## Racism and labor movement

Humphrey McQueen, in his influential book *A New Britannia* emphasises the racism endemic in the Australian labour movement at the start of its development in the 1890s. Iggy Kim, of the *Green Left Weekly*, in his pamphlet, *The Origins of Racism*, locates the early Labor Party as the prime source of racism in Australia and then draws a very long bow to argue that you should vote in current elections for his small socialist party, because the Labor Party has these racist roots, and in his view, is still hopelessly deformed by them.

At the same time, Pauline Hanson accuses Labor of flooding Australia with unassimilable migrants, so that by the year 2050 we may be governed by a half-Indian, half-Chinese lesbian cyborg.

Journalist Paul Sheehan accuses the Laborites of stacking safe Labor seats with Asian migrants, and asserts that the whole migration practice of the 1982–96 Labor government was an attempt to unacceptably change the racial character of Australia. The Geoffrey Blainey, Robert Birrell, Katharine Betts bunch put a similar spin on current Labor attitudes and practices in migration.

*News Weekly*, the fortnightly newspaper of the National Civic Council, founded by Bob Santamaria, also constantly denounces Laborism for encouraging multiculturalism and «unacceptably high» levels of family reunion. Finally, the Liberal government of Howard and Costello tip their hat towards all this perceived opposition to migration by reducing migration quotas and increasing obstacles to family reunion and to migrants receiving social welfare, obviously with the hope that they will gain electoral advantage from this.

This vortex of accusations against the labour movement about migration has the effect of arousing my latent labour movement patriotism, which has been mostly submerged during the last few years by my anger at the seemingly inexorable shift of the ALP to the right. My old instinct to defend the ALP is stirred up by all these contradictory, but possibly currently popular, conspiracy theories about the Labor Party and migration.

The main aim of most these attacks on Labor over migration is to damage Labor's prospects by appealing to what is perceived by many conservative pundits to be a latent racism and atavism in Australia. All this tends to make me feel that the trundling old ALP monolith can't be quite as bad as it often appears in other circumstances.

A more important question, ideologically and theoretically, and a very useful one strategically, is to try to understand what realities are reflected in these strange, contradictory attacks to equip us for the future. It is a very important question to ask: how we got from the labour movement racism of the 1890s to the relatively civilised policies and practices of the labour movement today.

It is really quite extraordinary that the same political party, the ALP, which fought extremely hard to entrench the White Australia Policy in Australian life, should now be denounced by the Hansons and Sheehans for «being the main agency flooding the country with Asian migrants and pouring them into safe Labor seats». A serious investigation of how the labor movement's attitude to migration, and particularly Asian migration, was changed, has a very practical bearing on how we can ensure that the labour movement develops and entrenches a civilised and realistic policy and practice in migration matters.

Some people interested in Marxist theory raise the question of the «reserve army of labour» in relation to migration. They say that the capitalist class encourages migration in order to create a pool of labour for the development of capitalism and that the capitalists do this with the intention of maintaining a sufficient surplus of labour to keep the price of labour down. They thus extend Karl Marx's discussion of the unemployment/reserve army of labour issue to the question of migration.

However, Marx never argued against the right of workers to migrate to other countries because they might then form part of the reserve army of labour. It is a fact that in whatever they do, including the encouragement of migration, the capitalist class pursues its own interests. They certainly wish to take advantage of a reserve army of labour.

It's worth making the point here that the working class itself has no intrinsic interest in attempting to prevent the development of capitalism as a social system. The working class itself develops its independent consciousness and its organisation as part of the development of the capitalist system, although in conflict with the capitalist class over wages, conditions and other workers' interests.

In Europe, the Americas and Australasia, working-class living standards in the 19th and 20th centuries could not have risen in the dramatic way that they did without the expansion and development of capitalism as a global social system. It's a kind of crude Luddism (machine-breaking) to think you can stop that process of development. It's worth noting the point that in the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and Latin America, the sites of European mass migration, all the periods of mass migration (the 19th century, and the 1950s and the 1960s in relation to Australia) have also coincided with a rapid rise in living standards.

It is almost a truism of trade union activity that the best time to press hard for improvement in wages and conditions is during the early stages of the upswing in the boom-bust cycle endemic to the capitalist system, and this upswing usually coincides with periods of increased migration.

What actually happens with mass migration is that the capitalist class always attempts to use the latest cohort of migrants as a source of cheap labour, to weaken trade unionism and the struggle for living standards. In most of the cases mentioned, the new migrants, being the objects of greatest capitalist exploitation, usually wise up pretty fast, and become involved in trade union and and other struggles for the economic and social interests of the whole working class.

It was like that in the United States and Australia in the 19th century and it has been like that in Australia in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. The capitalist class wants a «reserve army of labour», but what mass migration produces is a proletariat with real class interests, which always poses in real life the question of working-class organisation.

