the Stalinists.

After 1949 there were 23 years of conservative government, with relatively little resistance. But from about 1969 there were renewed industrial struggles and big protests against the Vietnam war.

In 1972 a Labor government was elected which withdrew Australian troops from Vietnam, introduced a state health insurance scheme, doubled public spending on education, made a small start on redress for the Aborigines, and unwound the White Australia policy. All this was, however, essentially middle-class radicalism: the

Labor government had no answer to the effects of the world-wide capitalist crisis of 1974-5 except to try to make the workers pay. There were mass protests when, in November 1975, the Governor-General, on the Queen's authority, sacked the Labor government; but, because of Labor's failures and the lack of a left alternative, they petered out.

The conservatives won the ensuing election and stayed in office until 1983, when Labor began the thirteen years of office which ended in March 1996. In those 13 years Labor did make a few reforms — it reinstated the state health insurance scheme started by the 1972-5 Labor government, then abolished by the conservatives — but mostly it drove for a drastic opening-up of Australia to the world market, with an accompanying sharp increase in unemployment and inequality.

The Australian working class that emerges, somewhat battered and dismayed, from those 13 years to face the Liberals, is different from the working class of a hundred years ago. Between 1947 and 1970, 800,000 migrants, 37 per cent of the total intake, entered Australia from southern and eastern Europe — Greece, Italy, Yugoslavia... Since the 1970s, increasing numbers have come from Asia. The working-class suburbs even of Brisbane, one of the most "white" of Australia's big cities, now have primary-school classes where almost every child is Asian or Aboriginal.

The south and eastern European migrants generally got worse jobs than "Anglo-Celtic" Australian workers, and the Asian migrants worse still. Yet racism is not a moral stain which continues through generations regardless of material circumstances. The roots of the racism of a hundred years ago have been somewhat eroded: Australia is no longer a precarious outpost of the British Empire, Asian workers are no longer on such a material level as to make the idea of workers' unity difficult to grasp from a trade-unionist point of view, the working class is less dependent on British culture and less scarred by defeats. And the racism, too, has been eroded. Despite great strains imposed by mass unemployment, multi-ethnic workers' unity remains a prize within the grasp of the Australian labour movement. That will be tremendously important in the battles which will come as Australia's rulers try to cut down the wages, job security, and public services of Australia to levels suitable for modern international capitalist competition on the Pacific Rim.

But Australian labour's political culture, too, has been eroded. The Communist Party, long by far the most influential force on the left, disintegrated bit by bit and then folded completely in the 1980s. Revolutionary socialists are a small minority. But some fundamental material conditions exist for them to advance — and make Australia a continent to which revolutionaries, not reformists, will look for inspiration. ■

* *Egon Kisch, "Australian Landfall", p.195.*