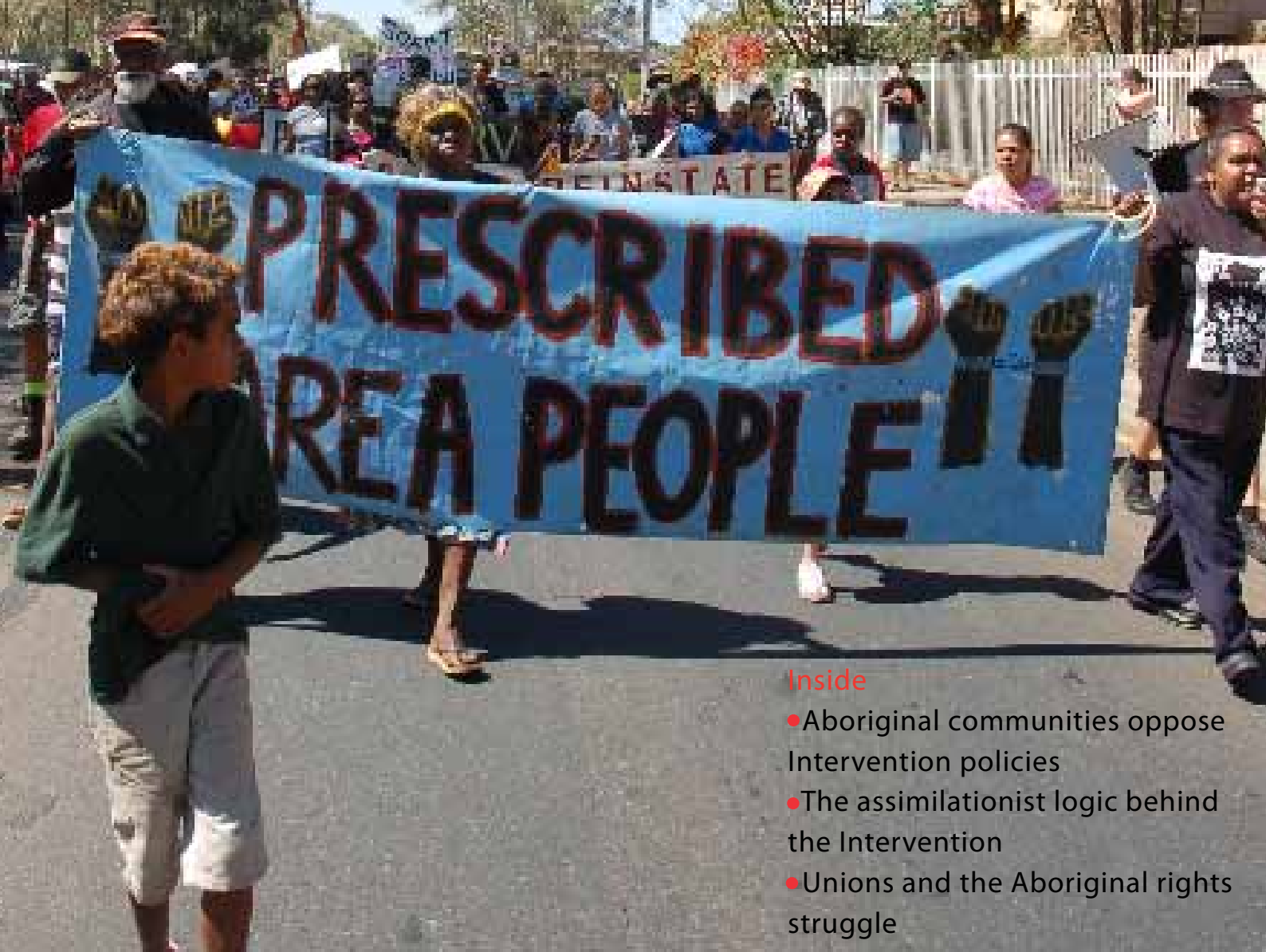


A Solidarity pamphlet

# ASSIMILATION AND THE INTERVENTION



## Inside

- Aboriginal communities oppose Intervention policies
- The assimilationist logic behind the Intervention
- Unions and the Aboriginal rights struggle

# SOLIDARITY: WHO ARE WE?

Solidarity is a socialist group with branches across Australia. We are opposed to the madness of capitalism, which is plunging us into global recession and misery at the same time as wrecking the planet's future. We are taking the first steps towards building an organisation that can help lead the fight for an alternative system based on mass democratic planning.

As a crucial part of this, we are committed to building social movements and the wider left, through throwing ourselves into struggles for social justice, to overturn the legacy of the Howard government and to strengthen the confidence of rank and file unionists. Solidarity is a member of the International Socialist Tendency.



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## ABOUT THIS PAMPHLET

Solidarity has been involved in the fight against the NT Intervention since it was launched in 2007. This pamphlet brings together articles published in our monthly magazine over this period that report on resistance from Aboriginal communities and supporters to the policy and analyse the assimilationist aims behind it.

You can follow the latest developments around the Intervention and Aboriginal politics by subscribing to Solidarity magazine and checking our website at [www.solidarity.net.au](http://www.solidarity.net.au)



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# A timeline of racist Intervention

## 2007

### June 21 Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) legislation is passed through Federal Parliament

The Racial Discrimination Act (RDA) is suspended. The Australian Army enters Aboriginal communities as part of the “stabilisation” phase.

### July 7 NT NAIDOC week marches oppose Intervention

More than 2000 people march in Darwin, the biggest NAIDOC march in NT history. Two weeks later 500 march in Alice Springs, led by women from prescribed areas who burn a copy of the legislation.

### Nov 18 First National Day of Action against the Intervention

500 march in Sydney and Alice Springs. Rallies in other capital cities.

## 2008

### Feb 12 Convergence on Canberra

A delegation of 50 Aboriginal people from the NT lead a 2000-strong protest on the new Labor government’s first parliamentary sitting day.

### Feb 13 Apology to the Stolen Generations

Huge crowds gather around the country to see live broadcasts of Kevin Rudd’s apology. He commits to “a future where this parliament resolves the injustices of the past must never, never happen again”.

### Feb 22 CFMEU annual conference calls for repeal of NTER legislation

### July Future housing restricted to 16 communities

NT and federal program restricts new housing in the NT to only 16 communities—on the condition that township land is signed over to government on long term leases.

### Sept 29 First meeting of Prescribed Area People’s Alliance (PAPA)

More than 100 Aboriginal people from across the NT meet in Alice Springs to call for an end to the Intervention.

### Oct 13 NTER Review Board report recommends end to compulsory income management and re-instatement of RDA

### Oct 18 Bi-lingual education scrapped in NT

The NT government announces the end of bi-lingual education programs. Teaching in Aboriginal languages will be restricted to afternoons.

## 2009

### April 2 UN Human Rights Committee expresses concern with Intervention and calls for reinstatement of RDA

### May 20 NT government sounds death knell for homelands

The “Working-Futures” policy is announced. This will see more than 500 Aboriginal communities starved of resources, forcing people to move into 20 “hub towns”.

### June 3 ACTU calls for an end to discriminatory policy

The Australian Council of Trade Unions passes policy demanding an end to compulsory Income Management, the acquisition of Aboriginal land and the tying of basic services to long term leases.

### July 14 Elders from Ampilatwatja lead a walk off, setting up a protest camp three kilometers from the township

### November 18 Amnesty International Secretary General Irene Khan condemns racial discrimination under the Intervention after visiting the NT community of Utopia

December Federal government completes takeover of Alice Springs town camps, through Tangentyere council signing 40-year lease. Macklin had earlier threatened compulsory acquisition if leases weren’t signed

## 2010

Feb 14 Launch of protest house at Ampilatwatja walk off, built by union solidarity brigade with help from local community in two weeks

Feb 24 UN Special Rapporteur on Indigenous rights James Anaya releases his findings on the Intervention, condemning it as “racist” and in breach of Australia’s obligations under international law

June 21 New Intervention laws passed, amidst claims they reintroduce the RDA—yet this only applies to Income Management and they are designed to ensure compulsory welfare quarantining can continue

August 21 Barb Shaw outpolls all other candidates across Central Australian Aboriginal communities in the federal election, running on an anti-Intervention platform for The Greens

October 20 More than 200 Gurindji people stop work at Kalkarinji to protest the Intervention and loss of CDEP jobs

November Trade union delegation led by ACTU and Secretary Jeff Lawrence tours NT communities to hear about the impact of Intervention

## 2011

May 10 Announcement of new Income Management “trial sites” at five locations outside the NT. A coalition against Income Management formed in Bankstown with support of unions, church groups and community sector

June 21 Statement “Alternative to the Intervention: Rebuilding from the ground up” launched by the anti-Intervention campaign in Darwin

June 22 Jenny Macklin releases Stronger Futures discussion paper outlining plans for a “second Intervention” and launches new round of sham consultations

August 26 Gurindji Freedom Day’s 45-anniversary marked by protests against the Intervention

November 14 Government announces Stronger Futures legislation, entrenching most Intervention measures for a further 10 years

## 2012

January 4 Kwementyaye Briscoe dies in a police cell in Alice Springs after being wrongfully arrested and assaulted by police. Family members say he is a “victim of the Intervention”.

April 4 The Yolngu Nations Assembly of Arnhem Land releases a statement demanding the withdrawal of Stronger Futures legislation. A broad alliance backs the statement including the Catholic and Anglican churches, major trade unions, Aboriginal bodies and more than 40,000 people who sign a supporting petition “Stand for Freedom”

June 28 Stronger Futures passes into law

July NSW branch of the Labor Party unanimously votes to oppose compulsory income management. Child protection workers from the Public Sector Association vote for an industrial ban on the implementation of income management in NSW

# SIX YEARS OF SHAME: ABORIGINAL ASSIMILATION AND THE NT INTERVENTION

Six years after Howard sent in the troops to Aboriginal communities to begin the Northern Territory Intervention, **Paddy Gibson** surveys the impact of assimilationist policies

ON JUNE 21 2007, Liberal Prime Minister John Howard launched the Northern Territory Intervention.

The Racial Discrimination Act (RDA) was suspended to allow the imposition of an explicitly racist regime over Aboriginal lives and communities. The army was sent in to Aboriginal lands as a “shock and awe” tactic to send a clear message that the Commonwealth was in complete control.

Howard had fought assiduously to re-establish the politics of assimilation throughout his eleven years in office, to push back the gains made by the Aboriginal rights movement and the fight for self-determination.

He mercilessly manipulated the issue of child sex abuse and wild assertions about “pedophile rings” to push his assimilation agenda. Those assertions were disproven by extensive investigations by the Australian Crime Commission.

Howard’s new assimilation project also came with a hard neo-liberal economic edge. He declared that Aboriginal people had “no future outside the Australian mainstream”.

Funding agreements with the NT government restricted productive investment to a handful of larger communities—the rest were written off as “economically unviable”.

In 2012, Labor passed Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory, a package of laws extending most Intervention measures until 2022. Draconian controls first mooted as an “emergency response” have become the touchstone for Aboriginal politics into

the foreseeable future.

## The impact

The Intervention has had a devastating impact on Aboriginal communities. At the core of this has been the destruction of employment opportunities and municipal and other community services with the closure of the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP). A recent report by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) reform council found that the NT had the highest level of Indigenous unemployment.

After six years of the Intervention, the NT Children’s Commissioner Howard Bath says that, “on the whole, the child well-being indicators in remote communities are getting worse”. A recent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commission report says that the number of incidents of attempted suicide and self-harm being reported in remote communities has exploded by more than 500 per cent.

The report noted: “We know that feelings of hopelessness and disempowerment contribute to vulnerability to suicide. These types of feelings are well documented and widely acknowledged symptoms of the local government reforms and the Intervention.”

Aboriginal imprisonment has doubled since 2007, giving the NT one of the highest imprisonment rates in the world. The number of Aboriginal women being incarcerated is now more than three times pre-Intervention levels. Conditions in NT prisons resemble concentrations camps,

with 15 people in a cell, thin mattresses on the floor and cells which flood when it rains.

More than twice the number of children are being removed from their families by child protection authorities (see back page).

Despite racist legislation and a massive police crackdown, alcohol-related domestic violence incidents have increased with every year of the Intervention. Fewer children are going to school, despite three layers of punishment for parents—fines from the NT government, income management through Centrelink and cuts to Centrelink payments under the new School Enrolment and Attendance Measure (SEAM).

The \$700 million Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program (SIHIP) has done more to line the pockets of multi-national construction companies who won the contracts than alleviate the shocking housing conditions in Aboriginal communities; more than 20 people in a

house is still common.

The government’s own figures show there will be no improvements in overcrowding rates. New housing is only planned for 16 of the hundreds of Aboriginal communities and outstations. The NT Housing department has taken over administration from Aboriginal organisations, leading to increased rents and deterioration in services.

The compulsory five-year township leases seized through the Intervention lapsed in June 2012. But the Labor government then put a new ultimatum to communities—sign a 40-year lease over housing stock and administrative buildings or suffer cuts in funding. Since taking power in September 2013, the Liberals are again foisting 99-year, whole of township leases on communities, in “exchange” for investments from the Aboriginal Benefits Account. The ABA comes from revenue from mining on Aboriginal lands and is already supposed to be spent on community development.

