George Zangalis

IMMIGRATION AND THE LABOR MOVEMENT

A Greek migrant, now a member of the National Committee of the Communist Party of Australia, stresses the need for new labor movement policies towards migrants.

THE LARGE SCALE of post war immigration is unprecedented in Australia's history in its volume, continuity and—what is significantly new—in the large numbers of non-British migrants. It is having a tremendous impact on the nation, and on the labor movement in particular, yet it has been subjected to less analysis by the left forces than any other major aspect of Australian life.

Immigration is now accepted with fewer reservations in the labor movement. Workers have seen that living standards did not break down and soccer did not take over Australian Rules.

The migrants being poured into the fast-growing monopoly enterprises of GMH and BHP have found themselves in bitter class conflicts, and have drawn closer to the trade unions. Hence class unity has been slowly overtaking national prejudices. But this reflects rather the overcoming of fears than a proper understanding of the historical significance of immigration.

Working class policies and attitudes have been very much influenced by the fact that the ruling class sees immigration as a means to strengthen its own position, using it, when able, to weaken the bargaining power of the trade unions. The deep-seated White Australia concept has also played a part in clouding migration in general with suspicion and in some cases with enmity. The only policy the labor movement appears to have on immigration is to limit it at times of recession. It is in effect, at best a non-immigration policy, and at its worst an anti-immigration one. The labor movement should have a positive policy on immigration.

Australia is becoming industrialised more rapidly than ever before. Industrialisation requires workers and more workers to build bigger and better factories, to design and operate new
machines, to transport and sell the manufactured goods. Britain and Germany, in the initial stages of their industrial revolution, created workers out of their country's peasants. Because Australia was launched in the era of capitalism, every step forward was accompanied by the import of workers, some with working class backgrounds, others of peasant or lower middle class origin.

As a result of the rapid industrialisation most migrants join the ranks of the working class. This objectively strengthens the forces for social change. But the strength of the working class movement cannot be judged by numbers alone. It depends on solving many problems, and when workers of more than one nationality are concerned the problems are more complex.

MAIN FEATURES OF POST WAR IMMIGRATION

The main characteristics of post-war immigration are its volume and diversity. From October 1945 to September 1966, 2,500,000 people have migrated to Australia, of whom 2,150,000 have settled permanently. In addition, according to official figures, nearly 900,000 children were born to migrant parents in that period. Almost one-quarter of Australia's present population of 11,500,000 is the direct result of post-war immigration.

The conditions that produced this phenomenally large migrant flow—economic expansion in Australia, uncertainties and upheavals in Europe—do not remain constant. Australia's involvement in the Vietnam war coupled with certain economic and political improvements in some West European countries is already reducing arrivals, and increasing departures. The Immigration Department warned last year that it is becoming harder to obtain sufficient migrants from the existing sources with the existing incentives.

To partly meet this situation the Government has provided in this year's budget payment of fares for the first time to certain non-British migrants and old age pensions to non-naturalised persons. New sources are being officially canvassed and of late Asian migrants are being considered for Australia's mining ventures. However, the overall economic situation in Britain and Europe and Australia's rate of development should continue to make possible a large flow of migrants, with Britain, Italy and Greece providing 2/3 of the total.

Before the Second World War almost 90% of all migrants to Australia were British. But, of the 2,150,000 permanent settlers since 1945 approximately 50% have come from non-British European countries. This Immigration Department table (November
1966) gives the permanent and long-term arrivals in Australia between 1945-1966.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Migrants</th>
<th>Country</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>British</td>
<td>1,334,407</td>
<td>Yugoslavian</td>
<td>60,136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>300,031</td>
<td>Hungarian</td>
<td>28,633</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>152,074</td>
<td>Latvian</td>
<td>20,050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dutch</td>
<td>141,616</td>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>16,861</td>
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<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>107,176</td>
<td>Czechoslovakian</td>
<td>12,336</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polish</td>
<td>83,210</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>12,850</td>
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1,172,329 migrants have come from 40 non-English speaking countries. The British total includes 45,000 Maltese and 20,000 Cypriots. Furthermore, the percentage of migrants returning home is far greater among British than non-British. It is lowest among Southern Europeans. The nationality figures do not apparently take into account that children born to non-British migrants, particularly Southern Europeans, consider themselves in most cases more non-British than British. The Italian Chamber of Commerce estimated last year there are 500,000 Italians in Australia. The Greek figure is probably well over 200,000.

