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TITLE: **"THE IMPERIAL WORKING CLASS MAKES ITSELF 'WHITE': WHITE LABOURISM IN BRITAIN, AUSTRALIA AND SOUTH AFRICA BEFORE THE FIRST WORLD WAR."**

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THE IMPERIAL WORKING CLASS MAKES ITSELF 'WHITE': WHITE LABOURISM IN BRITAIN, AUSTRALIA AND SOUTH AFRICA BEFORE THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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On the 1st of March, 1914, the biggest British labour demonstration of the early twentieth century flooded into London's Hyde Park in a seven mile long column. Estimates of the size of the crowd ran as high as half a million. The Socialist papers were euphoric: "Never in my long experience of Hyde Park", wrote R. B. Suthers in *The Clarion* (6 March 1914) "have I seen such countless multitudes pouring into its confines and gathering around the speakers and the platforms. Never have I seen so impressive a crowd, never have I seen so unanimous and earnest a mass meeting". The publication of the engineering workers' union described the gathering as "the greatest and most impressive of its kind that has ever taken place in the heart of the Empire." (ASEMJR, February 1914)[1]

One would imagine that such an event would have been the focus of considerable attention by the legions of British labour historians. But to my knowledge only one - Logie Barrow (1989) -has given a careful analysis of the significance of that day's events. It is easy to suggest a reason for this strange absence of comment. For the demonstration was in a cause embarrassing in the extreme to later twentieth century historians of labour sympathies. The march manifested the solidarity of British trade unionists and Socialists with the cause of white workers in South Africa.

Following a white worker's general strike in the Johannesburg area in June 1913, and a second, attempted one, in January 1914, nine leaders (seven of them British born) had been deported to Britain by the government of General Louis Botha and his right hand man, General Jan Smuts. The deportees' unions were ones which demanded the exclusion of Black and Asian workers from skilled jobs. Support for these unions and their leaders was the occasion of the Hyde Park demonstration.

In this paper I want to account for the extraordinary British labour response to events in South Africa, by advancing the following argument. Firstly, the white working classes in the pre-First World War British Empire were not composed of 'nationally' discrete entities, but were bound together into an imperial working class, by flows of population which traversed the world. Secondly, the labour movements based on this imperial working class produced and disseminated a common ideology of White Labourism. In this ideology, the element of the critique of exploitation and the element of racism were inextricably intermingled. This was an era of radical labour militancy, of profound ideological hostility to capitalism, of widespread influence of syndicalist doctrines in the unions. But these trends fused with the notion that employers were attempting to sap the organised power of white workers internationally by subjecting them to the

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[1]. The abbreviation ASEMJR is given for *Amalgamated Society of Engineers Monthly Journal and Report*. These periodicals are available at the Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, series MSS 259/4.

competition of cheap Asian labour. This internationally constructed synthesis of militant labour and racist visions was a major cultural source of the rise of working class racism in turn of the century Britain, of the beginning of South African industrial segregation, and of the politics of the 'White Australia' policy. These phenomena were not separate, but rather, part of a single story.

The approach which lies behind these arguments derives in part from the illuminating recent discussion of the historiography of colonial societies by Stoler and Cooper (1997). The tendency for historians of labour within Britain and it's former Empire to look at their subject in a 'national' framework can be profoundly misleading and anachronistic, for lateral connections within the Empire were extremely important in the formation of labour movements. As Stoler and Cooper (1997:22) argue "The 'nation-state' has become too centred in conceptions of European history since the late eighteenth century, and 'empire' not centred enough". Thus I take the British Empire, not its successor states, as the relevant geo-social framework for this paper.

The direction which a national labour movement took cannot be understood purely in terms of the conditions prevailing inside a single country, but must also be viewed in its connection with the international flows of political culture. South African scholars, for example, have been very good at describing the structural factors encouraging the creation of state sponsored labour segregation, but less good at accounting for the mind-set of the white working class (Legassick 1974; Davies et. al. 1976; Davies 1979; Yudelman 1983). This, I would suggest, is because they tend to leave out the vital international sources of white workers' political culture. The political concerns of white labour were carried around the empire by persons, by newspapers, and by organisational links. As Stoler and Cooper (1997:28) put it, "The circuit of personnel around empires grounded the idea of empire in global experiences." It is necessary and possible to show the specific pathways along which the ideas of the imperial working class circulated.

The tendency of the various national labour literatures to present racism as simply an unfortunate ideological infection of a previously robust proletarian identity is misguided. Not only in South Africa and Australia, but also in Britain itself, the development of labour identity was inextricably tangled with notions of race. In Stoler and Cooper's (1997:16-17) words "Cultural domination, racial exclusivity and violence were written into modernizing, nationalist and Socialist projects."

My paper's approach also derives partly from the American historical work of the 1990s on the relationship between the construction of 'whiteness' and the politics of class (Saxton 1990; Roediger 1994; Allen 1994; Ignatiev 1995). This literature emphasises that conceptions of 'whiteness' are socially constructed, and therefore have histories which can be investigated. Ignatiev (1995:180) suggests that American labour historians had previously tended to avoid the question of the role of white labour in promoting racial divisions amongst the work force. The newer work redresses the balance by examining the ideological construction of race in various historical contexts of American working class formation and organization. The present paper shares this concern with the history of how combinations of racism and labour identity have been built. However, I see the historical development of labour racism in the British Empire as possessing dynamics distinct from those of U.S. labour. The imperial framework was crucial in shaping the self-conceptions of British and colonial workers before 1914. In that period, notions of Britishness were crucial to the labour racism of Britain, Australia and South Africa.

