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Indigenous struggles against capitalism in “Australia”

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Jul 12th 21

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This article was originally written at the request of our comrades in France, the Union Communiste Libertaire. A translation of this article into French will hopefully be published soon. It is intended to be a follow up to an article by the UCL entitled “1788 : Les générations volées de l’Australie coloniale”, which deals at length with the details of early colonisation and the Stolen Generation. As such, our article does not go into detail about these two things, and is directed more to a global audience instead of a domestic one that already knows about Indigenous struggles. This article contains discussions of people now deceased

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destroying the capitalist system itself. This text is our theoretical contribution to that effort.

and divert them away from the arenas where they can most effectively push against the authorities, the streets.

Future trajectories

The struggles of Indigenous peoples in Australia are naturally close to our hearts, and we've written this article in the hope that they may inspire others overseas. We can't ignore the developments in these struggles that naturally catch our attention, as anarchists: for instance, the persistent failure of governments to do anything substantial about Indigenous deaths in custody or removals of children has drawn a substantial number of people towards "de-carceral" politics, moving beyond slogans that are against merely this or that instance of racism. Instead, they tend towards the general, explicit goal of the abolition of prisons altogether – inadvertently recognising the anarchist viewpoint that prison brutality is not exceptional, but normal; it's their entire purpose. Such a viewpoint naturally flows in productive directions, as people realise that the abolition of prisons itself is inconceivable without the abolition of capitalism and government altogether.

Similarly, Indigenous struggles have the potential to feed into the resistance of the wider working class, and vice versa. The overwhelming majority of Indigenous people are working class themselves, and if "Indigenous liberation" ceases to be a demand for Indigenous workers only and becomes something general to the working class, then the effects could be great. In this sense, there's another similarity with the American situation: though large numbers of white workers are also shot by the police, it is generally the black working class, not the white, that takes the lead in confronting the authorities. Should the struggles of all workers combine – across racial, ethnic and national boundaries – then we'll have made a great leap towards

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business and worth hundreds of millions of dollars; working-class Indigenous people are functionally locked out of owning it, even if the water is of fundamental cultural significance to them. The only way this and other Indigenous land issues could potentially be solved is through socialism – ending private property and returning the land (and water) to common ownership, allowing the phasing out of environmentally destructive practices like cotton farming, in favour of sustainable agriculture that suits Australian conditions.

The struggles around the protection of culturally important land shows the necessity of moving beyond state and capital for solutions to Indigenous oppression. In recent years, significant activist movements have sprung up to protest the destruction of important sites, like the sacred Djab Wurrung trees in Victoria threatened by the construction of a toll road, or the wildlife threatened by the Narrabri gas project in New South Wales. Following in the tradition of previous movements to protect heritage, like the movement that successfully stopped the Jabiluka mine in the Northern Territory, these movements have increasingly adopted direct-action tactics to achieve their goals. As an example, the road blockades to protect the Djab Wurrung trees reverberated across the country, inspiring many people who had never been politically active before to take up the fight.

Often, environmental non-government organisations push for legal action against the government and the relevant companies as part of the struggle, in temporary alliance with Indigenous communities struggling against the destruction of their lands. They do this even when they know they will lose – after all, the law is entirely stacked against us, and even when court cases do succeed, the major parties simply change the laws to undercut the courts' decisions. Though the intentions of the environmental NGOs are often noble – they have the idea that legal action can delay destructive projects while a mass movement is formed in the background – they still functionally constrain increasingly combative movements

Environmental destruction hits land and people

The increasing environmental destruction wrought by capitalism also hits Indigenous communities hard. An example of this can be found in towns like Walgett, situated in the Murray-Darling river basin of south-eastern Australia. Walgett is one of the hottest places in the country, with temperatures averaging over 35°C in summer. The town itself is inhabited mostly by Indigenous Australians, predominantly belonging to the Gamilaraay people, but the surrounding areas are occupied by a substantial number of cotton farmers. The class distinction between the two groups could not be more stark: in the town itself, poverty rates are intense, health and education services are poor, and crime rates are high, but among the farmers, there is no shortage of money. Some of the farmers are wealthy enough to have private planes and airstrips, and they pay to have their children educated at private boarding schools in Sydney and Brisbane.

In 2018/19, Walgett endured a severe water crisis. The main rivers in the area dried up, forcing inhabitants to rely on bore water. This bore water is poor quality, with the sodium levels in the water reaching dangerous peaks. In early 2019, the bore water pump failed and the town went dry; they relied on donated freshwater trucked in from outside until the pump was repaired. It is not an exaggeration to say that all of this can be pinned on capitalism: from the droughts that global warming makes more severe and more regular, to the administrative incompetence of local, state and federal governments, to the allocation of countless litres of water for resource-heavy but highly profitable cotton irrigation.

