THE AUSTRALIAN NEW LEFT:

Critical Essays and Strategy

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2. Laborism and Socialism

Humphrey McQueen

'It is not a matter of what this or that proletarian, or even the entire proletariat, envisages as the goal at any particular time. It is a question of what the proletariat is and of what it will have to do historically, judged by the conditions of its existence.'

Karl Marx

I

When the practice of the Labor Party in the eighty years of its existence is considered it is truly amazing that anyone could suppose that it has any more than the vaguest semantic associations with socialism. Yet every socialist must confront the question of the Labor Party. No matter what answer is forthcoming the Labor Party cannot be ignored in any revolutionary socialist strategy. Part of the purpose of this chapter is to show why the Labor Party is not and never has been a socialist party, and why it can never become one.

The nature of the Labor Party cannot be determined simply by recounting its actions, or by tracing the thread of temporary majorities at Federal Conferences. Rather it will be necessary to write of the rank-and-file and of the hopes and experiences of all those who have in any way supported the Labor Party: '. . . the history of a party, in other words, must be the history of a particular social group. But this group is not isolated; it has friends, allies, opponents and enemies. Only from the complex picture of social and State life (often even with international ramifications) will emerge the history of a certain party.' Attention must be directed to the nature of the Australian working classes if anything is to be learnt of the Labor Party.

Two problems connected with class arise immediately: what is a working class? and was there one in nineteenth century Australia?

Under capitalism a class is both a thing and an experience. A working class is a thing in the sense that it is a factor of production like iron or coal. But in terms of social action a working class is a continuing experience of real, living men. The nature of this experience is determined by the fact that because real, living men are treated as things they try to alter their position. Since their understanding will determine how they act it is to their consciousness that attention must be directed. The critical criterion for class is not ownership but consciousness.

If a working class is a thing, there was a working class in Australia last century. But in terms of a continuing experience there was not. This does not mean that Australia was a classless society, but that the experiences necessary to create working class consciousness did not exist. It certainly does not mean that wage-earners lacked a continuing experience. On the contrary, it means that their experience was such that they did not reject capitalism because they did not perceive life as intolerable. Despite some bad times, almost every aspect of life in Australia supported the belief that while industrial capitalism should be avoided and adjusted, it certainly did not warrant overthrowing. It will be necessary to find out why they thought this by examining their experiences.

II

Convicts: Some writers have pictured the convicts as 'innocent and manly' and imbued with an 'egalitarian class solidarity'. As such the convicts are presented as the originators of the mythical Australian. This is nonsense. The convicts were professional criminals and believed in nothing so much as individual enterprise. Even the three thousand social rebels failed to contribute to our political

tradition—they became either well-to-do or policemen. If the convicts did not establish a tradition of 'mateship', their acceptance of the acquisitive values of capitalism and their not infrequent successes nonetheless set the pattern for the free labourers who succeeded them. The link between the convicts and the free labourers was not one of shared traditions, but of a common confrontation with an economic and political system which was in every way more flexible than the one in Britain which had caused their transportation or migration.[1]

Emigrants: If the convicts were an unrepresentative sample of British society so were the free emigrants. If they paid their own fares they needed both capital and initiative; if they were assisted they needed at least initiative. In the main they were the upward striving section, those who were dissatisfied with their lot in Britain and thus sought independence and comfort within the bounds of a newer and freer economy. This is obviously true of the half-million who came for gold.

Gold: Gold had three important effects in the formation of the petit-bourgeois consciousness of nineteenth century Australians. Firstly, it often provided an amount of ready capital. Many labourers made a fresh start with a small nugget. This did not stop in 1860: fresh strikes in New Zealand, Queensland and Western Australia provided opportunities till 1900. But gold was not the only source of rapid riches; silver, copper and precious stones were also important in sustaining 'a rush that never ended'. Secondly, the discovery of gold eased the process of capital formation in Australia. The traditional source of capital—the surplus value of workers—

[1] For further details see my article 'Convicts and Rebels', *Labour History*, Number 15. The present essay is a synopsis of a larger work on the development of the Australian working classes which I am preparing. Schematically stated as it is here, the argument is aggressively imperialistic. It is hoped that the addition of corroborative detail will not make it less so. Most of the footnotes which follow indicate where such details can be found.

was partly circumvented in Australia at this time because capital came from mineral finds; from the British investments which these finds provoked; and from the natural increase in flocks which these investments helped to finance. This meant that employees were not called upon to sacrifice such a large share of the wealth they produced. Higher wages were an inevitable consequence in a society that faced a continual labour shortage.