A Comment on Bonnett

My paper also seeks to respond in a constructively critical way to some of the questions raised by Alastair Bonnett (1998) in his recent discussion of "How the British Working Class Became White" in *The Journal of Historical Sociology*. Bonnett starts from the argument that the United States literature on 'Whiteness' cannot be used as a 'template' for analysing racism in other societies. To apply it in this way is to homogenise and Americanise diverse histories. He offers instead a nationally specific account of the rise of British working class racism. Bonnett suggests that in mid-nineteenth century Britain, the upper classes denied the status of 'whiteness' to the working class. The working class was presented as lacking the defining characteristics associated in ascendant ideologies with whiteness, and the working class was thus marginal to the symbolic formation of whiteness. On the other hand, Bonnett (1998:322) argues, all whites in the colonial world were regarded as possessing these 'white' qualities;

"Whiteness, as the phenotype of civilisation, must simultaneously be made available to all Europeans within the colonial imagination, but denied to those deemed unfit or unwilling to carry its burden in Europe itself".

Bonnett explains the incorporation of the British working class in a strong 'white' racial identity in terms of two social factors of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. These were the rise of a 'popularist' imperialism, and the transition from liberal capitalism to welfare capitalism. Imperialism required state interventionism and national consensus. Welfarism enabled the formation of a broadly based 'national community' which attached the working class to national racial symbols and state institutions. The shift to interventionist welfarism was in turn the product of working class struggle and increasing complexity and consumer orientation in capitalist production and management. The working class, no longer marginalised, could take on the identity of whiteness. But the working-class conception of 'whiteness', Bonnett contends, centred not around notions of imperial heroism, but around whiteness as a definition of 'ordinariness' and 'decency'. In the late twentieth century, with the crisis of the welfare state, British workers increasingly have come to feel that the welfare system which they have created, and see as theirs, is threatened. Immigrants and non-respectable whites come to be seen as the culprits. 'Respectable' white working class people channel their hostility toward these supposed beneficiaries, fuelling the rise of a new racism. Bonnett's conclusion is that strategies of contemporary anti-racism have to recognise that there is 'a moment of social critique' contained within the history of white identity: the constitution of white identity in Britain combined social reformism and class militancy with racism.

My position implies a mixed response to Bonnett's claims. He is right to point out the dangers of American-centred models of racism in other contexts. But because of his focus within the national boundaries of Britain, he does not identify some important aspects of what it is that makes Britain's racial history distinct. He fails to give sufficient centrality to direct working class involvement and participation in, and movement through, the empire as a historic formative force in British working class racism. Because he misses this, he sees the history of racial ideology in Britain as more distinct from that of the empire than it was in reality. Bonnett is correct to suggest that the 'whiteness' of the working class in Britain was in question in the mind of the nineteenth century governing classes, but this was equally true in the empire, well into the twentieth century. White society in the colonial world had a class structure, after all, and the question of how that should

articulate with racial divisions was long battled over. Years of labour pressure lay behind the Australian federation's adoption of 'White Australia' at it's foundation in 1901, and even up to the last moment, the Labor Party was ever alert that Liberals would back-slide on the question. (see below) It was only in 1902 that a permanent organisation of white mine workers in pursuit of racial job protection arose in South Africa, and that battle was only to reach its high point in 1922, with the substantial military conflict of the white miners' strike (Herd 1966; Johnstone 1976). In both the Australian and South African cases, labour movements took positions implying that they were not being treated as sufficiently 'white' by the upper classes, and fought to obtain this racial status for themselves. Thus the periodization of change in the position of colonial white working classes coincides with, rather than differs from Bonnett's British case: working class 'whiteness' was a product of turn of the century political battles. The connection with Bonnett's British scenario extends further, in that both in Australia and South Africa, the early twentieth century saw the creation of a racially exclusive welfarism which eventually underwrote the ideological incorporation of the white working class. Turn of the century intensification of racism and white worker assimilation into 'whiteness' were pan-British Empire developments.

I concur with Bonnett in seeing white working class racism as linked with 'a moment of social critique'. But this connection is not specific to the British metropolitan rather than colonial cases, and the tension between racism and social critique is not specific to the present decay of western welfarism. From the 1880s, the themes of egalitarianism and racism were always intermixed in both the British and colonial labour movements. Labour leaders underwent immense ideological contortions in trying to reconcile universalist aspirations to human equality with a practical politics which defended white workers' privileged access to the labour market. From the beginning they sought to have their universalist cake and yet to eat it at racially segregated tables. Their discourse centred on the idea that they were protecting the existing organised working class against the destruction of their wage and welfare gains. This was often supported by a kind of anti-capitalist paternalism in which labour leaders claimed to be protecting African and Asian peasants against capitalist 'enslavement' through inhibiting the use of cheap labour. These ideas were the common property of the imperial working class in the years before World War One. In Britain itself, they were manifested in the strong Labour opposition to the importation of Chinese miners into the Transvaal and in the unions' campaign against the employment of Asian and African seamen on British ships.

