

The class issues behind Australia's race riots

The Socialist Equality Party
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The racist violence that exploded in the Sydney suburb of Cronulla on December 11 has exposed the ugly face of Australian society. Intense social pressures generated by the prolonged assault by the Howard government and its Labor predecessors on living standards have erupted in a malignant and reactionary form. A violent and drunken mob—draped in Australian flags, singing the national anthem and chanting nationalist and racist slogans—sought out, abused and physically assaulted anyone who appeared to be of Middle Eastern origin.

Ordinary working people need to recognise the dangers contained in the situation. Processes have been consciously set in train with direct parallels in the communal violence that has plagued countries like Sri Lanka and the former Yugoslavia for decades. Unscrupulous leaders, incapable of offering any progressive solution to the social crisis they have helped create, have whipped up ethnic and religious differences and fomented pogroms to divert attention from the devastation caused by their own policies. The result has been a descent into conflict and civil war.

Whatever the national peculiarities, communal politics in Australia is no less poisonous than in the Balkans or on the Indian subcontinent. The racist violence at North Cronulla beach erupted under conditions where the Howard government has confronted widespread opposition to an avalanche of regressive legislation—from the imposition of draconian anti-terror legislation to the full-privatisation of Telstra and far-reaching changes to industrial relations legislation. The cultivation of racist tensions is aimed at cutting directly across the class solidarity between workers of all backgrounds that has characterised recent mass rallies and protests against the Iraq war, the IR laws and in defence of living standards.

There was nothing spontaneous or accidental about the 5,000-strong racist rally on December 11. For an entire week following the alleged assault on a North Cronulla beach lifeguard by a young Lebanese man, right-wing radio and newspaper outlets whipped up a racist campaign to “reclaim our beaches” from “Lebanese gangs”. In particular, “shock jock” Alan Jones, who has been prominent in creating a climate in which Muslims are the target of continual abuse, approvingly broadcast text messages calling for “a Leb and wog bashing day”.

The beating of innocent individuals by a drunken mob screaming “Kill the Leb b—ds” produced entirely predictable results. Attack followed counter-attack, as rival gangs targetted people and property on the basis of race. Churches were shot at and burned, while Australian neo-Nazi and white supremacist outfits operated openly and were widely quoted in the media. Racist incidents inspired by the Cronulla rally have now been reported in Western Australia, Queensland, Victoria, and New Zealand.

The entire political establishment bears responsibility for the situation. Ever since the September 11 terrorist attacks, Muslim Australians have been the target of government scapegoating and fear mongering. The media has exploited the so-called war on terror to portray Middle Eastern immigrants as a fifth column for Al Qaeda. Muslim men, women, and children have been subjected to countless racist assaults as well as extensive state surveillance and repeated police raids.

The Howard government has had the complete support of the Labor

Party, at both federal and state levels. In New South Wales (NSW), the state Labor government has played an especially reactionary role in vilifying young people of Middle Eastern descent. Under former premier Bob Carr, Labor has made “Lebanese gangs” a focus of its “law-and-order” campaigns for over a decade. In 2002, Carr used a high profile rape case to insinuate that all Lebanese youth were potential gang rapists.

Having helped create a climate of fear, mistrust and tension, the Labor government is exploiting the racial violence to advance its own right-wing agenda. The NSW parliament held an emergency session on December 15 to ram through draconian police powers that had long been in preparation. Every state politician, including the Greens, backed what Premier Morris Iemma described as “extraordinary powers for extraordinary times”. The laws allow police to declare “lockdown” areas of unlimited size.

The legislation was immediately used in an unprecedented operation on December 17-18 involving thousands of police, including newly bolstered riot squads. On the basis of unspecified “police intelligence”, Iemma called on the public to stay away from beaches throughout Sydney and in Newcastle and Wollongong. Police roadblocks searched and arbitrarily turned cars with young people away from Cronulla and other beaches, impounded vehicles, confiscated mobile phones and detained several people. A front-page headline in Murdoch’s tabloid, the *Daily Telegraph*, on December 19 blared out the purpose of these police-state measures: “Sydney, Get Used To This”.

The events in Sydney recall those in Paris, where the French ruling elites have exploited the eruption of violent anti-police protests by African immigrant youth to impose an extraordinary three-month state of emergency and to push through new anti-terror legislation. Likewise in Australia, the entire spectrum of official politics has reacted to the Sydney riot by supporting a ramping up of police powers and blaming the violence on “alienated Lebanese youth” who have failed “to fit into Australian society”. State Labor governments around the country are already drawing up legislation similar to that in NSW.

No credence should be placed in claims that massive police mobilisations are required to end racial violence and safeguard the rights of ordinary citizens. New South Wales police are notorious for their entrenched racism and their persecution of the most oppressed layers of the working class—particularly Aboriginal and immigrant youth. They act on behalf of a ruling elite that will not and cannot address the profound social crisis that lies behind such eruptions in any way other than state repression.