But the most important effect was upon the outlook of the people. Gold mining, particularly in its early days, strengthened the ethos of acquisitive competition and resulted in the gross materialism that marked Australian society and which so greatly offended Richard Mahony.

By 1890, both Spence and Lane were lamenting the passing of the 'golden age' when every man had been his own master. A stone-mason, speaking in 1854, was more pertinent when he pointed out that the love of gold had thoroughly individualised the people and destroyed sociability.

Gold was at the base of high-living standards when times were good and it was there to sustain hopes when they were bad. Its effect upon social consciousness was to hold out the promise of escape from wage-slavery. If it did not offer untold riches, it certainly offered the prospect of sufficient capital to buy a shop, establish a tradesman or purchase a farm.

LAND: Most of those who came to Australia wanted to escape from urban industrialisation far more than from a system of individual enterprise. The desire for land was particularly strong amongst the Irish who provided the model and initiative for the supremely radical Land Conventions of 1857-59. Nineteenth century Australian politics were dominated by questions of land ownership and use. From the earliest days there were demands to 'unlock the lands'. These became ferocious after the gold rushes and culminated in the Free Selection Acts of the 1860s and 1870s.

The spread of Henry George's 'Single Tax' ideas is indicative of the acceptance of land as the source of wealth. The Intercolonial Trades Union Congress meeting in Brisbane in 1888 unanimously agreed that a tax on land would be: '. . . a simple yet sovereign remedy which will raise wages, increase and give remunerative employment, abolish poverty, extirpate pauperism, lessen crime, elevate moral tastes and intelligence, purify government and carry civilisation to a yet nobler height.'

At the height of the Shearers' strike in 1891 about a hundred strikers formed a co-operative at Alice River where they were financed by donations from Barcaldine. The Union Secretary there wired Perth and Argentina to see if those Governments would be willing to settle five thousand experienced bushworkers in co-operative colonies. William Lane's settlement in Paraguay was the measure of this demand, both in terms of the success he had in gaining recruits and in its eventual failure.

Despite the emergence of a Labor Party, the Queensland elections of 1893 were fought on the issue of Land Grant Railways. When Sir Charles Lilley stepped down from the Bench to join the fight he was given the wildly enthusiastic support of the Labor Party. This highlights an important aspect of the struggle for land. At every point in the campaign to establish a yeomanry, the people were not only ideologically subordinate in as much as they were avoiding the problems presented by capitalism by attempting escape into rural harmony: they were also organisationally dominated by the middle class. Part of the explanation for this is that the opposition to land reform came from the squatter-dominated Legislative Councils against which the predominantly middle class Legislative Assemblies were waging war for reasons of their own.

DEMOCRACY: Undoubtedly the most important fact about Australia is, as W. K. Hancock observed, 'that its entire history occurred after the French and Industrial

Revolutions'. This has meant that the issues which split European society into irreconcilable classes were easily contained within the existing framework of collaboration between labourer and employer—the Eureka charade notwithstanding. Even the battle against the squatters, though prolonged, was peaceable.

The fight to establish adult male suffrage was largely fought and won by the small middle class in such a way that the others were required to do very little except exist in sufficiently large numbers. This purely quantitative dominance ensured their enfranchisement by an advancing middle class which was thereby unable to desert its allies, even if it had wanted to. The high-point of this collaboration was reached in 1889 during the campaign to support the London dock strike. In Brisbane the relief committee contained employers and the otherwise none-too-liberal Premier, McIlwraith, contributed fifty pounds, while the Lord Mayor organised the appeal. The emergence of Labor Parties shortly afterwards did not entirely end this relationship, particularly in Victoria and South Australia where Deakin and Kingston continued to dominate movements for reform.

Dependence on radical liberals persisted well into the twentieth century as evidenced in the highly significant appointment of H. B. Higgins as Attorney-General in the first Commonwealth Labor Government of 1904. Although Hughes had recently qualified as a barrister, the Labor Party did not consider it proper that anyone so inexperienced should hold such an august position. This overwhelming deference to

> 'The Law as the true embodiment
> Of everything that's excellent'

has led some commentators to remark upon the Labor Party's excessively legalistic approach, one writer claiming that it has been more interested in constitutional than in social reform.