It is always wrong and unprincipled, from a socialist point of view, to try to stop migration. It is unethical to do so from the point of view of the working-class ethics at the core of Marxism. It's impossible to stop anyway, because of the powerful dynamism of the so far not expropriated capitalist system, a dynamism that continues to operate in the same framework as the equally pronounced tendency of the capitalist system to devastating and periodic crisis, which is also inherent in the system.

In migration matters, it is far better, both from the point of view of socialist ethics and practical politics, to accept the reality of migration under capitalism and to turn all energies towards uniting the working class, both migrants and those already here, in common struggle for their economic and social interests. In my long experience of the labour movement, left talk about the reserve army of labour in relation to migration has usually disguised an essentially anti-migration, and often racist content.

From the commencement of white settlement in Australia there was a constant shortage of labour, which slowed down capitalist development and led the representatives of the different capitalist interests to explore different sources of migrants for the Australian colonies. A number of assisted migration schemes were organised from the British Isles by the British and colonial governments and they satisfied the labour demand to some degree, although one constant idiosyncracy was that the assisted migrants included far too many rebellious Irish to make the British Australian ruling class feel comfortable.

From the 1840s gold rushes on, the constant shortage of labor, combined with the development of embryonic but reasonably effective trade unionism in the Australian colonies, forced the price of labour quite high, particularly from the 1860s through to 1890. This caused considerable comment throughout the capitalist world. Australia became quite famous for the high cost of labour, which the capitalist class resented and the working class celebrated.

Because of this perceived high cost of labour, various sections of the squatting elite toyed with the idea of importing large numbers of Indian and Chinese coolies to keep wages down. They also kidnapped («blackbirded» in the racist language of the time) a lot of Kanaks (usually referred to in those times as Kanakas) from the South Sea Islands, with the same intention.

The ship owners tried to run coastal shipping in Australia with cheap Chinese crews. What they found very early on was that even the Chinese «coolies» and «Kanakas», once they landed in the Australian environment, started to get themselves organised. Kanaks in Queensland organised embryonic trade unions and had strikes. The Chinese started to organise a seamen's union, and Chinese in Melbourne organised a Chinese furniture workers union.

Despite the incipient development of trade unionism among the Kanaks and Chinese, the main response of the existing white colonial proletariat was to feel strongly threatened by «cheaper coolie labour». Such a response meshed in with, and even subtly expanded and extended, the prevailing racist ideology of the British empire, and it was a more simple although cruder response than the notion of working-class internationalism put forward by a small minority of progressives in the labour movement, and some other liberal-minded people.

In 1878 a major flashpoint was the engagement on a number of ships of Chinese labour at rates of pay much lower than the prevailing rate. This produced a bitter strike of white seamen, which was basically successful, and ultimately the Chinese seamen were removed. The sole Labor representative in parliament of that time, Angus Cameron, was an energetic and vocal leader in this anti-Chinese agitation.

This attempt of a section of the capitalist class, spearheaded by the shipowners, to import cheaper Asian labour for their own economic interests, was totally overwhelmed by the explosion of racist opposition, which gained such powerful force from the whole ethos of «British Australia», the ethos that had been so assiduously cultivated by the British Colonial Office and the Protestant churches for the previous 70 years.

As a direct result of the success of the anti-Chinese agitation, the White Australia line of least resistance in the labour movement became quite institutionalised by the use of the rhetoric of British racism to oppose migration from non-British areas. In times of economic downturn, it even became a very popular thing in the labour movement to oppose all migration, including British migration.

The Sydney Labor Council actually employed a young John Norton (paradoxically, a British migrant himself) the same man who later became famous as the pioneer of tabloid journalism, the lineal business ancestor of Rupert Murdoch, who founded one of the tabloid titles that Murdoch now owns. The Labor Council sent Norton to London as its official delegate to publicise and campaign there for the viewpoint that migrants shouldn't come to Australia because there was unemployment here.

At this time the Labor Council frequently passed motions against the assisted migration schemes and any further immigration. All this is recounted in Cyril Pearl's wonderful, scabrous biography of Norton, *Wild Men of Sydney*. This book so infuriated the Norton family that they used their considerable newspaper influence to persuade the right-wing Labor government of Joe Cahill in NSW to push through the parliament a bill making it possible to take defamation actions on behalf of the dead. Happily the legislation was never used.