Altogether 90% of post war migrants have come from capitalist West Europe. Of the remainder, some 220,000 have come from the socialist countries, mainly as displaced persons or refugees after the last war. Some of these left their native land because of their violent opposition to socialism or their fear of having to answer for collaboration with the Nazis. It is among this small section that one finds the fascist elements such as the Ustashi.

Politically, migrants reflect very much the society they come from. Many have had important experience in struggles against capitalist exploitation and war. The Communist and/or Social Democratic Parties in England, Italy, Greece, Holland and Germany are mass parties. Migrants are influenced by what goes on in the countries of their origin. In many European countries there is a left trend, with growing unity of the left forces. Progressive migrants could contribute usefully to the current discussion on the concept of the left alliance on the basis of their overseas experience and the excellent mass position some of them have among their compatriots in Australia.

Political and industrial struggles involving migrants will produce better results if some thought is given to the overseas and community affairs close to their minds and hearts. Greek migrants, for instance, are wrapped up now in the political battles in Greece.
IMPACT ON THE LABOR MOVEMENT

Industrial workers have comprised 50% of all permanent settlers in Australia since 1945. The 1961 census showed the percentage of industrial workers in the whole Australian population as approximately 30%. The difference between those two percentages demonstrates the impact of mass migration on the working class.

In the Ford plant (Broadmeadows) 36% of all workers are Greeks, 28% Italians and 22% either British or locally-born. Non-British migrants make up substantial and often majority percentages in these industries: Vehicle, steel, building, transport, clothing, rubber, glass, liquor, food. The occupational changes brought about by technological advances will expand still further the percentage of foreign-born workers in industry.

The industrial working class is being replenished in large numbers by first generation migrants as the sons and daughters of the Australian-born workers and the migrants themselves are increasingly required to fill in the new positions. Most Southern Europeans, unlike British and Northern Europeans, are becoming industrial workers for the first time. For them the development of trade union consciousness and organisation is fundamental. Recent struggles which involved thousands of migrants (GMH strike, Mt. Isa dispute, claims of railway workers in Victoria) have shown:

1 Militancy and enthusiasm for struggle, motivated by longstanding economic and moral injustices, and influenced by the militant labor traditions of their birthplace.

2 Impatience and anarchistic tendencies, resulting mainly from non-working class background and difficulty in understanding the tactical line of the unions, their craft composition and the shackles of penal powers.

NATIONAL MINORITY GROUPS

Another important fact is that Southern Europeans are emerging as national minority groups in industries and localities. There are several reasons for this:

1 A big gap in social, economic, political, cultural and psychological background.

2 The inferior social and economic position they are made to occupy. They usually get the lowest-paid jobs and the oldest inner suburban houses. Although they are better off than in the old country they also compare their lot with other sections here.
3 The strong migration current which acts as an ethnic blood transfusion.
4 The need to face the new world together.
5 Fear in the labor movement that migrants will be used to lower living standards.
6 The policy of assimilation influenced by the White Australia concept which in essence, denies the national identity of migrants and the existence of specific problems and demands unconditional acceptance of the Australian way of life.

These factors undergo changes. But the trend towards national minority consciousness and organisation will grow in the immediate future because of the volume of immigration and its concentration in particular areas.

An Italian or Greek gets along much more easily today with less English and knowledge of Australian than 15 years ago. At work he is surrounded by compatriots. Process production eliminates the need for language communication. At home, the housewife needs no English to shop in the supermarket or in the Greek or Italian corner store. Neighbors often come from the same village. Dozens of foreign language newspapers are published in Australia. Daily ones from home arrive by jet within 24 hours of publication. Churches and evening schools keep alive religious and national traditions. There are hundreds of national, social, cultural and sporting organisations. Inner suburban theatres are reviving, showing now only Italian or Greek language films. All this makes for national minority existence and attracts closer to it even the second generation migrant.

