The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia)—Part 2

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The World Socialist Web Site *has published The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia). The document was adopted unanimously at the party's founding congress in Sydney on January 21–25. (See: "Socialist Equality Party (Australia) holds founding Congress"). (Click here for Parts 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11)*

The origins of Australian exceptionalism

22. The fight to win the support of Australian workers for the program of world socialist revolution requires an unrelenting struggle against the nationalist doctrines of Australian exceptionalism that historically have formed the chief ideological obstacle to the development of socialist consciousness.

23. Australian exceptionalism has always been a myth. But it has been sustained over decades by a combination of powerful material factors. Geographic isolation and the material advantages flowing from the economic relationship of the settler-state to the British Empire, in which wool and other exports created the basis for a relatively high standard of living, promoted an insular outlook. A century after British settlement, per capita gross domestic product was amongst the highest in the world—nearly 40 percent more than Britain and the US and more than twice that of other western countries. This wealth made possible the provision of social welfare in Australia, before it developed in many other advanced capitalist countries.

24. Relatively high living standards enabled, as well, the granting of significant political concessions. As the *Argus* newspaper noted in 1857, social conditions in the colonies were different from Europe. The number of paupers was insignificant compared to the total population and there was no "dangerous class." Consequently, the "wealthy classes" had "nothing to fear from manhood suffrage." It might prevent them from abusing their power but there was "no danger of its encroaching upon their rights."[5] There was no revolutionary struggle for democratic rights, in contrast to Europe. Writing in early 1855 on the conflicts in the Ballarat goldfields that had led to the Eureka Stockade the previous December, Karl Marx noted that while the immediate upsurge would be suppressed, the ferment that gave rise to it could only be overcome with "far-reaching concessions." Marx's prediction was fulfilled. Democratic concessions were granted in the 1850s followed by an expansion of the franchise. At

the end of the 1880s, payment of MPs was initiated and by 1890, when the Labor Party was founded, the demands of the Chartist movement, carried to Australia by British immigrants, had been largely realised without a significant political struggle. Lenin once referred to the fact that the Russian working class came to Marxism through "agony." In Russia and Germany, the struggle for democracy was waged against an entrenched reactionary state. As Leon Trotsky noted, while the attainment of democracy in Russia required a "grandiose revolutionary overturn", conditions in Australia were very different: "The Australian democracy grew organically from the virgin soil of a new continent and at once assumed a conservative character and subjected to itself a young but quite privileged proletariat."[6]

25. Australian exceptionalism found its embodiment in the Labor Party and the trade union bureaucracy. Closely associated from its very origins with the capitalist state and resting on definite material privileges, the Labor bureaucracy has played the key role, above all in times of economic and political crisis, in mobilising both ideological and material forces to counter the "foreign" doctrines of Marxism and socialist internationalism.

26. Contrary to nationalist myth, the emergence and development of Australian capitalism and the working class were, and always have been, the outcome of international processes. The settlement of Australia in 1788 resulted from the expansionary movement of British capitalism; at that time, the drive to open up new prospects for trade and commerce in the East, as well as the exploitation of the resources of the Pacific that had become possible because of navigational advances. Establishing the framework for the Marxist approach to historical processes, Trotsky wrote: "The railways which have cut a path across Australia were not the 'natural' outgrowth of the living conditions either of the Australian aborigines or of the first generations of malefactors who were, beginning with the epoch of the French revolution, shipped off to Australia by the magnanimous English metropolises. The capitalist development of Australia is natural only from the standpoint of the historical process taken on a world scale. On a different scale, on a national, provincial scale it is, generally speaking, impossible to analyze a single one of the major social manifestations of our epoch."[7]

27. While the settlement was bound up with the expansion of trade, the rise of industrial capitalism in Britain brought far-reaching changes to the new Australian colonies. By the 1820s vast areas of land were being turned over to the grazing of sheep, in order to supply wool to the British mills. This led to an onslaught against the indigenous population, which was "cleared" from the land through the spread of disease, poisoning and shooting, in a campaign that extended well into the 20th century.

