An exchange on Australia's "Sorry Day"

9 June 1998

While I have no sympathies with the Australian Government nor capitalism in any form, I disagree with the message your article sends as to the correct course of action. While the 'Sorry Day' is a poor excuse for generations of racism and exploitation, it is at least one step in the right direction. I also agree that joint Aboriginal and Capital agreements are prime for typical capitalist exploitation and division amongst Aboriginals. However, I do not think it appropriate to deny them the right to participate in the capitalist economy if it is of marginal benefit for them. A socialist revolution is not going to happen overnight so why should these people not benefit, if they can, from the current system? It is doubtful whether workers will unite with Aboriginals until the white majority see them as equals, and not 'savages living off welfare'. Yes a socialist revolution is worth agitating for, but it is not right to deny those in the most misery a decent life 'for the good of the revolution'. Just as many of the underdeveloped peoples of the USSR were left behind and further exploited in the name of socialism and for the good of the revolution, there is a danger in a similar experience for Aboriginals.

Believe me, I am not an apologist for the present government's policies. If I were in control I would provide Aboriginal communities with capital to establish their own industries, agriculture and communities as they see fit. But I'm not in control, there is not going to be a revolution in the foreseeable future, and there is no reason why Aboriginal people should not attempt to get the greatest benefit they can for themselves now!

In Solidarity

MP

3 June 1998

Dear MP,

Your letter raises some important questions. Despite your stated intentions of giving no support to the policies of the Australian government and capitalism, your arguments unfortunately dovetail with the program advocated by the Howard government and most of big business: that Aboriginal people should be shifted from "welfare" to "business".

In effect, you argue that Aborigines can only seek relief from social misery by participating in the process that has created their misery: the pursuit of private profit. Far from obtaining a benefit, even a marginal benefit, from the capitalist economy, Aboriginal people have been among its greatest victims over the past two centuries, from the earliest massacres on.

In the comment on "National Sorry Day" we demonstrated that both sides in the official "debate" cover up the economic roots of this genocidal history, precisely in order to perpetuate new crimes today and in the future.

For all their efforts to use events such as "Sorry Day" to make "the nation" or all "whites" responsible for the policies pursued, today's business chiefs and politicians are the heirs of the mining, pastoral and business empires established by clearing the Aborigines off the land. It was the drive of their predecessors to establish private ownership of land and natural resources, essential for a capitalist economy, that motivated the destruction of Aboriginal communal society.

Today they seek to accelerate their mining projects, pastoral ventures and other commercial operations by cultivating and integrating a privileged layer of Aboriginal business operators. Although this layer claims to speak in the name of the Aboriginal people, their interests as employers, investors and highly-paid consultants and administrators are inimical to those of the vast majority of Aboriginal workers, remote communities and youth.

This can be readily established from the historical record. The process of creating a capitalist layer is not new. It has intensified in the wake of the Mabo and Wik rulings in the High Court, which created a new

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form of private property referred to as “native title”. But those rulings themselves reflected a process first set in train in the 1970s. It was then that “land rights” became the official policy of the Whitlam Labor and Fraser Liberal governments—in order to divert a developing unified movement of workers around the demands of equal pay and equal rights for Aborigines into campaigns for separate, racially defined property rights for Aborigines.

What has been the result? Over the past two decades, the basic living conditions of most Aborigines have only deteriorated, as every social indicator shows. Meanwhile a small minority has prospered by going into business, in some cases directly profiting from the labour of Aboriginal workers by enforcing “work-for-the-dole” schemes.

Now even the paltry welfare benefits and primitive facilities provided by governments have been targetted for abolition, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) chairman Gatjil Djerrkura and other Aboriginal leaders taking up the Howard government’s call for the elimination of “welfare dependency”. The result will be that Aboriginal workers and youth will increasingly have no choice but to work as cheap labour for the mining companies, graziers and other employers ... including Aboriginal owners and subcontractors.

This vicious social assault, which is part of the onslaught on the conditions of the entire working class, can only be answered through the development of a unified struggle of all working people, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike, against their common enemy—the private profit system. That means fighting not only the revival by the Howard government and Pauline Hanson’s One Nation party of all the old racist conceptions used to justify the genocidal practices of the past, but also the racial divisiveness of the elite Aboriginal leaders.

Your argument that the fight for this perspective—that of socialism—involves denying those most in misery a decent life “for the good of the revolution,” is fundamentally false. It is only by developing the struggle for the fundamental reorganisation of society along genuinely egalitarian, democratic and socialist lines that even the most basic conditions can be defended and the burning needs of Aboriginal people addressed.

This is not the place to attempt to clarify in depth your identification of socialism with the Stalinist regime that existed in the USSR. The very existence of our movement, the Trotskyist party, is testament to an unbroken struggle for authentic Marxism against the betrayal of the Russian Revolution by the Kremlin bureaucracy. The archives of the World Socialist Web Site offer a wealth of material on this struggle, including the details of *1937: Stalin’s Year of Terror*, by Professor Vadim Rogovin, documenting the causes, impact and consequences of Stalin’s purges, directed against the substantial socialist opposition to his regime.

As for the suffering of the peoples of the former Soviet Union, they have only intensified with the restoration of capitalism by Stalin’s successors in the Kremlin. It has led to an unmitigated economic and social disaster over the past six years, marked by mass unemployment, the abolition of social programs, the spread of terrible poverty and the return of long-conquered diseases, such as the plague. It is a stark example of the barbarity that the capitalist “market” is already delivering across Asia, Africa and internationally.

Having made these points, we welcome further discussion.

Sincerely,
Mike Head

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