Formal native title arrangements offer little recourse, since even if native title is held by local Indigenous peoples, it only covers the land, not the water that flows through it. Water is big

The struggles of Indigenous people in Australia are of acute concern to anti-capitalists, not simply because they are victims of racism, but because this racism has resulted in them making up one of the most severely exploited sectors of the working-class in Australia. Participation in these struggles is doubly important, since it can head in two directions: one, towards reformism and the creation of a layer of Indigenous politicians and bourgeoisie to smother the struggle, or two, towards a deepening of the class struggle and a generalisation of these struggles that has the potential to inspire the rest of the working-class to fight.

The creation of the Indigenous working-class

Australian capitalism is built on the genocide of Indigenous peoples. By expropriating Indigenous lands and handing them over to settlers, the British empire created a class of Indigenous people that lived at the bottom of colonial society. The institution of private property was forced on Indigenous societies that were based on property being largely held in common. This entailed the replacement of Indigenous spiritualities with the Christian faith; the replacement of Indigenous legal systems with the British law; the replacement of the many Indigenous languages with English; the breaking-up of Indigenous families and their replacement with the European family model. When Australia secured independence, the responsibility for these tasks was formally transferred to the Australian government, continuing to the present-day. Of course, it should also be made clear that the colonial authorities attempted to do these things; they did not fully succeed, and Indigenous societies maintain continuity with their pre-colonial forms in a number of important ways.

Dispossessed Indigenous people formed a key part of the working-class in rural areas for many years. For decades they were effectively locked out of the skilled working-class and were forced to take the most humiliating jobs or subsist without work. Even children were effectively forced to work as domestic servants and as farm-hands. Under a “protectionist” framework, the Australian states and territories directly controlled Indigenous employment, with government “protectors” determining where Indigenous people worked, who they worked for, where they were permitted to travel and who they could socialise with.

By World War II, the ground had started to shift significantly. The protectionist laws were loosened by successive struggles, like the 1946 Pilbara strike (mentioned in the previous article) or the 1966 Wave walk-off of Gurindji agricultural labourers at Wave Hill Cattle Station in the Northern Territory. In these instances, the Indigenous workers were supported by militant sections of the broader union movement; in the 1946 dispute, the Seamen’s Union refused to process wool from the Pilbara in support of the strikers, and in 1966 the Waterside Workers’ Federation took the lead in marshalling support.

In addition to these workplace struggles, the post-war era saw the development of a more assertive and combative Indigenous activist movement than had previously existed. These movements were linked in with wider international movements against racism – the Black American Civil Rights Movement inspired a number of student activists in 1965 to travel to rural Australian towns and protest segregated pubs, swimming pools and parks, and in the late 60s/70s the American Black Power movement inspired an Australian Black Power movement – which included the creation of an Australian Black Panther Party. In addition, the 1967 referendum approved a change to the Australian constitution that would grant Indigenous Australians full formal status as Australian citizens.

ing that people who cannot attend – often those with poor physical and mental health, poor education, a lack of car and phone – receive no support payments whatsoever.

New forms of colonialism, new forms of resistance

Racism persists; so does resistance. In 2004, substantial riots ensued in the Sydney suburb of Redfern after a boy, T.J. Hickey, was killed when he fell from his bicycle after being pursued by a police vehicle. Again in 2004, the police station and courthouse on Palm Island was burnt to the ground by a crowd incensed at the death of a local Indigenous man, whilst he was in the custody of police.

Aside from these directly violent forms of resistance – which, all things considered, are rather exceptional in the Australian context – there have been countless mass protests against Indigenous oppression. Each year, tens of thousands march on the 26th of January against racism and in support of resistance. The 26th is Australia’s national day, marking the day the first British fleet landed in Sydney in 1788. Naturally, this is a day of celebration for Australian nationalists, but a day of resistance and mourning for everyone else.

In recent years – again demonstrating the international links Indigenous struggles have with struggles overseas – the movement has been energised by a domestic Australian Black Lives Matter movement against police brutality, inspired by the struggles of Black people in the USA against the police there. This movement has drawn new layers of people into the fight and made links with other struggles, both local and international, like those of African-Australians against the racism they face, and the struggles of Palestinians against Israeli domination.

of the previous century: the army was sent in, specifically racially discriminatory laws were implemented to ban drugs, alcohol and pornography in Indigenous communities, and welfare payments were placed under the control of a host of government agencies. Though some of the most authoritarian elements were withdrawn in 2012 when the Gillard Labor government introduced the Stronger Futures policy, many discriminatory laws remain.

Recent developments also demonstrate the way in which the Indigenous working-class population is used as a guinea pig for attacks that will later be applied to the wider working-class population. “Cashless Welfare Cards” were first trialled as part of the Intervention in the Northern Territory under the name of the BasicsCard. They are an Orwellian form of income management, replacing normal welfare payments with a debit card. These cards cannot be used to pay for goods and services deemed by the government to be restricted, like alcohol or gambling. Neither can they be used to withdraw cash. Trials of these cards are now being extended to non-Indigenous communities, like the predominantly immigrant Canterbury-Bankstown area of Sydney. These newer trials also include drug testing arrangements that punitively restrict welfare payments if the recipient is discovered to have drugs in their system.

