

Anarchist Political School

Racism, colonisation, and Indigenous struggle



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The Origins of Racism

Modern racism has its origins in the colonisation of the Americas in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Unlike the Spanish conquistadors who sought to get rich by plundering the New World of its gold and silver, English planters used agriculture to generate their wealth. During the 17th century, these agricultural capitalists established extremely profitable sugar, tobacco, and cotton plantations in the Americas on the back of vast quantities of slave labour.

Slavery was, of course, not a new concept. However, in ancient and medieval societies, slavery typically had to do with religion and the outcomes of warfare. Slavery also fit neatly into hierarchical feudal systems based on rank and status.

Yet in 17th century England, agricultural capitalists were overthrowing the feudal order and popularising ideas about personal liberty and equality before the law. This created a contradiction between their liberal ideas of “all men being equal” and the slavery which was the basis of their wealth.

The solution was the invention of racism. Colonisers and capitalists insisted that darker-skinned peoples were intellectually inferior, subhuman and suited for a life of

hard labour. They were therefore undeserving of freedom and equal rights.

It is important to understand the cause and effect of racism and slavery. **Slavery generated racism.** Racism did not cause plantation owners to enslave people. Plantation owners enslaved people in order to get rich, and racism was gradually elaborated as the justification. As such, the profits produced by the Atlantic slave trade gave rise to an entirely new way of classifying humans.

Capitalism has continued to generate, change, and shape racism to suit its needs. There is no biological basis for the division of the human species into races. Instead, the ruling class has created races and racism in the contexts of war, imperialism, colonisation, slavery, and the policing of borders. Although races are social constructs and have no scientific basis, the effects of dividing the world into races are very much real.

Discuss

Where can we see examples of racist ideas being propagated by the ruling class today to justify war, militarism, and genocide?

Racism

Racism is more than just racial prejudice in our thoughts or actions. Racism functions as a means of organising

and justifying the oppression of large masses of people. It is a form of systemic oppression in which one group of people is oppressed and often exploited by another and where the oppressed group is defined and selected on racial grounds. Racism continues to exclude certain workers from participating in economic, political, and social life.

Racist ideology perpetuates all manner of myths to justify this oppression. Brown people and hijabi women are singled out by police and border security. Asian people are seen to be overly industrious, submissive, and unable to communicate well. Black people are seen to be aggressive and dangerous. The whiter you are, the greater your perceived intellectual ability.

In the workplace, bosses use racism to pit groups of workers against each other and undermine attempts to unite and fight for higher wages and safer working conditions. Overall, racially marginalised workers are forced to work in more dangerous and insecure conditions and for lower pay than the rest of the working class.

Outside the workplace, racism, xenophobia, and nationalism are manipulative tools used by the state to justify war, imperialism, deportations, and detention centres. The state also uses immigrants as scapegoats for the crises faced by the working class.

Racism makes the ruling class rich but divides the working class and ensures that workers cannot unite to fight our common class enemies.

It is important to recognise that white workers do not benefit from racism. Whatever privileges they may secure through racist practices, and whatever role they may play in enforcing racism in various times and places, white workers lose more, and sometimes far more, than they gain. Racism divides the working class and weakens it in the struggle against the bosses. A white worker 'benefits' from racism in the same way a scab 'benefits' from crossing a picket line—that is, not at all.

Discuss

Can there ever be such a thing as 'reverse racism' (i.e. racism against white people)?

Migrant Workers

In Australia, workers without permanent residence are at a disadvantage in relation to their employers, and the bosses know it. This applies doubly if the workers are undocumented or working outside their visa conditions. This leads to some occupations being dominated by immigrants receiving much less than the minimum wage.

The horticulture industry in Australia, for example, is built on the hyper-exploitation of migrant workers and

refugees. The official minimum wage might be \$24.95 an hour, but in fruit picking, migrant workers routinely work for piece rates that amount to as little as \$8 an hour.

Certain jobs, such as cleaning, back-of-house hospitality, meat packing, and fruit picking, become racialised. At the same time, capitalist media spin up narratives of migrants stealing jobs and drum up racist myths about violent crime and African gangs. Many migrants who come to Australia are doctors, scientists, engineers and other professionals. However, their qualifications are often not recognised in order to funnel migrants into lower-paid and more exploitative work.