By far the best book about *The Bulletin* is *The Archibald Paradox*, by Sylvia Lawson, published by Penguin in 1983. Lawson describes how the unusual and inventive editor, J.F. Archibald founded and developed *The Bulletin* in the 1880s and 1890s. This newspaper, with its carnival parade of styles in writing and black‑and-white art, opened its pages to many thousands of contributors, among them Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson, who were first published there. In her introduction, Sylvia Lawson says:

The Archibald paradox is simply the paradox of being colonial…. *The Bulletin*'s republicanism and nationalism flowered out of the paradox. The republicanism worked as inspiriting argument for a time; but nationalism supervened. It was expressed strongly, through the late 1880s especially, as viciously chauvinistic racism – directed especially, but not only, against the Chinese. In this the editor, with all his compassionate, world-ranging perspectives, was not alone; but he was responsible. *The Bulletin* would have seemed at the time simply to be playing out the stern logic of its economnic realism, and standing in necessary opposition to the laissez-faire tolerance of the pontifical daily press. The old world was murderously oppressive; the new must be just and free, untainted not only by poverty and caste but also by strangeness. Thus the paradox worked: the dominant culture, which in one breath *The Bulletin* lampooned and disavowed, was upheld vigorously in the next. The prospective Utopia, the dream of «Australia» – federated, republican, democratic – was landscaped for white men only. The internationalist humanism, enacted so brilliantly in the journal's range of reference and its open-pages policy, was denied in the racist argument; it was also undermined and disfigured perennially in much of *the Bulletin*'s discourse on women.

*The Bulletin* unquestionably left a considerable imprint on Australia, particularly on the labour movement. A general republican sentiment and opposition to the pretensions of the ruling class can be traced back to *The Bulletin* but, unfortunately, so can the generalised anti-Asian racism that came to dominate the early years of the new century.

The strong editor, Archibald, had a veritable preoccupation with the Chinese. (*The Bulletin* always referred to them as «the Chows», and this unpleasant obsession unhappily had a considerable cultural influence on Australia.)

After Archibald's death, *The Bulletin* was acquired by other owners who swung over to the Tory side of politics while retaining all the exotic racism of the founder, and all through the 1920s, 1930s 1940s and 1950s, *The Bulletin* was both viciously anti-Labor and rabidly racist, adding to Archibald's anti-Asian racism a vicious anti-semitism. Finally, in the 1960s, the magazine was acquired by the Packer family, and is now a rather pedestrian business magazine and appears to have shed the racism of the past. Thank heaven for that!

However, even in the 19th century there was a significant amount of opposition to racism in the trade unions. The following exerpt is from a chapter by Mick Armstrong in *Class and Class Conflict in Australia* edited by Rick Kuhn and Tom O'Lincoln.

Consider the early Amalgamated Shearers' Union (ASU), notorious for its exclusion of Asians. There is no doubting the racism of the ASU leadership, which became more pronounced as a conservative bureaucracy strengthened its control, after defeats in the Great Strikes of the 1890s weakened the position of militants. Yet the union members were more open to ideas of inter-racial unity than most historians contend. In 1889 Robert Stevenson, a militant organiser, won the support of the Bourke branch for allowing Chinese shearers to retain their membership. The Bourke members, predominantly landless labourers, were more open to ideas of working-class unity than members nearer the coast, where small farmers predominated.

The ASU (shearers' union) paper, *The Hummer*, in 1891 exposed the terrible conditions of Aborigines, and they were exempt from the racist exclusion clause. Indeed at the 1891 ASU conference the Adelaide branch moved to admit Aborigines for half the normal fee. A compromise was reached: Aborigines received full benefits by payment of an annual contribution, without the entrance fee.

It was not only militants who supported this measure. The more conservative general secretary David Temple thought it would be a «graceful act to those from whom the country had been taken», and that it would be good for the union's image.

Nevertheless, by the time of federation, labour movement opposition to migration had become solidly entrenched and the White Australia Policy had become an almost unchallengeable orthodoxy in the labour movement. The labour movement didn't produce the White Australia Policy. It was initiated by the British ruling class, emanating from the Colonial Office in London, and it oozed out of the general fabric of British‑Australia imperialist bourgeois ideology. Nevertheless, despite its ruling-class origins, this unfortunate attitude became extremely entrenched in the labour movement.

The heroic member of the Left Opposition in Russia, Victor Serge, towards the end of his life, was challenged by theoreticians who completely opposed the Russian Revolution. He responded to this by saying:

It is often said that the germ of all Stalinism was in Bolshevism at its beginning. Well, I have no objection. Only, Bolshevism also contained many other germs – a mass of other germs – and those who lived through the enthusiasm of the first years of the first victorious revolution ought not to forget it. To judge the living man by the death germs which the autopsy reveals in a corpse – and which he may have carried in him since his birth – is this very sensible?.

Much the same analogy can be applied to the argument put forward by Iggy Kim, that the germ of racism was absolutely dominant in the formation of the Australian Labor Party. That may have an element of truth, but there were many other germs present in the early years of the Australian labour movement and the ALP. While the racism was dominant, it was contested by significant and vocal minorities in and around the labour movement. My investigations have led me to the conclusion that there were two significant currents that dissented from the prevailing racism.