Prime Minister Howard immediately sided with the instigators of the December 11 violence. Refusing to brand the attacks on Muslims as racist, he declared: “I think it’s important that we do not rush to judgement about these events. I think [racism] is a term that is flung around sometimes carelessly and I’m simply not going to do so.” He later expressed his approval of the thugs who wrapped themselves in the national flag, saying: “Look, I would never condemn people for being proud of the Australian flag.”

Labor Opposition Leader Kim Beazley took a similar tack. Deliberately passing over the racist character of the violence, he declared: “This is simply criminal behaviour and that’s all there is to it. Two areas of

it—Cronulla and Maroubra [beach]—that is what has to be cracked down on, and that is what I would urge the police forces to do.”

This bipartisan reaction raises critical political issues. Since the formation of the Australian nation in 1901, the entire political establishment has advocated a form of nationalism that has always been deeply rooted in racist conceptions. For the founding fathers, including those of the newly established Labor Party, advocating a “White Australia” became the ideological cement for welding together the six British colonies in the face of a powerful and combative working class. Fear of “Asian hordes”, intent upon invading the great southern continent and who threatened to “pollute” the “superior white race” was used as a means of promoting a sense of “national identity” and an “Australian way of life”.

In every political crisis since the beginning of the twentieth century, the government of the day has invariably played the race card to undermine working class solidarity and to prevent the development of socialist consciousness. Right up until the late 1960s, Labor and conservative governments maintained an openly racist immigration policy that barred Asians and blacks from entering the country. Only in the 1970s, as North East Asia became Australia’s largest trading partner, was the policy modified and a new form of nationalism based on “multi-culturalism” advanced in its place.

While multiculturalism met the requirements of the more globally oriented sections of capital, and was hailed as a more enlightened and tolerant perspective, it actually served the same class function: to promote different cultural, religious and ethnic “identities” as a counterweight to the unity of the working class. The new policy did not challenge White Australia racism in any fundamental way. Indeed, by encouraging identification on the basis of ethnicity, “multiculturalism” has directly contributed to the present communal tensions.

In the 1980s, as the Labor government’s market reforms led to growing social inequities, politicians of all stripes increasingly attempted to divert the resulting frustration and discontent of masses of people in racist directions. By the early 1990s, the Hawke Labor government was fomenting anti-immigrant sentiment, imposing mandatory detention on “boat people”, stripping refugees of basic legal rights and, with the backing of the trade unions, carrying out police dragnets of factories and suburbs to detain and deport so-called “illegals”.

In the Liberal Party, John Howard, a committed advocate of economic restructuring, sought to cultivate a social base for his policies among the most backward social layers. As early as 1985, he began utilising his “dog whistle” politics, encouraging anti-Asian prejudice by calling for cutbacks to immigration from Asia. While not an open advocate of White Australia racism, Howard has championed the revival of the old symbols of Australian nationalism and pandered to those who blame the most oppressed layers of the working class—immigrants, Aborigines and welfare recipients—for unemployment, crime and poverty.

Throughout the past decade, in the face of widespread opposition to his free market program, Howard has openly resorted to the politics of manipulating ignorance and fear. He won the 1996 election, not by advancing his policies, but by appealing to the “Aussie battlers” who had been savaged by Labor’s policies of privatisation, spending cuts and economic restructuring.

Once in office, Howard immediately launched a far-reaching assault on workers’ rights along with vicious cutbacks to public education, health and welfare. Amid growing opposition, Howard embraced the reactionary nostrums of right-wing populist Pauline Hanson as legitimate topics for public debate. The media followed suit, promoting her attacks on immigrants and Aborigines as a convenient safety valve for mounting popular frustration and anger. Once Hanson’s One Nation Party began threatening the stability of the two-party system, the political establishment pulled the plug, launching a witchhunt involving police

raids, legal attacks and the jailing of Hanson herself on trumped up charges.

Howard quickly moved to capture Hanson’s right-wing constituency. In the lead-up to the 2001 election, facing almost certain defeat, Howard adopted many of One Nation’s policies, provoking the infamous Tampa crisis, and then deploying the navy to prevent “boat people” landing in Australia. He then set about slandering a group of Asian refugees, and creating a climate of hysteria over possible Asian “invaders”. With the complete support of Labor, Howard exploited the 2001 terror attacks to further poison the atmosphere, branding asylum seekers as potential terrorists.

In February 2003, the largest protests in Australian history took place as part of a global movement against militarism and war. The demonstrations involved millions of people determined to take a unified, international stand against the criminal invasion of Iraq and the governments responsible for it.

Similar anti-capitalist sentiments were expressed in the global outpouring of sympathy and support for the victims of the Asian tsunami one year ago and again in a series of protests and strikes in different parts of the world against the impact of free-market policies. The more pronounced the groundswell of opposition, the more the political and media establishment has come together, under the banner of “the war on terror” to advocate reaction all down the line: militarism abroad and an ever-expanding onslaught on basic democratic rights and living standards at home.