In his account of British history, Bonnett presents the incorporation of the working class into 'whiteness' in a relatively 'top down' way, as a result of upper class diffusion of imperialist values and material concessions. The welfare state itself on the other hand, tends to be presented as the result of working class struggle of a fairly unsullied sort. Bonnett seems to treat the racist effects of welfarism separately from it's egalitarian achievement. My view implies instead that the battles which British labour fought in creating the welfare state were not conducted in an environment which was free of racial exclusivism. The idea of the welfare state as belonging to a 'white' nation was there at the start. British Labour was not operating in a different world from that of the Australian Labor Party and South African industrial segregationists: all of them effectively demanded of the state, a combination of welfare and the protection of racial boundaries. In saying this I do not want to detract from the importance of individuals in the British labour movement, such as Keir Hardie, who did take a brave anti-imperial stand.(Benn 1992) But it was only in the inter-war period that British labour leaders as a whole moved toward support for the dissolution of the Empire, and even then, gradually. In the 1920s and 1930s the Independent Labour Party

under Maxton was far more consistent and committed in its anti-imperialism than either mainstream Labourites or Communists. Only after World War Two did the anti-colonial position achieve total victory in the Labour Party. (Howe 1993)

Three Vectors of White Labourism

In the remainder of the article I want to substantiate the claims I have made about the existence of an imperial working class and its White Labourist ideology. I will show how various social threads crossed the world, helping to weave the pattern which was to be visible in the racial solidarity of 1914. In doing so I will trace three particular strands, amongst the many which existed. Firstly, I will show how the Australian labour movement played a fundamental role in the generation of a White Labourist political model, and how this was disseminated through the empire, especially to South Africa. Secondly, I will explore how the industrial world of the Cornish miners was crucial in connecting the racial labour politics of Britain, Australia and South Africa. Lastly, I will look at the similar unifying role played by a British union which operated internationally, the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE). Each of these were important 'vectors' through which White Labourism spread. The word 'vector' is used to emphasise that there were specific, identifiable, lines of direction along which White Labourism travelled across the world. I do not suggest that the three vectors I identify were by any means the only ones; there are certainly many others, are yet to be charted. The paper ends with an exploration of the British labour movement response to the 1914 deportations, which seeks to show how integral to that movement the conceptions of White Labourism had become by then.

In order to link this argument with my claims about the significance of the 1914 events, I must first provide the reader with a little more detail about on the background to the Hyde Park demonstration. The nine deportees included some of the most important figures of a period of white worker militancy which had gradually built up on the gold mining Witwatersrand region, around Johannesburg, in the period since the Boer War. This militancy was fuelled by many factors, including the hideous death rate from industrial lung disease and attempts by owners to increase the pace of work (Katz 1976,1990). But the underlying theme of the work of the union movement was the demand for the protection of white workers monopoly of skilled jobs against the competition of Asian and African labour. Initially, after the Boer war, white labour's focus was on the exclusion of Chinese labour from the mines (Richardson 1982). But once this issue had been won with the coming to power of the 1906 Liberal government in Britain, on a platform of opposition to Chinese labour, the white workers' focus changed. Now their fear was that they would be replaced African workers. This fear was all the more real, because with the introduction of revolutionary new drill technology, a considerable deskilling of mining work was taking place, which meant that new workers could be trained fairly quickly. In 1907 the resulting attempts by mine owners to change production practices precipitated an unsuccessful white mine workers strike on the Rand (Dawe 1998:217-234). In the subsequent period, the basic issue at stake remained, with mine owners seeking ways to raise profits through labour market and work process reorganisation, and the white miners resisting this. Between 1909 and 1912, the South African Labour Party, led by F.H.P. Creswell, emerged as a unified political voice for White Labourism. In June 1913 a general strike of white labour broke out in Johannesburg. Smuts, the key figure in Louis Botha's government, called out the British garrison. On 4th June clashes between strikers and the police erupted, leading to rioting by white workers and unemployed in Johannesburg. On 5th June British troops fired indiscriminately into the crowds, causing more than twenty fatalities and scores of injuries. Smuts and Botha then entered Johannesburg to negotiate with the strike

leaders at the Carlton Hotel. Once the meeting had started, strike supporters surged around the British troops guarding the hotel. At this point, according to some versions of the event, a union leader, J.T. Bain, and one of his companions, threatened to shoot Smuts and Botha if the soldiers fired on the crowds again. In order to extricate themselves from the situation, Smuts and Botha signed a non-victimisation agreement which they regarded as a complete capitulation to the strikers. Smuts, furious at what had happened, laid plans to deal with the union movement. In January 1914 the government deliberately precipitated a railway strike, leading to a general strike. Smuts used this as an excuse to proclaim martial law, calling out the newly constituted Union Defence Force. A large number of labour leaders were arrested, and nine of them, including Bain, were rushed to Durban and placed on the *S.S. Umgeni*, bound for England. Smuts freely admitted that he had little legal basis for his actions and attempted to cover his tracks with a bill indemnifying the government. (Clarion, 20 February 1914; Cope n.d.:88-161; Hepple n.d.:153-157; Walker and Weinbren 1961:22-58; Katz 1976; Hirson and Williams 1995:101-126)

The Australian Vector

The formation of the international Labour movement in the late nineteenth century, fuelled by the human rivers of migration flowing around and out of Europe, occurred at the same moment as an enormous outflow of migrants from the Fukien and Kwantung provinces of China and from India. It was this conjuncture which created a context in which defining themselves and their labour market interests as 'white' could seem an advantageous option to organised workers. Faced with the potentially highly competitive labour markets, one possibility for workers of European origin was to seek economic protection from the state by appealing to the idea that they were racial partners in empire. This formed the ideological basis for advocating a differential sets of rules governing access to labour markets for white workers as against Asians and Africans. Although the clashes between white and Asian labour on the west coast of North America in this era are well known, in neither the US nor Canada did exclusion of Asian workers become the central issue in national politics. In Australia it did. The 'White Australia' policy was the result.

The political processes taking Australia in that direction began shortly after Chinese workers entered the Australian goldfields in the 1850s. Within a few years, violent clashes were taking place between white and Chinese diggers. Exclusionary measures against Chinese were first introduced in Victoria in the 1850s, following racial violence in the Bendigo area in 1854.

