Our times

We are living in times that are difficult for revolutionaries. The great socialist movements that grew up in the last century and early 20th century have declined. Even the "new left" that emerged at the end of the 1960s has ebbed away. There are three main reasons for this decline, which must be understood by socialists attempting to rebuild the movement.

1. For decades the name of socialism has been associated with bureaucratic dictatorships ruling in such societies as Russia, China, Eastern Europe and a number of other third world countries. While the Russian revolution initially represented a genuine socialist movement, it remained isolated in a backward country whose culture and political system have degenerated into a new form of class society. The other "socialist" societies have emulated the Stalinist system that resulted: centrally planned by privileged bureaucrats, politically repressive, driven by economics and military competition with more advanced western states to exploit the working class. Thus in the guise of socialism there arose a sort of societies that reproduced the key features of capitalism in a new form. We call these societies "state capitalists".

While the state capitalist societies for many years aroused the hopes of those fighting for a communist revolution in the countries of the old empire, nature has been every more clearly exposed. This has dashed the hopes of millions who believed they represented socialism, and strengthened the hands of socialism's enemies.

We welcome the downfall of the bureaucratic dictatorships in Eastern Europe, and we believe that in time people both there and in the west will discover that they had nothing in common with genuine socialism. Nevertheless, in the short term the so-called "death of socialism" has made dominant the anti-capitalist climate in the west all the more intense.

2. Another claim to the mantle of socialism has been the Social Democratic and labor parties, for example in Sweden and to a lesser degree in countries like Britain and Australia. These parties exist to administer capitalism. As the history of the AFL-CIO shows, they are protected by the forces of the state workers seeking social change or a better life.

Yet during the long years of relative stability and growth of the capitalist system after World War 2, these parties were able to deliver some reforms which preserved people's faith in their claim to embody a socialist impulse.

Today, governing a crisis-ridden capitalist system, social democratic and labor parties worldwide are facing the threat from new attacks on workers' living standards and embarking on a strategy of public-anti-capitalist ideas. In Australia, through the Accord, the ALP has laid down its labor standards in order to boost employers' profits. Where militant unions stood in their ways, they have been prepared to use the most out-dated union-busting methods, as with the pilots and the ASU.
The betrayals would not be so disastrous if there were mass movements fighting for genuine socialist ideas. But while these have been times when sizeable movements fought for political goals, the years after World War I, even to some degree the critical years of the 1960s and early 1970s, socialism today is politically isolated.

Partly this is a product of major defeats suffered by the workers' movement, including the failure of the working class to take the initiative in the mid-1950s, the cold war witch-hunts of the 1950s, and most recently by a climate of political reaction, in society in general, and passivity among workers. We speak of a downturn in the exploitation of workers at the beginning of the 1970s, and was the dominating feature of the 1980s in most industrialised societies.

Our task is to win small numbers of people to socialism on the basis of our ideas. This means that education is the most important feature of our internal life. Education involves developing our political theory, and discussing our interventions in struggles. Organisational structures are simple, as develop in a democratic, tolerant and committed atmosphere, we aim to form a healthy and strong organisation.

Looking forward
While others have talked for years about unity on the left, we have made a small, practical step in its realisation. The fusion is an opportunity for more people to join any group that is politically as well as organisationally stronger. We appeal to those who left organised political groups after the factional contests of the mid-1980s, to rejoin us once again. And we appeal to others who have not joined us. To those who find that the international oppositions to apartheid in the 1970s are no longer the main ones. To those who have considered becoming part of Australia's only national organisation fighting for revolutionary socialism from below.
Muirhead reports, black deaths continue

Black deaths in custody are a major issue during the Bicentennial year of 1988. Aboriginal activist Bob Sykes highlighted the issue in his poem Ahmed written in the 1970s:

There you stand 
In your own land 
But you died 
By your own hand 
They said.

The Royal Commission has now been sitting for 4 years. It's looking at the evidence of the last 8 years, during which 434 deaths in custody have been reported. Of these, 103 were black people.

Western Australia comes over as much the most dangerous place to be black. A third of the deaths in custody over the eight year period were in WA, while a quarter were in Queensland. Of the 12 reported since the Commission started, at least five have been in WA.