In the sphere of ideology, all the muck of the past is being dredged up. Right-wing academics and commentators in Australia have launched an offensive to rewrite what they disparagingly term the “black armband” view of history and eliminate the genocide of Aborigines from the textbooks. Efforts are being made to breathe life back into Anzac Day—the anniversary of the ignominious allied campaign during World War I to defeat Turkey—as a celebration of Australian military prowess. A government campaign is underway to compel all public schools to conduct flag raising ceremonies.

In the wake of the Sydney riot, Murdoch’s *Australian* featured an op-ed piece by Con George Kotzabasis reviving the discredited pseudo-scientific theory of Social Darwinism. “Like most things in life, cultures are in a perennial state of competition,” he declared. “No dynamic culture in its acceleration to achieve its goals will stop to pick up a culture that lags behind, or treat it equally. It’s the latter that has to catch up with the former. In our case, the adherents of Islamic culture must be willing to cast off all the parts that are incompatible with Western culture, if they are going to be successful in achieving their ambitions in the modern world and not teeter on the precipice of hopelessness and despair. This is an elemental law of biology. Species that cannot adapt to their new environment wither away.”

In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the so-called biological law of the “survival of the fittest” was the underpinning of many racist theories. Kotzabasis’s assertion that Muslims must adapt or perish echoes the Australian colonial administrators who presided over the slaughter of Aborigines declaring that the eventual destruction of the “backward race” was inevitable. Social Darwinism was also the basis for the anti-Semitism advanced by the German Nazis to justify the annihilation of the Jewish people and culture. Even a decade ago, Kotzabasis’s comment would have been denounced as racist drivel. Today it is promoted in the mainstream press as a legitimate topic for comment.

Many people are genuinely disgusted and concerned by the racist violence at Cronulla beach, and by the reaction of Howard and official political and media circles. Letter writers to newspapers—one of the few avenues for any expression of dissent—have been quick to draw the comparison between Howard’s 2001 election campaign slogan “We will decide who comes to this country, and the circumstances under which

they come” and the violent mob determined to drive “Lebs” and “Wogs” off Cronulla beach. Various priests, ethnic leaders and small ‘l’ liberal commentators have sought to appeal to the sentiments expressed by these letter writers, calling for greater community understanding and the promotion of multiculturalism.

The roots of the Cronulla riot, however, are not to be found in the “breakdown” of multiculturalism. Rather, the eruption of racist violence on Sydney’s beaches is the cancerous expression of the extreme tensions being generated in Australian society by the deepening gulf between rich and poor. Lebanese immigrants and youth, who are among the most oppressed layers of the working class, are deliberately being vilified to divert attention from the failings of the profit system, which has no future for the vast majority of the younger generation. The youth of Sydney’s beach suburbs, who are being egged on by right-wing commentators, are also the victims of two decades of economic restructuring that has destroyed apprenticeships and permanent jobs and sent unemployment soaring.

Howard constantly refers to “the Australian way of life”, but there are two Australias. There is the Australia of the rich, who have accumulated unprecedented wealth over the last two decades through the incessant drive for greater productivity at the direct expense of jobs and conditions, and the outright plunder of the public purse. The combined wealth of the richest 200 individuals reached a staggering \$71.5 billion in 2004. Then there is the Australia of working people, the majority of whom are struggling from day to day to make ends meet and finding it increasingly difficult. At the bottom end of the scale, more than four million people live below the poverty line. The ruling class has only one solution to this burgeoning social disaster: the stepping up of police state measures side by side with the diversion of social tensions in politically reactionary directions.

Moral outrage against racism and its political purveyors is not enough. The only genuine antidote to the poison of communalism is an independent political movement of the working class based on the rejection of all forms of racism, communalism and nationalism, and the abolition of social inequality and want through the refashioning of society along socialist lines. The profit system, based on the unrestrained accumulation of corporate and personal wealth, is simply incompatible with the complex social demands of modern society.

Such a struggle necessarily transcends national borders. The allies of workers in Australia are not to be found in the company boardrooms and parliamentary corridors of the nation’s capitals, but among working people around the world who confront the same oppressive conditions and the same corporate exploiters. In fighting for their own independent class interests, all workers have the elementary duty to champion the democratic right of immigrants and refugees to live and work in any country of their choosing.

The events of the past week highlight the urgent need for a genuine political alternative to capitalist politics and the two-party system. Without this, the mounting tensions lying just beneath the surface of social life will continue to fester, finding expression in increasingly malignant and destructive forms. The Socialist Equality Party calls on all those opposed to racism to probe its deeper social causes and to join the struggle to create a genuinely egalitarian and democratic society, based on the needs of the vast majority, not the wealth and profits of the few.



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