Migrant workers on temporary visas often find themselves trapped in extremely exploitative workplaces, under the fear of deportation if they fight back. To undo this, we need to fight hard against the abusive visa system that exists in Australia today.

Discuss

What are some ways in which the state generates racist ideas to justify the abhorrent treatment of migrants and refugees?

Colonisation and Australia

First Nations peoples in Australia are not class societies. In many other areas of the world, colonising powers have

sought to conquer and co-opt existing class structures and use those class structures to dominate and exploit Indigenous people. In Australia, there was no ready-made system of exploitation and extraction that the British could take over, so instead they embarked on a project of settler colonisation.

The logic of settler colonialism is extermination. In order to extract resources, the colonial power needs control over land. Indigenous people never freely surrender the basis of their existence: their land. The colonial power, therefore, seeks to destroy Indigenous people and permanently dispossess them. Another word for this is genocide.

Historically in Australia, colonisation took the form of massacres, sexual violence, disease, poisonings, blackbirding¹, and starvation. Today, it looks like child removals, mass incarceration, deaths in custody, political and military oppression, the erosion of land rights, and the denial of sovereignty.

The same dynamics that drove genocide, dispossession, and settler colonialism in Australia from 1788 continue today. When Aboriginal peoples demand land rights, they run straight into the interests of mining and farming

¹Blackbirding involved the kidnapping and enslavement of South Sea Islanders who were forced into labour on sugar cane, cotton, and coffee plantations in Queensland and New South Wales.

capital. Large segments of Australian capital are still built on colonial extractionism.

To this very day, the expansion of mining, fossil fuel extraction, agriculture, and logging is built on the ever-greater dispossession of Aboriginal people. Rio Tinto blows up sacred sites like the Juukan Gorge to develop iron ore mining. The Victorian government cuts down sacred Djab Wurrung trees to expand a highway. Not to mention that every other aspect of Australian capitalism is built on the continuing dispossession of the already dispossessed.

Discuss

Should non-Indigenous workers today consider themselves as 'settlers'? What about migrants or refugees who come to Australia? What is a 'settler'?

Decolonisation and Self-Determination

Genuine Indigenous self-determination threatens the basis of Australian capitalism. Therefore, the struggle for it can only be won through a social revolution against the state and capitalism.

If the state and capitalism are left in place, any movement which overthrows colonialism will leave in place all other forms of oppression that exist under capitalism.

Decolonisation in Asia, Africa, and South America has repeatedly shown this to be the case. The direct racist rule of the old ruling class is ended but the workers and peasants of these countries continue to live impoverished and unfree lives. Highly repressive regimes of local capitalists continue to allow the plunder of their country by imperialism and profit handsomely in the process.

As anarchist communists, we say that freedom means something much more than life under capitalist governments. In fighting struggles against apartheid, colonialism, and imperialism, we argue that the working class must take the lead, with its own methods of struggle.

National oppression can only be eliminated by the working class, very much *including* First Nations peoples, taking control of their own lives.

Discuss

Will a capitalist state ever truly recognise First Nations sovereignty? What does this mean for the struggle for treaty?

White Australia and the Labour Movement

As the colonial population in Australia expanded with the gold rushes, colonial politicians were dealing with a serious issue for all ruling classes: how do we maintain

control? How do we prevent the working class from becoming rebellious? How do we contain their discontent?

In 1851, over 10,000 migrants from 23 different countries rose up during the Eureka rebellion in Ballarat. The ruling class needed to reassert control. One of the key solutions for the colonial elite was the idea of White Australia, accompanied by ever-greater attacks on Chinese migration. By demonising and oppressing Chinese migrants, the colonial ruling elite was able to co-opt white migrants and deploy them in defence of the colonial project against the 'yellow peril'.

In 1901, the newly formed federal government passed the White Australia policy, which was only officially renounced by the Whitlam government in 1973. The White Australia policy aimed to stop Asian immigration and limit non-white immigration (including southern and eastern Europeans), to keep Australia 'British'.

The unions and the Australian Labor Party adopted the racist propaganda of the ruling classes. The mainstream white labour movement was deeply racist and advanced the idea that the new Australian state was a utopia and a working man's paradise. Paradise was not open to non-white people or to working women, who were deemed inferior.