28. The violence inflicted on the Aboriginal people was not simply a policy. It was rooted in the very nature of the new capitalist property relations that were being established, starting with the private appropriation of land. It was the bloody expression of the organic incompatibility of this new social order, based on private ownership and exclusion, with the social relations of the hunter-gatherer society of the indigenous inhabitants. Like everywhere else, capital emerged in Australia dripping blood from every pore.

29. Transported convicts provided the initial labour force of the new colonies. But, by the middle of the 19th century, the population had considerably expanded, with the influx of the gold rushes in the 1850s. The development of larger-scale capitalist production in the latter decades of the 19th century closed off opportunities for the small farmer and miner and led to the growth of the working class in the towns. Notwithstanding the importance of wool and other primary industries, Australia was one of the most urbanised countries in the world.

The Labor Party and "White Australia"

30. The expansion of the working class led to an increase in trade union membership and demands for political representation. Following the introduction of payment to MPs, the NSW Trades and Labor Council resolved, in January 1890, to stand Labor candidates at the next general election and to draw up a Labor platform. The onset of a global recession later that year, resulting in a plunge in the price of wool, the staple export, saw an explosion of class conflict as employers moved, under the slogan of "freedom of contract", to smash the newly-formed unions. What began as a maritime strike in August 1890 extended into an industrial conflict involving more than 50,000 workers over a period of two months. Press reports likened it to the Paris Commune of 1871 and spoke of an "armed insurrection of class against class."

31. The initial strike movement was defeated, but was followed over the next four years by a further series of tumultuous struggles. These battles revealed both the combative character of the working class and the weakness of the ruling class. Unlike its counterparts in France and America, the emerging Australian bourgeoisie had no revolutionary or democratic traditions to which it could turn—its origins lay in the Rum Rebellion, the exploitation of convict labour and the murder of the indigenous population. Nor did it have a large peasant class as its constituency, which it could turn against the working class. It was not rooted in centuries-old land and property ownership, with its rule blessed by the church and sanctified by tradition, but had emerged at the same time as the working class, which it now directly confronted. Under these conditions, the bourgeoisie turned to the Labor Party and the doctrines of Laborism as the chief means of subordinating the working class to its rule.

32. The Australian Labor Party (ALP) was founded in direct opposition to Marxism and its scientifically-grounded program of socialist internationalism. In 1848, the Communist Manifesto, authored by Marx and Engels, had called on the workers of the world to unite in a common struggle against capitalism. In the latter half of the 19th century, the growth of the socialist movement and the founding of mass workers parties in Europe led to the founding of the Second International in 1889 on a Marxist perspective. In contrast, the Labor Party, which was established one year later, was grounded on a nationalist and exclusivist program. Its consummate expression was the doctrine of White Australia.

Significantly, the Labor Party did not seek affiliation to the Second International.

33. The White Australia policy originated in the British colonial office which, in the 1840s, opposed the importation of labour from India on the grounds that, while it may have aided the immediate interests of the pastoralists, it nevertheless had to be prohibited "for the benefit of the metropolitan state." The British bourgeoisie, reliant on the wealth extracted from India and forcing entry into China through the opium wars, feared the growth of an Asian population in the colonies. Such a development, it reasoned, would run counter to its perspective of using a "White Australia" as a bastion for the defence of its expanding interests in the Asia-Pacific region. Above all, the emerging Australian capitalist class feared that the introduction of labour from Asia would create a "dangerous class", that is, a proletariat with ties to the region's oppressed masses.

34. By the end of the century, economic expansion, both into the South Pacific and across the continent, posed the task of forming a unified nation-state from the six colonies. The rising Australian bourgeoisie sought to establish the new nation within the framework of the British Empire. The mechanisms of rule established under the British Crown were crucial for the suppression of the working class at home, while the Empire provided the all-important export markets that formed the basis of the colonies' wealth. At the same time, the new ruling elite was developing its own interests, especially in the South Pacific region. The Australian nation-state emerged from its very birth as an imperialist power.