After a year on the Commission, Justice Muirhead has reported, leaving behind an interim report. The Report tells us in passing that police particular easy arrest among people in certain communities. Queensland tops the nation's list for overall arrests. In August 1988, the Queensland police arrested 650 people all told. That's the highest number in Australia, even though NSW has twice the population.

WA, for its part, has the highest number of arrests per head of population.

In WA, had the Aboriginal people in jail are there for de-faulting on fines. Poverty is just another criminal offence.

Muirhead has a lengthy list of recommendations. One is that the affairs of the public inquiry be published in Victoria, Queensland and WA, the only States which still have them. He decides, on the basis of the charges police make, that alcohol was involved in two thirds of the arrests that were followed by death.

Half the deaths occurred within eight hours of arrest. Muirhead recommends better medical and other attention in watch-house. But he goes on to point out: "The explanations for these deaths do not all lie within prison walls or in the comfort of lock-ups nor are they explanatory of the content of prison policies. The real reason for the deaths is the social oppression of Aboriginals, by poverty, harassment and discrimination built into the society. When we hear about NSW police treating Aboriginals by offering them football socks, that's just a particularly public example of what goes on all the time."

So where will Muirhead report go? To State governments who will do as much or as little as they like about its recommendations. Police and lawyers in WA haven't exactly been cooperative with the Commission. They have a policy of giving no statements at all.

The police union, with financial support from the State Labor government, have issued challenges to the validity of the appointments of two commissioners. The police union, with financial support from the State Labor government, have issued challenges to the validity of the appointments of two commissioners.

The Queensland government already has its own report, signed by two Aboriginals from Weewinda and from Charters Towers. That is the "Police-Law Report on the Incidence of Rising Suicides by Aboriginals on Queensland Community Whits in Custody."

The Royal Commission, while not interfering to recommend any practice, is at least to point out that it doesn't assume in advance that the deaths were suicides. It saw the Queensland government in custody to all had been suicides.

The government also cites the Police-Law recommendations that all blacks should work for the police to give them social respect, and that there should be more Aboriginal police (coffin). The police want to be quit of Queensland Police equipment).

Muirhead, while saying more Aboriginal police and social work would be nice, did also mention black people's widely expressed suspicion of the system as an obstacle. Some of his approaching statements about the underlying causes of the deaths touch on the social issues of unemployment, discrimination and racism, but mere reference to those because the Commission has no powers to act.

All it can do is suggest to State governments that they might imitate the number of "band-aid" measures.

Muirhead's final four case reports, released on 2 February, have not impressed the black community either. While he found that police and prison officers had mistreated several black prisoners, blaming this for causing at least one death, he didn't claim causes of final death.

LACE DIXON, mother of 15 year old Keith Dixon who was found hanged in Adelaide jail 15 months ago, spoke for many who she described as "I expect some verification, I expect, not behalf to, but justice ... I doesn't seem to be happening."

And, worse, not the usual realities that cause Aboriginals to make up 15 percent of the prison population, and a quarter of those who die in custody.

As if to hammer home the point, a few days before Muirhead's case reports were released an Aboriginal man, Greg King, was hanged in Adelaide's Dartington police station. He was convicted only twenty minutes after being found in the cells. Lance Walker, a relative and a member of the Committee to Defend Keith Dixon, had found the body and found a brace on the right cheek, a black mark on the side of the cheek and bruises on both wrists and upper arms.

Walker had also heard cops saying over the police radio that they were "celebrating" the death.

It will take more than a Royal Commission to destroy the system of oppression that makes such things as everyday reality in modern Australia. — Carole Ferrer

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Muirhead reports, black deaths continue

BLACR DEATHS in Australia have been increasing for two hundred years. It is grimly appropriate that they became a major issue during the bicentennial year of 1988.

Aboriginal activist Bobbi Lykes highlighted the issue in her poem Andrew Whitley in the 1970s.

There is a handprint & footprint
Always you
Were they found you
But you died
By your own hand.
They said.

