Our times

We are living in times that are difficult for revolutionaries. The great socialist movements that grew up in the last quarter of the 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 socialist activists 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, East Germany and a number of third world countries. While the Russian revolution initially represented a genuine socialist movement, it remained immured in a backward country and was ruled by a small group of people, and 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 economic and military competition with more advanced western states, and exploited the working class. Thus in the guise of socialism there arose societies 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 workers and peasants, their very existence has made the state capitalist societies a model of capitalism’s failure and nature has been exposed in a much clearer way. This has dashed the hopes of millions who believed they represented socialism, and strengthened the hand 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 the dominant pro-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 administrate capitalism. As the history of the AFL-CIO shows, they are trained to use the forces of the state against 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 the targets of new attacks on workers’ living standards and embracing blatant pro-capitalist ideas. In Australia, through the Accord, the ALP has helped out its living standards in order to boost employers’ profits. Where militant unions stood in their ways, they have been prepared to use the most out-senious union-busting methods, as with the pilots and the BRL.
1. These betrayals would not be so disastrous if there were mass movements fighting for genuine socialist ideas. But while there have been times when sizeable movements fought for politics similar to ours - the Paris Commune of 1871, the world-wide revolutionary upsurge of the years after World War I. - even to some degree the socialist upsurge 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 breakdown of the waging of cold war witch-hunts of the 1950s. more recently, it has been made worse by a climate of political co-option and substantial passivity among workers. We speak of a downturn in industrial and political radicalism and struggle which had its roots in the 1970s and was the dominating feature of the 1980s in most industrialised societies.

Our tasks

The tasks of a revolutionary group are propaganda, agitation and organisation.

In the present period we place a central emphasis on arguing for socialist ideas. We see ourselves as building a propaganda group.

A large share of our energies and resources are devoted to our publications, particularly in finding new audiences. We hold regular educational discussions and public forums and work hard to encourage new people to come along and give our ideas a hearing.

We work especially on campaigns as they have a concentration of people which are particularly interested in ideas and open to new ideas.

People on campaign are also often interested in being active around publications, meetings, bookstalls, etc and through involvement in our organisation.

We work on a similar basis in campaigns and unions, through operating there as revolutionary socialists in the present climate is often not easy.

While we contribute to the building of campaigns and struggles, our primary task is to build and strengthen our own organisation. The key element of this is the education and political development of our members. This is achieved partly through our regular meetings and participation in the organisational work of the groups, and partly the latter that our ideas are tested, strengthened and regenerated.

Our organisation

From this analysis of our role as a “propaganda group”, certain organisational consequences flow.

We do not pretend to be a ‘party,’ which can load, or even make a significant difference in winning, the class struggle. While at times socialists can make a difference 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 theory, and discussing our interventions in struggles. Organisational structures are simple, as develop in a democratic, tolerant and harmonious atmosphere, we are looking forward

While others have talked for years about unity on the left, we have made a small, practical step in its realisation. The faction is an opportunity for more people to join an group that is politically as well as organisationally stronger. We appeal to those who left organised left and think it would be wise to reconsider this statement to forming other organisations. We welcome anyone to read this statement to 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, "Rebels", written in the 1970s.

The Royal Commission has been sitting for six years, it's looking at the evidence of the last eight 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 fifth of the deaths in custody over the eight-year period were in WA, while a quarter were in Queensland. Of the 12 reports since the Commission started, at least five have been in WA.

After a year on the Commission, Justice Muirhead has rejected, leaving behind an incident Report. The Report tells us in passing that police particularise easy arresting people in certain areas. Queensland tops the nation's list for overall arrests. In August 1988, the Queensland cops 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, the Aboriginal people in jail are there for being bad. On top of that, they get another criminal offence.

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

He declines, prefacing his call for the ban on the abuse of the charges police stop that alcohol was involved in two-thirds of the arrests that were followed by deaths.

Half the deaths occurred within eight hours of arrest. Muirhead recommends better medical and other attention in watch cells. He gets on to point out:

"The explanation for these deaths do not all lie within prison walls or the comfort of lock-ups nor are they evidence of gross negligence or a series of negligent policies."

The real reason for the deaths is the social oppression of Aborigines. He lists poverty, harassment, and discrimination in the Australian society. When we hear about NSW police tearing 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 government, who will do as much or as little as they like about it. The recommendations and according to the Commission. They have a policy of giving no statements at all.

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

The Queensland government already has its own report, signed by two Aboriginals from Woorabinda and from Cherbourg. That is the "Police Law Report on the Incidence of Rising Suicides by Aboriginals on Queensland Communities Whilst in Custody."

The Royal Commission, while not intending to recommend any prosecution, is at least careful to point out that it doesn't assume in advance that the deaths were suicides. But it says the Queensland government to have them all labelled suicide.

The government also lists the Police and the recommendations that all blacks should work for the police to give them better respect, and that there should be more Aboriginal Police (constabularists, constabularists, and Queensland Police (constabularists) in all the States.

Muirhead, while saying more Aboriginal police and politicians would be nice, did also mention that black people's already extolled suspicion of the system is an obstacle. Some of his statements about the underlying causes of the deaths touch on the real issues of institutional discrimination and racism, but mere rhetoric because the Commission has no powers and no teeth.

All it can do is urge State governments that they might imitate a number of "handful" measures.

Muirhead's first four case reports, released on 2 February, have not impressed the black community either. While he found that police and prison officials had misinformed several black prisoners, blaming this for causing at least one death, he rejected claims of foul play.

Alice Dixon, mother of a 17-year-old Kingsley Dixon, who was found hanged in Adelaide jail 15 months ago, spoke for many when she remarked: "I expected some verballism. I expected, not beauty of all, but justice ... it's seems to be happening right now.

And it's not, while the worst realities that cause Aborigines to make up 15 per cent 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 report were released an Aboriginal man, Greg Whetnall, was found hanged in Adelaide's Dartington police station. He was found dead only twenty minutes after being phoned in the cells. Lance Walker, a relative and a member of the Committee to Defend Black Rights in Custody. While he body and found a black ray 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

SOCIALIST ACTION — PAGE 3
Muirhead reports, black deaths continue

BLACK DEATHS in Aus-
tralia have been sit-
ing for two hundred years. It is gruelling to think of the suffering, the loss of lives, the despair. The losses are innumerable. But in 1988, the number of deaths was greater than ever before. The number of deaths in the past two years is estimated to be around 10,000. This is a significant increase over the past decade. The reasons for this increase are complex and multifaceted. There are many factors that contribute to the higher death rate among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. These include poverty, racism, discrimination, poor health care, and a lack of access to basic services. The death rate among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is significantly higher than the death rate among non-Indigenous people. This is a significant concern for the health and wellbeing of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The Australian government has acknowledged the issue and has taken steps to address it. However, much work remains to be done. The government has implemented a range of initiatives to improve the health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. These include increasing funding for Indigenous health services, implementing cultural safety training for health professionals, and improving data collection and analysis. Despite these efforts, the death rate continues to be a significant concern. It is essential that the government continue to prioritise addressing this issue and that it works collaboratively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to implement effective solutions.