One location of opposition was the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, which was an international outfit, the boss of which was an Italian in the Vatican in Rome, and it had a largely Irish flock in Australia, thoroughly alienated from the rhetoric of British Australia.

There were also quite a few Catholics who weren't British. Cardinal Moran defended the Chinese. Moran also, on a number of occasions, articulately exposed the imperialist activities of Protestant missionaries in the South Pacific. Caroline Chisholm defended Asian migration to Australia. Archbishop Duhig, the long-time and politically very right-wing Archbishop of Brisbane, nevertheless stood up strenuously in opposition to racism against Italians and Maltese in North Queensland, obviously partly because they were part of his own flock.

Some of the group settlements of Italians in North Queensland were actually organised by the Catholic Church. A bit later on, during the British‑Australia hysteria of the First World War, Archbishop Mannix strenuously defended German and Austrian Lutherans and Catholics against the prevailing madness.

While it wouldn't be accurate to idealise the racial attitudes of ordinary Catholics, who no doubt shared, to some degree, the prevailing racism of Australian society at that time, their Irish origins made their racism more equivocal than that of the majority. In addition to this, the international connections of the Catholic Church, and particularly the Catholic hierarchy, brought an international influence into play that implicitly contradicted the local racism.

Even the fact that some Catholic priests went overseas to Rome or Louvain to train, had a rather internationalising effect on the Catholic Church. The fact that the overwhelming majority of Catholics supported, and many were active in the labour movement, brought this influence to bear in the labour movement.

The other major site of opposition to racism was in the socialist, Marxist and secular groups and sects in or around the labour movement. Quite a few early socialists and left-wingers in Australia were themselves non-British migrants. Such groups as the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) were explicitly anti-racist from their inception.

The largest and most influential socialist group in Australia before the First World War was the Victorian Socialist Party. It was well entrenched in the ALP, and was, through linked socialist organisations in other states, influential all over Australia.

The VSP was repeatedly convulsed by debates and arguments over the White Australia Policy and the race question. There are three important sources on this debate. One is *These Things Shall Be*, an objective but filial biography of his father, Bob Ross, by Edgar Ross; the chapter, *A Socialist Dilemma: Racism and Internationalism in the Victorian Socialist Party 1905–21* by Graeme Osborne, in the book *Who Are Our Enemies? Racism and the Australian Working Class*, edited by Ann Curthoys and Andrew Markus; *International Socialism and Australian Labor* by Frank Farrell; and *Doherty's Corner*, the biography of Marie E.J. Pitt, by Colleen Burke.

The major debate in the Victorian Socialist Party erupted in 1907. To quote Graeme Osborne:

The case for socialist brotherhood was put initially by a non-Party member, a remarkable Victorian public servant – Miss Amelia Lambrick – who wrote first under the pseudonym Hypatia. She launched the debate by urging socialists to recognise that they had not yet grasped the full meaning of socialism in Australia. When they did they would see as its unique essence an insistence on brotherhood which demanded freedom and equality for all peoples. Unfortunately Australian socialists who though quick to recognise the nature and beauty of brotherhood… are often slow to realise what it involves. We generalise loudly but particularise softly. We shout «Brotherhood» in the major and «White Australia» in the minor and seem quite unconscious of the discord…

Both «reason and righteousness» compelled socialists to recognise the antagonism between socialism and the White Australia Policy, and the inconsistency involved when «we repudiate the rights of a privileged class, and uphold the rights of a privileged race». Accordingly Australia's socialists must seek to open her abundance to her crowded northern neighbours…

Within the Party her principal support came from the poet Bernard O'Dowd. He acknowledged the delicacy of the issue when he wrote of Hypatia's «courage» and congratulated Tom Mann as editor of *The Socialist* for running «this dangerous, but necessary discussion». Though conceding that immigration restrictions might be necessary on occasions to protect workers against unfair competition, he attacked the racist assumptions that frequently underlay such a view. European cultures were not necessarily superior, nor was it evident that interracial unions and their progeny were in any way inferior. Further, if such unions were undesirable it was not a matter for males alone to decide. For O'Dowd socialism meant democracy. To realise democracy it was necessary to absolutely eliminate… colour from all State and social policy, unless you would justify… caste, wealth, rank, birth and education, as giving title to privileged treatment…

Some in the Party, however, when discussing the immigration question, saw very definite reasons for limiting the application of the principles of democracy and socialist brotherhood. In advocating restricted immigration, they began by stressing the need to defend the economic position of workers, but nearly always eventually revealed a range of racial assumptions. Prominent in these assumptions were the inevitability of racial incompatibility, the dangers of pollution and contamination, and the horrors associated with sexual encounters across racial boundaries. W.J. Baxter and Mrs M.E.J. Pitt were the leading protagonists of such views…