SOCIALISM: Cordial relations between employers and employees ensured that such socialism as there was in nineteenth century Australia would have a distinctly Utopian character. The most widely read 'socialist' work was Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* in which the hero awakes after a hundred year sleep to find himself in the perfect society. This personal transformation significantly avoids the problems of the transitional period and any unpleasantness involved therein. In the locally produced novel, *The Working Man's Paradise*, by William Lane, the protagonist, Geisner (Lane himself) explains the world to Ned, an outback shearer. Geisner's attitude to class warfare is revealed when he plays 'The Marseillaise' on the piano. It does not invoke a call to arms, but is a 'softened, spiritualised, purified' rendering, signifying the struggle in men's hearts.

'Socialist' ideas in Australia were part of the largely pre-industrial environment in which they flourished. The enemy was not capitalism, but bankers and land monopolists. American populist notions were widespread and found fresh converts in a period of bank crashes. David Syme, owner-editor of *The Age*, was not averse to seeing himself described as a 'socialist' and William Lane was certainly correct when he wrote in *The Worker* on May Day in 1890: 'We are all socialists only some of us don't know it.'

What was this marvellous notion that could penetrate men's minds without their being aware of it? For Lane it was 'mateship': the desire for human solidarity, Asians excepted. For almost everyone else it was governmental activity. The requirements of a colonial economy demanded governmental intervention. Governor Macquarie set the pattern with deficit financing to relieve unemployment as early as 1813. During the 'Long Boom' from 1861-1890, Australian governments borrowed heavily on the London market in order to finance developmental works; almost half the capital inflow

going to public sources. It was therefore no theoretical novelty when the Labor movement demanded a programme of public works to assist the unemployed, or when they insisted that these works be carried out under a system of day labour. Although they objected to State intervention in the strikes of 1890-94, they were even more insistent in their demand for compulsory arbitration to make strikes unnecessary. Protection, Free Selection, Factory Acts, Immigration Control, and a compulsory eight-hour day in government contracts were but some of the items which made nonsense of *laissez-faire*. As J. B. Condliffe put it when discussing a similar situation in New Zealand: 'The widening of State functions is due primarily to colonial opportunism and freedom from theories. It has little to do with Socialism. Reeves' phrase, "colonial governmentalism", is a truer description of New Zealand practice than "State Socialism" or Métin's "socialisme sans doctrines". It is "étatisme" rather than socialism.'

In 1904, J. C. Watson, first Labor Prime Minister, defined socialism as state action, a view which has been echoed ever since. (Every time Whitlam opens his mouth he promises some new form of state action, on a national basis.) Governmental activity remains acceptable because it contributes to national development and falls under the protective mantle of the dominant component of all radical ideology in Australia, namely, nationalism.

NATIONALISM: When someone last century described himself as an Australian he was not only saying something positive about what he *was*, but something negative about what he *was not*. Specifically, and in diminishing order of disapproval, the Australian was not an Asian; not a European, especially not an Italian; and only finally, when at all, not British. This is why, no matter how often it is repeated, there is still something strange about saying 'Australia is part of Asia'.

Australian nationalism is often presented as if it were

a mystical essence that had no other content than reverence for 'the land, boys, we live in'. Disputes between Imperialists and Nationalists in Australia are thus reduced to abstractions, despite occasional references to Australia's interests, which, like as not, refer to nothing more specific than the right to control one's own destiny. In a world which contains more than one great power any minor power that either cuts itself off from, or is cast aside by one power is likely to fall victim to, or be adopted by another. This is precisely the situation that Australia has perennially confronted. In a world of imperialism, complete independence from Britain has meant either conquest (by France, Russia, Germany, China, Japan) or voluntary tutelage (to the United States).

This has made for an ambiguous anti-British feeling. Australians wanted the Empire to be strong so that it could protect them, but they did not always trust Britain to put our interests first. By 1910, the Anglo-Japanese Alliance had placed the Naval Defence of Australia in the hands of the Japanese fleet. This enabled Britain to keep its fleet intact in the Atlantic but it terrified Australians. The threat from the north has made Australian nationalism essentially racist and militaristic. Racist because it is the slit-eyed little bastards who are planning to rape our wives and eat our children; militaristic because only a civilian militia can keep them out.[2]