The powerful, rurally based Australian Workers Union (AWU) represented the mainstream of the Australian labour movement. They regarded hostility toward Asia as central to the maintenance of high living standards.

By restricting non-white immigration, they sought to keep wages and living conditions for white (male) workers comparatively high. Despite declining living standards in the 1920s, the AWU and its allies remained loyal to White Australia.

The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) attacked the AWU—calling it ‘Australia’s Worst Union’—and forcefully opposed both White Australia and the Labor Party. They made active efforts to recruit Asian workers and translated their publications into several languages. The IWW was eventually destroyed by police repression.

Discuss

It is often said that the White Australia policy never really ended in practice. Where can we see its modern equivalents today?

Defeating Racism

Racism is a necessary part of maintaining capitalism. Unless capitalism is overthrown, capitalists and the state will continue to regenerate racism to defend their interests. This means that any strategy for defeating

racism not only requires fighting for anti-racist reforms, such as prohibiting the use of police firearms or the right for all migrants arriving on a work visa to apply for a permanent visa on arrival, but it also requires a programme of revolutionary class struggle.

Racially marginalised workers, fighting alone, have limited power within capitalism. In order to defeat racism and win the fight for Indigenous sovereignty, it will require a united working-class movement committed to fighting against racism, the state, and the bosses. We have seen examples of this kind of struggle throughout Australia's history.

During World War II, the Chinese Seamen's Union (CSU) engaged in a series of strikes, demanding the right to stay in Australia. At the time, China was under brutal occupation by Japan, and Chinese workers did not want to return to a warzone. The government resisted the CSU and even killed two Chinese workers during a strike at Fremantle in 1942. Through continuous strikes and protests, and with solidarity from the Waterside Workers Federation and the Seamen's Union of Australia, the Menzies government was ultimately forced to grant the Chinese seamen permanent residency.

In August 1966, around 200 Gurindji workers at Wave Hill cattle station walked off on strike. Not just in protest of their horrendous working conditions, but also for the return of the land to Aboriginal control. The strike received

support from rank-and-file unionists around Australia who provided food and other necessities to the Gurindji workers, allowing the strike to endure until 1975.

In 1972, a block of houses in Redfern, Sydney was bought by a development company IBK who planned to knock down the houses, evict the tenants, and build expensive townhouses in their place. Aboriginal families had lived in these houses for decades and begun buckling down to resist evictions by the police. The Builders' Labourers Federation (BLF) also stepped in to support the Aboriginal community. Union workers in the BLF not only refused to demolish the houses but also did repairs on the plumbing and electricity in the block for free. Sixty-five homes were saved, providing the Aboriginal community with affordable housing. Factories in the nearby area were also repurposed into a medical centre, a preschool, and a cultural centre.

Discuss

Although these examples of solidarity are inspiring, they are considerably rare across Australian labour history. How should we go about building solidarity across different racialised groups today?

Working Class Unity

White workers should not fight for racially marginalised workers simply out of altruism. Resistance against racism is essential to building independent working-class power. For as long as capitalism is able to pit segments of the working class against each other in defence of a false racial hierarchy, the rule of capital will remain secure. The workers, divided, will certainly be defeated.

Racialised workers remain under-represented in most unions in Australia today—a product of the racist history of the labour movement. Unless this barrier is overcome, and the unions commit themselves to fighting against racism, the Australian labour movement will remain hampered.

This leads to a two-way conclusion for anarchists. On the one hand, in order to abolish racism, we must overthrow capitalism. And in order to overthrow capitalism, we must build up the power of the trade union movement. So, fighting racism requires building up the power of the unions and pushing them to fight for the immediate struggles of racialised workers.

On the other hand, in order to build the unions, we must fight racism. No union will be effective unless it can unite workers, regardless of their race, gender, or sexuality. Much like fighting sexism or queerphobia, fighting racism

is not something that can wait until 'after the revolution'. Quite the contrary, the only way that we will successfully bring about a revolution is if we commit ourselves to fighting racism now.

Discuss

Some anarchists argue that the unions of today are too deeply racist to be suitable bodies for representing the interests of migrant and Indigenous workers. Therefore, other organisations of class struggle are required to fight racism. What do you think?