

Racism and capitalism

By Mark Osborn

THE Tories' current Immigration and Asylum Bill is an example of a constant of capitalist society: racism. *Workers' Liberty* maintains that to beat racism we must understand what it is and where it comes from. This article aims to explain the relationship between economic exploitation and discrimination against black people, and outline the AWL programme to beat racism, in the hope of promoting debate with other anti-racist campaigners.

Modern anti-black British racism has relatively recent roots which lie in the history of slavery and colonialism. Racism did not start as a divide-and-rule trick imposed by the ruling class. The racist practice of slavery and colonialism came first; racist ideas came later.

When the slave trade started in the 16th century the British capitalists took slaves and sold them like cattle, bullied them and beat them. Then, they began thinking of them as sub-human. That is the natural way of things for slave owners. When Britain conquered territories and peoples and assumed the right to rule and make decisions for them, then British people began to believe those peoples were inferior.

The roots of modern racism can be traced back to the planter class of slave owners. Although fear and suspicion of the stranger and the outsider had existed before, it had not been fear on the basis of skin colour.

In the ancient world there were many societies based on slavery. But there was no idea comparable to 'race'. The ancient Egyptians looked down on the black peoples to their south, but they were just as scornful of other, lighter-skinned, neighbours. Egyptian artists caricatured the captives taken in war — but the peculiar dress of the Libyans or Hebrews was held up for ridicule as much as the features of the black southerners. In Greek society the slaves were frequently of the same colour as their owners. There were many white slaves from the north and the east. In Rome any citizen might become a slave and any slave a citizen. Slaves came from every province and every skin colour — so did the Emperors, of whom some were black.

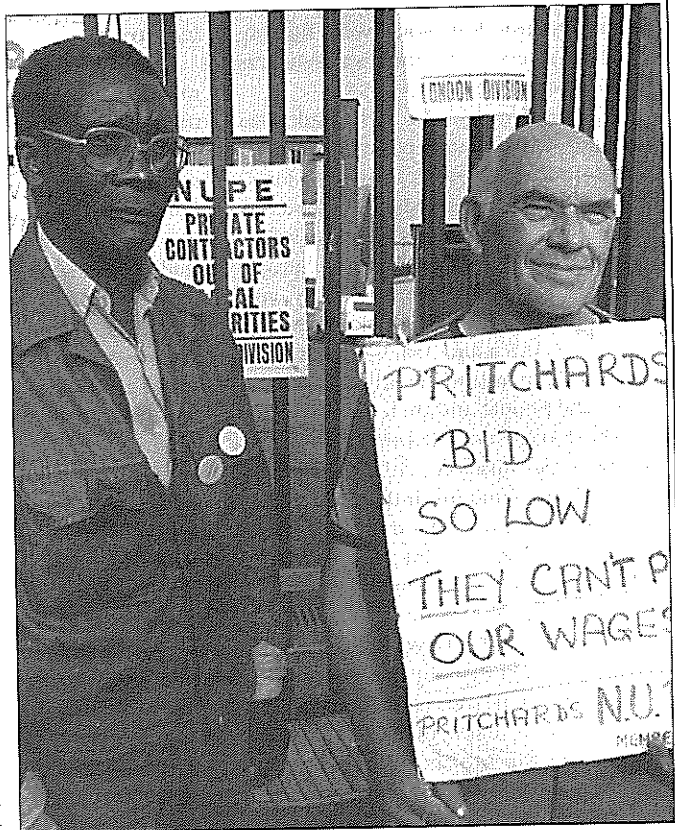
There is nothing 'natural' about anti-black racism in the psychological-biological

make-up of whites. This can be seen today by watching the way young children of different skin colours play together quite happily.

Modern racism was a product of the beginnings of capitalism. As Karl Marx summed it up: "the discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of black skins... The treasures captured outside Europe by undisguised looting, enslavement and murder flowed back to the mother-country and were turned into capital". Pre-feudal slavery was wedded to the most modern merchant capitalism in a drive which helped produce the capital for the future industrial revolutions. Tens of millions of African slaves were taken across the Atlantic. The population of Africa remained stagnant in the period 1650 to 1850, while that of Europe nearly doubled.

The slaves were part of the 'triangular trade'. Boats took slaves to the plantations, brought sugar back to Europe, and then took manufactured goods to Africa.

In the beginning there were Indian slaves and white indentured labourers too as well as Africans. Black slaves were taken from Africa as a simple commercial decision: it was cheaper than going elsewhere. The reasons were economic, not racist. Racist ideas squared an ideological circle for the capitalists. Their anti-feudal revolutions took place under the banner of liberty. Yet there was no liberty for the slaves. Paradoxically, it was because capitalism had developed the ideas of universal human rights and equality — the same ideas that would later inspire the revolts of



Fighting capitalism, building working-class unity

the colonial and enslaved peoples — that it also developed the ideologies of racism. Previous societies had had slavery and conquest — but their rulers had no need for general theories of racial superiority to justify the slavery and conquest. The poor had no rights, whatever their skin colour and whatever their ethnic origin. There was no need for special theories to cancel the human rights of a special category of poor people.

Under the pressure of economic compulsion — the economic need for slavery — writers and thinkers developed the gut reactions of the planters into fleshed-out theories. Those theories are as recent as the eighteenth century. Black people were called sub-human, allowing the bourgeoisie to have their 'liberty' and their slaves too. Pseudo-science said black peoples were inferior — because of head shape, or some other rubbish.