2 S. Encel, 'Defence and the World Outlook', *Australian Outlook*, Volume 17, Number 2; D. C. Gordon, *The Dominion Partnership in Imperial Defense, 1870-1914* (Baltimore, 1965); W. Ross Livingston, 'Nationalism in the Commonwealth of Australia', *Pacific Historical Review*, Volume 11, Number 2; Neville K. Meaney, 'A Proposition of the Highest International Importance', also: Alfred Deakin's Pacific Agreement Proposal and its Significance for Australian Imperial Relations', *Journal of Commonwealth Political Studies*, Volume V; Meaney, 'Australia's Foreign Policy: History and Myth', *Australian Outlook*, Volume 23, Number 2; I. H. Nish, 'Australia and the Anglo-Japanese Alliance', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Volume IX, Number 2; E. L. Piesse, 'Japan

RACISM: The full import of racism in the development of Australia can be gauged only by seeing it as part of a total ideological landscape. Firstly, it was the dominant aspect of our much-vaunted nationalism, the anti-British and anti-imperialist phases of which have been overstressed, while its militaristic connotations have been largely ignored. Secondly, the appeal of racism was assisted by the almost total absence of Marxian socialism, which would have directed attention towards class and away from racial grievances. Even when internationalism gained some ground with groups like the Victorian Socialist Party, it did not extend beyond a call for *European Workers of the World, Unite!*

The historical roots of Australian racism are to be found in the days of the gold rushes and in attempts to use coloured labourers to undermine living standards.[3] Labor Party apologists today pretend that White Australia had a pure and simple economic motivation. This will not bear analysis. For as Watson told the House of Representatives in 1901: 'The question is whether we would desire that our sisters or our brothers should be married into any of these races to which we object.'

As Japan became a powerful industrial nation so it became the source of anxiety. Fear of Japan was undoubtedly one of the major reasons for the decision to introduce conscription in 1916-17, just as it was one of the reasons for its defeat. This second feature is exemplified in the career of J. H. Catts, M.H.R. for Cooke, who left his office as Director of Voluntary Recruiting for N.S.W. to become secretary of the 'Vote No Conscription' campaign. Hughes arrested him seven times under the War Precautions Act because 'he dared to tell the truth concerning the war aims of Japan'.

and Australia', *Foreign Affairs*, Volume IV, Number 3; Hugo Wolfsohn's 'The Evolution of Australia in World Affairs', *Australian Outlook*, Volume 7, Number 1, is remarkable for its wilful refusal to acknowledge even the existence of Japan.

3 Humphrey McQueen, 'A Race Apart', *Arena*, No. 19.

MILITARISM: It is difficult to sustain a belief in Australia's anti-British, anti-militarist attitudes in the face of the response to the First World War. Sixty-four per cent of enlistments in the A.I.F. were labourers and tradesmen who responded to Fisher's pledge of the last man and the last shilling. Henry Lawson had voiced this aspect of nationalism in his poem *The Star of Australasia*:

'From grander clouds in our peaceful skies than ever were there before,
I tell you the Star of the South shall rise—in the lurid clouds of war.
It ever must be while blood is warm and sons of men increase;
For ever the nations rose in storm, to rot in a deadly peace.'

Labor's anti-militarism was opposed to élitist cliques, but was strongly in favour of civilian armies in which everyone participated. This longing found realisation at Gallipoli 'when Australia became a nation'.[4]

WAGES: Nothing is more illustrative of the petit-bourgeois nature of the nineteenth century labouring classes in Australia than the arguments surrounding the eight-hour day. A typical resolution at an eight-hours meeting was 'that the enervating effects of the climate, the advanced state of civilisation, the progress of the arts and sciences, and the demand for intellectual gratification and improvement, call for an abridgement of the hours of labour.' The opposition argument was neatly put by an artisan who asked: 'Would any man in this room, *who ever expects to be a master for himself*, consent to work for eight hours for 16s., if he could obtain 20s. for ten hours?' (Emphasis added). The last point is indicative of the high wages prevalent: what

4 S. Encel, *Equality and Authority* (Melbourne, 1970); K. S. Inglis, 'The Anzac Tradition', *Meanjin*, Volume XXIV, Number 1; and Geoffrey Serle's doggedly romantic response in the following issue.

worker today could sacrifice twenty per cent of his earnings?