## National agenda

Besides the devastation in the Northern Territory, the Intervention has provided the framework for spreading the politics of assimilation and punishment across Australia.

In every state, more punitive measures are imposed on Aboriginal people. The number of Aboriginal children being removed by child protection authorities has increased 68 per cent over the years of the Intervention.

Labor cut CDEP across Australia, crippled communities and

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**The Intervention has provided the framework for spreading the politics of assimilation and punishment across Australia**

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threw more than 20,000 Aboriginal people out of work.

Rene Adams, head of the Toomelah Aboriginal Co-op in North West NSW told *Tracker* magazine, “all people who were on CDEP are basically unemployed now... Mental health issues and suicides have increased. There’s more drugs, more violence, more alcohol. It’s heart breaking.”

Since the Intervention, the government’s major Indigenous employment initiative revolved around a corporate venture, Australian Employment Covenant (AEC) and GenerationOne, run by mining boss Andrew Forrest. It supposedly aims to get 50,000 Aboriginal people into jobs pledged by the corporate sector.

When the AEC was set up in 2011, the then Labor Indigenous Employment Minister, Mark Arbib, told the Senate that the explicit aim of the AEC was to “mainstream” Aboriginal people away from their communities: “The issue that you are raising, which is people in remote areas being mobile enough to move from, say, Yirrkalā down to Melbourne to take up a job through the AEC, is extremely difficult... [but] I am confident that we will see further improvement, because we are making the connections now that allow for better channelling of people into jobs.”

More than 50,000 “pledges” have now come in from corporate Australia—but these are pledges, not actual jobs. Only 14,000 jobs have been secured in the last five years, and according to the AEC’s own figures 30 per cent of the jobs did not last six months.

Andrew Forrest says he has personally contributed between \$50-100 million of his personal fortune to the project. It would have been far better if he had just handed the money to Aboriginal organisations to fund vital services.

One of the first acts of the Abbott government was to appoint Forrest to head yet another “review” into Indigenous employment, which has foreshadowed even more punitive measures to force Aboriginal people off their



Above: Canberra’s signs of shame that mark the prescribed communities, this one outside Yuendumu

lands into work or training for corporate Australia.

The Liberals’ hand-picked “Indigenous advisory council” includes the CEO of Westpac and Managing Director of Rio Tinto. In December 2013 they changed of regulations to the NT Land Rights Act to allow new companies outside of the Land Council structure, including non-Aboriginal interests, to deal away Aboriginal lands.

Despite the intensity of these attacks, Intervention has failed to smash the idea of self-determination. If anything its dramatic failures have on the one hand increased the opposition to the notions of assimilation behind the Intervention, and on the other increased the institutional support for policies backing Aboriginal self-determination.

In 2012, hundreds of submissions from across Australia were made to an inquiry into the proposed “Stronger Futures” laws, calling on the government to abandon the Intervention, including from the Australian Council of Trade Unions, the Australian Council of Social Services and national Aboriginal organisations. A statement by the Yolngu Nations’ Assembly in Arnhem Land rejecting the Stronger Futures bill

was supported by the Uniting and Catholic Churches.

### Empty symbolism

At the ideological level the government is trying to cover the deprivation of Aboriginal people and their ongoing racism with symbolic gestures.

The first was Kevin Rudd’s much-acclaimed apology to the Stolen Generations. Now we have the government-backed push for constitutional recognition of Indigenous people. The first politician to seriously float this idea was John Howard in the final month before the 2007 election, immediately after he launched the NT Intervention.

In late May 2012, Labor, Liberal and corporate leaders participated in the launch of a flashy government funded campaign for changes to the constitution, branded “Recognise”.

But while supporting “Recognise”, newly elected Liberal Prime Minister Tony Abbott has stressed there will be no recognition of Aboriginal people’s rights to land—or rights to anything at all. There will just be a simple statement that Aboriginal people were here before colonisation.

The support by Australia’s political elite for constitutional rec-

ognition is designed to incorporate Aboriginal leaders into a tokenistic process that provides cover for the ongoing racism and devastation wrought by government policy.

“Recognise” offers no relief from Stronger Futures or the shattering of Aboriginal communities through child removal, deaths in custody, increasing incarceration, more punitive welfare reforms and moves to undermine collective ownership of land. It will do nothing to stop a new wave of devastating funding cuts announced by Abbott, including the removal of \$13 million in funding from Aboriginal Legal Aid and the abolition of advocacy bodies such as Aboriginal Early Childhood Support and Learning.

These cuts should be fought with protests and strikes. There are campaigns against Income Management and the growing outcry over the new Stolen Generation that need support. So too protests for justice for deaths in custody victims and to defend Aboriginal land from mining and pollution, like the campaign against the Muckaty waste dump. A renewed fight for Aboriginal rights is needed—out on the streets—to push back the offensive begun by the Intervention and put self-determination back on the agenda.

# Unions, Labor members say no more Income Management

By Geraldine Fela

A COMMITMENT to organising with unionists has paid off for the campaign against the NT Intervention and the rollout of Income Management into Bankstown. Child protection workers in the Public Service Association (PSA) in New South Wales have had an industrial ban on participating in the implementation of Income Management and on referring their clients to Centrelink since July 2012.

The PSA's action is a powerful antidote to the official line that Income Management "helps families" and is "in the interests of children." It is an embarrassment to the government and shows that child protection workers regard Income Management as a policy that punishes and stigmatises the people they work with. Importantly, many of the workers involved see their action as part of opposing the racism of Income Management and the entire Intervention in the Northern Territory.

In July 2012 the NSW ALP conference also unanimously passed a motion calling on the government to halt the rollout of Income Management in Bankstown and any other community and review the Stronger Futures legislation that extends the Intervention for ten years.

The motion also called for the redirection of all funds earmarked for Income Management into programs to provide real support for people, such as job creation and social services and called for the right for anyone on the system to be able to exit immediately. This gives the campaign a powerful tool in forcing the debate about Income Management and the NT Intervention as the government's continues to roll out the system to five "trial sites" outside the NT.

## APY push

There is now widespread opposition to Income Management amongst both the Aboriginal community and the community sector.



**Above: Sue, a PSA member, addresses a Stop the Intervention Collective demonstration**

But in October 2012 the Labor government used the call of the NPY Women's Council to expand Income Management into the remote Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) lands in South Australia.

The Women's Council is the only Aboriginal organisation that unequivocally supported Stronger Futures in submissions to the Senate inquiry on the legislation. They've long been a conservative organisation that the government relies upon to cover up for the mass hatred of Intervention policies amongst Aboriginal people.

The opposition to Stronger Futures extends as widely as the entire Catholic Church of Australia. At the conclusion of the National Assembly of the Uniting Church in Adelaide in July 2012, church representatives led a march to parliament to hold a prayer vigil against Stronger Futures.

The NPY Women's Council's call does not reflect the views of people on the ground in the APY Lands. Mr Murray George, a member of the executive of the APY Land Council, travelled

to six community consultation meetings on Income Management within the area where people overwhelmingly rejected proposals to introduce the scheme. The extent of the opposition was such that Centrelink officials dropped out of the consultations. As Mr George said, "They're not listening to people, you know...I walk the communities, I go and sit down with the community and I talk to those people and I know what they want."

This truth was acknowledged by a meeting of SA Unions, the peak union body in South Australia. They passed a motion opposing the roll out of Income Management in the APY Lands, noting that "...all communities in the APY Lands have rejected the introduction of compulsory Income Management at a recent visit by federal government officials despite the claims by Indigenous Affairs

Minister Jenny Macklin..."

They also expressed their opposition to Income Management in Playford, Adelaide, one of the five trial sites, as well as the NT Intervention which they declared has, "had serious detrimental effects on the culture and wellbeing of Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory."

Rather than measures to control people, APY Lands communities desperately need money for jobs and investment in social services. The Labor government progressively axed 400 jobs—from a community where 900 people are of working age—since cuts to the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) in the APY Lands began in July 2009. Now they want to blame Aboriginal people for the misery they've inflicted.

The push only reinforces the importance of the campaign in Bankstown. A victory there could be a real boost to those in the APY lands opposing this, as well as those in the Northern Territory bracing themselves for another decade of the Intervention.



# Income Management expansion in effort to break boycott

By Paddy Gibson

FORMER LABOR Indigenous Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin launched a further expansion of the Income Management system in mid-2013, sparking renewed protest.

Income Management quarantines 50 per cent of Centrelink payments, so it cannot be accessed as cash and can only be used in stores and on items approved by the government.

From July 2013, people under 25 exiting prison and receiving the “crisis payment” will automatically be placed on compulsory Income Management.

Youth with an “unreasonable to live at home” status with Centrelink, or under 16s on a special benefit, will be forced onto the system.

This follows the expansion of Income Management in July 2012 to five new “trial sites”, including Bankstown in Sydney. A coalition, “No to Government Income Management—Not in Bankstown, Not Anywhere” has 67 organisations listed as supporters including major trade unions, ethnic and faith groups.

Whereas Income Management in the NT is applied automatically to more than 13,000 long-term unemployed and young people on benefits, in the “trial sites” it relies on referrals from social workers or child protection workers who believe their clients may be “vulnerable to financial crisis”.

But community sector workers in Bankstown have been refusing to refer people as part of a boycott called for by the campaign. Laudably, Child Protection workers in the Public Sector Association (PSA NSW) have voted for an industrial ban on referrals.

Figures released in January show Bankstown has the lowest numbers of people on Income Management in the country, with only a handful of people on the compulsory measure. And the



Above: Campaigning to support the PSA ban on Income Management

lack of enthusiasm about Income Management from workers is evident at all the “trial sites”.

Whereas the government was planning for 1000 people per year in each site, the average number so far is around 50. The announcement of the new mandatory categories is a clear attempt to circumvent this boycott.

## Campaign

What this policy will mean for people already struggling is clear. Recently, an Aboriginal woman in Bankstown was referred to Income Management by the NSW Housing Department. She was \$500 in arrears, making her allegedly “vulnerable” because of risk of eviction.

The campaign helped her lodge and appeal and access records to prove the source of the arrears was actually administrative errors by Centrelink and NSW Housing! No decision had been made in her appeal.

As a result of the expansion, many more will find themselves in this situation.

## Racism

On top of the new “youth at risk”

category, the Laverton and the Ngaanyatjarra Lands in Western Australia were added as the latest “trial sites” on April 15.

Income Management was first applied in 2007 as part of the Howard government’s racist Intervention in Northern Territory Aboriginal communities. For all Macklin’s talk of a new

“non-discriminatory” system, it is clear that punishment and control of Aboriginal people remains the primary purpose of Income Management.

And Income Management is set for further expansion in the NT itself. Labor has already entrenched the Intervention for another ten years, and Income Management will apply indefinitely.

The new Country Liberals government in the NT introduced draconian legislation in April which will mandate “mandatory rehabilitation”—read three months or more of detention—for people picked up drunk by police three times. Along with deprivation of liberty, the new policy also foreshadows imposition of Income Management of up to 100 per cent of payments!

Aboriginal people in the NT still live under the harshest Income Management, with 15,000 Aboriginal people still in the regime, they make up more than 80 per cent of people on the system Australia wide.

Linking up the fight against the Income Management expansion with the NT Intervention will continue to be important.

**Bankstown has the lowest numbers of people on Income Management in the country, with only a handful of people on the compulsory measure**

# GenerationOne: the gloss on an assimilation agenda

By Jasmine Ali and Paddy Gibson

GENERATIONONE IS a corporate-funded campaign, ostensibly aiming to “close the gap” in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. But behind the gloss lurks a contemporary agenda of assimilation.

GenerationOne is a new front for the Australian Employment Covenant (AEC), launched by then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and Fortescue Metals Group CEO Twigg Forrester in October 2008 and backed by other corporate moguls such as James Packer and Andrew Fox.

Forrester is the same man whose company won a court case in 2009, FMG vs Cox, establishing that there is no serious obligation to negotiate with Native Title holders before mining on their land.

The AEC offers training subsidies to corporations pledging to employ Indigenous people and ties these positions into Jobs Services Australia run through Centrelink. The AEC committed to creating 50,000 jobs for Indigenous people in two years. These promises sounded hollow then and now look like a sick joke.

A report by Dr Kirrily Jordan from the ANU, released in October 2010, found that the AEC had achieved less than 3000 job placements in two years.

Questioning in the Senate by Greens Senator Rachel Siewert revealed that only 282 job placements were confirmed to have lasted beyond 26 weeks (the period of intensive government subsidy).

Andrew Forrest says that approximately 25,000 jobs have been “pledged” by corporations and governments across Australia. But the vast majority of these positions do not yet exist.

The AEC and GenerationOne are key planks of an assimilation-



Jenny Macklin launches the GenerationOne roadshow

ist government policy framework that is about dismantling Aboriginal communities and organisations and blaming Aboriginal people themselves for social problems such as unemployment.

## Mainstreaming

The AEC has replaced Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) as the government's premiere Indigenous employment strategy.

