

Pacific Islanders to be used as cheap labour

# Australian government prepares to revive “blackbirding”

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3 November 2003

One aspect of the Australian government’s neo-colonial policy toward the island nations of the South Pacific is a proposal to exploit the region’s people as a source of cheap labour—a practice which has a long and sordid history. In the second half of the 19th century, tens of thousands of Pacific Islanders were dragooned to Australia to work as cheap labour on sugar cane plantations in the tropical north east of the continent.

The recruitment of island labour was called “blackbirding”—after the term “blackbird shooting,” which referred to the barbaric practice of English colonists who hunted down Australia’s aboriginal population. The term “blackbird-catching” was also used to describe the African-American slave trade.

The proposal for a modern-day revival of “blackbirding” is contained in the recent Australian Senate committee report “A Pacific engaged: Australia’s relations with PNG and the island states of the South West Pacific.” In a section titled “Labour mobility” the report recommends that the Australian government “support Australian industry groups, State governments, unions, Non-Government Organisations and regional governments to develop a pilot program to allow for labour to be sourced from the region for seasonal work in Australia.”

The Senate cites a number of submissions to its inquiry in support of such schemes. The Queensland Fruit and Vegetable Growers claimed labour shortages at harvest time were causing them losses and that working tourists or backpackers were not reliable enough as a source of labour. Mr Nielsen, who runs a piggery and asparagus farm, claimed he had been unable to harvest 30 per cent of his asparagus, worth \$1 million, due to a shortage of pickers. The peak union federation in Australia, the ACTU, outlined its talks with a Fijian business association to set up “a pilot project bringing into Australia on short-term contracts, workers from Fiji to assist in harvesting fruit and vegetable crops.”

Reference was made to a 1997 government inquiry that recommended granting work visas to Pacific Islanders, as it “may prove to be more cost-effective than continuing high levels of aid in perpetuity.” Island workers remitting part of their wages back to the home states could eventually be used as a rationale for reducing Australian government aid to the region. To further cut costs, the report also recommends that the labourers’ countries of origin organise, finance and manage the labour hire schemes.

In the 19th century, the major colonial powers—Britain, France, Germany and newcomer America—expanded their empires throughout the South Pacific. After profits from the easily harvested sandalwood, pearls and beche de mer began to dwindle, the plantation system developed, with copra, sugar, coffee, cocoa, vanilla, fruit, cotton and rubber all being planted commercially.

Indigenous people living near these plantations, who could rely upon their own subsistence gardens and hunting, refused the long hours and bad conditions on offer. It thus became necessary for the plantation owners to

seek an alternative source of labour.

It is estimated that nearly one million indentured labourers worked throughout the South Pacific from the 1860s to the 1940s. As well as Pacific Islanders, some 600,000 Asian workers were brought to work in the region. As many as 380,000 workers were brought to German New Guinea between 1884 and 1940, 280,000 to British New Guinea and 12,000 to German Samoa. Up to 60,000 Indians were transported to Fiji between 1879 and 1916. Plantations within the Solomon Islands employed around 38,000 people between 1913 and 1940.

In Australia, the use of indentured labour from the Pacific took place primarily in the colony of Queensland, which was established in 1859. While the vast tracts of fertile land in the river valleys in the north-east of the continent presented opportunities for agriculture, there was a chronic shortage of labour.

The Queensland government passed the Coolie Act in 1862 that set out conditions for indentured Indian labour, but few Indian recruits could be found. In 1863, Queensland landowner Robert Towns dismissed his German workforce, claiming they were eating too much, and replaced them with 65 Pacific Islanders, whom he recruited in the New Hebrides or present day Vanuatu.

In all, 61,160 Pacific Islanders were brought to Queensland as indentured labourers between 1863 and 1906. The majority were Melanesians or “Kanaks,” as they were called. They created the Queensland sugar industry, which today produces A\$2 billion worth of raw sugar annually through the back-breaking tasks of clearing and ploughing new land.

In the early phases of this brutal trade in human labour, some Islanders were kidnapped. One of the worst documented cases was the voyage of the *Carl* in 1872. Led by a Melbourne doctor, James Murray, the ship sailed around the New Hebrides and the Solomons. Murray dropped a cannon overboard into the canoe of Islanders who paddled out to meet the ship, sinking their vessel and allowing the ship’s crew to grab the floating men. After visits to the islands of Malaita, Isabel, Guadalcanal and Buka, Murray captured a total of 141 men. Fighting inevitably broke out between Islanders in the hold, who were from antagonistic tribes and had no common language. During an escape attempt, Murray ordered his crew to fire into the hold, killing and wounding 70 islanders, who were then dumped overboard. The survivors were offloaded in Fiji.

Most of the indentured workers, however, were recruited by agents who painted false pictures about how long they would be away, the nature of their work and their destinations. The Islanders who worked on the plantations sought to acquire industrial products and the status accorded those who had traveled overseas. Many expected to be away for just 12 months, only to discover they had been indentured for three years.

Pay rates of two shillings per week formed a fraction of the 20 shillings

per week paid to European workers. Indentured labourers, mostly single men, were cheap indeed, as the employer was not obliged to pay the cost of feeding their families.