35. Already by 1840, the *Sydney Herald* had declared the need to "assert our just rights to the undivided supremacy and superiority over all the possessions we have discovered in the Southern Pacific betwixt this country and South America."[8] In 1883 the colony of Queensland sought to annex the entire eastern region of New Guinea (the western part was in Dutch hands) but failed to receive Britain's backing, thereby opening the way for the establishment of a German colony in the north-eastern part of the island. The colonial governments drew the conclusion that they needed a federal union in order to promote their imperialist interests with one voice. On May 29, 1883 an editorial in the Melbourne *Age*, which had the largest circulation of any newspaper in Australia, declared that as "unappropriated parts of the world were being seized" sooner or later "it must come to something like a Monroe doctrine for Australia and we shall have to intimate unmistakably that no foreign annexations shall be permitted in countries south of the line." When war broke out in 1914, one of the first actions of the Australian forces was to seize the German colony in New Guinea.

36. The position of the emerging capitalist class—dependent on Empire but with its own burgeoning appetites—was summed up in the concept of the "independent Australian Briton" developed by one of the "founding fathers" of federation, Alfred Deakin. But, as the era of mass politics dawned, the bourgeoisie lacked a political ideology on which to establish a nation-state. Unlike the American bourgeoisie of the 18th century, it had no desire to cut its ties with the Empire upon which it depended. Nor could it found the new nation by appealing to democratic sentiments under conditions where, as the 1890s conflicts had so clearly revealed, class divisions were rapidly deepening. It needed a new program. This was formulated by various petty-bourgeois ideologists in the doctrines of Laborism. According to them, Australia was a new, exceptional, nation where the class conflicts that had erupted in Europe need not arise. Provided it was unified racially through policies of exclusion, the new nation could become a "workingman's paradise".

37. In 1901, in the first major debate in the Commonwealth parliament, Deakin made clear the critical importance of White Australia in uniting the working class with its "own" bourgeoisie, while dividing it from the working class and oppressed masses of Asia: "Unity of race is an absolute to the unity of Australia. It is more actually in the last resort than any other unity. After all, when the period of confused local politics and temporary political divisions was swept aside it was this real unity which made the Commonwealth possible."[9] The conflicts of "local politics"—the squattocracy versus manufacturers, free trade versus protection—that is, the divisions among different sections of the bourgeoisie, were subsumed under the banner of White Australia. Speaking in the same debate, shearers' union leader and Labor MP W.G. Spence articulated the relationship between White Australia and the British Empire: " … if we keep the race pure, and build up the national character, we shall become a highly progressive people of whom the British government will be prouder the longer we live and the stronger we grow. I do not think the Imperial authorities would hesitate to give their assent to a proposal to close the door to those people who would degrade our national character, lower the standard of our energy and capacity of our people, and thus weaken the Empire itself."[10]

38. The reactionary utopia of a white "workingman's paradise", where living standards would be protected through a ban on the immigration of "coloured" labour, underpinned the program of national reformism. White Australia was supplemented by tariffs to protect local industry, and, therefore, wages. Wages and conditions were regulated by the state, with the trade unions given official recognition in the legal structure of the state through the federal arbitration system. Together, White Australia, tariff protection and arbitration formed the basis of what later came to be known as the "Australian Settlement".

39. The pervasive character of this ideology, and the powerful class pressures that sustained it, was revealed in the attitude of the early socialist groups towards White Australia, even as they opposed the Labor Party's other policies and took issue with its leadership. In 1896 Edward Aveling, the son-in-law of Karl Marx, acting as a European delegate representing the Australian Socialist League (ASL) at the London Congress of the Second International, put forward a motion calling on workers' organisations to refrain from requesting immigration restrictions. The ASL opposed his actions and, at its 1898 conference, incorporated into its program the demand for "[t]he exclusion of races whose presence might lower the standard of living of Australian workers."[11]

40. The racist and anti-democratic ideology on which the nation-state was founded was enshrined in the 1901 Australian constitution, which declared that "aboriginal natives shall not be counted" in the population. Drafted by colonial politicians for adoption as a British Act of Parliament, without any popular vote, the document contained no bill of rights. In fact, it made no mention of the word democracy and did not even guarantee the right to vote. Instead, it was left to parliament and the states to determine the eligibility of voters, with the states' racial disqualifications of Aboriginal people specifically retained. After convention debates, where the spectre of "revolution" was mentioned a number of times, the "reserve powers" of the British monarchy to dissolve parliaments, appoint governments and command the military forces were incorporated in the constitution and vested in the governor-general, the vice-regal representative.