Baxter's heroic depiction of woman's role as defender of the race and his sexual chivalry won the approval of Mrs Pitt, one of the first Party members to voice doubts openly over coloured immigration. Mrs Pitt found the prospects of sexual encounters across racial boundaries «repulsive» and under normal conditions «impossible». In her view «perfect brotherhood» would be quite as perfect «without any blending of the white and coloured races». She concluded:

«As a woman… I cannot allow the occasion to pass without very sincerely thanking Mr Baxter for his treatment of his subject as affecting the woman, and particularly for his able and singularly luminous expression of the instinct in the woman of any race which makes for racial purity – an instinct… as dear… as life itself, and… being so, should be equally dear to the nation to which she belongs.» Clearly, in Mrs Pitt's view the connection between racial purity and nationalism was indissoluble.

This debate continued in the Victorian Socialist Party for the next 10 years, with both anti-racist and pro-racist views having quite widespread support, both among the rank and file and the leadership of the party. The debate was still unresolved as the Victorian Socialist Party gradually declined in the 1920s after many of its supporters and members crossed over to the newly formed Communist Party following the Russian Revolution.

One very significant generally left-wing figure in the VSP was R.S. Ross, who through his own socialist magazine, *Ross's Monthly*, widely popularised the Russian Revolution. Despite this, Ross remained a defender of the White Australia Policy, and this is discussed carefully and intelligently, but quite critically, in veteran Communist Edgar Ross's very useful biography of his father, Bob Ross.

A rather interesting sidelight on this debate is the personal story of the poet Marie Pitt and the poet Bernard O'Dowd, who clashed so sharply on opposite sides in this debate. As far as one can tell from the records, their views didn't change, but they got together personally and became quite a well-known couple in Melbourne intellectual circles. This was complicated by the fact that O'Dowd was married to a Catholic woman who would not give him a divorce, and so O'Dowd and Marie Pitt became quite a notorious item in the rather moralistic atmosphere of Melbourne in the 1920s, and remained together into old age, until Marie Pitt died. In their own way, they struck a considerable blow for civilised, modern living arrangements. This is all described rather nicely in Colleen Burke's book about Marie Pitt's life, which also contains an excellent selection of Pitt's poetry.

One significant opponent of White Australia at its inception was the quirky, independent-minded Melbourne bookseller, E.W. Cole. He published a number of pamphlets and articles at his own expense, opposing the White Australia Policy, which was quite a courageous line of action, considering that his large Melbourne retail business might have been, on one reading of the situation, affected by his public stand on White Australia. It did not seem to be, as his business went from strength to strength in the early years of the new century.

The most important bourgeois opponent of White Australia was Bruce Smith, the Free Trade MP for Parkes in NSW. He was a very significant figure in the capitalist class. He was the principal of Howard Smiths, the shipowners, and he was a fairly determined opponent of trade unionism.

He was obviously partly motivated by his antagonism to George Reid, the Free Trade leader, who had formed several Free Trade governments in NSW by getting Labor support at the price of enacting a lot of progressive pro-Labor legislation. Smith had been his main opponent within the Free Trade party of this parliamentary line-up.

Smith's lengthy and intelligent speech against all aspects of the bill embodying White Australia in the newly established federal parliament, was the only one against it, and he was attacked by his fellow politicians on all sides for his stand, which didn't seem to overawe him one bit.

He even subsidised the publication of a hardback book opposing White Australia, a large part of which consists of a reprint and discussion of his speech in the parliament.

This 235‑page book, printed in Rowe Street, Sydney, by R.T. Kelly and Sons, in 1903, a copy of which I own, is called *Colorphobia. An Exposure of the White Australia Fallacy*, by Gizen-No-Teki (obviously a pseudonym) concentrates its criticism of White Australia on Smith's fellow Free Traders, particularly Reid, who supported White Australia, and on the labour movement advocates of White Australia. A curious feature of this book is that it is written from the point of view of the advocates of Henry George's single tax on land. Maybe Bruce Smith was a Single Taxer.

The conflict over conscription during the First World War had a number of complex and conflicting racial overtones. The British‑Australia racism of William Morris Hughes and the ruling class was used to whip up wild jingoistic hostility to Germans and Turks in Australia, and to the «disloyal» Irish Catholics.

Unfortunately the anti-conscription side resorted to a certain racism of its own, with accusations that the ruling class intended to flood the country with cheap labour from unacceptable places. This conflict came to focus around an unfortunate shipload of 214 Maltese migrants, who had the bad luck to arrive in Australia on a French ship, the *Gange*, in the middle of the first conscription referendum campaign in 1916.