This culminated in the imposition of penal taxation against the Chinese in Victoria in 1857. From here a pattern developed in which one Australian colony after another pushed Chinese labour out through taxation; legislation aimed at doing this was introduced in New South Wales in the early 1860s and in Queensland in 1877. (Johanson 1962:5-6)

From the start, White Labourism's weird combination of racism and egalitarianism was present. In December 1861 the Miner's Protective League issued its manifesto at Lambing Flat, New South Wales, in the build up to a particularly notorious anti-Chinese pogrom. The document called for the white diggers to "drive the moon-faced barbarians away", while at the same time urging "men of all nations."' to join the League and calling "upon every man whose spirit yearns for equality, fraternity and glorious liberty.."'(Ebbels and Churchward 1960:74-76) Emerging labour organisations took this path. The employment of Chinese labour was a central grievance in the Sydney seaman's strike of 1878 (Ebbels and Churchward 1960: 103-105). In 1890, the Sheep Shearers' Union, which in the next year would launch possibly the most symbolically significant strike in Australian history, forbade the recruitment of new Chinese members (Ebbels and Churchward 1960:114-6). Unions played a major role in bringing about the passage of Exclusion

Acts in the various Australian colonies in 1888, aimed at shutting out Chinese immigration (Rolls 1993:471-503). In the 1890s economic recession gave a considerable impetus to the development of labour parliamentary politics in Australia (White 1981:86). Persisting white fears of immigrant competition, especially from Japanese, Indian and 'Kanaka' (Pacific Islander) workers, made yet tighter immigration restrictions a crucial plank of Australian Laborism.

At the elections which led to the formation of the Australian Commonwealth in 1901, although there was a broad consensus on the notion of White Australia, Labor suspected the other parties of being prepared to renege on this 'principle'. Labor made the passage of a 'White Australia' policy a condition for supporting the 'middle way' government of Edmund Barton (Clark 1993:411). In the debate on the bill at the first Commonwealth parliament, Labor's leader, J.C. Watson, posed the question of immigration at the elevated level of "whether we would desire our sisters or brothers to be married into any of these races to which we object." (Ebbels and Churchward 1960:234-235) Interestingly, Labor MPs were actually more likely to be British born and more likely to be recent immigrants than the MPs of other parties (White 1981:87). So the sense of where racial lines were to be drawn seems not to have been stronger amongst the Australian born than amongst immigrants. Thus Bonnett's implied view that racial lines were initially clearer in the colonial than in the British mind seems dubious.

What Australian labour created at the turn of the century was a militantly egalitarian polity, protected by an interventionist state. Local industry would be protected by tariffs; worker's rights by the arbitration system; the vulnerable and aged through pensions, and children through maternity benefits. And white worker's jobs would be protected by 'White Australian' exclusion of all 'other' races from the labour market. The boundaries of the social-democratic project would be racially defined.(White 1981:144-5; MacIntyre 1997)

It was this political 'ideal' that many Australian workers brought to the Witwatersrand. The depression in Australian mining during the 1890s coincided with the rapid development of the South African gold fields, resulting in a flow of Australians to the Transvaal. After that, many of the 16000 strong Australian military contingent in the Boer War stayed on in South Africa after their service was completed. By 1904, there were over 5000 Australians in the Johannesburg area, most of whom were miners or artisans. (Kennedy 1984:2-6))

Australians played a major role in white trade unionism around Johannesburg, in the years from 1902 to 1914. Elaine Katz (1976:16,449) was the first to draw scholarly attention to the importance of these Australian unionists. This was not just a question of their physical presence, but also of the prestige which the Australian political model enjoyed more widely amongst the ranks of the imperial working class. (Katz 1976:2)

There is abundant evidence of this crucial Australian role and of the extent to which it was linked to attempts to import the racial-utopian vision of 'White Australia'. When James Ramsay MacDonald, then a London County Councillor, visited Johannesburg in 1902, he found 'an Australian trooper' had been the author of a 'platform' which had been circulated from the engineers' union to labour groupings for their support. This document included a number of strongly anti-capitalist provisions, but also had an Australian White Labourist tinge. It contained proposals for a franchise which excluded blacks, for legislation to prevent the introduction of 'Asiatic' labour on the mines, and for the arbitration system in labour relations (MacDonald

1902:112-3). Peter Whiteside, the Ballarat-born President of the Witwatersrand Trades and Labour Council, took a lead in opposing the importation of Chinese labour and in subsequently campaigning for the deportation of the Chinese miners. An Australian, J. Forrester Brown, was a leading figure in the white mine workers' union. Robert Burns Waterston, born in Bendigo, was one of the nine unionists deported by Smuts. At the time he was secretary of the South African Labour Party. The prominent Johannesburg unionist John Joseph Ware had been a member of the Operative Masons' Society in Australia, and had represented that union at the founding conference of the Australian Labor Party. He ended his career as a Senator representing the South African Labour Party. Paramatta-born James Briggs' South African career took him through leadership of the bricklayers union, the presidency of Pretoria Trades Council and also to a Senate seat. Tom Kneebone, a militant organiser of the Associated Society of Engineers in South Africa, was also born in Australia. Frederick Swan, the leader of the South African banking employees, was born in London but had grown up in Queensland and had his first job at Brisbane Post Office. (Gitsham and Trembath 1926:159-179) O.H. Evans, another president of the Witwatersrand Trades and Labour Council, was another British born unionist who had worked in Australia (Katz 1976:485).

The direct impact of the domestic politics of 'White Australia' was also felt in South Africa. In 1904, the Australian Prime minister, Alfred Deakin, found himself reliant on the goodwill of Labor MPs for the survival of his government in office. At this juncture he was approached by the Labour government of New Zealand to make a joint protest to the imperial government over the importation of Chinese labour into the Transvaal. Deakin was personally very unenthusiastic about this proposal, but felt obliged to join in, because of fear of a possible Labor Party revolt if he failed to do so (Jebb 1905:130).