It should also be made clear that state paternalism continues in employment; the most prominent example is that of the “Community Development Programme” (CDP), a “work-for-the-dole” programme set up primarily to target Indigenous youth living in rural areas. In order to receive meagre support payments, recipients are made to work twenty-five hours a week. The wages they receive are a fraction of the legal minimum wage, an arrangement permitted since CDP participants receive none of the legal protections that regular workers receive. People are regularly penalised for non-attendance and are docked their support payments as a result, naturally mean-

This era also saw a great cultural renaissance for Indigenous peoples: there were new attempts to preserve Indigenous languages and cultural sites, with programmes being developed to educate children in local Indigenous languages. These sorts of efforts continue to the present, though they are hamstrung by conservative politicians that want to emphasise learning “the national language” of English over all others.

The emergence of land rights

These activist struggles pushed the issue of Indigenous land rights onto the political agenda, with a number of changes taking place over the coming decades to establish a legal right of Indigenous peoples to the land they traditionally inhabited. Significant amounts of government-owned land were transferred to the administration of Aboriginal land councils, non-profit entities representing the relevant Indigenous peoples in the area. Disputes about Aboriginal land rights were funnelled off the streets, into parliament and into courtrooms. The 1992 *Mabo vs. Queensland* decision of the High Court of Australia established formally for the first time that Australia was not “terra nullius” – unoccupied land – prior to colonisation; this, combined with the Keating Government’s 1993 Native Title Act, opened the door for further land claims.

Whatever potential these new forms of land ownership had to change the Australian economy was formally nullified by the 1996 *Wik Peoples vs. Queensland* decision, which established that in cases where a native title claim conflicted with existing private property rights, it would be the private property right that would win out over the native title in the end. This largely diminished the fears of the powerful Australian rural capitalists that their landholdings would be given over to Indigenous peoples.

Because most land held under native title is not fit for commercial agriculture, Indigenous land holding bodies do not have many sources of income. Tourism can contribute some money, but not a lot; in such an environment, it is common to see rich mining companies sign agreements with local Indigenous owners to mine on their land in exchange for investment in their communities, the promises of jobs, scholarships for their youth, and so on, holding these communities hostage. Those landholders that reject these deals with the devil require immense solidarity from supporters in order to hold on.

In this, we can see how the shift from combative protests in the streets and workplaces to negotiations in parliament, in the courts and in corporate boardrooms has been a conscious response by the ruling class to contain the potential of Indigenous struggles. This mirrors the shift in the union arena from direct action to state arbitration schemes: it is not one that has occurred for the benefit of the workers!

In both instances, control gets taken away from the people at the base, and is instead given to layers of bureaucrats and “community leaders” to make decisions, and lawyers to interpret the relevant legal codes, which are incomprehensible to most people. It’s no surprise that the layer of middlemen tends towards conservatism. The struggle is too important to be left to professionals!

Colonialism in its contemporary phase

Whilst formal state racism has diminished since the pre-WWII era, it still exists. In addition to direct state racism, there is the general brutality of the capitalist system towards the working class that Indigenous people suffer from more acutely, representing as they do some of the most exploited workers in the country: their rates of poverty, ill health, unemployment, and access to health and educational services are

in all instances higher than those of other people in Australia. The social ills that derive from poverty and deprivation – like family breakdowns, child neglect, drug addiction and so on – flow from this also.

Though Indigenous peoples make up around 2% of the Australian population, they are around 30% of the Australian prison population – one of the highest rates of incarceration relative to population in the world. It is sadly common for Indigenous people to die whilst in police custody; a prominent example is that of David Dungay Jr., who was choked to death by prison guards at Sydney’s Long Bay prison in response to Dungay eating chocolate biscuits without permission in his cell. The prison guards have suffered no consequences as a result of their actions; they have been tacitly approved by the authorities.

As well as this, there is also the issue of ongoing removals of Indigenous children from their families by government case-workers. Though the “Stolen Generation” policies have ended, Indigenous children are still removed at a drastically higher rate than non-Indigenous children – ten times higher, according to some statistics. In response to the acknowledged brutality of the Stolen generation, and as a result of activist struggles – such as those led by the group “Grandmothers Against Removals” – some states have adopted formal measures to try and keep Indigenous children within their families. However, the persistence of this higher rate of removals demonstrates that the problem of structural, racial oppression cannot be fixed with any amount of further government bureaucracy.

The most obvious form of official state racism came with the Northern Territory National Emergency Response, known colloquially as “the Intervention”. The Intervention was launched by conservative Howard government in 2007, after a government-fabricated media panic over alleged high rates of child abuse in Northern Territory Indigenous communities. The Intervention marked a return to the state protectionism