CDEP focused on employment providing services within Aboriginal communities and was administered by Aboriginal organisations. In contrast to the AEC's fictional 50,000 jobs, at the height CDEP in 2005, more than 35,000 Indigenous people were engaged in the program.

Wages were substandard and CDEP workers were denied key rights such as superannuation. But rather than build on the strengths of CDEP and improve conditions for workers, the Howard government began to abolish CDEPs in 2007. The results have been devastating. Indigenous unemployment has gone from 13.8 per cent in 2007 to 18.1 per cent in 2009. Remote Aboriginal communities across Australia relied on CDEP

for the delivery of basic municipal services. Many face collapse.

Kirrily Jordan's report revealed that AEC jobs were overwhelmingly concentrated in major capital cities.

The AEC explicitly seeks to “mainstream” Aboriginal people through forced migration from their communities into urban centres. Indigenous Employment Minister Mark Arbib assured the Senate that the government was up to this massive task of social engineering: “The issue that you are raising, which is people in remote areas being mobile enough to move from, say, Yirrkala down to Melbourne to take up a job through the AEC, is extremely difficult... [but] I am confident that... we are making the connections now that allow for better channelling of people into jobs.”

We can't rely on the “goodwill” of Forrest and Co; Indigenous employment targets need to be forced on the corporate sector by law. And we need a serious fight back demanding public investment in employment schemes under Aboriginal control—starting with resistance to the NT Intervention and the jobs massacre now taking place across remote Australia.

Mark Fordham was the works manager for the Barkly Shire Council (BSC) who service Ampilatwatja, a “prescribed community” under the NT Intervention. Alongside the Intervention, mega-Shires like the BSC have taken over from locally run Aboriginal community councils, acquiring all of their assets and laying off staff.

On April 9 2010, a temporary Barkly Shire Services Manager appointed to Ampilatwatja ordered workers to dump raw sewage at the local tip, approximately 800 metres from the school.

Mark refused to co-operate with this order and spoke out publicly when the Shire brought in contractors to do the job. Mark has been persecuted for speaking out. After he challenged a BSC decision to refuse him annual leave, Shire management sent police to evict Mark and his two young sons from their house at Ampilatwatja. He was issued with a dismissal notice, arrested for threatening Shire management and banned from all communities in the Barkly region.

Here he speaks about the incredible difficulties faced by Aboriginal workers who are trying to deliver basic services in the community under the regime of the Intervention. He also discusses the new Shires and the NT Government's “hub towns” policy that means no new resources to Ampilatwatja and the majority of communities in the NT.

Tragically Mark died of a heart attack on February 2, 2011, aged just 37.

A campaign initiated by unions and the Intervention Rollback Action Group in Alice Springs has been working with unions in Central Australia, especially the LHMU who represent Shire workers, to demand investment in “Jobs with Justice” instead of the racist Intervention.

**In your time here, what has been organised by the Government Business Manager (GBM) who has been installed through the Intervention?**

The only thing I have seen in the



# Aboriginal communities say: 'We need jobs and services not the Intervention'

last eight to ten months is a big shelter over the Basketball court. But the funding was approved for that years ago, the GBM just got the money to a contractor.

## What's the attitude to the local Aboriginal workforce when these projects happen?

It's a very sad story. No Aboriginal person on the community was employed to help build the Basketball stadium. The contractors have brought in entirely their own work crew and gang.

Every contractor that comes out does exactly the same thing. They don't hire any of the local guys. Plenty of people here have training—but they are not willing to pay anyone a proper wage.

## You've had experience working with the Shire. What is the attitude of the Shire to dealing with the serious lack of services here, or getting local Aboriginal people into work?

It's a complete joke. There are positions that are badly needed on this community but the Barkly Shire refuses to put people on. With my position I was forced to do half a dozen jobs in a day—and the next day five or six others.

That's happening right across the region. We need proper positions so people can work on basic things like rubbish, sewage and maintenance everyday if we're going to keep up with the problems.

## So as a result, you get the sewage overflows, the garbage everywhere?

You get to a crisis stage where you have five or six houses that have got sewage problems. Then we need to drop what we are doing as our daily or weekly job to scramble and try and stop a sewage overflow.

## Do the Barkly Shire often use



## contract labour from outside the community?

They get contractors for basically everything. Pump out septic tank and dispose of it any way they can, the whipper-snipping, lawn mowing, hanging doors and windows. All these jobs that Aboriginal people can and should be doing.

## What about the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) run through the Shire, where people are now working for their Centrelink payments that are quarantined on the BasicsCard?

When I started here, we had no other full-time workers on. But I had 15 blokes coming in every day (for CDEP) and I probably would have got eight of them wanting to work full days. But the Barkly Shire was only willing to run them for their Centrelink payments, which is 16 hours a week. Some guys would work full days, even though they weren't being paid for it. They just wanted to work.

Through Centrelink people only get \$100 or something cash a week and the rest on the BasicsCard. So a lot of those guys have just dropped out and walked away. There's no light at the end of the tunnel. Forever and a day just work CDEP for the BasicsCard. Why are we not paying them wages?

## What sort of work were people doing for the BasicsCard?

All municipal work. Before we had the rubbish truck, they were actually picking it up by hand. Mowing the lawns, painting, housing maintenance, pumping the septic tanks, fixing the airstrip, slashing the grass and fixing fences.

## Have you ever encountered racism from the Barkly Shire managers?

It exists, but these people in these positions have the experience to be nice about being racist. For example, I suggested for them to put in for a grater, or some heavy earth moving equipment to maintain the roads—invest in some equipment for the whole region. But as an Aboriginal person, I get the feeling that they don't take me seriously. It's not because of my lack of experience or education, it's because of the colour of my skin. I haven't seen any Aboriginal people in senior Shire positions. All of them are taken up by whitefellas really.

## Can you take us through step by step about what happened with the dumping of the sewage?

When I first started here, one of the main issues was that a lot of septic tanks were overflowing.

The guys were being instructed by the Shire to just take it out bush and dump it on the ground. I said that this was an illegal practice and I didn't want to have any part in it. So the previous Shire Services Manager got a licensed truck out from Alice Springs, to travel back and dispose of it in the proper manner.

But since that manager has left and the temporary manager has come in—who happens to be the Regional Housing Manager for the Barkly Shire—we've just gone back to the Middle Ages so to speak. He just ordered we go out and dump it out on the flat at the tip.

The local guys refused. But they brought in two contractors who pumped out over 3000 litres, then went to the rubbish dump, just let the hose out and drove round and round in circles until all the sewage had drained out.

So now we've got approximately 3000 litres of raw sewage sitting out at the rubbish dump. It's rained for a couple of days, all muddy for the dogs to come back here. That afternoon one of the contractors was flown out to hospital. Just by watching those guys work I could tell they had no training. They drove around the whole community with it on the truck, dripping raw sewage out the back!



Raw sewage left uncovered at Ampilatwatja tip

# Communities opposed Intervention from the start

By Paddy Gibson

THE WALPIRI people of Yuendumu, 300 kilometres northwest of Alice Springs, have been at the forefront of the fightback against the NT Intervention.

Following Howard's announcement in June 2007, the community council took a strong position against the laws and adopted a strategy of non-compliance that held off repeated attempts to enforce regressive changes.

Harry Jakamarra Nelson, president of the community council, was one of many Yuendumu residents who traveled to Canberra to join a mass demonstration against the Intervention on the first sitting day of parliament for the new Rudd government.

He argues that the paternalism of the Intervention has been "a nightmare... it's trying to take us back forty years" and insists, "our people will never bow down".

The Intervention saw a Government Business Manager (GBM) stationed at Yuendumu behind a barbed wire fence. The GBM was given extraordinary powers, including the ability to remove people from their own community and seize control of locally owned assets and services.

He refused to talk to local people, liaising only with white "bosses", without even introducing himself to many respected traditional owners and community members.

From their first appearance in the town, Intervention officials were met with angry community meetings.

Jeanie Egan, from the Yuendumu community council has said, "They come here to tell us what to do. They are not interested when we talk about our rights."

Yuendumu is proud of successful independent organisations that provide services and employment opportunities in the community, built up over many years by the local community. Yuendumu



The Yuendumu business manager's residence is fenced with barbed wire

women were the founders of the Night Patrol Service, which has been copied in many communities across the NT. It has been successful in assisting people out at night who are at risk of causing or being the victim of crime, and providing them a safe place to go to.

But rather than supporting local initiative, Intervention officials applied enormous pressure on community-run organisations, trying to seize assets and administrative control.

The Old People's Program, for example, has consistently been forced to assert its autonomy.

The biggest confrontation

however, came over the welfare quarantine system. This system has proved a disaster across the NT, segregating service delivery in Centrelink and shops and severely restricting the ability of Aboriginal people to control their own lives.

## Community store defies quarantine

In late 2007, Intervention officials began trying to set a firm date for the introduction of the quarantine. But non-cooperation by the people at Yuendumu frustrated this. In open defiance of officials, the local Social Club store and the mining shop refused to apply for a license that would allow the new system to operate.

This left Intervention officials with a choice. They could have brought in the quarantine without a local shop in the system, forcing people to travel the 300 kilometres into Alice Springs for shopping.

Similar measures have been applied in other communities, forcing literally thousands of people into urban centres.

But Yuendumu is the largest remote community in central Australia and the backlash would

have been too strong. Instead, they pushed on with attempts to enforce the policy against overwhelming opposition in the community.

From April 2008, the Social Club store, which has been community owned and run for decades, began to be threatened with take over. Payments on government purchase orders were withheld. Still, the committee running the store refused to shift its position and began to prepare a legal and political defence campaign.

In late May 2008, the government began pushing a plan to establish another store in Yuendumu to run the quarantine.

This would have forced residents to shop away from the Social Club store, a serious threat to its viability.

Many residents who travel between Yuendumu and other prescribed communities were already suffering because there was nowhere for them to spend quarantined money in the township.

On June 5 that year, the Social Club committee released a statement explaining they would participate in income management, while stressing their ongoing opposition to the Intervention.

Despite this set back, the resistance shown by the Walpiri at Yuendumu has demonstrated to many in prescribed communities across the NT that the Intervention can be fought.

Mr Nelson, who attends Central Land Council meetings, has said, "people are starting to realise it's not doing any good. They don't need to accept that".

Large delegations from Yuendumu have travelled into Alice Springs to take part in major day of protest action against the Intervention.

The hard battle for basic rights being fought at a community level needs the backing of a strong movement across the country. We must stop the ruthless implementation of these racist laws on Aboriginal people.

**From their first appearance in the town, Intervention officials have been met with angry community meetings**



# Gurindji want freedom from Intervention



Banners at the Gurindji Freedom Day demonstration in Daguragu in August 2011

By Paddy Gibson

GURINDJI FREEDOM day, August 26, is usually a time for celebration. But 2011's activities, on the 45-year anniversary of Freedom Day, condemned the racist NT Intervention that has stripped back many of the rights won through the original walk-off.

Freedom Day commemorates the famous Gurindji walk-off from Wave Hall station in 1966, immortalised in the Paul Kelly song, *From Little Things, Big Things Grow*.

Aboriginal stockmen and domestic servants, paid in rations by cattle baron Lord Vestey, went on strike to demand equal pay with white workers. This struggle soon spilled over into a fight for land rights that won a historic victory on August 26, 1975 when Gough Whitlam granted land title to Daguragu, famously pouring sand into the hands of strike leader Vincent Lingiari.

The government has seized control of Daguragu under a compulsory five-year lease. Cuts to Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) and the take-over of the Daguragu Community Government Council by a new mega-Shire, controlled from Katherine 450 kilometres away, have decimated the community.

Everything has been closed down: the arts centre, workshop, brick-making enterprise, bakery, family centre, health clinic, CDEP office, nursery and canteen. Assets

such as road grading equipment and buses have been taken.

Philip Chubb, who used to work at the bakery, said that all of his fellow bakers were now unemployed due to lack of funding and the racism of the Shire management. "Most young people are just working for their Basics-Card now" said Philip. The new CDEP scheme forces people to work for the income managed dole payments in the form of the BasicsCard.

Regina, who used to work as a child nutritionist at the Daguragu family centre, is also unemployed. She said that the community was facing a new "stolen generation": "It's hard for the young mothers now. There are no support services for them and if their babies don't put on weight, they'll be taken away by welfare.

"We had five children taken from one family last year. They just flew in on a plane and took those children to Darwin, leaving their parents suffering. They can't be with us here to celebrate Freedom Day, because they are in Darwin fighting to get their children back".

## Fighting the government

On Freedom Day 2011, hundreds of Gurindji people and supporters from across the country marched from the Shire office in Kalkaringi down to the Victoria River, in a re-enactment of the original walk-off. The locals carried banners with anti-Intervention slogans

such as "Stop the NT Intervention, Gurindji Demand Community Control".

A meeting by the river then heard speakers both recount the struggles of the past and condemn the Intervention. Local leader Gus George said: "This Freedom Day we are talking up strongly and fighting the government. We got no rights to have a say in the community. Government took the community away. We had Aboriginal owned enterprise and all, but they took all the funding away. All missing. That's true for every community in the Territory".