The working day was at least 10 hours, six days per week. In Maryborough in 1880, islanders were forced to work from 6 AM to 6.45 PM, with a 45-minute lunch break. Government legislation required that workers were housed and fed during their stay. One historical study noted: "Melanesians on the plantations, where meals were often prepared in bulk by contractors, were frequently given food that was unfit for human consumption." (*Race Relations in Colonial Queensland: A History of Exclusion, Exploitation and Extermination* by Raymond Evans, Kay Saunders and Kathryn Cronin, University of Queensland Press, 1988. p.185)

"This practice was not simply confined to the extensive estates. Arthur Dixon, a farmer on the Albert River in 1869, frequently "gave his bonded servants rancid meat; Islanders at Magnolia Estate at Maryborough complained that they were served salted dugong. Melanesians were often served what was euphemistically referred to as 'Kanaka beef'—the offal, refuse and the tough, unpalatable quarters of a slaughtered beast." (ibid. p.185)

Islanders were not considered competent to take a legal oath. Thus any case of assault against an Islander was dismissed on the denial of an employer. If workers walked off the plantation to lodge a complaint, they were liable to being counter-charged with desertion and punished by the authorities.

Despite calls for segregation and the banning of Islanders from leaving the plantations, no such laws were enacted. The Islanders were encouraged to buy illegal alcohol, to gamble and to use prostitutes on their one day off each week. In 1883 a riot erupted at the Mackay racecourse when a sly grog dealer refused to serve the Islanders, who responded by throwing bottles. They were then attacked by men on horseback with whips and sticks. One islander was killed and 30 seriously wounded in the attack. This incident, although unusual, expressed the simmering hostility between the local population and the islanders—a sentiment fed by constant racist vilification of the islanders in the popular press.

The *Bulletin* of 26 March 1892, for example, described Islanders in the following language: "When he doesn't die altogether, he remains half-dead and quite submissive. He is priceless to the planter, because pre-eminently kickable."

Many workers died at the hands of their employers. In 1871 John Riley stated that an Islander named Vacon had been attacked by an overseer with a hoe and sustained three broken ribs and a broken shoulder. He died and was buried. His death was not reported to the local government official supposedly responsible for the Islanders' welfare. No further action was taken. (ibid P. 197)

The grimmest indicator of the horrific conditions under which the Islanders lived and laboured was the death rate. For those working in Queensland, mostly males aged between 16 and 35, the annual death rate averaged 55 per 1,000, compared with a death rate for European workers of 10 per 1,000. In 1884 alone, 1,769 islander labourers died, a rate of 148 per thousand.

The second half of the nineteenth century saw the emergence of Australia's trade unions. The unions were hostile to the indentured labourers, claiming they were being used by the employers to undermine the conditions and wages of non-indentured European workers. While this was true, the unions never fought to improve the lot of the Islanders. In fact the unions and their political arm, the Australian Labor Party, founded in 1891, were the most virulent racists. The Amalgamated Shearers Union's rules of 1890 banned "Chinese and South Sea Islanders" from membership and the Amalgamated Workers Union, founded in 1894, extended the ban to "Kanakas, Japanese and Afghans". (*One Big Union - A History of the Australian Workers Union 1886-1994* by Mark Hearn and

Harry Knowles, Cambridge UP, 1996, p.66)

In 1901, the six British colonies were federated to form the nation of Australia. The ideological cement binding the nation was the White Australia Policy, championed by the Australian Labor Party. Edmund Barton, the first Australian Prime Minister, declared at the Federation ceremony: "I do not think that the doctrine of equality of man was really ever intended to include racial equality." (*Race Relations*, p.172)

Coinciding with these political changes, the final years of the 19th century saw a major restructuring of Queensland's sugar industry. While it had developed on the basis of large plantations, changes in farming techniques were eliminating the need for sugar growers to employ large numbers of unskilled labourers.

One of the first pieces of legislation to be passed by the new parliament was the banning of the virtually redundant indentured labour system and the establishment of the framework for the racist expulsion of the Pacific Islanders from Australia. The *Pacific Islands Labourers Act 1901* banned island labourers from entering Australia after 1904. From 1906 all Islanders were to be deported. The only exemptions were those few who had lived for five continuous years in Queensland before 1884.

In an effort to oppose this legislation, Islanders organised themselves, for the first time. In 1902 and 1903, they presented petitions with over 3,000 signatures to the Queensland Governor and to the British king. In 1904 the Pacific Islanders' Association was founded. As a result of the protests, the number of Islanders exempted from deportation was increased from 691 to 1,654. Between 1904 and 1908, however, 7,068 Islanders were deported.

The current Australian military takeover of the Solomon Islands has been named Operation 'Helpem Fren' (Help a Friend). But its real content is to revive Australia's past colonial relations with the Pacific Islands—the plunder of their human and natural resources. In the 19th century, the essence of "blackbirding" was the exploitation of the Islanders' labour for the development of the wealth of Australian imperialism. Today's proposals amount to a continuation of that same process.

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