Some of the ideas that were developed were perversions of real facts. Take the racist view that black people are 'lazy'. In fact the slaves were not lazy, they were just rebelling. In modern capitalist society

the basic form of revolt is the workers' strike; the basic form of revolt in Stalinist society, where unions were forbidden, was absenteeism and, perhaps, throwing a spanner into the nearest machine. The equivalent on the plantation was: I am damned if I am going to work hard. The slaves were not 'lazy', they were fighting back! But, perversely, their struggle was turned back on them.

Colonialism and the slave trade also wrecked societies and civilisations. Much of the African past was destroyed. Colonial intervention in India reduced a fabulous treasure-house, the world's leading industrial nation, to backward poverty. Europe reduced Africa and India to poverty; and then built a whole racist ideology that the peoples of Africa and Asia were naturally 'backward'. In Ireland the British state brutalised the people and then blamed them for their own condition. They were described as "unstable, childish, violent, lazy, feckless, feminine and primitive".

But it is not true that only white men made slaves. The black Iraqis on your television screen during the Gulf war were brought there by Arab slave traders. The Arab trade in African slaves started earlier and finished later than the European trade, and probably enslaved more people. The history is not a simple black-versus-white one; in fact the African trade depended on the co-operation of many African chiefs who benefited from it.

At the same time, there was opposition to slavery, in the name of human equality, from white radicals. In Britain, for instance, during the American Civil War, the workers were solid for the Union despite their government siding with the slave-owning South and despite the unemployment caused by the Northern blockade of the South and the consequent lack of cotton for the Lancashire mills.

In the heyday of the British Empire, racism and nationalism penetrated every part of intellectual life. They had the effect of pinning the workers to the bosses in the mistaken belief that they had more in common with Queen Victoria than with the Indian poor. Frederick Engels wrote to Karl Kautsky in 1882: "You ask what the English workers think about colonial policy. Well, exactly the same as they think about politics in general: the same as the bourgeois think. There is no workers' party here, you see, there are only Conservatives and Liberal-Radicals, and the workers gaily share the feast of England's monopoly of the world market and the colonies".

Many labour movement leaders campaigned to restrict the entry of Jews fleeing Eastern European pogroms at the end of the last century. The first modern immigration act was passed against the Jews —

the Aliens Act of 1905.

Immigration laws have been one of the major mechanisms of state racism over the last 30 years. After the Second World War, capitalism expanded, and the British bosses toured Africa, the Caribbean and India looking for workers to work in British industry.

As the boom slowed the racist right mobilised. It was led by Winston Churchill, the supposedly great leader of British democracy in World War 2 and grandfather of the current racist bigot. In 1955 Churchill proposed "Keep Britain White" as a Tory election slogan. The Metropolitan Police described "coloured people" as "work-shy and content to live on National Assistance and immoral earnings." Black workers found 'colour bars' in clubs and housing. Black community organisations began life as self-help groups in response to this racism.

Racist attacks became more common, and in 1958 there was a riot led by organised racists in Notting Hill, West London. The Immigration Act of April 1962 began the current process of formal racism — laws which discriminate against black people. The Immigration Acts of 1968 and 1971 completed the process, barring almost all immigrants from Africa, the Caribbean and India except those joining close family here.

In addition to legislation there have been assaults from the right: "If you want a nigger neighbour, vote Labour" was a Tory election slogan in 1964. Thatcher said that "this country might be swamped by people from a different culture" before her election victory in 1979, taking some of the political ground from under the fascist National Front who, during the 1970s, organised some thousands of white British people.

On the street the police have posed a constant threat to black people. A Policy Institute report from 1983 shows that in the Metropolitan Police racism is "expected, accepted and even fashionable". Racist stereotypes have moved on to target black youth as drug dealers and criminals. Take the *Evening Standard's* coverage of the Operation Bumblebee police "crackdown on crime". The *Standard's* reporter went with police on a raid: the young woman "claimed she was 18" and her partner's wall was "covered in Bob Marley posters". Got the message?

But the story of racism is also the story of struggle and resistance. In the last 30 years the battle to confront all forms of racism has broadened out. The fight against racism must be bound up with the struggle to replace capitalism with democratic, working-class socialism. As Malcolm X said: "you can't have capitalism without racism".

A programme to beat racism

THE Alliance for Workers' Liberty organises socialists to fight for working class solutions to the crisis. If we do not then black people, Jews and foreigners will be scapegoated; the working class will be split along ethnic lines; and we will all lose — black and white.

Socialists must be part of the basic organisations of the working class — the trade unions and the Labour Party and help to turn them outwards to campaign on the estates and streets.

● **A decent home for everyone!**
Demand government money to enable local councils to undertake a crash programme of compulsory purchase of empty properties, renovation, and house-building, to create new homes at affordable rates.

● **Jobs for all! Cut the work week to 35 hours; create useful new jobs by restoring and expanding public services; provide training and re-training at union rates of pay. To pay for this: tax the rich, cut arms spending, take control of the big banks and financial institutions.**

● **Restore the Health Service and other public services.**

● **Jobs, training or education for all youth, with union rates of pay or an adequate grant.**

● **Make the police accountable to elected local committees. Defend civil liberties: fight to replace the existing bureaucratic, hierarchical capitalist state by a regime based on accountability and workers' control.**

● **Scrap the immigration laws! No more deportations!**

● **Fight for real equality in employment and housing. Council-house allocation by need, not by race under disguise of a "sons and daughters" policy. Special training programmes to ensure real equality in employment for ethnic minorities.**

● **Equality in the labour movement. No toleration for racist prejudice: special campaigns to recruit and integrate ethnic minority workers.**

● **Labour movement support for black communities' self-defence; united black and white workers' defence squads to beat back the fascists.**

● **The labour movement must stand up and fight! That is the only way to beat the Tories, the capitalists and the racists. Join the AWL.**