The Royal Commission has now been sitting for 5 years. It's looking at the evidence of the last 8 years, during which 430 deaths in custody have been reported. Of these, 103 are black people.

Western Australia comes out as much the most dangerous place to be black. A third of the deaths in custody were in WA, while a quarter were in Queensland. Only the NT has a more serious problem. In the NT, 27% of deaths in custody have been reported.

A year after the Commission, Justice Muirhead has resigned, leaving behind an interim Report. The Report tells us in passing that police particular-ly enjoy arresting people in certain regions.

Queensland tops the national list for overall arrests. In August 1988, the Queensland police arrested 1500 people all told. That's the highest number in Australia, even though NSW has twice the population.

WA, for its part, has the highest number of arrests per head of population.

In WA half the Aboriginal people are still there, and 50% of all arrests are Aboriginal. Poverty is just another criminal offence.

Muirhead has a lengthy list of recommendations. One is that the offence of drunk- kennel be abolished in Victoria, Queensland and WA, the only States which still have it.

He declares, persuasively on the basis of the charges police chose, that alcohol was involved in two thirds of the deaths that were followed by deaths.

Half the deaths occurred with, in eight hours of arrest. Muirhead recommends better medica-tional and other attention in watch- ing prisoners. But he goes on to point out:

"The explanations for these deaths do not all lie within prison walls; or in the confines of knowledge, but are those exemplified in the terms of sentencing policies."

The real reason for the deaths is the social oppression of Aborigi-nies, the poverty, harassment and exclusion built into the Australian society. When we hear about NSW police beating Aborigines by offering them football socks, that's just a partic-ularly public slice of what goes on all the time.

So where will Muirhead's re-pair go? To State governments who do much - or a little - as they like about it, to recommendations. Police and media in WA haven't exactly been cooperating with the Commissions. They have a policy of giving no statements to it.

The police force, with finan-cial support from the State Lab-or government, have issued challenge to the validity of the appointments of two commis-sioners.

THE QUEENSLAND govern-ment, already having its own report, signed by two Aborigi-nies from Woomera and from Cherbourg, is the "Police Law Report on the Incidence of Rising Suicides by Aborigines on Queensland Commission Whilt in Can-unda."

The Royal Commission, not intending to recommend any specific policies, is at least correct in point out that it doesn't assume in advance that the deaths were suicidal. But it says the Queensland government must act to prevent suicides.

The government also likes the Thunder-Water Recommendations, that all blacks should work for the police to give them self- respect, and that there should be more Community Police Coor-dinated with the Queensland Police equipment.

Muirhead, while saying more Aboriginal police and But would be nice, did also mention more black projects: "They're not the stereotypical office of state, but an obstacle course to his- tory's charges about the undersidelings of the police touch on the evil mixture of institutional discrimination and racism, but remains mute remorse because the Commission has no power and no teeth.

All too can Pigs suggest to State governments that they might im-plement a number of "hand-out" measures. Muirhead's first four re-pair re-ports, released on 2 February, have not impressed the black community either. While he found that police and prison of-ficers had "misunderstood" several black prisoners, blaming this for causing at least one death, he rejected claims of foul play.

A LICE DIXON, mother of the 29-year-old Kingkong Dixon who was found hanged in Ade-laide jail 18 months ago, spoke for many when she remarked: "I expected some vindication, I expected a head to roll, but justice ... It doesn't seem to be happening."

And it won't, while the social realities that cause Aborigines to make up 15 percent of the prison population, and a quarter of those who die in cases of suicide, persist.

As if to hammer home the point, a few days before Muirhead's case reports were re leased an Aboriginal man, Greg Kumpula, was found hanged in Adelaide's Dartington police station. He was found dead only twenty minutes after being placed in the cells. Lance Walk- er, a relative and a member of the Committee to Defend Black Children in Gravity. He was the body and found it had a red mark on the right cheek, a black mark on the side of the cheek, and a red mark on both wrists and upper arms.

Walker but also heard cops saying over the police radio that they were "celebrating" the death.

It will take more than a Royal Commiss-ion to destroy the system of oppression that makes such things as everyday reality in mothers lives. An activist..."  

— Carole Fetter

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