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THE PROBLEM OF THE ABORIGINES

[HANNAH JAMES]

In order to assess the magnitude of the problems of our coloured minority and to formulate a policy both for the immediate future and for the more distant socialism it is necessary to understand the history of the contact between the white man and the aborigines of Australia.

They have suffered under the disability as far as their conflict with the white man was concerned, of living in a condition of Primitive Communism. They possessed no "State" in the Marxian sense of the term and when they were expropriated from their land by the squatters they were unable to offer anything resembling united opposition. Undoubtedly there were sporadic killings of white men but there never was any organised resistance to the encroachment of the settlers. The situation contrasts strikingly with that which existed in New Zealand where the white settlers had to fight a full-scale war against the Maoris before their tenure of the land was secure. The sole instance of the consolidation of an Australian tribe in opposition to British authority occurred in the so-called "Battle of Pinjarra." During this incident some thirty of a tribe of aborigines, caught unawares probably at a corroboree, were slaughtered by a party of British troops under the leadership of Governor Stirling.

During the settlement of Australia it is illuminating to trace the position of the aborigines relative to British law. In the period prior to 1840 British law 'in toto' applied, in theory at least to the aborigines. White labour despite deportation of convicts from England, was short in the various Australian colonies and there was a demand for cheap black labour. The equality of the black and white man in the eyes of the law was a reflection of the desire to turn the black man into a 'white' labourer. The use of chained black convict gangs as labour forces dates from these times. This usage continued until the beginning of the present conflict with Japan and in the northern towns it was commonplace to see half a dozen manacled aboriginal convicts working in the gardens and about the houses of the Government officials.

As the frontiers of the colonies were pushed further out it became apparent that British law could not be applied in practice to the aborigines while at the same time it tended to hinder their exploitation by the squatters. Their legal status has accordingly deteriorated until at the present day the aborigines occupy a position that is the lowest of any people in the British Commonwealth of Nations.

To say that we have chattel slavery in Australia is not entirely correct despite the following statement by the Royal Commissioner, H.D. Mosley, in his Report to the Governor of Western Australia in 1935.

"In the Kimberleys the native is not paid, and bearing in mind the experience of one district of the North West it appears to be no great disadvantage to the natives." (He might also have added that this situation was of great advantage to the pastoralists.) Nevertheless this is not chattel slavery or even serfdom because although the native is tied to his tribal country by custom he is not tied by British law. The result of course is the same, for provided an aboriginal horde country is part of a cattle or sheep station a supply of cheap black labour is automatically available. Like the emancipated serf who became the "free" proletariat so the expropriated aborigine becomes "free" black labour for the squatter.

Merely to reverse the process of history and to restore to the aborigines the complete rights of British subjects is patently absurd; but, such rights that they can use should most definitely be restored. The question immediately arises - what rights can the aborigines use and who is to be the arbiter to determine what rights can be

returned? Thus, as an example, to demand from the Western Australian Government that the aborigines should have the right to lease land would meet with a stonewall of opposition, for the pastoralists and financial interests behind this particular government would realise that once the aborigines and half castes could lease land the supply of cheap labour would dry up. H.D. Mosley, as the mouthpiece of these pastoral interests gives their viewpoint when he says in his report, "One could not, even with extreme imagination, visualise a native of the kimberleys settled on his own property."

It is here that another facet of the history of the aborigines must be considered. Who has ever championed the cause of the aborigines? Subjectively it can be said that some Christian missionaries have been the protagonists of the aborigines for it would be useless to deny that some are quite sincere in their desire to alleviate the condition of the aborigines. In the same category can be placed a number of scientists and administrators. But objectively we know that missionaries, bourgeois scientists and administrators can no more raise the economic standard of the aborigines than a man can lift himself by attempting to raise a chair on which he is sitting, for all three are part and parcel of the capitalist State. Who, then, are the allies of the aborigines in their struggle for emancipation? Their single ally is the Australian working class.

It is only within the last few years that the working class has awakened to its responsibility towards the aborigines. As has already been stated the aborigines have no cohesion either to fight direct physical oppression or to counter economic exploitation. The education that they have received at the hands of the bourgeoisie, except in very exceptional cases, is quite insufficient for them to grasp even the fundamentals of the class struggle. As far as the capitalist system is concerned an ignorant race is a docile race, although it is a fact worthy of remark that the ground was certainly fertile for the seeds of Japanese fifth column propaganda amongst some aborigines and half castes who had been in contact with white people in the northern towns. But, by and large, the aborigine in his primitive state of culture has no weapon to use against capitalism and it falls to the lot of the Australian worker to fight his earliest battles for him. If those earliest battles are won an education will be wrested from the capitalist for the aborigine that will fit him for the class struggle and he in his turn will be a not insignificant ally of the white working class.

It might be asked why the working class has scarcely raised a finger in the aborigines' fight? The answer is not far to seek; it is because the very astute bourgeoisie have driven the wedge of chauvinism very firmly between the aborigine and his white comrades in adversity. How insidious is this propaganda of the capitalist press is shown by the question that even some party comrades ask:

"But surely the aborigine is not as intelligent as we are?"

With the forces of reaction in retreat throughout the world the time is opportune for the Australian Labour Movement, led by its vanguard, the Communist Party, to strike a blow for our oppressed minority. The Four Freedoms of the Atlantic Charter are a weapon that has been placed in our hands and which, with dexterity, reactionary Trade Union executive would attempt to obstruct a resolution couched in the following terms:

"It is resolved that in accord with the spirit of the Atlantic Charter medical practitioners should be available to the aborigines of Australia and Papua pro rata as for the white population of Australia."

If this one resolution were carried into effect the number of doctors administering to the aborigines would increase tenfold.

Some missionaries are undoubtedly desirous of assisting the aborigines but Christianity is the most powerful disintegrating agent at work amongst the aborigines. The aborigines never were Christians and the right of religious self determination implied in the "Freedom of Religion" clause of the Atlantic Charter demands that all religious teaching amongst the aborigines should be discontinued forthwith. It is not the purpose of this article to discuss the reasons why Christianity has such disastrous effects upon aboriginal society except to point out that in attempting to transplant a system of ethics in which the chastity of the female figures so largely to a society in which sexual group marriage exists, is to produce such psychological discord that only ill can result. The code of ethics the aborigines have is entirely their own affair and for us to teach them Christian morality is quite as immoral and equally ridiculous as for a bush aborigine to retail his totemism and group marriage in the marked square. Our responsibility to the aborigines is, by a helping hand to raise their economic standards and to educate them so that they may hammer out their own code of ethics in the mill of their own experience.

Exploitation by financial interests of a subject race has never been driven so hard to its logical conclusion as it has been in Australia. That conclusion in the Southern parts of Australia was the virtual extermination of the aboriginal race. In the early days of Australia's history the labor movement having no theory of the class struggle did not appreciate that the aborigine's cause was their own cause. But with marxism as a guide Comrade Wright has indicated the tactics that should be adopted and it is for other comrades to copy his example in leading Unions and other Labour organisations in a demand for a "New Deal for the Aborigines."