What is taking place is not assimilation but integration, which is a slow complicated process demanding recognition of the migrant's particular needs and qualities as relevant to the development of this country. This process is taking place contrary to expectations and theories. It catches the labor movement unprepared.

ETHNIC GROUP DEVELOPMENT

Ethnic group development does not in itself prevent unity. What happens depends on the migrant’s social position and on the political thinking in the community as a whole and among migrants in particular. To work for unity we must above all recognise ethnic group development and end the attitude that migrants ought to become more like us.

Twenty years of mass immigration have brought valuable knowledge and experience. Progressive policies receive mass sup-
port, for instance, among Greek migrants, not only because there is a base to start from, but primarily because Greek communists and other progressives here are an integral part of their community. They lead, or help to lead many fine struggles for migrant rights and for support of the democratic forces in Greece.

The best feature of the GMH strike was the ability of many migrants to lead the workers in the manner and language that was understood. The best contribution to progressive policies among migrants is made by the migrants themselves. There are many today in industry and the community in general who are making such contributions or who are potentially capable of doing so. They should receive more assistance and be listened to with greater attention and readiness to learn.

The main job of progressive migrants should be in the direction of fighting for the best interests of migrants, They should be so organised as to have the most natural and effective contact with their compatriots.

QUESTIONS OF POLICY

Although immigration is a most valuable national asset, the committee advising the Government on migrant intake is entirely made up of leaders of industry. The millionaires aim to manipulate immigration in their own narrow interests. The price paid for ready-made migrant labor usually does not even cover their fare to Australia. And as soon as the migrants get off the ships and planes the Government washes its hands of responsibility, inviting the industrialists and land speculators to descend on them like vultures.

The labor movement has no real say on immigration planning and administration. The ACTU's voice is only advisory and it is inadequate. A peoples' immigration policy should take into account the needs of the entire people and the specific problems of migrants settling here—stable employment, proper and cheap accommodation, better social services, fully subsidised fares, no discrimination, respect for the right to retain national traditions.

The labor movement should combat the concept that migrants have an obligation to Australia. This concept assists the ruling class to impose super-exploitation, to deny migrants social and political rights and to cause friction between workers. The internationalism of the Australian labor movement is tested by its policies and attitudes not only towards the people of other countries but towards the workers in Australia who have come from overseas.
Non-British migrants are denied some social service benefits for five years, yet they pay taxes on their first pay. They cannot claim deductions for supporting families overseas. They cannot collect old age pensions if they decide to see their last days in their birthplace. They are placed last on the lists for housing commission accommodation. The education crisis affects their children worse because of the lack of facilities to give them special tuition in the English language. They cannot gain citizenship if they exercise the same right as locally-born people to join the party of their choice, unless this be the Liberals or the DLP. Formation, last March, of the Special Police Branch for migrants, is another and serious step in legalising political intimidation.

**SOME PROPOSALS**

The thing needed for wider participation of migrant workers in labor movement affairs is to improve the lines of communication between them and leading labor bodies. Policy and tactical questions go over the heads of most migrants. Far too few of them are in leading positions even where they have excellent mass standing and capabilities. The work of many unions can be vastly improved if the migrant membership, sometimes up to 70% of the total, becomes more active. To this end the consistent use of foreign languages, mainly Greek and Italian in the written and oral form is most urgent. The forces to do this job can be found and developed from within the organisation.

There must be a policy of promotion of migrants to leading positions, from job level to full-time officials. The primary consideration of promotion should be the person's mass position and ability to do a good job among migrants. If this worker has a language difficulty, the organisation should subsidise his attendance at a school. There is also a demand for migrant personnel in union offices. (The employers have long recognised the value of migrant interpreters in factories, shops, banks).

There is a great need for detailed and patient explanation of awards, the structure of Australian unionism, the function of Arbitration, entitlement to industrial and social benefits, their shortcomings and inadequacies.

Formation of migrant advisory bodies in unions and other organisations would also help.

Our concern is for working class unity, for maximum participation of workers in developing policies and tactics to serve their struggles. The process of integration will then be quicker, and there will be more unity and struggles.