Edward Bacon

ABORIGINES STRUGGLE: A NEW STAGE

The Queensland secretary of the Communist Party of Australia reviews the course of the Aborigines' struggle for equality, dignity and identity, and shows that a new stage in that struggle has been reached.

THE LONG SMOULDERING discontent of Northern Territory Aboriginal station hands, which burst into life, making national and international headlines late last year and is still in progress, marked the beginning of a new phase in the struggle for human rights for Australian Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders.

Contrary to the sedulously propagated myth, struggle is not something new for these people. Oppressed and restricted in a thousand ways, they have yet retained the will to live and advance, demonstrating it again and again throughout the long years since the main tribes were massacred or subjugated.

Since the end of the Second World War they have established an impressive record of various efforts to stand up for their rights in all the mainland States and in the Territory. But, until recent years, most of their efforts have been frustrated because they were broken into isolated groups, without much public understanding or sympathy.

This time their struggle is taking place in a new context. It is no longer possible for governments or pastoralists to take private revenge against Aboriginal leaders who stand up for their people, or to force groups into submission without fear of public reaction. The sorry truth about the conditions of life imposed on Australia's native peoples is coming out, and they are beginning to get the mass support they need.

The response by trade unionists and others to the appeals from Darwin and the direct appearance of Northern Territory Aboriginal leaders on the east coast was powerful evidence of this—powerful enough to cause the Federal Government and the big pastoralists to think twice about their original plans to use
the big stick, and powerful enough to shake rightwing union leaders' views that the struggle could be diverted into harmless channels.

As yet, the dispute has involved only a fraction of the 40,000 NT Aborigines, more of whom will inevitably come into action before long. There is also a strong possibility that it may spread into Queensland, where some 5,000 Aboriginal station-hands live and work for a pittance in sub-standard conditions, and to Western Australia, where their situation is perhaps worst of all. The straight lines of the NT borders were not drawn by Aborigines. The importing of many hundreds of Torres Strait Islanders to work on rail, port and other constructions for big mineral concerns exploiting northern Australia has introduced a new component into the mainland struggle and also conveyed back to the islands new concepts of possible living standards and of ways to fight for them. This is helping to building Aboriginal-Islander unity.

Elsewhere in Australia, the spirit of rebellion against flagrant injustices is still rising, expressed in a wide range of struggles in country towns, in the response to the the "freedom rides" carried out or projected in New South Wales and Queensland, and in many other ways. Awareness is growing of yet another facet of the problem: the condition of the thousands of Aborigines forced from the country areas by mechanisation and other causes into the big cities, especially Sydney.

Over the past few years, the nationwide movement has thrown up a core of capable, devoted Aboriginal and Islander leaders. This core is growing steadily. This is perhaps the most important new factor that has emerged in recent times. There were always such leaders among the peoples, but their leadership was confined to particular areas.

Only since the mid-fifties have they begun to come together on an all-Australian scale. Restrictive laws, backed up by the State and Federal police forces charged with "native protection", made it virtually impossible for them to do this alone. The groundwork for the nationwide organisational forms had to be done by devoted white supporters of the peoples' struggles, together with a few Aborigines.

The process of bringing these elements together around a commonly agreed program of aims and actions was necessarily complicated and difficult. Though quite a big store of knowledge about the peoples had already been collected and filed—for example, in the Mitchell Library—there were and still are, including among Communists, many points of disagreement on inter-
pretation of facts, many subjective and onesided views and differ­
ences on such basic questions as the definition of an Aborigine.

As the founders of the organised movement began to come
together, political differences emerged—were the peoples to be
regarded as national minorities or was their problem purely that
of a depressed section of the working class? Doubts were expressed
as to the possibility of overcoming differences among the peoples
themselves, especially those between Aborigines and Islanders,
between “pure” and part-Aborigines, between town and country
dwellers and between Aborigines and dark-skinned Australians of
other origins.

The formation of the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advance-
ment (FCAA) in the mid-fifties was a historic step towards resolving
these and other problems. It was also the decisive, essential step
towards the formation of a program which could show the path
of nationwide struggle. It marked the real beginning of persistent
and successful efforts to draw Aboriginal and Islander leaders into
positions of responsibility in the States and Comomnwealth, open-
ing the way for the peoples to take control of their own destinies,
with support from the white working class and people such as
scientists, artists, writers, religious men and women and other
individuals who had pleaded the cause of the oppressed and
worked for them over many years. From the beginning, all who
defended the human rights of the oppressed people had to work
under conditions of serious difficulty.

Despite a great deal of pious claptrap in Annual Reports or
occasional Parliamentary debates, both Federal and State Govern-
ments had long held the view that “assimilation”—meaning the
disappearance of the people into an all-Australian amalgam—was
not only inevitable but desirable.

But they also enforced the contradictory practice of herding
large numbers of the peoples into restricted government settlements
and church missions under conditions in which they could neither
advance themselves nor even become “assimilated”. They could,
however, be used as they were and still are, as convenient pools of
cheap labor for cattle owners and others—their lack of experience
of normal Australian working conditions, wages and living stan-
dards making them easy prey for exploitation.

At the same time, the possibility of trade union action on
their behalf was limited by the spreading of stories to the effect
that they were naturally lazy and unintelligent, by the strong
element of white chauvinism in the labor movement and by
neglect or worse by some unions, especially the Australian Workers’
Union (not to be confused with the North Australian Workers’
Union, which is a separate organisation), which covers most of their occupations.

It is scarcely possible to exaggerate the viciousness of the conditions forced on the Aborigines. As Charles D. Rowley commented in an article in *Oceania* in June, 1962: “There could hardly be a more complete case of racial exclusion and discrimination . . . than that affecting the Australian Aborigines”.