The chronic labour shortage meant that wages in Australia were appreciably higher than those obtaining in Britain. Brian Fitzpatrick estimated that real wages in Australia increased by one hundred per cent in the fifty years after 1840. In 1890, the young radical critic, Francis Adams, summed up the position of the urban tradesman thus: 'The old rates of good wages made him years ago a petty suburban proprietor. He bought his sixteen or thirty-two perch allotment within reach by 'bus or tram or train of his work, and went to the building societies to put him up a wooden cottage . . . and he paid off the pretty heavy building bill (with running interest) by monthly instalments, which he refused to call "rent". There he lived with his wife and children in the profuse Australian style. . . . Generally he owned a small, iron-framed, time-payment piano, on which his daughters, returning well shod and too well clothed, from the local public school . . . discoursed popular airs with a powerful manual execution.'

This is sufficient evidence of the experiences and ideas of the labouring men in Australia from 1840 to 1890 to conclude that although their position was often proletarian, their consciousness was petit-bourgeois through and through. This outlook dominated their organisations, firstly in the trade unions and later in the Labor Party.

UNIONS: The motto of the unions speaks volumes for their role. While the wording varied from *'Defence not Defiance'* to *'United to relieve, not combined to injure'* the meaning remained clear. The typical unionist was a pillar of the community, truly a marble angel. The decision to build a Trades Hall in Melbourne was largely initiated because delegates objected to meeting in hotels. This connection between radical politics and prohibition continued well into the 1920s.

Even the coalminers did not defy their taskmasters; instead they gave their superintendent an embossed address valued at twelve pounds when he retired; proprietors and managers were always invited to the annual picnic. Two of the main objects of the Lambing Flat Miners Protective League are most informative in this regard. One was the promulgation of the word of God. The other was 'to use their utmost energies to preserve order and to protect property, and the rights of every individual, and to seize, secure and hand over to the government authorities any thief, robber or ruffian who violates the laws of the country.'

Craft Unions were often nothing more than benefit societies aimed at providing sustenance to ill or unemployed members. Even with the growth of the 'new unionism' in the 1880s which took in semi-skilled workers the overall strength of unionism was slight. At the commencement of the 1890 strikes there were more domestic servants than unionists in New South Wales. Nor had attitudes changed greatly: in 1893 the Melbourne Trades Hall Council refused to interest itself in the unemployed who were not members of affiliated Trade Unions. After the strikes, and in the face of a continuing economic crisis, unionism almost died away. It did not revive until well into the twentieth century when it was artificially stimulated by the Harvester Judgement handed down by the newly formed Arbitration Court.[5]

ARBITRATION: Unionists wanted nothing better than to talk to their employers; and when the employers refused to talk, the Unions wanted the Government to

[5] Robin Gollan, *The Coalminers of New South Wales* (Melbourne, 1963); J. Hagan, *Printers and Politics* (Canberra, 1966); N. B. Nairn, 'The Role of the Trades and Labour Council in New South Wales 1871-1891', Jean E. O'Connor's and June Phillipp's discussion of '1890—A Turning Point in Labour History' are all in *Historical Studies, Selected Articles, Second Series* (Melbourne, 1968).

make them. It was the Conservative and Free Trade forces in Australia who opposed Arbitration. In 1889, well before any of the strikes, William Lane was working for an Arbitration system that would be policed jointly by the unions and the employers.

Compulsory Arbitration was eventually granted by Deakin in return for Labor support of his Protective Tariff. Higgins' first award, which meant a thirty per cent wage increase in some cases, confirmed the belief in the benefits which Arbitration would bring. The 'New Protection', as the scheme of Tariff rebates for the employers who abided by Arbitration was called, was typical of Labor thinking in as much as it was based on a belief in the common interests of Labour and Capital, and in the neutral role of the state. White Australia was a more obvious form of protection that the Unions had fought hard to achieve.

What is common to the Unions, Arbitration and White Australia is their essentially defensive nature. This is equally true of the Labor Parties, the greatest of all the creations of the nineteenth century workers.

LABOR PARTY: The Labor Parties that emerged after 1890 were in every way the logical extension of the petit-bourgeois mentality and organisations which preceded them. There was no turning point. There was merely consolidation; confirmation of all that had gone before. The Labor Parties did not represent a break with militant socialism for no such thing had existed. Radicalism was widespread as it invariably is amongst a petit-bourgeoisie on the make.[6]

Labor's parliamentary candidates reflected this. There were those who stood as they had done at every election and merely changed the wording on their banners to Labor; there were radical farmers, editors and journalists

[6] See Terry Irving's contribution to the present volume for the distinction between 'radicalism' and 'socialism'. Also R. N. Rosencrance, 'The Radical Tradition in Australia: An Interpretation', *Review of Politics*, Volume 22, Number 1.

by the score; there were trade union officials of the old school. All were solidly moderate in outlook and practice. The tale of the first Tommy Ryan (Queensland M.L.A. for Barcoo) needs some revising. He did not resign from Parliament because 'the whisky was too hard, the seats too soft, and the call of the billabongs too strong' but because he refused to pay his debts in Brisbane.