41. Following the federation of the six colonies, the Labor Party played the central role in laying the foundations for the national state. Labor was the only national party—the parties of the bourgeoisie were divided on the issue of protection (Victoria) and free trade (NSW). In 1905 the federal Labor Party defined its objective as: "The cultivation of an Australian sentiment based on the maintenance of racial purity and the development in Australia of an enlightened and self-reliant community."[12] This "objective" was to remain at the centre of the party's platform for the next six decades. In 1909, the two bourgeois parties united in opposition to the Labor Party. But their program was based on support for protectionism, the arbitration system and White Australia. The program of Laborism had become the national ideology.

42. In 1910, the Labor Party formed the first national government of a single party—the previous governments had been coalitions. The supposed first "socialist" government in the world attracted international attention, especially from those seeking to advance a parliamentary, rather than a revolutionary, orientation. Summing up the Labor Party's real role in 1913, Lenin wrote: "[I]n Australia the Labor Party is the *unalloyed* representative of the *non*-socialist workers' trade unions. The leaders of the Australian Labor Party are trade union officials, everywhere the most moderate and 'capital-serving' elements, and in Australia, altogether peaceable, purely liberal. The ties binding the separate states into a united Australia are still very weak. The Labor Party has had to concern itself with developing and strengthening these ties, and with establishing central government. In Australia the Labor Party has done what in other countries was done by the Liberals …"[13] Seven years later, in a characterisation of the British Labour Party that applied no less to the ALP, Lenin insisted that its class nature was determined not by the fact that it enjoyed a mass working class membership, but by the nature of its program and leadership: "Of course, most of the Labour Party's members are workingmen. However, whether or not a party is really a political party of the workers does not depend solely upon a membership of workers but also upon the men that lead it, and the content of its actions and political tactics. Only this latter determines whether we really have before us a political party of the proletariat. Regarded from this, the only correct point of view, the Labour Party is a thoroughly bourgeois party, because, although made up of workers, it is led by reactionaries, and the worst kind of reactionaries at that, who act quite in the spirit of the bourgeoisie. It is an organisation of the bourgeoisie, which exists systematically to dupe the workers …"[14]

43. The trade unions established the ALP, not to overthrow capitalism, but to try and curb its excesses within the official parliamentary framework. Its 120-year history constitutes the most powerful verification of the assessment made by Lenin at the beginning of the 20th century: that trade union consciousness is bourgeois consciousness. "There is much talk of spontaneity," he wrote, "but the spontaneous development of the working class movement leads to its subordination to bourgeois ideology … for the spontaneous working-class movement is trade unionism … and trade unionism means the ideological enslavement of the workers to the bourgeoisie." He went on to explain the origins of socialist consciousness and its role in the development of the struggle of the working class. "[S]ocialism, as doctrine," Lenin wrote, citing Karl Kautsky, "has its roots in modern economic relationships just as the class struggle of the proletariat has … But socialism and the class struggle arise side by side and not one out of the other; each one arises under different conditions. Modern socialist consciousness can arise only on the basis of profound scientific knowledge. Indeed, modern economic science is as much a condition for socialist production as, say, modern technology, and the proletariat can create neither the one nor the other, no matter how much it may desire to do so; both arise out of the modern social process. The vehicle of science is not the proletariat, but the bourgeois intelligentsia: it was in the minds of individual members of this stratum that modern socialism originated, and it was they who communicated it to the more

intellectually developed proletarians who, in their turn, introduce it into the proletarian class struggle where conditions allow that to be done. Thus, socialist consciousness is something introduced into the proletarian class struggle from without and not something that arose within it spontaneously. Accordingly … the task of Social Democracy [Marxism] is to imbue the proletariat [literally: saturate the proletariat] with the *consciousness* of its position and the consciousness of its task. There would be no need for this if consciousness arose of itself from the class struggle."[15]

44. Lenin was basing himself on the experiences of the European socialist movement. But there could be no clearer summation of the historical lines of conflict in the Australian workers' movement between Marxism and the various petty-bourgeois ideologists. The latter have always opposed the necessity for a struggle against the spontaneous bourgeois consciousness of the working class as they line up to defend the nationalist ideology of Laborism and the ALP.