A Central Land Council (CLC) full council meeting was

held in the days leading up to Freedom Day. Former Labor Indigenous Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin addressed the meeting, trying to sell her government's *Stronger Futures* policy that will continue most Intervention measures for a further ten years.

Macklin faced a protest at the Kalkaringi airport from locals and then angry questioning from CLC delegates. After a presentation from the Intervention Rollback Action Group, council delegates voted to endorse *Rebuilding from the Ground Up: An Alternative to the NT Intervention*, an eleven point program based on Aboriginal community control championed by Stop the Intervention Collective Sydney and the national campaign.

CLC delegates Rob Roy and Ngarla Kunoth-Monks read out the Land Council's own statement to the Freedom Day meeting: "We demand an apology from our governments for the terrible recent policies that encourage assimilation and 'normalisation'—this amounts to cultural genocide".

The national Freedom Day activities created a renewed momentum amongst the Gurindji. Just days after Freedom Day, a wildcat strike by shire workers successfully forced the resignation of a racist manager.

In Sydney, the Stop the Intervention Collective held a 100 strong lunchtime protest outside the office of Labor MP Tanya Plibersek in solidarity.

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**"Government took the community away. That's true for every community in the Territory"**

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# ENTRENCHING THE NT INTERVENTION: WHAT HAPPENED TO THE RESISTANCE?

**Paddy Gibson** looks at how the ruthless imposition of Intervention measures in the NT has undermined resistance, and what this means for the future

THE NT Intervention (Northern Territory Emergency Response, NTER) was launched by Liberal Prime Minister John Howard just before his final election campaign in 2007. It was an attempt at a final dispossession, to sweep away the “Aboriginal problem” and to bury the idea of Aboriginal self-determination.

Throughout his eleven-year term Howard promoted conservative historians fighting “history wars”, denying the frontier massacres and the Stolen Generation.

Howard argued it was the failings of Aboriginal people themselves, and their refusal to assimilate into “mainstream” culture and the market economy, that were to blame for the third world conditions in many communities.

In the NT, where the Commonwealth can exercise direct control, he planned to smash Aboriginal organisations and disperse Aboriginal communities living on their land. He ripped up the Land Rights Act. He announced the abolition of CDEP, an employment program employing 7500 Aboriginal people, which had been just enough to keep remote communities functioning.

Once again, Aboriginal people were to be subject to a protectionist regime controlling their lives and forcing them to assimilate.

When the Intervention first broke, very few in Australia’s progressive institutions were willing to openly denounce it. The Labor Party capitulated, voted for it and then expanded it when they took office in 2007.

Howard mercilessly exploited the emotive issue of child abuse to

**Many Aboriginal communities, seeing what was at stake openly resisted the NT Intervention from day one.**

silence, or stifle, any criticism.

A open letter to Minister Mal Brough initiated by the Australian Council of Social Services and signed by 60 organisations on June 26 2007 said, “we welcome your commitment to tackling violence and abuse” while meekly noting “in their present form the proposals miss their mark and are unlikely to be effective”. The letter called for more “consultation”, but not for an end to the Intervention or for Aboriginal control.

Many Aboriginal communities themselves however, seeing what was at stake openly resisted the NT Intervention from day one. Within a week, Aboriginal women in Alice Springs led a protest rally that burned a copy of the legislation.

Their resistance won support from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal activists across Australia. An Alice Springs meeting of a new “National Aboriginal Alliance” which included left wing Aboriginal leaders from the eastern states such as Michael Mansell and Larissa Behrendt

slammed the plan as an “invasion”.

After Labor’s election in November 2007, there was a national call for a rally in Canberra. On February 11 2008, the day before Rudd’s apology to the Stolen Generation, more than 2000 people marched from the Aboriginal Tent Embassy to Parliament House protesting the Intervention. This was one of the biggest rallies for Aboriginal rights since the 1988 Bicentenary march.

## Fightback

City-based committees such as the Stop the Intervention Collective Sydney saw that the battle over the Intervention had significance far beyond the NT. Across Australia, a serious fight was needed to challenge the Intervention and the impact of racism on the political system. The power of wider social forces outside isolated NT communities would be crucial to actually beat back the Intervention.

In 2008 there were a series of public forums and street demonstrations as Labor conducted a “review” of the Intervention. A convergence in September 2008 featured a meeting of the “Prescribed Area People’s Alliance” (PAPA), with more than 100 delegates from Aboriginal communities living under the Intervention issuing a statement for full repeal of the laws. Five hundred people marched through Alice Springs, the biggest protest in Central Australia since the 1970s marches for Land Rights.

A complaint by PAPA regarding the Intervention was upheld by the UN Committee for the

Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

But by 2009 however the Intervention was well and truly entrenched. CDEP cuts and the abolition of local government councils had seen thousands of jobs lost and millions of dollars of community assets confiscated.

The “review” had found widespread evidence of discrimination and misery under the Intervention, but Labor did not budge an inch. Government Business Managers sat safely in compounds on formerly Aboriginal land.

More than 15,000 people had been given a new BasicsCard to control their Centrelink payments, and confine spending to particular shops. The groundwork was in place to ensure that the new political order would continue long after the 5-year “sunset clause” attached to NTER legislation.

Central to this was forcing Aboriginal communities to sign “voluntary” 40-year leases that would last beyond the compulsory leases imposed by the NTER. The government first moved against the Alice Springs town camps, represented by the Tangentyere Council.

Tangentyere had successfully resisted a pre-Intervention ultimatum from the Howard’s Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough. But Labor’s Minister Jenny Macklin was more ruthless, threatening to compulsorily acquire the town camps forever unless Tangentyere signed a 40-year lease.

The anti-Intervention campaign gathered significant institutional support for Tangentyere.

A statement condemning the Intervention and Macklin's attack, "Keep Aboriginal Housing in Aboriginal Hands", was endorsed by a wide range of trade unions, welfare and Aboriginal organisations and published in *The Australian* newspaper in September 2009.

But even at this crucial point, very few of these organisations called their members to protest. Aboriginal Land Councils could have put hundreds on the streets, but preferred to "box clever" and not risk government funding. Reconciliation Groups circulated emails, but made nothing like the effort seen for the "bridge walk" in 2000.

Tangentyere eventually signed over the town camps, "with a gun held to our head" as Executive Director William Tilmouth described it. After Tangentyere fell, other major remote communities followed.

Nonetheless the campaign continued to fight. In 2009, hundreds of people from the community of Ampilatwatja staged a "walk-off". They set up a protest camp on traditional grounds just outside of the NTER leased area. Senior Alyawarr leader Banjo Morton said at the time, "They had us penned there like bullocks in a yard. We needed to step outside of that yard and stand up".

A trade union backed work-brigade traveled to Ampilatwatja, working with the local community to construct a house at the protest site. This was the first house built on Aboriginal land for Aboriginal people since the Intervention in 2007. It also began to rekindle solidarity networks with the unions that had historically played a central role in the fight for Aboriginal rights.

In 2010, Aboriginal workers being paid on the BasicsCard addressed stop-work and other union meetings in Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra.

By 2011, when the Labor government proposed a series of laws called "Stronger Futures", organisations ranging from ACOSS to the Catholic Church condemned them. In the NT communities, people used the Stronger Fu-



**A protest against the takeover of the Alice Springs town camps represented by the Tangentyere Council, was a turning point in breaking resistance to the Intervention**

ture "consultation meetings" to express their anger. The Yolngu Nations Assembly released fiery statements that galvanised online support, including a petition of more than 40,000 signatures, "Stand for Freedom", against Stronger Futures.

But there was still no sign that the broader forces now clearly opposed the Intervention were prepared to force the open confrontation with the government that was needed. Many NT leaders became demoralised. The last anti-Intervention rally held in the NT was in June 2011, with the Prescribed Area People's Alliance leading a crowd of 300 people through the streets of Darwin.

### **Conditions getting worse**

Since the Intervention there are more than twice as many NT Aboriginal people in prison, more than twice the number of children are being removed, the unemployment rate is worse, third world health conditions such as trachoma and glue ear are rife, self-harm incidents have increased five fold and there has been no let up in the horrific rates of domestic violence.

There are no new houses outside sixteen "hub towns", and even here these have made barely

a dint in chronic overcrowding.

Removing publicly funded community development programs has not led to a booming market economy; it has just left people to rot in deeper poverty. There has been no massive increase of Aboriginal jobs in the mining industry, but there has been a slow drift of even more people into overcrowded camps in urban centres where many are caught in cycles of homelessness and alcohol abuse.

The Intervention has increased the prominence of Aboriginal spokespeople willing to embrace punitive policies and corporate "solutions". Noel Pearson, Marcia Langton and Warren Mundine have been joined on the national stage by NT Aboriginal Liberal politicians like the new NT Chief Minister Adam Giles and Bess Price.

In the 2012 NT election, the Country Liberals ran on a platform of restoring community control over local government and ending neglect of small communities and outstations. This cynically tapped the deep anger in NT communities at the process of reform since 2007—but it was enough to sweep them to power on the back of Aboriginal votes.

In power the Country Liberals have meted out even more brutal Intervention-style punishment, putting 100 more police in urban areas, establishing "mandatory rehabilitation", criminalising Aboriginal drinkers and slashing the budget of support services.

The oppression confronting Aboriginal people across Australia has intensified since the NT Intervention.

There is deep anger amongst many grass-roots Aboriginal activists at the hollow symbolism of "constitutional recognition" being pushed by the government as the next great hope in Indigenous affairs.

A dogged fight against the national expansion of income management continues to keep the severe discrimination faced by Aboriginal people in the NT on the agenda.

We can't say which issue will be the focus of the next wave of struggle for Aboriginal rights. But the lessons of the campaign against the NT Intervention will be crucial for that fight. The legitimacy of the "new assimilation" represented by the Intervention is in tatters. But the fight for Aboriginal self-determination needs to find ways to break through.

# FROM INVASION TO TODAY: A HISTORY OF ASSIMILATION

Lucy Honan looks how today's NT Intervention is reviving assimilationist policies

THE MOST prevalent explanation of racism today is that it is just a set of bad ideas, based on prejudice or ignorance of other cultures. Hence we have Harmony Day, and multicultural days, on the basis that such events will educate people and cause racist ideas to disappear.

But a more radical analysis recognises that racism is built into the structure of our society, and that it will require a real struggle to uproot it.

Racism is not something that has existed forever. It emerged historically in 17th century. Prior to this forms of oppression and discrimination existed. But the idea that one set of human beings were inferior to other human beings because of a set of physical characteristics or their race arose with the era of colonial slavery.

In pre-capitalist slave societies, such as Greece, Egypt or Rome slavery was never justified on racist grounds. It was justified as being expedient to a society, part of the spoils of war, or on class grounds, but not race.

Racism developed hand in hand with the development of the capitalist system.

Capitalism was expanding from Europe to America and the New World. The plantation crops produced in the New World were indispensable for industry in Britain. Growing production in Europe required more cotton and sugar produced by slaves and the slave trade.

It became more and more profitable to bring large numbers of slaves from Africa to the New World.

But slavery stood in stark contrast to the new ideology of democracy beginning to spread in Europe, along with capitalism. The bourgeoisie, the new ruling

class, promoted the idea that we are all born free and equal.

But the slave was not free. There was no hiding the fact that people were born into slavery and that slaves were physically compelled to work.

The ideology of racism emerged to justify slavery. It held that slaves did not deserve to be free, as they were inferior to white Europeans, or even subhuman. This led to "scientific" justifications of racism, and the measurement of skull sizes, noses, and so on to "prove" racial inferiority.

## Colonising Australia

This ideological racism became a very useful justification for colonialism. The racist ideas that justified slavery could also be used to justify the stealing of indigenous peoples' land.

They were used by the British to justify the dispossession of Aboriginal people as soon as they arrived in Australia.

European invasion drove Aboriginal people off their land, disrupting and destroying their traditions and way of life. Almost from the beginning, Aboriginal people fought back.

But the British colonists carried out a policy of massacre. In Tasmania 5000 Aboriginal people were reduced to 200 in the space of 30 years between 1803 and 1830. In 1834 pastoralists from Tasmania established the first permanent settlement in Victoria. Over the next 15 years there were 68 massacres, and 60 per cent of the Aboriginal population was killed.

This process was replicated across Australia. The massacres continued even into the 20th century. But by then in the south, Aboriginal land had been conquered. But Aboriginal people were still

there—still resisting, a constant reminder of who the original owners were and that settlement rested on stolen land.

They became the "Aboriginal Problem".

## Assimilation policy

In Victoria the first response of the Colonial Authorities was to set up reserves or missions. The remaining Aboriginal groups would be "given" these reserves, so that they wouldn't fight settlers for land anymore.

They were given land of no immediate value to the settlers and a number of different language groups were concentrated on one reserve.

In one sense these reserves were a concession to the militant, relentless resistance of Aboriginal people—an admission on the part of the settlers that they had not successfully killed off all the Indigenous population.