Labor's fighting platform was another measure of this carry-over. Every item of the 1894 N.S.W. platform, the first for which rank-and-file opinion was consulted, brings to light some aspects of the petit-bourgeois culture sketched above. The order of priority was determined by exhaustive ballot so that at the top of the list came a 'land value tax', a triumph for Henry George and the land myth; second was a mining on private property bill, to ensure that the rush would never end; third and fourth were 'abolition of the Upper House' and 'local government', both sound liberal measures, the former recalling the battle against squatterdom; sixth came a 'state bank' to beat the money-lenders and satisfy agrarian populism; finally, limping in a sad second last, came the only specifically working class reform, the eight-hour day; two years later this was amended by the addition of the words 'where practicable' in order to secure the farmers' votes.

Nothing in the subsequent behaviour of the Labor Party gives the slightest indication that it has changed. It remains as firmly trapped under capitalism as ever. The only changes have been to appearances, for example, the much modified 'Socialisation Objective' of 1921. All attempts to move 'Socialisation' from the realm of a long-term Objective into the Fighting Platform have been strenuously rejected. Thirty or so 'state enterprises' ranging from butcher shops to brick works, were not attempts at 'socialism by stealth'. They were never intended to replace capitalism, but were an extension of

the belief in 'state action'. They usually arose to meet an emergency and most often merely supplied other Government departments and did not sell to the public. One public enterprise refused to employ all union labor even under a Labor Government. Conservatives have been at a loss to understand the gulf between Labor's stated aims and its practices and attribute it to Machiavellianism. W. G. Spence understood matters far better when he praised the first Labor Premier of South Australia, claiming that 'the rich anti-Socialists soon discovered that the Socialist Premier . . . could be trusted with big business affairs'. Chifley's attempt to nationalise banking came after every other method of regulation had been tried; it was seen as a special case and in no sense was part of an overall socialist offensive. Nowadays, every Federal policy speech is prefaced by a promise not to attempt socialisation. If Section 92 of the Federal Constitution did not exist, the A.L.P. would have had to invent it.[7]

More alarming still is the rich tradition of strike-breaking by Labor Governments. The fable that the Labor Party was created because the workers saw the futility of striking has been interpreted by many Labor politicians to mean that their job is not to make strikes superfluous but to smash them. In 1911, the N.S.W. Labor Government proposed that ordinary strikers would 'not be liable to imprisonment, but to a fine only. We believe this is a more effective deterrent, provided that the fine is enforceable as the first lien on any wages that may be earned after its imposition.' Two years later, the Labor Premier of N.S.W. called for volunteer labour

[7] D. J. Murphy, 'The Establishment of State Enterprises in Queensland, 1915-1918', *Labour History*, Number 14; R. S. Parker, 'Public Enterprise in New South Wales', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Volume IV, Number 2; J. R. Robertson, 'The Foundations of State Socialism in Western Australia: 1911-1916', *Historical Studies*, Volume 10, Number 39; W. J. Waters, 'Labor, Socialism and World War II', *Labour History*, Number 16.

to replace striking gas-workers. More spectacular was the decision by the Labor Premier of Queensland to dismiss the entire staff of the railways and re-employ only those who could be trusted. Not surprisingly the daily papers acclaimed him as 'their Commander-in-Chief'. When the Tory Government in Queensland attempted to break the 1965 Mt Isa strike with amendments to the Arbitration Act they copied them directly from legislation which had been brought down by a Labor Government in 1948.[8]

The Labor Party is not a working class party. Nor is it a two-class party for no such thing is possible. In ideas and practice it is firmly committed to the maintenance of capitalism, though it is not averse to making some running repairs. The nature of the Labor Party cannot be avoided by placing the blame on individuals, or upon the over-populated community of 'Labor rats'. The case against Labor does not rest on the iniquities of particular Labor leaders but on the social nature of Laborism as the historical manifestation of an integrated, subordinate work force. The Labor Party cannot produce socialism because it is part of a class which is fundamentally committed to capitalism. Socialism requires a new and different class for its creation. It needs a working class with a proletarian, not a petit-bourgeois, consciousness. Such a consciousness can come only from a new set of experiences.