As the propaganda of the anti-conscription side against the government about Maltese migration was obviously damaging the government in the referendum, Hughes ditched the interests of the Maltese migrants, whom he had previously encouraged.

The unfortunate Maltese were first of all interned for some weeks in New Caledonia, and then they were detained for a further long period like convicts on a dilapidated old hulk at Berry's Bay in Sydney Harbour. A mad and virulent controversy ranged around the heads of these unfortunate immigrants for nine months.

They were defended by a courageous and redoubtable Maltese priest, Father Bonnet. After being thus interned for such a long time, they were finally allowed to land in Australia in March 1917, well after the first conscription referendum. Predictably, the most vehement advocates of deporting the Maltese were the bureaucracy of the Australian Workers Union.

One wonders whether Terry Muscat, the Maltese migrant, who was recently elected National Secretary of the AWU, may even have had the odd relative on the *Gange*. The shameful incident of the internment of the Maltese, is described in detail in Barry York's very fine book, *Empire and Race. The Maltese in Australia 1881–1949*.

The greatest atrocity perpetrated by British Australia against any cultural group after the enormous atrocities committed against indigenous Australians, the Chinese, and the Kanaks, was the ruthless cultural destruction of the German‑Australian community during the First World War.

This is described thoroughly and graphically in a 400‑page book *Enemy Aliens* by Gerhard Fischer, published by University of Queensland Press in 1989. The large German‑Australian community was assaulted by anti-Boche hysteria in every possible way. All the German-language schools in South Australia and Queensland were closed down. Many Lutheran churches were locked up. Even the German names of villages of German settlement (like Hahndorf in South Australia) were changed. An arbitrary and brutal policy of internment was inflicted on the German Australian community.

Not everybody was interned. That would have been impossible, as there were about 70,000 people of some German ancestry. But all the significant leaders of the German community, and many others besides, were interned in a completely arbitrary way. They included Edmund Resch, the brewer, interned at the age of 71, a large number of Lutheran ministers, a Catholic priest, Australia's foremost orthopaedic surgeon, a number of musicians, a waiter in a German club who happened also to be a member of the IWW, the secretary of the Sydney Motor Chauffers Trade Union, who had committed the unpardonable sin of leading a successful strike of his members in time of war, a second-generation German Australian leader of the wharfies' union, and even a second-generation farmer in the Riverina who was interned just a week after his eldest son, a volunteer in the AIF, had been invalided back from France.

Many of the German‑Australians interned were Australian citizens and many had even been born in Australia. No evidence was ever produced of political activities on behalf of the German war effort.

The citizens of other belligerent countries on the other side in the war were also interned extremely arbitrarily, including Bulgarians, Austrians, Turks, and even some Afghans who were classed as sympathetic to Turkey because of their Muslim religion.

In Western Australia the then racist mineworkers union played an unpleasant role, succeeding in provoking the internment of 300 southern Slavs, Croatians and Slovenes, who were classed as enemy aliens because they were citizens of Austria-Hungary. These were mainly mineworkers at Kalgoorlie, who the racist union had been trying to exclude from the mines for years.

Even some Serbs, who were actually British allies in the First World War, were interned, so viciously confused was the attitude of authority. Later, a number of Russians, also ostensible allies, were interned, really because of their trade union and labour movement activity. Most of these people were locked up in an enormous concentration camp at Holsworthy near Liverpool, in NSW.

When the war ended, these prisoners, who by then numbered about 6000, were kept interned until after the signing of the Versaille Treaty in 1919, when the overwhelming majority of them were ruthlessly deported to their countries of origin. A few, like the brewer Resch, managed to stay in Australia after mounting an extensive and costly legal campaign, which he had the resources to fund. The overwhelming majority of the Germans were not so favoured by circumstances.

Many of the deportees were back-loaded on empty troop ships. A large and significant number of those deported were Australian citizens, and many were Australian-born. So much for «citizenship» in British Australia. According to Fischer's book, hundreds of migrants who weren't enemy aliens, but who were politically and industrially active on the left, were deported in the same sweep.

To quote Fischer: «The total number of deportees, based on the shipping lists of the nine transports, comes to 6150. Of these, 5414 had been interned, the remainder were family members and uninterned ex‑enemy aliens who either accepted the offer to be repatriated or were ordered to leave the country.» The major Australian figure who publicly opposed this atrocious witch-hunt was His Eminence Archbishop Mannix.

The intrinsic cruelty of all this is almost unimaginable. Six thousand people uprooted and implacably deported from this country where they had built their lives, and had lived for many years, to the chaotic and miserable Europe of the 1920s. The main instrument carrying out all this brutality was British‑Australian military intelligence, particularly one Major Piesse, whose name will be remembered in infamy for generations.