But the reserves were also a new weapon colonial governments used against them. Their lives were to be controlled by a mission manager, who often banned speaking in Aboriginal languages or practicing traditional culture. There are records of rape, castration and of mission managers treating Indigenous people like cattle, forcing them to work chained together by the neck. Families were separated, children from parents, so-called "half" and "full bloods" were separated, and movement between and outside of reserves was restricted and most often banned.

The reserves were seen as places where the Aboriginal race could die out. But Aboriginal people survived the attempted genocide.

After the Second World War, state and federal governments

faced a very different situation, "...continuing with the reserves would," according to Minister of Northern Development, Paul Hasluck in 1951, "result in the very situation that we have always sought to avoid namely the existence of a separate minority group in Australia."

In 1972, when militant activists established an Aboriginal Tent Embassy in front of Parliament House in Canberra, it was seen as a threat to the legitimacy of the Australian state. The Minister for Aboriginal Affairs said, "The government is not prepared to see a separate race within a race develop in Australia, with an embassy from the Aborigines as though they were a foreign power."

With the failure to physically eliminate Indigenous people, the government turned to a policy of assimilation to deal with the Aboriginal problem and eliminate Aboriginal consciousness.

Assimilation was not simply about the destruction of Aboriginal traditions and Aboriginal identity. It represented both continuity and discontinuity with the grotesque policy of biological absorption adopted by some state governments in the 1930s—most infamously stated by AO Neville, West Australian Protector of Aborigines in 1937, "Are we going to have a population of a million blacks in our commonwealth or are we going to merge them into our white community and forget there were ever Aborigines in Australia?"

One of the important ideological functions of assimilation was to attempt to erase the inherent conflict between the Australian capitalist nation and Indigenous people over the land claimed and controlled by the Australian state.

Although later assimilation-



## Homes Are Sought For These Children



A 1930s newspaper ad trying to find homes for Aboriginal children stolen from their families

ist policies moved away from the explicit emphasis on race, per se, just as racist was the effort to make Aboriginal people fully assimilate into what the Australian state determined to be “the Australian way of life”.

Under this policy some reserves were closed down and Aboriginal people were re-housed within white townships, so that they might assimilate better. No land was to be returned. The hope was that they would lose all sense of being Aboriginal.

But the 1960s and 1970s saw major social movements fight back against the assimilation policy. As early as 1963, the Communist Party of Australia counter-posed the assimilation policy to a policy of self-determination:

“Aborigines and Islanders should be free to live as they choose, as either as members of the general Australian community, or in their own autonomously controlled communities, according to individual choice... For such a policy to become a reality, Aborigines and Islanders should have inalienable possession of their remaining tribal areas, of the lands now set aside as Government or Mission settlements, or of better land where this is unsuitable, ownership of natural and mineral wealth located

on their lands and economic aid to enable them to develop rapidly as modern communities.”

The union-supported Gurindji walk offs, the Black Power movements of the 1970s, the FCAATSI fight for the 1967 referendum, Charlie Perkins and the Sydney Uni student freedom rides, the 1972 tent embassy in Canberra—this concentrated period of united, anti-racist, Aboriginal rights struggle raised awareness and forced the government into funding some services and making concessions.

In 1975 the Racial Discrimination Act was passed, followed by the Northern Territory Lands Right Act in 1976.

Successive governments paid lip service to a policy they called “self-determination”—but they never allowed Aboriginal people real control. Successive Aboriginal representative bodies like the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee, the National Aboriginal Conference, and the Aboriginal Development Commission were abolished when they began to push beyond the bureaucratic straightjacket imposed by government.

By the 1980s, however, the movement was in decline and government promises for wider

land rights laws were being broken.

In 1992, the High Court recognised that small numbers of Indigenous people retained native title over the land. But by 2004, the Howard Liberal government was extinguishing even the small native title rights the decision granted.

### The Intervention

The Northern Territory Intervention is a return a full-blown assimilationist policy. Under the legislation and the control of Government Business Managers, the government has ruthlessly wiped out any vestige of Aboriginal community control. Assets built up over decades have been removed from communities. Community child care and other programs have been scrapped.

Communities are being blackmailed into signing 40 and 90 year leases over their land in return for basic rights like health, education and housing. Teaching in Aboriginal language is being restricted despite its recognised importance for identity and overall education for those who have English as a second language.

Over the years the Australian settler state has tried to deal with what it regards as the “Aboriginal

problem” in a variety of ways. But the central thrust of them all was to fit Aboriginal people into what they called the Australian “way of life”. The Intervention is the latest example.

In 1961 the Native Welfare Conference defined assimilation as: “All Aborigines and part-Aborigines are expected to attain the same manner of living as other Australians and to live as members of a single Australian community enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs, hopes and loyalties as other Australians.”

Four years later that was changed to, “The policy of Assimilation seeks that all persons of Aboriginal descent will choose to attain a similar manner and standard of living to that of other Australians and live as members of a single Australian community.”

But if Aboriginal people don’t choose to assimilate and, worse, if they consciously resist as they have, then the assimilation will have to be forced.

Their resistance to this is a constant affirmation that the Australian state was founded on racism, violence and dispossession. And it is a constant challenge to the ideological underpinnings of Australian nationalism and to the white blindfold view of Australian history.

Before the 1940s, Aboriginal people could not become citizens, but after the Second World War they could be counted as citizens if they applied for a certificate. By having a certificate, however, they had to give up all ties with the Indigenous community, including their families. In New South Wales it was known as an “exemption” certificate, it exempted someone from being a person of Aboriginal descent.

The overt racism of the 1940s and 1950s may have been replaced by a more insidious attempt to entrench dispossession, disperse the homelands, stifle language, eradicate townships, and deny rights. But the parallels are obvious and the racism just as pernicious.

# 20 YEARS SINCE MABO WHY NATIVE TITLE HASN'T DELIVERED

The year 2012 marked the 20-year anniversary of the historic *Mabo* High Court judgement. **Paddy Gibson** looks at why it failed to reduce Aboriginal poverty.

THE 20TH anniversary of the *Mabo* case, where the High Court recognised Native Title, has seen the case celebrated by the government and the media as an historic step for Aboriginal rights.

But while *Mabo* formally rejected the legal doctrine of “terra nullius”, used to justify colonial dispossession, the High Court did not challenge the legitimacy of this dispossession.

It fact it ruled that Aboriginal ownership had been extinguished over the vast majority of the Australian continent—and that Aboriginal people were not entitled to any compensation for this.

Aboriginal activist Gary Foley calls the *Mabo* decision in 1992 and the Native Title Act that followed in 1993, “the greatest single act of dispossession since 1788”.

The *Mabo* decision simply provides the possibility of common law recognition of Aboriginal customary title, in the small number of places and circumstances where courts find this title has survived the onslaught of colonisation.

Aboriginal people must prove that they have maintained an ongoing connection to the land by continuing their traditional practices on it. But where the land was stolen and used for any other purpose—whether farming, mining or urban development—that stopped traditional practices, native title is considered extinguished.

The lands that have been given back are mostly in very remote areas in Australia and particularly on land unwanted by white settle-

ments and industry. Only a small fraction of the Aboriginal population have any hope of gaining recognition of Native Title.

And even where it is recognised, Native Title does not provide rights to exclusively own or control the land.

## Rights under Native Title

Native Title is the weakest form of land tenure in the British common law system. Native Title holders can use land for certain

purposes like camping, hunting and fishing. But they have no right to block commercial development. They cannot veto mining operations.

In June 2012, the Arabana people had Native Title recognised over 68,000 square kilometres covering Lake Eyre and the Mound Springs conservation park. After an arduous 14 year claims process, they have gained, “unlimited access for hunting, camping, fishing and traditional ceremonies.” But they will have no power to stop the expansion of Roxby Downs into the largest uranium mine in the world. The mine will use 100,000 litres of water every day, much of it pumped from Arabana country, devastating the fragile eco-system of the Mound Springs and surrounding areas.

The Native Title Act only stipulates that potential commercial developers must, “negotiate in good faith” with Native Title holders, “with a view to forming an agreement”. There is no requirement to actually enter into an agreement or even to pay mining royalties.

Michael Woodley, CEO of the Yindjibarndi Aboriginal Corporation, is currently fighting Andrew Forrest’s Fortescue Metals Group over their plans to push ahead with mining on Yindjibarndi Native Title lands. He says:

“Native Title legislation is really a discriminating process to legitimise the taking of Indigenous people’s land by

government and industry... If we don’t do a deal, the company threatens us that they’re going to get the land anyway and we know they will. That puts poor people in a very compromising position.”

Protest actions or even media campaigns designed to bring pressure to stop the project are seen to be a breach of “good faith”—and can cost Native Title holders a seat at the negotiating table.

In this situation many Aboriginal Land Councils make the decision to take what they can get from negotiations with the mining companies, rather than oppose destructive mining operations which they have no legal power to stop.

For instance at James Price Point in WA, the Kimberley Land Council is supporting Woodside’s gas hub on pristine coastland, despite local elders opposing it because it would damage culturally significant sites. In exchange for a funding package from the mining company, the Land Council is therefore trying to undermine opposition to the development from local Aboriginal people and environment groups.

The process of claiming Native Title through the courts also places an enormous strain on Aboriginal communities.

As the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported about the claim of the Wongatha people in WA: “After 12 years of litigation, 17,000 pages of transcripts, 100 days of hearings, 34 volumes of experts’ reports and 97 volumes of submissions, the claim was

rejected in 2007, essentially on a technicality”.

Establishing an unbroken, customary connection to land in a hostile court-room means putting your identity on trial. This process can cause bitter divisions.

As a detailed report on the Victorian experience by Muriel Bamblett and other Aboriginal leaders says:

“What began with hope soon began to become a tool which fractured our tribes and communities in a way not seen before.

“Siblings, cousins, Uncles, Aunties—families began to be driven apart from each other. In some cases they would not even talk to each other.”

The process of fragmentation and compromise of the “Native Title” era is a far-cry from the nation-wide solidarity of the Aboriginal movement in the 1960s-80s that popularised the “land rights” slogan.

That movement demanded large grants of full freehold title to Aboriginal people as compensation for their systematic dispossession. This meant that all Aboriginal people had a stake in land rights—not just those who could prove an “ongoing connection”.

The movement gave birth to a national Aboriginal political consciousness and identity, and experiences of leadership and self-organisation that led to the establishment of vital community based organisations.

The Keating government’s Native Title Act has its roots in the betrayal of land rights by the Hawke Labor government. Hawke won the 1983 election promising to deliver national land rights legislation, but after pressure from state premiers and the mining lobby, he dropped it cold.

The *Mabo* ruling gave Keating an opportunity to displace the Aboriginal struggle for land from the political arena into the legal one.

### **Labor’s hypocrisy**

Labor’s betrayal of Aboriginal people continues today. Labor Government Ministers displayed



**Above: Noongar people in Perth celebrate their initial native title court win in 2006. But six years on they are faced with a decision on an out of court settlement to extinguish their claim**

sickening hypocrisy at a Native Title conference held in Townsville to mark 20 years since *Mabo*.

Minister Macklin paid homage to historical figures of the Land Rights movement like Vincent Lingiari, who led the Wave Hill walk-off.

Never mind that Labor’s continued Intervention in the NT has compulsorily acquired the land Lingiari fought for at Daguragu.

Attorney General Nicola Roxon claimed Labor had been consistently “on the right side of history”, citing their support for *Mabo* and the Racial Discrimination Act (RDA). But Labor voted to suspend the RDA to help legislate the Intervention in 2007 and has intensified the policy since taking office.

Minister Macklin’s press release for Mabo day was titled: “Marking two decades of land rights and progress for Indigenous Australians”.

But both state and federal governments continue vicious attacks on Aboriginal land interests across the country, both to make way for destructive industry and to increase government control.

Traditional owners at Muckaty in the NT have taken the government to court over attempts to

impose a nuclear waste dump on their land.

The Government and the Northern Land Council have argued the case should be struck out on the basis that Aboriginal owners effectively have no rights when it comes to nuclear waste.

Legislation introduced by the Howard government says that any nomination from a land council remains valid even if traditional owners never gave their consent. Labor’s new legislation maintains these provisions.

The NSW O’Farrell government has passed its own laws in March to allow uranium exploration in NSW to exclude provisions of the NSW Aboriginal Land Rights Act, ensuring Aboriginal people have no rights over uranium on Aboriginal land.

And as *Mabo* lawyer Bryan Keon-Cohn points out, the government still resists Native Title claims “tooth and nail” in the Federal Court—sometimes with legal bills that far exceed the value of the land.

Turning this around will require a head-on fight with Labor’s contemporary policies of dispossession—bringing the struggle out of the court-room and back onto the streets.

## **The government still resists Native Title claims “tooth and nail” in the Federal Court**



# LOCKED UP AND KILLED FOR BEING BLACK:

## RACISM, DEATHS IN CUSTODY AND THE NT INTERVENTION

Following the recent death in custody in Alice Springs, **Paddy Gibson** explains how the situation has actually gotten worse since the 1991 Royal Commission

ON 28 SEPTEMBER 1983, off duty police officers in Roebourne, a remote town in WA, started racially abusing Aboriginal patrons at a hotel, sparking a brawl outside.