The Australian model was one which aroused not only the admiration of South African labour activists, but also the fears of mining magnates, who saw it as system in which working class interests had attained an excessively powerful position. Percy Tarbutt, a director of Consolidated Goldfields, wrote from London to F.H.P. Creswell in 1903 explaining his opposition to the latter's proposal for the use of whites in unskilled work on the mines on the grounds that business feared:

"the same trouble will arise as is now prevalent in the Australian colonies, viz. that the combination of the labour classes will become so strong as to be able, more or less, to dictate not only the question of wages, but also the political questions by the power of their votes when a representative government is established." (quoted in Hepple n.d.:145)

Thus mining magnates were suspicious of any measure that would increase white worker numbers or security. It has been seriously suggested by at least one academic commentator that fear of white labour unrest was a key motive in employers' support for developing a Chinese work force. (Adam Smith 1965:158) Although this claim should be treated with scepticism, there seems to be no doubt that business interests viewed the example of the Australian polity with some alarm.

The success of the Australian activists in influencing the South African labour movement arises from the way that their model squared with the aspirations and prejudices of trade union supporters, while also helping to resolve the dilemmas of egalitarian-minded activists. As the fascinating recent work of Lucien van der Walt (1999) has shown, some of the small white left groups in South Africa in this era were in close touch with syndicalist movements in Europe and

North America, did think seriously about the position of black workers, and did begin to establish common organisations with black activists. However, where white Socialists took leadership positions in the white labour movement, they found themselves pushed toward a white labourist project. Some left wing union leaders were able to reconcile themselves to this fate by way of the circuitous reasoning that although African workers should have political rights in principle, in a situation in which Africans were living in an unfree condition, and could thus be forced to perform cheap labour, the wage and welfare gains of white workers needed to protected be protected against 'unfair' competition. It was at this point that the Australian model offered itself as a solution to white leftists' difficulties. The white mine workers' leader Tom Matthews explained how he had decided that the Australian strategy was imperative, despite his more broadly democratic sympathies:

"I hold that the Kaffir should be allowed to get free, but in the interim, as he is here only as a semi-slave, I have a right to fight him and oust him just as the Australians ousted the Chinamen and the Kanakas." (Simons and Simons 1969:95)

What Avner Offer (1988:235) wrote of Canada and Australia seems true of South Africa in an even more sinister way:

"It is wrong to regard exclusion as a 'dark side' of colonial societies. Rather racism arose directly out of their virtues of democracy, civic equality and solidarity."

The Cornish Vector

A central component of the imperial working class was provided by the mining communities originating in Cornwall. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the extraordinary international mobility of the Cornish, the demand for their specific mining skills, and their social cohesion abroad gave them a social impact which was out of all proportion to their relatively small numbers in England itself. In this section I will seek to demonstrate firstly, the remarkable reach and strong collective identity of the Cornish diaspora; secondly, how it became unionised and mobilised abroad; and thirdly how its White Labourism connected back into British politics. Cornish White Labourism had peculiar features. The Cornish working class was not very responsive to the rise of Labour parliamentary activity in Britain. In the period under discussion, they voted largely for the Radical Liberals. It was partly as a consequence of this that the Radical Liberals were to take such a strong anti-Chinese labour positions. At a time when the shift of British working class allegiance from Radical Liberalism to Labour still had a very long way to run, this situation helped to ensure that Labour could not take any sort of non-racial position on imperial labour questions without threatening its own ability to continue winning new support.

From the middle of the 19th century, the exhaustion of some of the Cornish ore deposits, combined with the opening elsewhere in the world of cheaper and more plentiful sources of copper and tin, and the lure of the gold rushes, produced a vast Cornish mining diaspora. From the 1830s there was a massive population movement to North America, and from the late 1840s, to Australia. In South Africa a trickle of Cornish miners to the mines of Namaqualand and Kimberley turned into a flood with the opening of the Witwatersrand in 1886. (Burke 1984:59) In these migrations, the

Cornish emigrants did not necessarily just move to one area of settlement, but often shifted around the world, from one site to another, as new mineral fields opened and declined. As Philip Payton(1996:244) has observed, this generated the construction of an international industrial culture rooted in a network of Cornish communities around the world.

This was an example, perhaps *the* example, of what James Belich (1996) has called 'Crew Culture', the characteristic workers' social formation of the 19th century gold-rushes. Crews shared "the same manners, customs, slang, prejudices, dress, leisure habits, virtues and vices - the same subculture ...Crews were prefabricated communities into which new members could easily slot". (Belich 1996:428) It was a culture which valued "strength, toughness and manual skills." (Belich 1996:431)

Cornish identity can usefully be understood in this framework because it was a culture which defined itself industrially; mining skills were at its core. It was not an ethnic-nationalist identity despite the fact that the Cornish language had only recently faded away, and despite the very strong regional sense in Cornwall (Payton 1992:112-114). Cornish nationalism only began to be developed in the late nineteenth century by Anglican clerics and intellectuals, whose ideas had little appeal for their Methodist, proletarian countrymen (Payton 1996:260-268). Crew culture, on the other hand, was well adapted to miners' competing needs in the Cornish diaspora, for both mobility and solidarity. Migrants could fit into a crew culture grouping wherever they arrived, and crew culture also provided the informal networks which could be used to exclude unwanted competitors in the labour market.

On the Rand, Cornishmen participated in what initially was a classic migrant labour system. In the South African case, Cornish miners were much less likely to bring their families with them than they had been in America and Australia (Burke 1984:67). Many worked for several long periods on the Rand, punctuated by return visits to Cornwall. Early Johannesburg was perhaps the ultimate example of the crew culture world of "binge centres, red-light districts and shabby boarding houses" of which Belich (1996:436) writes. In 1905 there were about 7000 Cornish miners on the Rand, out of perhaps 16000 white mine workers. The emigrants, mostly men, single or separated from their families, sent back about a million pounds Sterling in remittances to Cornwall each year (Dawe 1998:211). Many of them returned to Cornwall only to die of phthisis as the crystalline quartzite dust of the Rand tore up their lungs (Katz 1990).

