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Racism and Labour Organising in Australia

Anarchist Affinity

November 8, 2014

Australia is a country with an undeniable history of racism. It is a history of outstanding colonial cruelty. The Australian state is built on genocide and colonialism, and this legacy seeps through into all aspects of our political and social lives. The current issue of 457 visas harkens back to times such in 1878, where Australian sailors unions held strikes to fight the use of Chinese and Pacific Islander labour, claiming they had no right to work in Australia, and were taking what was ‘rightfully’ the white man’s. This is a dangerous repetition of history, as strikes were common in this same era to try and block immigration, and helped start the White Australia policy.

While it is indisputable that racism infects the white Australian working class, some sections of the working class have a powerful history of combating racial divides – despite the divisive attitudes of the Australian media, bosses, and politicians who would seek to exploit it. The Eureka stockade – a defining moment of Australian labour history – was a historical moment of multicultural resistance, where workers of many nations, races and creeds rebelled

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against colonial authorities. Nor is this the only example; Freedom Rides, and the Builders Labourers 'Black Bans', among others, give us a hint of the potential for working class Australians to take part in the struggle against racism from above and amongst their own.

The 457 visa issue is one of the most recent battles around jobs defined by national boundaries. 457 visas allow the bosses to exploit the weaker labour laws, lower wages and conditions that exist in other nations, and provide them with an opportunity to pit workers against one another. The visa allows foreign skilled workers to be 'sponsored' by an Australian business to work in the country for the duration of the contract. Bosses can pay 457 visa workers less than the minimum wage, which allows them to undercut the wages of workers in Australia. However, rather than seeing that foreign workers are being exploited by such visas, the media and some leaders of the union bureaucracy claim that the bosses are helping these workers, and that these workers are 'taking our jobs.'

It is reprehensible to play the 'stolen jobs' card, when our movement should be calling out all forms of exploitation. But not only is this blatant fear-mongering, it is completely disingenuous too. The right-wing faction of some unions claim overseas workers are taking jobs in the industrial-labouring sectors, but of the 160,000 on 457 contracts, about 70% of them are highly paid managers in the private industries. This is hardly foreign workers 'stealing' the jobs of blue collar labourers we are presented with. None the less, the 30% of workers on these contracts deserve our support, not the condemnation and dismissal of our union leaders.

Exploited workers in Australia on any kind of temporary working visas should be assisted by the unions. If these workers are organised to fight for their rights and treated as equal to the Australian working class by the unions, then the labour movement can help stop exploitation both overseas and at home, and help eliminate the unjust division created by the bosses. Top politicians or business leaders may claim to have the interests of "Australia" at

heart, but they are only considering what serves their interests – they use immigration as a political tool to win the vote of the working class. It is a card they can play to maintain political power, by exploiting fear and insecurity.

But it is not a card that is always successful, and Australian labour history provides important examples of when Australian labour has organised to fight racism. A famous example is the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in the early twentieth century, through to its defeat by the government in the 1920's, which had one of the nation's most militant legacies of labour organising. The IWW organised in solidarity with workers of all colours, and of any legal status. They were famous for defending the rights of workers who the traditional unions (namely the Australia Workers Union) would not touch. As then and now, to challenge this exploitation of racist fears by bosses, the fight against racism needs to come from below. Marginalised peoples will fight for their own rights and white and privileged workers need to be prepared act in solidarity, and encourage anti-racist attitudes amongst one another.

The 1946 Pilbara workers strike provides a brilliant example of indigenous resistance to class exploitation, and how white workers can support these struggles. In Pilbara, Western Australia, exploited Aboriginal workers organised a mass strike demanding basic human rights, equal wages, and native title, which would turn out to be one of the longest strikes in Australian history. This was during a period when the Australian courts did not consider Aboriginal people to be as 'evolved' as white men. But workers do not always believe the lies of the bosses, nor do they always consider the courts to be the sole arbiter of what is right and wrong. The strike was supported by the Communist Party and several unions, who organised rallies and raised funds in support, as well as using their press to disseminate information combating the racist lies of the state and the bosses.

Examples like this show that the possibility for successful working class anti-racist political action always exists. But to make these actions a reality, we need to think more about what genuine solidarity looks like and how we can support the leadership of people of colour in our organising. Every time we decry racism, every time we organise labour across national lines paying no heed to 'legal' or 'illegal' migration status as granted by the state, every time we stop fascist organising, every time a refugee is freed, we are battling the will of the bosses and politicians and reactionary elements of our own class, while strengthening our communities and movements. We need to create autonomy for labour, provide real equality, and construct a movement as strong as it is diverse. Only when this is realised can workers unite to stop their exploitation at the hands of bosses and politicians.