III

If the preceding analysis was all that could be said about the working classes in Australia the prospects for socialism would not only be bleak, but non-existent. Socialism remains a real alternative for Australia because there is a working class with a proletarian consciousness, though not a socialist one. After 1890 an

[8] Humphrey McQueen, 'Labor versus the Unions', *Arena*, No. 20.

increasing section of the work force felt that they were no longer an accepted part of society, that there was no place for them, no hope for them as long as capitalism endured. The combined effects of economic stagnation, political repression and industrialisation began to produce a working class that sought its salvation outside capitalism.

Although real wages did not fall continuously from 1890 to 1940 the overall picture was one of stagnating living standards and diminished prospects. No longer could union demands be met readily so that bitter, protracted strikes became common, particularly for coal-miners and railway workers. The strikes of 1890 to 1894 pale into insignificance when compared to the 1912 general strike in Brisbane or the N.S.W. general strike of 1917. To lament the passing of militancy with the nineteenth century is to slander the militancy of the twentieth, by underestimating its persistence and intensity, in the face of vicious repression and continuing defeats.[9]

The tightening in the economic situation produced a tightening of political controls. As employees sought to maintain their living standards in the face of depression they put greater pressures on their employers who fell back onto political repression. Troops were sent to Barcaldine in 1891 and to Broken Hill in 1892. Strikers were shot down in Melbourne in 1928, under a Labor Government, and at Rothbury in 1929. Political repression became particularly intense during the First World War when Queensland Hansards were seized as seditious and thirty-seven people prosecuted for displaying the red flag. For, as the then secretary of the Prime Minister's Department, Sir Robert Garran, observed in his memoirs *Prosper the Commonwealth*: 'The regulations were

[9] M. Dixson, 'The Timber Strike of 1929', *Historical Studies*, Volume 10, Number 40; A. A. Morrison, 'Militant Labour in Queensland, 1912-1927', *Royal Australian Historical Society, Journal and Proceedings*, Volume 38, Part V.

mostly expressed widely to make sure that nothing necessary was omitted, and the result soon was that John Citizen was hardly able to lift a finger without coming under the penumbra of some technical offence against the War Precautions Regulations.' The smashing of the I.W.W., the ban on progressive literature, the deportation of strike leaders and a political censorship on films as innocuous as *All Quiet on the Western Front* helped to draw a sharper line between workers and their opponents. Even if the killing of Jack Brookfield, the independent M.L.A. for Broken Hill who had defended the I.W.W. twelve, was accidental, it was seen by the workers that

> '. . . in the height of his manly prime,
> Brookfield died for the people.'

The rise of the New Guard during the depression was the final proof that the politically open society of the nineteenth century was gone forever.

More devastating in its psychic effects than either of these was the spread of large-scale industry which put an end to all hopes of self-proprietorship or rural escapades.

This new experience and consciousness brought forth organisations radically different from the Trade Unions and the Labor Party. Just as the petit-bourgeois experience has persisted long after the somewhat arbitrary dividing line of 1890, so too did the proletarian experience have its roots before that date. The pockets of poverty that sour affluence today were no less prevalent in the affluence of nineteenth century Australia. The Active Service Brigade that was formed from the Sydney unemployed in 1890 was the precursor of the new militancy which came into full play with the I.W.W., the demand for 'One Big Union' and the Communist Party.

The I.W.W. performed two invaluable services for the emerging proletariat in Australia. The first was to

bring it to self-confidence. Wobbly propaganda, by both word and deed, stressed class conflict, while their courage and daring destroyed the remnants of the subservience which had marked relations between master and man. The second service was to commence the long haul in the battle against racism. Both these tasks were taken up and consolidated by the Communist Party after 1922. Further strength was drawn from the increasing acquaintance with Marxism as a distinctive world view. Previously Marx had been lumped with Jesus Christ and Sidney Webb as socialist thinkers. Marx's unique position became clear only when there was a class that was forced by their experiences to recognise the validity of his notion of class struggle.