This migrancy created a bizarrely close connection between Cornwall and the Rand. The historian A.L. Rowse (1942:35) wrote in his memoir of his working class boyhood in Cornwall before the First World War that:

"At home people knew what was going on in South Africa often rather better than what was happening 'up the country': the journey across the seas to another continent was more familiar to them than going very far 'up the country', say as far as London."

In the depressed condition of the turn of the century Cornish economy a kind of dependence upon the Rand developed. When the 'African Mail' bearing the postal orders arrived at Redruth-Camborne, people would flock into town from the surrounding villages to collect their money, and business in local shops would boom. (Barton 1974:162, Payton 1996:245)

The existence of this world of Cornish migrancy points up the limitations of Bonnett's concept of the 'British' working class. The white working class on the South African goldfields, the Cornish working class and the miners of Australia were not just connected. To a very great extent, one is actually talking, in these three cases, of the same globally mobile individuals, linked in a transcontinental network.

At home, the Cornish miners displayed remarkably little interest in trade unionism. This is linked to two factors. One was the Cornish mining industry's tradition of 'tributing', a practice in which a miner would bid against his fellow workers in an auction, to work a pitch of rock at a particular rate. Thus tendencies toward solidarism were undermined by a sense of private enterprise. A second feature was that it was only late in the nineteenth century that technological change even began to threaten the craft skills of the 'hard rock' miners. Rock drill technology only started to be used after 1875. In contrast, in British coal mines the deskilling process began decades earlier. (Burke 1984: 66-72)

Abroad, whether in Australia, America or elsewhere, changed working conditions rapidly broke down the Cornish reluctance to organise collectively. In Australia, the initial wave of Cornish mining migrants was particularly concentrated at the Burra Burra copper mine in South Australia, which flourished from 1845 to 1860. Already in 1848, a major strike took place. A second Cornish copper mining concentration formed in the 1860s in the Moonta-Kadina-Wallaroo area of South Australia; so heavy was the Cornish dominance there that it became known as 'Little Cornwall'. Significant strikes broke out in that area in 1863 and 1874. So Cornish miners participated in the emerging labour movement of Australia from the beginning. Those who came to South Africa with a background of Australian mining had experience of a labour movement which was propagating its "White Labourist" position. And significant numbers of the Cornish did move through Australia to South Africa. The South Australian mines entered a steep decline in the 1880s, which meant that the labour market there was closing up just as the Rand gold rush started in 1886. (Payton 1978, 1984:89-94)

The Cornish, whether they came via other countries, or direct to South Africa, played a remarkable role in the initial emergence of White Labourist union organisation in that country. When the Miners Association was started on the Rand in 1902, its founding leader was the Cornishman, Tom Matthews, whose mining career in the United States had included being elected as the only Socialist member of the Montana legislature (Dawe 1998:197). A unionist whose personal history is emblematic of the influence of global Cornish diaspora on South Africa (although not himself a miner) was Benjamin Caddy. Caddy's father had emigrated from Cornwall to Australia with his parents in 1854. Caddy was born in Ballarat and trained as a boilermaker. Coming to South Africa with the Australian contingent in the Boer War, Caddy stayed on and became a leader in the unionisation of the boilermakers. He participated in all the major actions of the era of white worker militancy, including the 1913 and 1914 strikes, the 1919 worker occupation of Johannesburg municipality and the 1922 strike (Verwey 1995:34-35).

The strength of the crew culture of the Cornish on the Rand gave them an ability to implement racially and ethnically exclusionary labour practices. In the first two decades of Rand mining they were able, through their informal social networks to exercise a remarkable degree of control over recruitment of skilled labour, shutting out not only black and Asian workers, but also Afrikaners

and other whites who had not been initiated into the world of crew culture. This power was usually exercised through Cornish foremen, in whose hands management often placed the control of recruitment of skilled personnel. This had some remarkable results; in one Rand mine, Ferreira Deep, the entire white workforce was made up of workers from a single Cornish pit, Dolcoath (Payton 1996:242). Other mines also had a reputation for exclusively hiring Cornishmen as skilled workers (Dawe 1986:75-6). Even after the failure of the 1907 strike loosened this control, enabling management to bring in substantial numbers of Afrikaner workers, the Cornish influence remained strong.

From the turn of the century, White Labourism became the dominant electoral issue in the mining areas of Cornwall, largely because of the area's close links to South Africa. Although the supporters of Joseph Chamberlain had made some political headway in the area in the 1890s, (Payton 1992:153-4) Chamberlain's backing for the use of Chinese labour in South Africa ensured that miners would not be available to support his Unionist deviation from Liberalism. (Chamberlain's inability to question the educational policies of his Conservative allies, which were unfavourably regarded by religious non-conformity, was an added disadvantage in Methodist Cornwall). In the 1900 election, the radical Liberal W.S. Caine won the mining division of Cornwall on the basis of a campaign against the still hypothetical possibility of the importation of Chinese labour to the Transvaal. This was a particularly burning question in that year, because of the presence in the constituency of many miners who had fled the Rand at the outbreak of the Boer War, and were anxious as to the future of their jobs. Following Caine's death in 1903, another anti-Chinese candidate, Wilfred Lawson, defeated the experienced Unionist, Arthur Strauss. (Dawe 1998:193-215)

In 1906 Transvaal Chinese Labour became an important national issue in the British elections. The issue played a big part in tipping Cornwall as a whole firmly into the Liberal camp, and certainly also helped the Liberal cause in other parts of the country (Payton 1992:154). Unionist arguments that Chinese labour, by boosting the production of the mines, would create jobs for Cornishmen were rejected by the voters of the mining division, who returned yet another radical Liberal, A.E. Dunn (Dawe 1998:193-125).