An examination of the written records of military intelligence suggests that all this cruelty was motivated by a kind of mad, but in a way logical, notion that the crisis of the war gave the British economic interests the chance to settle accounts with German business activity in Australia and the Pacific, which was seen as a major competitor with Britain.

The German‑Australian cultural community was cowed and crushed by this, and the old centres of German community settlement have never really regained their German multicultural aspect, which is a great pity for the cultural richness of Australian society.

Nevertheless, one of the ironies of all this is that after the Second World War substantial German migration to Australia recommenced, and when you refer to the redoubtable Charles Price and his computer breakdowns of Australian ethnicity, he presents convincing evidence that the German ethnic component in Australia is still the largest after the English, Irish and Scottish, and ahead of the Italian and Greek, at about 4 per cent of the mix. The current best-known German‑Australian is, of course, Tim Fischer, the leader of the National Party.

The foundation of the Australian Communist Party, as a section of the Communist International, in 1920, had considerable repercussions, over time, on the labour movement's attitude to the White Australia policy and racism. From its inception, the Communist Party had a formal opposition to the White Australia policy and racism, though many of its members were quite naturally still influenced by the prevailing racist mood of the labour movement as a whole.

Nevertheless, even the left-wing union bureaucrats, the 'Trades Hall Reds', led by Jock Garden, the Secretary of the Sydney labor Council, took, for that time, quite a courageous stand against racism. They affiliated the Sydney Labor Council to the Pan Pacific Trade Union Secretariat, which had its headquarters in Vladivostok, which included unions in a number of Asian countries.

This gave rise to a hysterical clamour from the establishment and right-wingers in the labour movement, like the bureaucrats of the Australian Workers Union (AWU), who accused the Sydney Labor Council of thereby undermining the White Australia Policy, which was in fact true, and completely laudable.

At the ACTU Conference in 1930 there was quite a complex battle over affiliation to the Pan Pacific Trade Union Secretariat, with the conference evenly split over the issue, the Sydney Labor Council and Garden in favour of the affiliation, and Bob Ross, who by this time had shifted somewhat to the right, opposing the affiliation.

The Australian Workers Union leadership became an entrenched force defending racism in the trade union movement. Throughout the 1920s they induced successive AWU conventions to oppose all migration and they even persuaded a couple of conventions to carry resolutions against the «southern European menace».

The Queensland AWU even attempted to prevent Italians and Maltese joining the union, and joined the extraordinary and unpleasant racist mobilisation against Italian and Maltese cane farmers and farm workers in North Queensland. North Queensland had also, however, a tradition of industrial militancy and the Communist Party grew rapidly in the late 1920s and the early 1930s in North Queensland.

The North Queensland communists, who were initially mostly Anglo-Celtic indigenous North Queensland militant workers, took a strong stand right from the commencement of their independent political activity, against the prevailing North Queensland racism. In the middle 1930s they led major industrial struggles, particularly the very effective strike in favour of burning the cane to prevent Weils disease, led by the notable communist militant Jim Henderson.

This struggle, despite the bitter opposition of the AWU leadership, was spectacularly successful, and Henderson and the other North Queensland communists were able to draw the Italian and Maltese cane cutters and cane farmers into the struggle, thereby largely defeating and pushing aside the racism.

Many North Queensland Italians and Maltese joined the Communist Party, and by the time the Communist Party was declared illegal in 1940, its influence in North Queensland was enormous, including a very considerable influence among the Italians, Maltese and Spanish immigrant farmers and workers. Fred Paterson, the Rhodes Scholar Communist, who was elected as the only Communist member of Parliament ever in Australia, for the seat of Bowen in the 1940s, got an enormous vote amongst the Italian, Maltese and Spanish migrants in the area.

All these developments in North Queensland are described in detail in Dianne Menghetti's excellent book, «The Red North». (It is one of the wonderful ironies of trade union history that in 1997 a bitterly fought election took place in the Australian Workers Union. Two teams were in conflict, one a coalition of some right-wingers and some left-wingers, and the other one the traditional leadership of the Queensland AWU. The left-right combination defeated the Queensland group, and even got 46 per cent of the vote in the large Queensland AWU branch.

The successful candidates of this team were Graham Roberts for President, a left-winger from Port Kembla, and a right winger, Terry Muscat, for AWU General Secretary, who also happens to be a Maltese from Melbourne. The Queensland AWU has come a long way in 60 years!)

Most of the 1920s and all the 1930s were a period of mass unemployment, and the labour movement tended to oppose all migration throughout the period. Also, the conditions of mass unemployment and some bitterly fought strikes at the onset of the Depression created an environment in which the use of some migrants as scabs in industrial disputes led to an explosion of chauvinism.

The most unfortunate examples of this were the waterfront strike in Melbourne, in which Italians were taken straight off the ship, so to speak, and used as scabs. This gave rise to many ugly incidents. There were also extensive race riots on the Western Australian gold fields in the early 1930s, directed at Yugoslavs and Italians.