45. While the Labor Party was the chief instrument for the subordination of the working class to the capitalist state, it did not go unchallenged. The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) established a Sydney branch in 1907, two years after its foundation in Chicago, and declared its opposition to the ALP's racism and parliamentarism. The IWW denounced the Australian Workers Union for refusing to enrol in its ranks "all Asiatic workers and representatives of the South Pacific Islands" and opposed the participation of the emerging trade union bureaucracy in the arbitration system. In 1910, following the experience of state and federal Labor governments, the Australian Socialist Federation pointed to the growing hostility towards the ALP among the most politically-conscious workers: "The Labor Party does not clearly and unambiguously avow socialism, nor does it teach it; it is unlike any other working-class creation in the world in that it builds no socialist movement, issues no socialist books, debates no socialist problems. It is not international; it is not anti-militarist; it is not Marxian. In policy and practice it is Liberalism under a new name; in utterance and ideal it is bourgeois. The coming conflict in Australia is between Laborism and Socialism."[16] That conflict was soon to emerge with the outbreak of World War I in August 1914.

World War I and the Russian Revolution

46. World War I was rooted in the very structure of world capitalism. As Trotsky wrote in 1915: "The present war is at bottom a revolt of the forces of production against the political form of nation and state. It means the collapse of the national state as an independent economic unit. … The War of 1914 is the most colossal breakdown in history of an economic system destroyed by its own inherent contradictions."[17] It marked the opening of the epoch of imperialism; the epoch of wars and revolutions.

47. The eruption of the war exploded the myth that Australia could somehow be insulated from global tensions and conflicts. In the federal election campaign of 1914, which was taking place as the war began, both major parties committed themselves to defend the British Empire, with Labor leader Andrew Fisher pledging "the last man and the last shilling."[18]

48. Australian workers, like their counterparts in Europe, were initially caught up in a wave of patriotism. The euphoria was short-lived. By 1916, the reality of the slaughter at Gallipoli and on the Western Front, as well

as deepening attacks on social conditions at home, were having their impact. Out of an Australian population of fewer than 5 million, the war would claim the lives of almost 62,000 and see 156,000 wounded, gassed or taken prisoner. Opposition began to grow, both to the war and to the Labor government, now led by Billy Hughes. Concerned over falling levels of recruitment, Hughes demanded conscription for overseas service, but so great was opposition in the labour movement that he could not secure Labor Party support for the policy. Hughes and his chief supporter, NSW premier Holman, were both expelled from the party, whereupon Hughes formed a National Party government. Two conscription referenda in October 1916 and December 1917 were defeated—the second by a bigger majority than the first.

49. Opposition to the war and the onslaught against social conditions was expressed in a series of militant trade union struggles. The most important erupted in August 1917 over government attempts to impose a speed-up in the NSW rail and tramway workshops. The February Revolution in Russia, which brought down the tsar, had an immediate political impact, with resolutions carried at both NSW and Victorian Labor Party conferences congratulating the Russian workers for overthrowing the autocracy and calling for an immediate international conference to negotiate peace. The NSW resolution laid the blame for the war on the "existing capitalistic system of production of profit which compels every nation constantly to seek new markets to exploit, invariably leading to a periodic clash of rival interests" and insisted that peace could only be accomplished by the "united efforts of the workers of all the countries involved."[19]

50. Hostility to the Labor leadership and the trade union bureaucracy was expressed in growing support for the IWW, which suffered brutal repression at the hands of the Hughes and Holman governments because of its vociferous opposition to the war. While the IWW attracted support from the most militant and class-conscious workers, it could not provide them with a perspective to fight Laborism. The IWW opposed the construction of an independent revolutionary party of the working class, maintaining that capitalism could be defeated by "one big union" and a general strike. While the IWW proved to be short-lived, the conception that the Labor Party's betrayals could be countered simply through militant syndicalism was to emerge repeatedly in the course of the 20th century.