A 16-year-old Aboriginal youth John Pat stepped into the fight. He was punched in the face by a police officer, kicked in the head by police after he fell, dragged to their waiting van and “thrown in like a dead kangaroo”, as a witness described it.

John Pat was dumped in a cell and given no medical treatment. He was found dead a little over an hour later from a brain hemorrhage.

An all-white jury acquitted the police of manslaughter charges.

Twenty-five years later, on 26 September 2008, an Aboriginal cultural leader Mr Ward was picked up by police for drink driving on a remote WA road and taken into custody in Laverton. The following morning, he was put in a rundown van by private security firm GSL to be transported 400 kilometres to the lock-up in Kalgoorlie.

The WA Inspector of Custodial Services had written reports predicting fatal consequences if prisoner transport through the scorching desert wasn’t reformed.

It was 42 degrees outside. The GSL guards knew that there were problems with the air-conditioning unit in the prisoner pod. But they didn’t check on Mr Ward, or let him out of the vehicle, for the entire trip.

Just outside Kalgoorlie, the guards heard a thump in the back of the van and drove to hospital. A nurse described the temperature in

the back of the van as being “like a furnace”. Mr Ward had been literally cooked to death. Severe burns from the hot metal surfaces in the van marked his body. No one was ever charged for the death.

These horrific deaths in custody—and there have been many more—expose the brutal, systemic racism suffered by Aboriginal people in Australia.

### Royal Commission

John Pat’s death fuelled a groundswell across Australia demanding action to stop Aboriginal deaths in custody and win justice for the victims.

Under pressure Prime Minister Bob Hawke announced a Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody in 1987.

The Royal Commission conducted a three-year investigation that cost over \$50 million. It produced 339 recommendations. Almost all of them have been ignored since.

Mr Ward’s death has fuelled another groundswell over two decades later, bringing young Aboriginal activists into the WA Deaths in Custody Watch Committee. This new generation is demanding to know why the situation has become worse since the Royal Commission.

In the decade prior to the Royal Commission there were 99 Aboriginal deaths in custody. Between its final report in 1991 and 2008, there were 270 deaths.

There are no publicly available figures on the number of deaths since 2008, but Gerry Georgatos, completing a PhD

on the subject, has been keeping his own records: “In the last two years Aboriginal people have been dying at record levels... but there has still not been a single successful criminal prosecution against a custodial officer”.

News reports reveal many shocking incidents—including eight deaths in custody in a single month in late 2008 in the NT alone.

Two central points made by the Royal Commission are crucial for understanding this.

Firstly, Aboriginal people actually die at a similar rate to non-Indigenous people who are held in custody. The huge number of Aboriginal deaths is directly related to the disgracefully disproportionate rate at which they come into contact with the criminal justice system. And Aboriginal incarceration rates have soared since 1991.

Secondly, this incarceration can only be explained by the systemic discrimination and disadvantage faced by Aboriginal people in all aspects of their life. The Royal Commission called for “an end to domination and a return of control over their lives

and communities to Aboriginal hands”.

But recent history in Aboriginal politics has seen the complete opposite of this—a war on self-determination, culminating in the NT Intervention, that has pushed Aboriginal communities to breaking point.

### Behind bars

The Royal Commission said that the main reason for deaths in custody was that “too many Aboriginal people are in custody, too often”. In that year, an average 2140 Aboriginal people were in prison.

In the March quarter of 2012 however, an average 7873 Aboriginal people were incarcerated. That’s a 268 per cent increase in two decades.

Comparisons with the US illustrate that Aboriginal people are now one of the most incarcerated groups on the face of the planet.

The US has the world’s highest incarceration rate, with approximately 1.01 per cent of its adult population behind bars. African-Americans form by far the largest proportion of US prisoners, locked up at a rate six times higher than the white population.

In contrast, only 0.17 per cent of Australian adults are held in prison. But Aboriginal people are incarcerated at a rate 14 times higher than the non-Indigenous population. Despite being only 2.5 percent of the general population, 26 per cent of inmates are Aboriginal.

And it’s even worse in WA, where Aboriginal people are

**If the NT was a country, it’s adult imprisonment rate would rank second only to the USA**

almost 20 times more likely to be locked up, and in the NT, where 83 per cent of the prison population is black. If the NT was a country, its adult imprisonment rate of 0.85 per cent would stand in world ranking second only to the USA.

African American male adults are incarcerated at a rate of 6.6 per cent. In comparison, 4.2 per cent of Aboriginal male adults are locked up.

But in WA, the situation for black males is actually worse than the US. An outrageous 7.2 per cent of Aboriginal men are in prison. In the NT, the figure is 5.2 per cent.

In the US, black youth are about four times as likely to be in juvenile detention. But Aboriginal Australians are placed in detention at 28 times the rate of non-Aboriginal youth. A staggering 59 per cent of youth locked in Australia's juvenile detention system are Aboriginal.

### Structural racism

The Royal Commission argued that past policies of dispossession, child removal and racist exclusion have left lasting social scars that leave many Aboriginal people trapped in cycles of despair.

A high proportion of those who died in custody, for example, have come from families affected by the Stolen Generation.

The legacy of racist attitudes that informed these policies pervades Australian society at all levels, informing police attitudes, those of employers and the general community.

It was this systemic racism that killed both John Pat and Mr Ward: The racism of the police that cracked John Pat's head open and refused to call an ambulance. The racism of a court system that refused to convict his murders. The racism of the WA government who saw no need to upgrade their prisoner transport systems, despite explicit predictions of death from their own agency.

The Royal Commission made numerous recommendations around technical processes in the police and prison systems, some

of which have been implemented—but most of which have not.

The recent Briscoe case in Alice Springs (see page 20) shows the tragic consequences of locking up Aboriginal people simply for being drunk, a policy railed against by the Royal Commission.

A report published by the Indigenous Law Bulletin in February 2012 demonstrates the way that structural racism interacts with incarceration. The *Investigation into hearing impairment among Indigenous Prisoners within the NT Correctional Services* found that 94 per cent suffered from "significant hearing loss", with 76 per cent of inmates struggling to hear corrections staff.

It is government neglect and the third world conditions in most NT communities that are to blame for tragic rates of ear infection and subsequent hearing loss.

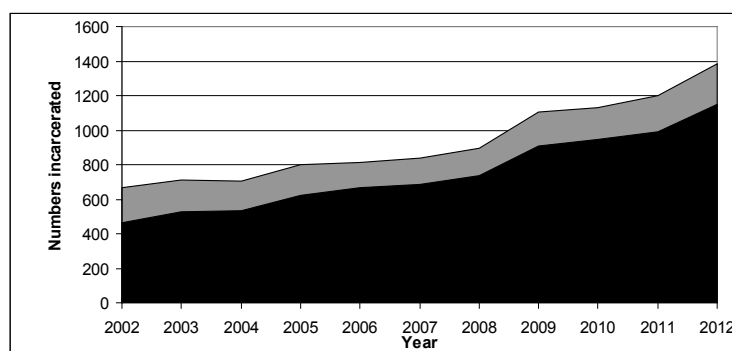
The study suggests that once impaired, people are more likely to drink and fight to escape frustration, less likely to have a job and ultimately more likely to come into contact with the police. They are then unable to negotiate with police or advocate for themselves in the system.

Another study published by the *Medical Journal of Australia* in June 2012 found that 90 per cent of Indigenous women in Queensland prisons have a mental illness. They were also far less likely than non-Indigenous inmates to have accessed any treatment or support service before being locked up.

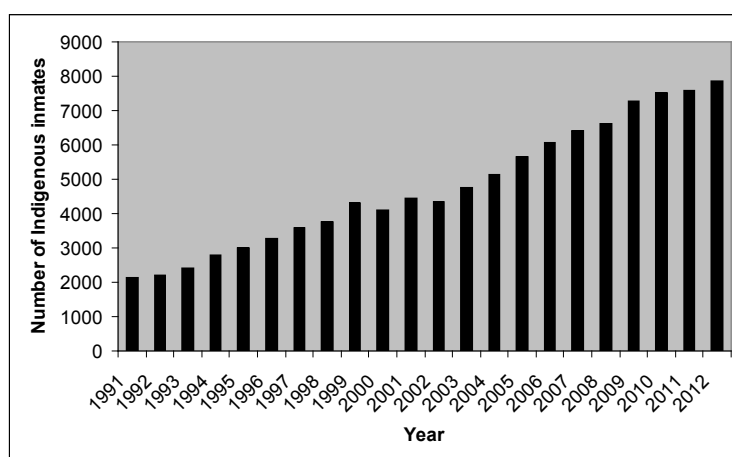
### Paternalism

The Royal Commission's central goal was the "empowerment of Aboriginal society on the basis of their deeply held desire, their demonstrated capacity, their democratic right to exercise... maximum control over their own lives and that of their communities".

In contrast, the Howard government slashed the Aboriginal Affairs budget, gutted an already weak Native Title system, forced Aboriginal communities into demeaning "Shared Responsibil-



**Above: The number of people imprisoned in the NT over the last ten years, with the grey representing total numbers and the black representing Indigenous detainees**



**Above: Total number of Indigenous inmates in Australian prisons since the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody report was released**

ity Agreements" and disbanded the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC).

Howard also began the closure of Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP), closures that the Labor government following him implemented. Up to 35,000 jobs have been wiped out in Aboriginal communities, crippling Aboriginal organisations.

The NT Intervention was their nail in the coffin for any notion of self-determination. Aboriginal men have been demonised as drunken child abusers and control over all aspects of Aboriginal life has been taken away.

Disgracefully, Labor continued this Intervention and passed "Stronger Futures" legislation that extends its key powers until 2022.

The recent growth in the numbers of Aboriginal people locked up—and dying in custody—indi-

cates the growing level of oppression of Aboriginal people thanks to the policies of the Howard government and their extension by Labor.

Family spokesperson Patricia Morton-Thomas has said her nephew Kwementyaye Briscoe was, "a victim of the NT Intervention".

This is not just because there are more police, with more powers, than before 2007, but also because, "the Intervention has let every closet racist in the Territory to come out". It has dehumanised Aboriginal people, legitimising the sort of brutal treatment and indifference to suffering demonstrated by the police in the Briscoe case.

Without turning around policies like the NT Intervention, there will be more Aboriginal people behind bars and more grieving families.

# Justice for Kwementyaye means charges must be laid

By David Suttle

KWEMENTYAYE BRISCOE'S family are demanding criminal charges against police over the young man's death in the Alice Springs watch house in January 2012. Family members led a demonstration of 100 people in October that year, holding placards reading "Police must be charged".

Human rights lawyer George Newhouse added his voice to the call for charges, saying, "I believe this extreme level of negligence is criminal". He has called on the Department of Public Prosecutions (DPP) to examine criminal charges, and is also investigating a civil claim for damages against police.

Northern Territory Coroner Greg Cavanagh's official report blamed obscene police neglect for Kwementyaye's death.

The much-loved Anmatjere man died, as the coroner put it, from, "the combined effects of acute alcohol intoxication, positional asphyxia and aspiration, which ultimately obstructed the airways and led to death".

The Coroner's report clearly rests the blame on police stating that, "the care, supervision and treatment of the deceased was completely inadequate and unsatisfactory and not sufficient to meet his medical needs."

However his report goes out of its way to create excuses for the police. It turns the focus away from unacceptable police brutality onto alcohol and public drunkenness. Cavanagh concludes by announcing how impressed he is with internal procedural reforms conducted after the incident and the disciplining of ten police officers. But not one of the officers involved has been demoted or referred to the DPP.

## Criminal negligence

Key details left out of the report call into question the "tragic mistake" version of events accepted by the Coroner, and show that the police actions went well beyond "neglect".

Kwementyaye already had bitter experience of police treatment, having been in "protective cus-



Family members of Kwementyaye Briscoe led a rally of 100 people in Alice Springs calling for charges

today" a staggering 31 times previously. Omitted from the report are claims that police had assaulted Kwementyaye just weeks earlier. He was already nursing a cut above his eye from this incident before his arrest. Patricia Morton Thomas, Kwementyaye's aunt, testified to this, saying he likely ran from police out of fear for his safety.

Kwementyaye should never have been arrested on the night he died. The law says that a person intoxicated in a public place can only be taken into "protective custody" if there is evidence that the person is a threat to themselves or others, or that they intend to commit a crime.

There was no evidence of any of this. At the inquest Constable Evans claimed he suspected Mr Briscoe was going to damage school property. But Kwementyaye was only chased into the school by Evans.

Another issue is why Kwementyaye was never taken to hospital. Prisoners in nearby cells were consistently shouting out for him to be taken to hospital. CCTV records captured police discussing with each other Briscoe's need for medical care, but ruling out taking him to the hospital because he might run away.

Yet the footage shows he was barely able to stand up or talk, let alone run. Kwementyaye was

## Not one of the officers involved has been demoted or referred to the DPP

bleeding from the head and unconscious on the floor. It was obvious that he urgently needed medical attention. Yet the Coroner's report accepts police testimony that they didn't take him to hospital for fear he might become aggressive.