The rising Labour movement was very ready to assure the Cornish miners of their reliability on the Chinese labour issue. From the beginning of the Transvaal Chinese labour scheme, the Trades Union Congress campaigned against it. In March 1904 a labour-led demonstration of 80,000 people against the Chinese labour scheme took place in Hyde Park (Yap and Leong Man 1996:106-107). Will Crooks, the Labour MP and famous union organiser, campaigned in Cornwall against Chinese labour during the initial crisis on the issue of 1904. In 1906 Labour stood in Cornwall for the first time (Dawe 1998:193-215).

The politics of this era demonstrate one of the difficulties in Bonnett's arguments. If any faction of the upper classes had a coherent project of creating a sense of national community in Britain, it was surely Chamberlain and his followers. Yet they were not as firm on drawing the boundaries of 'whiteness' against Chinese labour as were working class supporters of the Radical Liberals and the Labour Party. Thus to a significant extent, the pressure for a stronger boundary to 'whiteness' came from below, and was not imposed by upper class advocates of 'national community', as Bonnett's view implies. The anti-Unionist election campaign of 1906, in which 'Chinese Slavery' was an important slogan, exemplified the way in which radical Liberal and Labour thought in

Britain and the empire managed to combine racism with an appearance of altruism. This critique of 'slavery' directed venom against the Randlords' exploitation of the Chinese, apparently demanding the liberation of those who would in fact be deprived of work. The effect was to protect white skilled workers against 'cheap' labour competition while wrapping this cause in a cloak of morality.

The Engineer's Vector

A major way in which the Imperial working class was socially unified was through the practice of several important British unions of maintaining branch structures abroad. A significant example of this was the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE), described in 1898 by John Burns as '57,000 skilled artisans combined in the strongest trade union in the world.' (Kapp 1979:313) The ASE had branches throughout North America and Australasia, and a scattering of branches more widely in the empire. While the union could devolve some functions to regional councils, all branches continued to report and send fees to the London head office, and the London-based executive committee ensured that the benefits, voting procedures, contribution payments and entrance requirements conformed strictly to British practice. In return all overseas branches could draw on the union's centralised funds (Jefferys 1945:172). This created a structure which facilitated the mobility of engineering workers around the empire, and in which UK-trained members often took the leadership of overseas branches. The success of this form of organisation in the pre-first world War period strengthens my case for the existence of an imperial working class.[2] In Australia and New Zealand, the ASE expanded from 24 branches with 2600 members in 1890, to 82 branches with 11000 members in 1913 (Jefferys, 1945:128). Similarly in South Africa the ASE, after maintaining only a handful of struggling branches in South Africa in the 1890s, proliferated branches in the Transvaal in the immediate post-Boer War period. By 1913 it had 26 South African branches with 2800 members (Jefferys 1945:128). That there was an organisational dynamic specific to the Empire, is suggested by the fact that the union did not make similar progress in the United States. Before 1890, British artisans had established a number of ASE branches in the US, especially in the New England industrial centres. But after that date, the union ceased to make any American headway (Jefferys 1945:128).

In all the countries where the ASE was active, the high levels of training and literacy of their members made the organisation particularly well placed to produce leadership figures in the wider union movement. Some of the major leaders of white labour in South Africa, including J.T. Bain and W.H. Andrews (later an important member of the Communist Party) came out of the ASE. But despite the relative lack of personal racism on the part of these two leaders, the logic of white unionism tended to trap such men in racist positions. Thus in its submission to the Transvaal Mining Regulations commission, the ASE presented it as self-evident that, 'the growing practice of placing kaffirs and other coloured persons in charge of winches, engines and other machinery' was a safety hazard and that this would reduce 'the sphere of employment for European labour without which the colony cannot progress.' (Simons and Simons 1969:90) In a submission to the 1908 Transvaal mine commission, supervised by Andrews, the ASE explained its support for the exclusion of blacks from skilled jobs, and the introduction of whites into skilled jobs on the basis that the African 'has no interest in the country except to earn his living here.'(Simons and Simons 1969:89)

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[2]. The story of the international development of the ASE can be followed in its fascinating branch reports, on which I have drawn here. These reports are housed in the Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, series MSS 259/2/1.

British unionism was directly involved in the creation of South African industrial segregation. For anyone inclined to seeks the roots of labour racism in Afrikaner racial ideologies, it is worth noting that at the first conference of the South African Labour Party in 1909, there was not a single Afrikaans speaking delegate present (Hepple n.d.:153).

White Labourism in Britain, 1914

In this last section, I will use an exploration of the solidarity movement which greeted the deportees from South Africa in 1914 to show the depth and intensity of the support for White Labourism in the British working class movement at that time. I will start by demonstrating the extraordinary unanimity of labour in taking this position of solidarity, and then go on to examine the discourse of the statements put forward in support of the deportees.

The deportations created a remarkable wave of unity amongst the ever factious British left. The deportees' ship was greeted at Gravesend by a senior Labour delegation, led by Arthur Henderson who became came alongside the *Umgeni* in a small boat to persuade the group to come ashore (rather than remaining on board in protest). (Cornubian, 16 February 1914) The deportees were entertained to dinner at the House of Commons by the Labour MPs (Forward, 7 March 1914). They were feted at a dinner given by the staff of *The Clarion* (Clarion, 13 March 1914). Three of the deportees were welcomed at a public meeting of 3000 in Glasgow, addressed by the renowned union leader Bob Smillie, and the legendary revolutionary activist, John MacLean (Forward, 4 April 1914). The campaign was taken to Cornwall, where some of the deportees spoke at Penzance (Dawe 1998:204). At a London public meeting held at the Opera House before the great demonstration, the labour movement wheeled out its big guns to share the platform with the deportees: Henderson, Keir Hardie, Ramsay MacDonald and Trades Union Congress President J.A. Seddon. (MacDonald suffered from Suffragette heckling) (Clarion, 6 March 1914).