During the race riots in Kalgoorlie the Communist Party played a heroic role, attempting to combat the outbreak of chauvinism directed at the Italian and Yugoslav miners, who were accused of competing with Australians for a declining number of jobs. This vigorous defence of migrant miners by the Communist Party led many Yugoslav and Italian migrants to support the Communist Party for quite a period afterwards.

Another feature of the 1920s and the 1930s in the labour movement was a certain amount of thoughtless anti-semitism. The notorious architect of the Premiers' Plan sent out by the Bank of England to put Australia «under orders», so to speak, was one Otto Niemeyer.

He was actually descended from Prussian bankers, «pure» Germans, who had come over to Britain with the «German Georges», who became kings of England. Nevertheless, the persistent urban myth grew up that he was Jewish, and this gave rise to a long lived and widespread popular propaganda about «Jewish bankers» which, unfortunately, became mixed up with the completely righteous opposition, in the labour movement, led by J.T. Lang, to the «Premiers' Plan».

This was particularly pronounced in Catholic circles, where the mild anti-semitism of G.K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc, which was mixed with their anti-capitalist radicalism, had considerable influence. In the late 1930s, when Jewish refugees from Hitler began to knock on the Australian door, so to speak, the labour movement confusion between Jewishness and capitalist banking, gave rise to a certain unfortunate resistance to Jewish migration in some labour movement circles.

This is all documented in «Australia and the Jewish Refugees 1933–1948», by Michael Blakeney. Once again, a significant part of the left, particularly the Communist Party, were a notable and honourable exception to this anti-Semitism, and defended the right of the Jewish refugees to enter Australia. An example of this agitation was a couple of excellent Communist Party pamphlets by Len Fox debunking anti-semitism and defending the right of Jews to come here.

Julia Martinez, of Wollongong University, has been doing her PhD on the above topic. She published a most informative article, a preliminary part of her thesis, in «Labour History» magazine for May 1999. The picture that emerges from Martinez's pioneering research underlines the social dynamics in both Australian society and the labour movement, in the very special but culturally significant circumstances of the Northern Territory, that eventually undermined «White Australia» on an Australian national scale. Martinez's investigation shows the evolution of trade union and labour movement attitudes in the Northern Territory.

In 1901, when White Australia was adopted, Port Darwin, the main town in the Territory, had a small population of mixed origins and initially the White Australia Policy was supported by the trade union movement.

However, special objective circumstances prevailed because the workforce was actually of very mixed racial origins, including many people of mixed white, Asian, and Aboriginal origin and many non-British European migrants. British‑Australian racism was, in practice, very hard to enforce in the frontier conditions of the Northern Territory.

The tiny trade union movement paid strong verbal allegiance to the White Australia Policy, but even at the start a number of exceptions were made for people of mixed racial origins, both for practical reasons and for the more ethical reasons of basic human solidarity. Martinez describes a variety of arguments in the emerging Northern Territory trade union movement about these questions.

The 1911 census gave Darwin's population as 1387, including 442 Chinese, 374 Europeans, 247 «full-blood» Aboriginals, with the rest being Japanese, Filipino, «half-caste» Aboriginal and Timorese.

During the First World War there was a complicated industrial struggle by Darwin wharfies, which had the ugly side to it that the Department of Aboriginal Affairs attempted to use Aboriginal labour, compulsorily employed at slave rates, to undermine the interests of the unionised wharfies.

Another interesting feature of the Darwin waterfront was that most of the white wharfies were non-British migrants and were significant scapegoats for the mad British‑Australia racism of the First World War period. Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) supporters in Darwin, who were quite numerous, attempted to organise all workers on an internationalist basis, but the endemic racism was more powerful at this period and non-racist internationalism remained a minority current, although it surfaced from time to time.

In one strike of white wharfies the leader of the strike said that their only friends were the Chinese and in another strike, the Japanese Pearl Divers Association, who were not allowed to join the North Australian Workers Union because of White Australia, gave money to the union in support.

In the 1930s things began to change quite rapidly. The two sources of civilised changes in relation to racism, were the two significant recurrent forces in the Australian labour movement, the socialist stream expressed in the Communist Party, pushed on by the Comintern's anti-racist policy, and the Catholic current.

To quote Martinez about Darwin in 1937:

If we look some 20 years ahead, to 1937, the social make-up of Darwin has altered and the unionists have formed themselves into a working-class community with close ties to the coloured population. This next section, considers the character of Darwin society in 1937 and three positive influences on Darwin unionism which had a tempering effect on White Australia. Those were the growing influence of communist internationalism; closer connections with Asian labour movements; and most importantly, a sense of community which included «coloured» workers.