51. The Russian Revolution of October 1917, led by Lenin, Trotsky and the Bolshevik Party, opened a new chapter in the struggles of the international working class. The revolution validated in all essentials Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution, which he first advanced in 1905, and which anticipated the actual course of events. It was this theory that enabled Lenin to re-orient the Bolshevik Party in April 1917 towards the struggle for political power against the bourgeois Provisional Government, led by Kerensky and supported by the Mensheviks. The revolution underscored the historical significance of the protracted struggle that Lenin had waged against all forms of opportunism, a struggle that had led the Bolsheviks to break with the Mensheviks in 1903. What had begun as a conflict over the nature of the party turned out to have the most far-reaching implications. In 1917 the Mensheviks, who sided with the bourgeois Provisional Government as it supported the continuation of the war and opposed the distribution of land to the peasantry, opposed the taking of power by the working class.

52. The Russian Revolution was carried out on the program of proletarian internationalism. Conceived as the opening shot of the world socialist revolution, it sparked a wave of revolutionary struggles in Europe and provoked a radicalisation of the working class and oppressed masses

throughout the world as the war came to an end. But nowhere else had parties of the Bolshevik type been constructed in advance. As Trotsky was later to write: "After the war, the proletariat was in such a mood that one could have led it into decisive battle. But there was nobody to lead and nobody to organise this battle—there was no party. … Insofar as there was no party, victory was impossible. And, on the other hand, one could not maintain the revolutionary fervor of the proletariat while a party was being created. The communist party began to be built. In the interim, the working class, not finding a militant leadership at the proper time, was forced to accommodate itself to the situation which formed after the war. Hence the old opportunistic parties received a chance once again, to a greater or lesser extent, to strengthen themselves."[20]

To be continued

Footnotes:

5. *The Argus*, Melbourne, January 6, 1857.[back]

6. Leon Trotsky, 'Three Conceptions of the Russian Revolution', *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1939–40*, Pathfinder, New York, 1977, p. 69.[back]

7. Leon Trotsky, 'En Route: Thoughts on the Progress of the Proletarian Revolution', *The First Five Years of the Communist International*, vol. 1, New Park, London, 1973, p. 80.[back]

8. 'Sworn to no Master, of no Sect am I', *Sydney Herald*, August 21, 1840.[back]

9. Paul Kelly, *The End of Certainty*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1992, p. 3.[back]

10. *Commonwealth of Australia Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, September 25, 1901.[back]

11. Verity Burgmann, *In Our Time: Socialism and the Rise of Labor*, *1885-1905*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1985, p. 101.[back]

12. Official Report of the Third Commonwealth Political Labour Conference, Melbourne, 1905, p. 10.[back]

13. V.I. Lenin, 'In Australia', *Lenin Collected Works*, vol. 19, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1980, p. 217.[back]

14. V.I. Lenin, 'Speech on Affiliation to the British Labour Party', *Lenin Collected Works*, vol. 31, Moscow, 1980, pp. 257–258.[back]

15. V.I. Lenin, 'What is to be Done?' *Lenin Collected Works*, vol. 5, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1980, pp. 383–384.[back]

16. 'The Party as the inheritor of socialist trends in the Victorian Labor Movement,' by E. F. Hill, *Communist Review*, August 1945, pp. 580-582.[back]

17. Leon Trotsky, *War and the International*, Young Socialist Publication, Colombo, 1971, pp. vii-viii.[back]

18. *Speaking for Australia: parliamentary speeches that shaped our nation*, Rod Kemp and Marion Stanton (eds), Allen & Unwin, April 2005, p. 48.[back]

19. Graham Freudenberg, *Cause for power: the official history of the New South Wales Branch of the Australian Labor Party*, Pluto Press, Leichhardt, 1991, p. 117.[back]

20. Leon Trotsky, 'Towards the Question of the "Stabilisation" of the World Economy', *The Ideas of Leon Trotsky*, Hillel Ticktin and Michael Cox (eds), Porcupine Press, London, 1995, p. 349.[back]

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