The ASE was well to the forefront of the agitation. A delegation of the deportees led by Bain was welcomed by the union's executive for discussions at ASE headquarters. Numerous British branches sent in resolutions to head office supporting the recall of the Governor-General of South Africa, Lord Gladstone. Three thousand ASE members from the London branches alone participated in the Hyde Park march (ASEMJR, February and March 1914) The trade union demonstration was followed by a broadly based union conference of protest in London, on the subsequent weekend (ASEMJR, May 1914).

The discourse of the reception is revealing as to how far the assumptions of White Labourism were part of the fabric of the British labour movement by 1914. Firstly it is clear that for most activists, the working class which they sought to defend was the diasporic 'British' working class. At its worst, the Socialist response to the deportations merged with the discourse of biological racism, to the extent that the cause of the working class and that of whiteness were conflated. This is exemplified by a contribution in one of the left papers, the Glasgow *Forward*, by J. O'Connor Kessack. Kessack was then involved in the leadership of a campaign, under the auspices of the transport workers' federation, to exclude 'Lascars' - Asian and African seamen - from employment on British ships. Kessack wrote that:

"The coloured man's life is low, his food simple and inexpensive, and his clothing so scanty as to be financially negligible. He costs the Capitalist a mere fraction compared with the white man. He is squeezing the white man out. That is the real Yellow Peril. The standard of life is in danger, and

the white man must either fight the evil influence or go under and carry white civilization with him." (Forward, 11 April 1914)

For Kessack, the labour conflicts on the Rand were:

"the preliminary skirmishes of the great battle which will determine whether African and Asiatic shall displace White." (Forward, 11 April 1914)

Secondly, the labour movement was often presented as defending British liberties, which should apply to white imperial citizens, against erosion by authoritarian government. The labour movement was seen to have an interest in the constitutional integrity of the Empire. Labour could thus be presented as the true defenders of the Imperial enterprise against self-interested capitalists who were betraying it. Victor Fisher, the Secretary of a British committee set up to contest the legal basis of the deportations wrote that it was the Botha government;

"who have acted unconstitutionally, they who have pursued a revolutionary policy. We are the constitutional party. We vindicate the privileges of an ancient Imperial state." (Clarion, 13 February 1914)

Thirdly, the threat to the working class was seen as coming from all the social forces that could be represented as non-British; not only the primary threat of Asian and African labour, but also white 'others'. In the left press's coverage of the deportation incident, anti-semitism was a common feature of the characterisation of the Rand mine-owners. Thus in a cartoon in the Glasgow *Forward* a stereotypic, fat Jewish capitalist is shown kissing an armed Boer, while a clean-cut manacled worker looks on the background (Forward, 21 February 1914).

Finally the extent to which white workers had been subject to repression in South Africa was seen as a breaching of the thresholds of violence which could acceptably be used against white British citizens. It was taken as presaging a threat to the British labour movement in a way in which repression of African or Asian colonial subjects was not. Thus the ASE's official publication wrote that "Russianised methods of government in a British colony cannot be tolerated by the trade union movement." (ASEMJR, February 1914) The ASE journal also contended that Botha with the connivance of the Governor-General "has ridden rough-shod over the hard won charter of British freedom". (ASEMJR, March 1914) This charter clearly did not extend to the Black workers in South Africa whom the ASE had played a prominent part in excluding from skilled employment.

Conclusion

The paper has shown that the imperial working class was a social reality of the pre-First World War world. Space has only permitted me to indicate a few of the multiple threads that held it together, but the strength of its global connections should be apparent. Although the ideologies of its social world were many and complex, it should be clear that one of the dominating and unifying ones was White Labourism.

Bonnett's view of the history of working class racism in Britain has been shown to suffer from

treating British history as separate from the history of the Empire. While he correctly identifies a shift in the relation between the working class and racial identity at the turn of the century, he wrongly sees this as specific to Britain itself. Throughout the empire there were movements of labour fighting for their members to be recognised as 'white'. Whiteness was not so much imposed from above as demanded from below. The imperial working class did not 'become white': it *made itself* 'white'.

The most interesting part of Bonnett's contribution is his identification of the link between white working class 'social critique' and racism, but this was historically much more widely present than he would tend to suggest. The imperial working class of the pre-First World War era was unable to separate its hostility to its own exploitation from its aspiration to incorporation in the dominant racial structure. The consequence was an egalitarian racism which sought to construct racially bounded 'democracy'. However incomprehensible this ambiguous universalism may be to the early twenty-first century observer, to those who participated in it, it made perfect sense.

The most notorious moment in South African labour history came in the 1922 white miner's strike, when the strikers (literally) marched under the banner "Workers of the World, Fight and Unite for a White South Africa." (see the photographs in Glanville 1922) This slogan is often treated as evidence of the illogicality of Rand white labour's thinking, and of the specifically South African character of their movement. This paper has indicated that it proves neither point. The notion of 'Workers of the World' that the slogan expressed was that which had prevailed in the British Empire labour movement before the First World War. The cause of international labour was seen as identical with the cause of the globalised white British labour diaspora. And the 'White South Africa' which the banner advocated was the analogue of the 'White Australia' which had been the 'achievement' of the Australian labour movement.

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