Then there is the refusal to implement recommendations following the last death in the same watch house in 2009. Following Cedric Trigger's death in a very similar manner, police told the Coroner they would ensure a "watch house keeper" was placed in charge of monitoring those in custody. But one officer, Superintendent Jones, told the coronial hearing that she had continually pushed for a senior police presence in the watch house, but was refused.

The Coroner has now made further recommendations to police—but it's hard to believe

any changes to police practices will last.

## Alcohol or justice

Rather than recommending charges against police, Cavanagh has called for further alcohol reform in Alice Springs. The new CLP government has seized on this focus. They are planning to criminalise public drunkenness, with three-month "mandatory rehabilitation" facilities for "habitual drunks". These \$30-40 million establishments are really just jail compounds that NT Attorney General John Elferink says are designed to "get the drunks off the streets" and encourage often homeless alcoholics to "revisit their worldview".

Family members are furious. Patricia Morton Thomas released a statement condemning, "...in the strongest terms his [the Coroner's] gutless recommendations which sought to slyly take the focus off the police conduct and evidence of systematic racism in the force and shift it to alcohol related social problems in Alice Springs."

The police and the CLP can't be allowed to get away with further punishing Aboriginal people. The officers involved must face charges. But not one officer has ever been convicted of a charge over an Aboriginal death in custody. So this won't happen without a fight.



# HAWKE, KEATING AND ABORIGINAL RIGHTS: LABOR'S 'SORRY' HISTORY

Labor's approach to Indigenous Affairs today follows that of Hawke and Keating, argues **Jean Parker**

THE LAST official act of Labor Prime Minister Bob Hawke in December 1991 was to hang the “Barunga Statement” in Parliament House. The Statement was a manifesto of Aboriginal demands—self-determination, land rights, a treaty, compensation for stolen land—mounted in the centre of a painting by several Aboriginal artists. Presented to Hawke at the Barunga Sports Festival in June 1988, he had promised to hang the painting as a symbol of his commitment to Aboriginal people.

But Hawke was a hypocrite. Years before, his government had turned its back on Aboriginal rights.

In 1982, as thousands of Aboriginal people and their supporters assembled to march on Brisbane's Commonwealth Games, Labor shadow Indigenous Affairs minister Susan Ryan had told a cheering crowd that an elected Hawke Labor government would introduce national land rights legislation. But within two years of gaining office in 1983, Hawke had reneged on that promise.

Land rights was the central political demand raised by the militant Aboriginal rights struggle from the late 1960s on. The famous Gurindji strike that began in 1966 is remembered as the beginning of the modern land rights movement. The strikers won nation-wide support among trade unionists, who raised money to support them.

The famous Aboriginal Tent Embassy was established on

the lawns of parliament house in Canberra in 1972 in response to the then Liberal government ruling out any legislation to grant land rights.

This demand struck at the very legitimacy of Australian capitalism, and its foundations in genocide and dispossession.

At its height the land rights movement fought for land as an act of recognition of prior ownership and compensation for the wrongs inflicted on Aboriginal communities. Some thought land rights could provide the basis for the economic development that the Australian state had denied them.

On assuming power in 1972 Gough Whitlam had immediately dropped all charges against protesters from the Aboriginal Tent Embassy that, for the previous six months, had defiantly stood in front of Parliament House. “It's Time”, Labor's iconic slogan for the 1972 election campaign, fitted nothing better than the Aboriginal rights movement.

Whitlam removed regulations that prevented Aboriginal people leaving missions or reserves and from traveling overseas. He created the first Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA), set up a land rights commission, and froze uranium mining in the Northern Territory.

Following his dismissal in 1975, Whitlam's Northern Territory Lands Rights Act was put through Parliament by Malcolm Fraser's Liberal government in 1976. The laws set a benchmark

and fed the hopes that a future Labor government would go further.

Hawke's promise of national land rights legislation, a Treaty and generous “social justice” spending, was seen as a continuation of the hopes of the Whitlam era.

## How Hawke killed land rights

But Hawke was to kill those hopes. On coming to power in 1983 Hawke's Aboriginal Affairs Minister Clyde Holding talked of strengthening the NT Land Rights Act and introducing the improved model nationally. But ominously, Holding backed away from Susan Ryan's 1982 commitment to use the powers granted by the 1967 referendum and impose national laws.

Holding promised that the views of Aboriginal people would be at the heart of the land rights process. His land rights steering committee included the Chair and Deputy of the National Aboriginal Conference (NAC), the Aboriginal representative body originally established under Whitlam to advise government, as well as its six state and territory representatives, the Northern and Central Land Councils, and Charles Perkins, the Aboriginal Chair of the Aboriginal Development Commission (ADC).

In December 1983 Holding told parliament that the support of NAC, which he described as a “democratically elected black parliament” would be obtained before any legislation was brought

to parliament.

This carefully crafted organ of “representation” was, however, quickly pushed aside once the Aboriginal representatives voiced opposition to Hawke's legislation.

As the mining companies attacked the idea of land rights, Hawke caved in, seeing the interests of business as more important than justice for Aboriginal people. The peak mining industry body, the Australian Mining Industry Council, supported by the Western Australian Labor government, ran a hard-line racist campaign against the idea. The Chamber of Mines Western Australia ran a campaign under the slogan “Land rights should be equal rights”—claiming Aboriginal people were being given “special privileges”.

The mining bosses claimed people's backyards were under threat. One blatantly false advertisement claimed that the laws would see 94.8 per cent of Western Australia open to Aboriginal land claims.

The right wing RSL (Returned and Services League) weighed in with the racist argument that servicemen had died “for king and country”, not for Aboriginal people.

Hawke met with Western Australian Labor Premier Brian Burke for two days in September 1984. This was a turning point—signaling Hawke's capitulation to the racist fear-mongering of the mining companies, the Liberals and the Western Australian state Labor government. By October his draft land rights legislation

was so weak that it was universally opposed by Aboriginal organisations—no national law was preferable to what Hawke was proposing.

The laws explicitly rejected the demands of Aboriginal people. Crown land would not automatically be claimable as Aboriginal land. National Parks wouldn't become Aboriginal land without "prima-facie evidence of traditional attachment", and there would be no compensation for lost land.

Hawke and Holding tried to sell their watering down of the laws by arguing that any more substantial rights for Aboriginal people would fan the flames of the vicious campaign being led by the mining industry.

But it was the government that refused to use its power to override the states, and instead allowed the state premiers' vocal attacks on land rights to set the terms of the debate.

In the end Hawke dropped his land rights legislation. In a further betrayal, he granted the miners' wish for an amendment to the NT Land Rights Act to weaken Aboriginal rights to veto mining on their land. By agreeing to any mining exploration on their land, the right to veto later mining projects was lost.

When Hawke called an early federal election in December 1984, *The Age* headline summed up his stance, "PM Axes Blacks' Veto on Mining."

Hawke won the election, but he had lost the support of black organisations, as well as sections of the Labor Party.

In stark contrast to the present day Northern Territory Labor government, the then Northern Territory branch of the Labor Party slammed the abandoning of the veto over mining as "morally repugnant".

Hawke's capitulation was part and parcel of the Labor government's determination to govern in the interests of business, and prove its credibility to the ruling class as able to run Australian capitalism. Investor confidence trumped Aboriginal rights hands

down. He re-assured the mining, pastoral and tourism industries that Labor could be trusted to maintain "business as usual".

The final twist of the knife came when Hawke blamed his own failure to introduce land rights legislation on Aboriginal organisations, painting them as being too picky and too demanding to support the offers on the table.

Hawke's support for mining interests over Aboriginal rights was a deep and painful betrayal. 1985 saw a national land rights protest of 800 people occupy Canberra's Department of Aboriginal

Affairs (DAA) headquarters. Invoking the Commonwealth Games protests, Aboriginal leaders promised to ruin the 1988 Bicentenary celebrations.

In response Hawke moved to silence and shut down the Aboriginal representative organisations. The NAC was the first to be disbanded in 1985.

In July 1987 he wound down the DAA and axed the Aboriginal Development Council (ADC) under the cover of creating a new body—the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC).

ATSIC was part of Hawke's moves to reduce even further the meager autonomy and powers of Aboriginal organisations.

The ADC had included an Aboriginal-controlled development fund, while the DAA was a government department that had made a serious attempt to employ a majority of Aboriginal staff. ATSIC's role was never more than providing advice to government and its own special accountability unit had a more arduous standard of reporting than any other government agency.

Despite being almost powerless, ATSIC had only been running for two years when Keating moved to undermine it by setting up the rival Office of Indigenous Affairs within his own Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

Years later in 2004 Labor confirmed its betrayal by calling for the abolition of ATSIC. Two weeks later John Howard announced ATSIC's abolition.

Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR) was bitterly critical of Howard's move and declared, "For now, any semblance of self-determination has been eradicated."

But there never had been any genuine self-determination. Hawke and Keating had systematically undermined the small degree of Aboriginal consultation that Whitlam had put in place.

## Mabo puts land back on the agenda

In 1992, the High Court brought

the issue of land rights back to centre stage by overturning the lie of "terra nullius" (an empty land). The recognition of Eddie Mabo's native title ownership of nine square kilometres in the Torres Strait again lifted hopes. But the High Court decision was a double-edged sword.

As well as recognising native title, the court also recognised the Australian government's sovereignty. Native title was extinguished by any grant of freehold title and limited by the grant of leases. Therefore full native title ownership could only apply to unused Crown land, and to claim even that Aboriginal people had to provide evidence of an ongoing relationship with the land. But for all the groups of Aboriginal people who were rounded up and driven off their land at gunpoint, as well as the 50 per cent of the Aboriginal population who live in or near major cities, native title offered nothing.

But even this was too much for the mining and pastoral industries. When the new Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating announced that his government would legislate to end the uncertainties of the Mabo decision, some Aboriginal people hoped for land rights. But the business sector knew what Keating really meant—extinguishment of native title.

1993 was the year of "Mabo madness". As in the 1980s, the mining and pastoral industries and the Coalition ran scare campaigns about Aboriginal people taking over people's backyards. An indication of Keating's attitude came when he intervened to stop any Mabo-style legal challenge by the Boorooloolo people threatening mining company MIM's McArthur River mine project, thought to be one of the world's largest lead, zinc and silver deposits.

Keating backed the NT government's proposals to suspend the Racial Discrimination Act to protect the mining company from any future legal challenge.

Crucial to the passage of Keating's Native Title Act was the support of a handful of self-appointed Aboriginal negotiators

## Hawke moved to silence and shut down the Aboriginal representative organisations



**Labor promised land rights to this demonstration against the Brisbane Commonwealth Games in 1982, only to renege once in power**

led by Lowitja (formerly Lois) O'Donoghue, known as the A team. Current advocates of the Intervention Noel Pearson and Marcia Langton cut their political teeth in the A team, working to drum up support for the Native Title Act.

The legislation was opposed by The Greens and Aboriginal leaders led by Michael Mansell, dubbed the B team, who encouraged the Greens and the Democrats to demand serious amendments to the laws.

Keating's laws entrenched the property rights of companies over stolen Aboriginal land. They offered the weakest form of recognition for the tiny percentage of Aboriginal people who can prove an unbroken connection with a particular piece of land. While mining companies still had to negotiate over access and royalties, native title holders had no right to veto mining on land

they "owned".

After winning power in 1996 the Howard government stripped back native title rights even further. They went on to deliver "bucketloads of extinguishment"—but Labor had laid the groundwork.

### **Reconciliation, not Treaty**

After Howard took office and refused to apologise to the Stolen Generations, a myth developed that Hawke and Keating's championing of reconciliation represented a serious desire to deliver justice for Aboriginal people. But it was empty symbolism.

Reconciliation was an attempt to undercut the anger Aboriginal people felt over Labor's betrayal on land rights. The phrase "national reconciliation" had been part of Hawke's election platform in 1983. But it wasn't until 1991 that the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation was launched.

ATSIC attempted to ensure that a Treaty was at the heart of the Reconciliation process.

But Hawke wrote a telling letter to Liberal leader John Hewson, saying he wasn't wedded to the word "treaty", but rather, "what I believe is important is that there be a process of reconciliation"—in other words any action to bring justice for Aboriginal people was not on the government's agenda.

After replacing Hawke as Labor leader, Keating took the mantle of reconciliation and ran with it. Keating's famous Redfern speech in 1993 was laden with symbolism but light on any mention of treaty or land.

There is a continuity here with Kevin Rudd's approach. In 2008, he said "sorry" for past wrongs and acknowledged the Stolen Generations. Yet, his government was implementing the assimilationist policies of the Intervention

that ensure the wrongs are being repeated.

There is a sorry history to Labor governments. Saying one thing and doing another did not start with Kevin Rudd. On Aboriginal rights, each Labor government since Whitlam has been more right-wing than the one before.

But alongside that sorry history is the history of the working class movement and the struggle for Aboriginal rights. The reforms of the Whitlam government were a direct result of the 1966 Gurindji walk off that in turn fed the radical policies of the Tent Embassy of 1972. Union action for the Gurindji welded together a fight of black and white for Aboriginal rights.