Or, as Era Bell Thompson, a most “moderate” Negro commentator, who visited Australia for some weeks more recently wrote (*Ebony*, Sept., 1966):

“Repressive laws passed by the Australian States against the indigenous people were a combination of the ‘Black Codes enacted by the (US) South against the Negro, and Government Acts which restricted and pauperised the American Indian’.

In these conditions, deprived of their land more completely than any other people, their complex social system destroyed, their customs and even their marvellous arts derided or scorned, yet still refused admittance to any but the lowest levels of white society, it is hardly surprising that feelings of pessimism became prevalent among them and that they became suspicious and resentful even of well-meaning white people. In fact, their clinging to what they could retain of their identity and customs, even their languages in the face of all odds is splendid evidence of the persistence of the human spirit in conditions of the deepest oppression.

On the initiative of the FCAA, the first Australian Conference on Aboriginal Affairs was held in 1958. Such conferences have been held every year since at Easter. The conferences have been marked each year by greater direct concern with immediate and fundamental problems of the movement and by increasing participation of Aborigines and Islanders from all parts of the country.

This Easter the conference will take place in an atmosphere of rising struggle by growing numbers of the peoples and of much greater sympathy and support from trade unions and the public. The spark that ignited at Newcastle Waters and spread to Wave Hill last year cannot be put out, whatever the pastoralists, governments and their rightwing friends in the labor movement may plan, or whatever they are able to do about particular immediate struggles. For, as the Gurindji people on Wave Hill declared last year, as the Torres Strait Islanders declared years ago, the peoples are now beginning to fight not only for equal wages, but for other fundamental rights—for the collective ownership of lands, together with mineral rights, for local autonomy, for modern health, edu-
cation and industrial facilities and all the other rights most Australians accept as normal but these people have never known.

The process of acquiring knowledge about such things, which began in a big way with the troop movement in the Second World War and has been helped inadvertently by the penetration of government and mineral monopoly teams, is being speeded up now by the visits of Aborigines and Islanders to work in the south or to go as their peoples' representatives to various parts of Australia, to New Zealand to study Maori conditions, even to Africa and socialist countries.

New research centres such as that established by the Australian National University are coming into being and supplying basic information. Surveys, such as those of the NSW Teachers' Federation, are uncovering important data. But no Australian Government, State or Federal, has yet even begun the kind of detailed study of Aboriginal and Island facts needed to disclose the full realities of the conditions and needs of the peoples. There are no statistics available on employment, health, education, etc., as there are for the white population.

The work done by the State, Northern Territory and local organisations for Aboriginal Advancement to help develop awareness and action is beginning to show results. Even such organisations as OPAL, established by the Queensland Government to counter the influence of the State Council of the movement, are being compelled in their practical activities to take sympathetic notice of the peoples and even to support their struggles on occasions.

Debates and resolutions of the United Nations Assembly, Federal and State Parliaments and other leading bodies of the general problems of colonialism and the particular plight of Australia's native peoples continue to throw light on the situation and to inspire the movement to further action. Several trade union bodies are beginning to take systematic notice of the problems of the people and give help—notably the Queensland Trades and Labor Council and the Building Workers' Industrial Union.

The growth of diverse organisations and individuals concerning themselves in one way or another with the movement brings problems in its train. Though many of them have no organic connection with each other, there are tendencies here and there and from time to time for one or another to assume exclusive rights to leadership. Such tendencies, as well as personality problems, have a disuniting effect in a movement which needs unity above all. Communists, perhaps more than anyone else, should know this and feel responsible to seek continually for ways to help bring together the maximum forces on commonly-agreed
plans of action. Dogmatism or sectarianism in any form are most glaringly out of place here. For, although the movement has made great progress in the last decade or so, it is still in a formative stage and no one yet has all the answers. Organisations flourish and decline in it, generally speaking according to the state of the movement, but also according to the degree of understanding, maturity and mutual tolerance possessed by leaders.

The welfare of the movement itself and its potential for enhancing Australia's democracy demand above all that its main aim be to assist the development of self-movement towards self-determination by the Aboriginal and Island peoples. This does not mean leaving them to get along as best they can. On the contrary, it implies the necessity of action by all democratic forces, especially the working class, to help clear the road for them. But it does mean that no personal or group interests or conceits should be allowed to disrupt their progress.

Within the general framework three tasks seem urgent:

1. Winning the right of the Aborigines and Islanders to participate fully and freely in North Australian development, along the lines proposed by Mr. J. Kelly in his fine work, *Struggle for the North*. This raises directly the question of struggle against the huge and rapid penetration of foreign capital and for genuine development of the North for the people.

2. Intensifying pressure on State and Federal governments for abolition of all restrictions and introduction of uniform legislation involving large-scale expenditure, to make equal rights a reality and to establish special national minority rights.

3. Much more systematic study of and assistance to the "ghetto" Aboriginal population of the cities. In this the trade unions can play a very big part by expanding their social role.

The progress of the movement over the last few years, despite all the growing pains and difficulties, has already achieved important legislative changes in all States and in the Northern Territory, but much remains to be done even to make the new legal rights effective, let alone to establish true equality.

Full human rights for Aborigines—the goal of the movement—are, it would appear, unattainable this side of socialism, for no Australian, white or black, yet enjoys human rights in the fullest sense modern industry makes possible. Monopoly capital prevents that. But what is done to help the Aborigines and Islanders to advance now is not mere abstract justice or charity. It is, in a very direct sense, an essential component of the general struggle for peace, national freedom, democracy and human dignity—the struggle that opens the way to the socialist future.