

Sydney's racial violence: a warning from Sri Lanka

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The working class in Australia and internationally must take serious warning from the racial violence that erupted in the suburbs of Sydney on December 11. The events of that day reveal how base racist instincts are aroused and manipulated by the political establishment to further its broader agenda of destroying the democratic rights of all working people, irrespective of their background.

An isolated incident involving a youth of Lebanese descent and a surf lifesaver at North Cronulla beach was blown out of all proportions to incite racist violence against anyone of Middle Eastern appearance. This was no spontaneous outburst. In the week following the initial episode, right-wing media commentators whipped up an atmosphere of racial hysteria setting the stage for what we in Sri Lanka, tragically, have seen too many times—a vicious communal mob.

Who was the main beneficiary? None other than Prime Minister John Howard and his Liberal government, which is notorious for stirring up anti-immigrant sentiment and fears of terrorist attack to divert attention from its own regressive economic and social program.

The Labor Party, which has been complicit in all of Howard's policies, immediately seized the opportunity to ram repressive new police powers through the NSW state legislature, where it holds office. Last weekend, Sydney residents were introduced to what has been commonplace in Colombo: roadblocks, vehicle searches, identity checks and arbitrary detentions.

This bipartisan front in Australia for the strengthening of the state machine is becoming the norm for every capitalist government around the world. This, more than any other factor, expresses clearly the international character of the social and political crisis that humanity faces. Incapable of securing popular support for policies that benefit the wealthy few, governments now routinely resort to lies, reactionary provocations and anti-democratic legislation.

Howard's comments following the North Cronulla riot were particularly revealing. Sympathising with the sentiments of the mob, Howard declared: "I don't think Australians want tribalism. They want us all to be Australians." In other words, the violence was the fault of Middle Eastern immigrants for failing to fit in.

As a Sri Lankan socialist, I was reminded, upon hearing Howard's words, of the terrible events that took place here 22 years ago. For three days, beginning on July 23, 1983, racial carnage erupted right across the island as state-sponsored thugs indiscriminately attacked Tamils. Hundreds of people were killed and homes and businesses worth tens of millions of dollars burnt to the ground.

The communal pogrom was the immediate prelude to a civil war that has plagued the country for more than two decades. Tens of thousands of people have died and large areas in the war zones of the north and east turned into rubble.

After allowing Sinhala racist mobs to rule the streets for three days, President J. R. Jayawardene justified the death and destruction in his address to the nation. In words eerily similar to those of Howard, he declared: "The Sinhala people who inherit a history of over 2,000 years are opposed to the division of the country." Then he added: "In accordance with the wish of the Sinhala people, we have decided to pass a parliamentary act to legally ban all propaganda for separatism."

Thus the blame for the violent pogrom was squarely placed on the victims. The fact that the demand for Tamil separatism was the result of decades of anti-Tamil discrimination and oppression by governments dominated by Sinhala chauvinists was conveniently swept under the carpet.

On August 4, Jayawardene rammed the sixth constitutional amendment through parliament as a matter of urgency, allocating just 13 hours for the discussion and debate. It included a clause making it binding on all members of parliament to take an oath of allegiance to the "unitary state". The Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), the main parliamentary opposition, refused and was stripped of its seats. Effectively disenfranchised, Tamil youth flocked to join the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)—a bourgeois nationalist movement that issued the demand for a separate Tamil nation in the north and east of the country.

The pogrom was the reaction of the Sinhala ruling elite to a deepening economic and social crisis. Under Jayawardene, Sri Lanka was the first country in South Asia to embrace the free market policies of the World Bank and the IMF. In 1978, he changed the constitution to establish an executive presidency with wide-ranging powers in preparation for looming class

battles. In 1980, more than 100,000 workers were summarily dismissed for joining a partial general strike to defend their conditions.

By 1983, the working class was beginning to wage a fight for the reinstatement of the sacked workers and to challenge the government's agenda of economic restructuring. A group of 28 trade unions rallied around 11 demands including: an end to privatisation; full citizenship rights for the Tamil-speaking plantation workers; the abrogation of the prevention of terrorism act; defence of the right to self-determination of Tamils; the release of political prisoners and the defence of free education.

Only six days after the 28 trade unions met and adopted these demands, Jayawardene and his United National Party (UNP) unleashed the anti-Tamil pogrom. The police and military stood by while UNP thugs went on the rampage. The direct connection between the government's anti-working class policies and this racist provocation was unmistakable.

Racial discrimination is one of the age-old weapons of the ruling classes to keep their adversary, the working class, divided and under the thumb. The more social polarisation sharpens, with the accumulation of great wealth in the hands of a few while the majority are thrown into destitution, the more this reactionary weapon is wielded.

The impoverished Indian subcontinent has suffered more than its share of communal violence. In fact, the nation states formed after World War II were mired in communalism from the outset. British imperialism, with the backing of the indigenous ruling classes, dismembered South Asia into a Muslim Pakistan and a predominantly Hindu India and unleashed a communal holocaust that cost hundreds of thousands of lives. As for the tiny island state of Sri Lanka, it was based from the start on Sinhala supremacism. In 1948, the very year Sri Lanka was founded, the UNP government stripped all Tamil-speaking plantation workers—one tenth of the population—of their citizenship rights.

Although Australia has a different history, racism has also been entwined with nationalism from the outset. Australia's racially discriminatory immigration policies are notorious throughout Asia. During the postwar boom, politicians and media pundits were fond of calling it "the lucky country" but millions of Australians are now living below the poverty line. The resort to racist violence is always a sign of extreme social tension. Perhaps it seems far-fetched to compare Australia with Sri Lanka, but communalism has a terrible logic of its own and working people in Australia could rapidly find themselves swept down the Sri Lankan road.

Howard declares: "We place greater emphasis on the integration of people into the broader community and the avoidance of tribalism within our midst". And NSW Premier Morris Iemma echoes him saying: "I won't allow Sydney's reputation as a tolerant, vibrant international city to be tarnished by these ratbags and criminals who want to engage in

the sort of behavior we've seen."

To anyone familiar with the code words of communal politics, it is self-evident that these comments have nothing to do with tolerance. It is obvious who the "tribe" and "the ratbags" are. These remarks are an invitation to the racist bullyboys, including those in the police force, to intimidate, harass and bash the "Lebs" and the "wogs" as they are derogatorily referred to. This is the language of communal conflict.

A further lesson should be drawn from the Sri Lankan experience. Communalism is no answer for persecuted minorities either. Immigrant workers and youth in Australia cannot defend their rights by banding around religious and community leaders who advocate one form or another of identity politics. In Sri Lanka, young Tamils who joined the LTTE to fight persecution and discrimination have been led into a complete dead-end. The LTTE's demands represent the interests of the Tamil bourgeoisie, not the impoverished Tamil masses.

The answer lies not in communalism, but in a class solution based on the recognition that all workers, whatever their religion, skin colour, language or ethnicity, face a common enemy: the profit system. If the working class internationally does not take the initiative and fight for the socialist restructuring of society to meet the pressing needs of the majority, the ruling class will continue to stoke up fratricidal conflict: whether it be "Aussies" against "Lebs" or Sinhalese against Tamils.

Nothing less than the abolition of global capitalism and the construction of world socialism will ensure an end to conflict and war and guarantee basic democratic rights and a decent standard of living for all. Together with our comrades in the Socialist Equality Party in Australia and the other sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International around the world, that is what we in the Sri Lankan SEP are fighting for.



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