Important as these changes were they did not produce a new mass party, as happened in France and Italy. This failure is related to the earlier period of prosperity. Although a proletariat had been formed this process took place in a society where 'the eight-hour day was the rule, modern machines were installed and where these were worked principally by men, not primarily by women, and by children scarcely at all', and where the proletariat was enfranchised free of cost and with some defence organisations in position. This meant that the more brutal aspects of the emergence of industrial capitalism were softened; for some they were hardly felt at all.

The war for position on the ideological front was equally indecisive. Despite the valuable work against racism conducted by the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat in the 1920s, internationalism was mutilated by the forties into little more than friendship with the Soviet Union. In general the Communist Party was little more than the culmination of militant unionism and its relationship to Marxism as a philosophy, as distinct from a political programme, was slight. This was partly due to the abysmal level of bourgeois intellectualism in Australia. Meeting no serious challengers, Marxism

in Australia rarely rose above the surrounding morass of scientistic positivism.

Not surprisingly the proletariat has not established itself as an independent political force. The explanation for this failure is not to be found solely in the strategic weaknesses mentioned above. There were equally important reasons of a purely immediate character.

The first occasion when a proletarian party seemed possible was in 1916 when the working class had suffered a great deal at the hands of the Labor Party. If conscription, or more accurately, Ireland, had not intervened, the split in the Labor Movement would have been on class lines, probably in conjunction with the 1917 strike. As it turned out the cleavage was blurred by the presence of Irish-Catholics in an uneasy alliance with the proletariat against the Labor Conscriptionists. Moreover, the proletariat had been weakened by the ritual suicide of the I.W.W. early in 1916. A further split, centreing on support for the war was developing along class lines in 1918, while in Broken Hill an independent Labor M.L.A. was elected.

The next two opportunities were in reality one and the same. The militant unions had suffered severe defeat in 1927-29 and thus entered the depression, and the period of disillusionment with the Labor Government, in a defensive mood. It took almost ten years for the depression to produce a new political force in N.S.W. around the Hughes-Evans Labor Party which was destroyed by its anti-war stand just as the phoney war ended. Equally important was the hold Jack Lang had over many workers. Lang had won this support in the period of his first government (1925-27) when he reinstated the strikers of 1917 and initiated some welfare measures. His dismissal by Game was precisely what he needed to maintain his position as a martyr for the working class. Moreover, depressions are not the seedbeds of revolution that they are supposed to be because

the workers who are most affected are those who are unemployed and thus out of the factories and difficult to organise.

Since the Second World War the petit-bourgeoisie and the proletariat have both had their previous experiences confirmed, materially and ideologically. After magnificent fights in the late forties and early fifties against wage-freezes and political repression, the proletariat has spent over a decade recovering its strength for the battle against the penal clauses which erupted with the arrest of Clarrie O'Shea, Victorian Tramways Union Secretary, for refusal to pay $12,000 fines imposed for 'illegal' strikes. It is impossible to overestimate the importance of the fight against Arbitration and against the kind of unionism that it fosters. The strike that followed O'Shea's arrest was the most extensive in Australian history. When victory is achieved it will represent a decisive break with the tradition of fighting the boss on his terms and within his system.

It may be that the break-up of Arbitration will coincide with the appearance of a genuinely working class party. That such a party would not necessarily be revolutionary socialist would not detract from the importance to be attached to the political emancipation of the Australian working class. The problems that would arise for this new party would present many opportunities for further advance.

Meanwhile, three tasks present themselves. Firstly, there is the need to establish the ideological supremacy of Marxism in every area of activity and thought. Secondly, the fear of Asia must be combated by building movements for practical solidarity with revolutionaries there. Thirdly, the Arbitration system and its related unionism must be replaced by responsive job organisations which engage every worker in a day-by-day struggle against capitalism. None of these things will be easy, but they are necessary and possible.

Those who look at the Labor Party and the A.C.T.U. and despair of the working class are mistaken. What they see in those organisations is not a working class but a peculiarly Australian petit-bourgeoisie; they do not see workers who have lost the will to overthrow capitalism but a petit-bourgeoisie who never had it. The working class has not declined in militancy since 1890 because it did not exist then. Its militancy has extended throughout its life as it continues to demonstrate. The attack on Arbitration will not lead immediately to socialism. Nor can the proletariat achieve socialism unaided. It will have to lead an alliance of the type constructed in Russia, China and Vietnam (though the role of peasants will be minimal). Those who discount the leading role of the proletariat misjudge the future just as surely as they misread the past.