We must look to that history of struggle so that we can overturn the Intervention and build a movement for genuine Aboriginal self-determination.

# RED AND BLACK

## THE HISTORY OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY'S SUPPORT FOR ABORIGINAL STRUGGLES

By Jean Parker

THE ROLE the early Communist Party of Australia (CPA) played in fighting for Aboriginal rights provides clear examples of the way that a joint “black and white” challenge to the oppression of Aboriginal people can build the radicalism, consciousness and strength of the working class movement in Australia.

The establishment of the Australian Communist Party in 1920 took place alongside the formation of the “Third International” (Comintern). This organisation united communists globally around the politics that had led to a successful socialist revolution in Russia. Anti-racist and anti-colonial struggles that were breaking out across the world were understood as central to challenging capitalism.

In Australia the CPA stressed the necessity of fighting for civil and political equality for Aboriginal people, as well as to support Aboriginal demands for self-determination and communal rights to land and culture.

In the first decade of the CPA's existence the plight of Aborigines was in the public eye with the outcry at the shocking massacres at Forrest River in the Kimberleys in 1926 and at Coniston in the NT in 1928. During this period the CPA developed a radical platform for Aboriginal rights (although some of the language used reflects the predominant colonial view of Aboriginal people):

- *The release of all Aboriginal people from jails until they have been tried by Aboriginal juries,*

- *Abolition of the Protection Boards (“Capitalism’s slave recruiting agencies and terror organisations against aborigines”),*

- *Absolute prohibition of the kidnapping of aboriginal children by the A.P.B., whether to hire them out as slaves, place them in “missions,” jails or “correction” homes.*

- *Full right of the aborigines to develop native culture. Right to establish their own schools, train their own teachers, for the children of the aborigines and half-castes (sic). The Australian Government to make available sums of money for such purposes, to be paid into and controlled by committees comprised solely of aborigines and half-castes (sic).*

- *The handing over to the Aborigines of large tracts of watered and fertile country, with towns, seaports, railways, roads, etc., to become one or more independent Aboriginal states or republics. The handing back to the Aborigines of all Central, Northern, and North West Australia to enable the aborigines to develop their native pursuits. These Aboriginal republics to be independent of Australian or other foreign powers. To have the right to make treaties with foreign powers, including Australia, establish their own army, governments, industries, and in every way be independent of imperialism.*

The rise of Stalin in Russia signaled not only the defeat of the revolution there, but also saw the Communist Parties globally, including the CPA, increasingly become slaves to the Russian foreign policy of the day. Yet for all the mistakes that this led to

CPA to make, for many years it was the organisation that brought together many of Australia's industrial and political radicals, both black and white.

### Militant unionism and Aboriginal struggle

Alongside the CPA's theoretical positions and its platform went active support for Aboriginal resistance. This support was not just something for party members, but was to be encouraged in workers everywhere. The early work of the CPA led to a proud tradition of mass working class participation in Aboriginal struggles.

Industrial and Aboriginal militancy became linked together. Aboriginal activists in unions began to influence the awareness and activity of the unions. Where the Communists were able to build rank-and-file organisations such as the Militant Minority Movement in the 1930s, or where they influenced labour councils, a constant stream of education, fund-raising and industrial activity in support of Aboriginal

campaigns can be found.

One example is the work of Tom Wright, the CPA General Secretary from 1925-1929. Wright was active in the Unemployed Workers Movement during the Depression, and the Militant Minority Movement that was built as economic recovery followed the Depression. In 1936 Wright was elected the NSW Branch Secretary of the Sheet Metal Workers Union and also became the Vice President of the NSW Labor Council.

Wright organised for Aboriginal activist and unionist William Ferguson to address Labor Council in 1937 which prompted the Council to pledge full support for the Aborigines Progressive Association (APA), and to adopt “a detailed policy on Aborigines ... calling for full social and political rights, award wages, full unemployment benefits, abolition of all indentures, and homes and missions ‘which are exterminating the aboriginal race by segregating the sexes and sending the girls to domestic slavery’, full representation on the Aborigines Protection Boards... and land rights.”

Aboriginal communities had fiercely resisted colonisation since the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788. But as a layer joined the workforce on the wharves, in mines or on pastoral properties they gained experience of collective, industrial organisation through trade unions, and exposure to explicit anti-capitalist politics. Many became members of the CPA.

From the Torres Strait Island strike in 1931, to the Pilbara, Wave Hill, and many more, Aboriginal leaders began to arise that

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**The struggles against assimilation area a crucial chapter in both Aboriginal rights and labour movement history**

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had previous experience of union militancy, and often contact with socialists.

The CPA as an organisation played a crucial role in taking Aboriginal struggles to the heart of capitalist Australia—the industrial centres of Sydney and Melbourne. The CPA's influence opened hundreds of thousands of workers to the campaigns of Aboriginal communities in the remotest parts of the country.

### Pilbara strike struggle 1942-1949

Twenty years before the Wave Hill walk-off Aboriginal stockmen in Western Australia's Pilbara region shut down the pastoral industry in a strike that lasted three years. Preparation for the strike began in 1942 when leaders of Aboriginal stockman who were working for rations approached CPA activist Don McLeod, who had been organising meetings against war-time restrictions on Aboriginal freedom of movement.

When stockmen began walking off in April 1946 McLeod swung into action organising solidarity in Perth. A Committee for the Defence of Native Rights (CDNR) was set up. The CDNR organised a meeting of over 400 people in Perth that endorsed the strikers' claims and protested the jailing of strike leaders. The committee organised support amongst unionists, churches and women's organisations, took motions to the World Federation of Trade Unions and printed a pamphlet on the struggle.

When McLeod was himself jailed in the Pilbara 400 strikers marched on the prison with hammers and crowbars and won his release!

The success of winning deep and genuine support for Aboriginal people within unions can be best judged by what happened when striking Aboriginal stockmen took some work on the wharves.

Police ordered them off, but the wharfies refused to work until the stockmen worked alongside them. At the end of the strike in 1949 the Seaman's Union put a ban on shipping wool from the



stations where, as the Seaman put it, "the slave conditions still apply that brought about the present strike".

### Gurindji Wave Hill walk-off

The story of the Gurindji strike against beef baron Vestey is a pivotal point in Aboriginal struggle. What began as a strike for equal wages became the first successful fight for land rights in the modern era.

Like the Pilbara strike, key figures such as Dexter Daniels, an Aboriginal organiser with the NAWU, had been in contact with the CPA through union networks in Darwin.

Despite the wealth and political connections of Lord Vestey, the Gurindji were able to defend their strike camps and claim prime land at the heart of Vestey's estate (Daguragu) because of the moral and material support they received from the union movement.

With encouragement from the Communist Party, the Actors Equity union organised a national tour in October 1966, that allowed Aboriginal leaders to speak about

the strike at workers' meetings around the country.

The Waterside Workers Federation donated \$10,000 to the strike fund, and carpenters in Sydney contributed a weekly levy to help the Wave Hill strikers. In Wollongong miners levied their wages to support the Gurindji strike camp, and were reluctant to cancel that support even when the campaign won.

The CPA newspaper, *The Tribune*, helped create momentum with regular reports of solidarity actions around the country. On July 17, 1968 they reported:

"In an outstanding example of trade unionists' support, workers at Oxley (Brisbane) meatworks voted from their Welfare Fund a donation of \$800 for the Wave Hill Aborigines."

"A Melbourne march of over 1000 students, unionists and others and an Adelaide march of a hundred students last week protested the Government's rejection of the Gurindjis' land claim."

An editorial from *The Australian* read: "There is talk in Government circles of the Aborigines being encouraged to tackle their

inferior status more militantly by the communists ... we have only ourselves to blame if the vacuum we have left in Aboriginal welfare and education is capitalised upon by the communists."

The work of organised socialists encouraged some of the best examples of broad and genuine working class support for Aboriginal rights. The history of these struggles against protectionism and assimilation are a crucial chapter of both the Aboriginal rights movement, and the radical labour movement in Australia.

From Mapoon in 1963, to the Black Moratorium in 1972, to Nookanbah in 1980, to the Bicentenary demonstrations and the fight for land rights, trade union support has been crucial to countering the racism of our rulers and helping to push Aboriginal rights onto the national agenda.

This history of black and white fighting together points to the work that is needed again to mobilise the power of organised workers in the fight against the racist government policies that continue to be imposed on Aboriginal people.

# THE BLACK MORATORIUM—HOW UNIONS WALKED OUT FOR ABORIGINAL RIGHTS

In 1972 unionists joined what were amongst the most successful protests for Aboriginal rights ever in this country. **Paddy Gibson** explains how the unity between Aboriginal activists and organised workers was central to their success.

ON JULY 14 1972, 500 Aboriginal people led a 6000-strong demonstration from Redfern into central Sydney under the banner “Ningla-na—we are hungry for our land”.

A sizeable chunk of this crowd were workers including builders’ labourers, ship painters and dockers and teachers, who had voted to take a half-day strike demanding black rights. More than 2000 students rallied at Sydney University then marched to Redfern to join the demonstration.

The demonstration was part of a national “Moratorium for Black Rights”. Marches were also held in Darwin, Adelaide, Melbourne, Canberra, Brisbane and NSW regional centres.

The Moratorium was the biggest protest that had been held in Australia around Aboriginal issues and it will always remain among the most historically significant. It helped put justice for Aboriginal people squarely at the centre of the political agenda in Australia, in the lead up to the election of the reformist Whitlam government.

The last major national political mobilisation had been for the Referendum in 1967, which won formal citizenship rights long denied to Aboriginal people. It was run by the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI), a coalition of Aboriginal community advocates, churches, unions and other progressive organisations.

Politically, the campaign had

been dominated by liberalism, aiming to educate mainstream Australia about the abuses suffered by Aborigines—but steering clear of protest.

It achieved a real breakthrough and laid essential groundwork for the fight that was to come. But by the early 1970s Aboriginal people had seen none of the “equality” promised by the referendum and conditions were ripe for radicalisation.

In Queensland a system closely resembling apartheid was still in operation, with Aboriginal movement and income totally controlled by the government. In NSW assimilation policies similar to today’s NT Intervention proceeded apace—Aboriginal reserve land was being revoked and housing and resources were being denied to Aboriginal settlements in an attempt to force people into the “mainstream”. In swelling city ghettos like Redfern, blacks faced intense persecution at the hands of police.

Everywhere across Australia, Aboriginal people languished in crippling poverty. And everywhere, isolated skirmishes trying to win Aboriginal control of land were becoming more organised and more confrontational.

In NSW, a Lands Board to log claims and lobby government united Aboriginal activists from the coast to the far west. Woodenbong saw one of many rent strikes over terrible housing conditions on what people knew to be their own land.

In the NT, a strike by Gurindji stockworkers for equal pay had

transformed into a full-blown battle for land rights. In Yirrkala, the struggle by the local Yolngu people against a Nabalco bauxite mine had forced the High Court to consider the issue of ongoing native title rights to land.

In the cities of Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne young Kooris and Murris were moving amongst anti-capitalist student and union networks. They were immersed in the literature of the anti-colonial rebellions across the world.

It was not enough to simply draw attention to racism in Australia and put the case for reform. The system had to be fought back and eventually dismantled.

When the courts ruled against the Yirrkala land rights claim in late 1971 NSW Kooris recognised this as a major setback for the national movement. Clearly, jus-

tice could not be won within the confines of the Australian legal system.

A statement by the Conservative McMahon government released on January 25 1972 about the implications of the Yirrkala case repudiated any possible recognition of land rights by the federal government. In response, Redfern activists dispatched four young Kooris to Canberra. Driven by a Communist Party photographer, they established the Aboriginal Tent Embassy on the front lawns of Parliament house on January 26.

## Union support grows

The Aboriginal movement was growing, and becoming increasingly militant. But it was the unity forged between Aboriginal activists and norganised workers that was responsible for the gains won in the period, the most far reaching in the history of the Aboriginal rights movement.

After years of persecution through the Cold War, socialists within the labour movement had begun to successfully re-establish strong, militant networks. After the election of the Menzies government in 1951, days lost to strikes rarely rose above one million a year. By 1972 the figure had risen to three million and continued to escalate until 1974, when there were six million strike days—one of the high points of union struggle in Australian history.

Accompanying this increase in industrial militancy was a rapid growth in working class participa-

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**It helped put justice for Aboriginal people squarely at the centre of the political agenda in Australia, in the lead up to the election of the reformist Whitlam government**



**Rally at the Aboriginal tent embassy in Canberra, founded in the same year the black moratorium took place**

tion in social justice movements. Tens of thousands of workers participated in strike action to support Moratoriums against the Vietnam War. Mass union delegates' meetings held in Victoria after the 1971 Moratorium called on Australian troops to defy orders in Vietnam and refuse to fight.

When the South African Springboks rugby team toured Australia in 1971, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) backed calls for union bans in protest against apartheid.

The Springboks, refused a place on all planes, restaurants and hotels, had to buy a private aircraft to fly around the country and were billeted with supporters. At the height of the controversy surrounding the tour, before games scheduled in Brisbane, conservative Premier of Queensland Jo Bjelke-Peterson declared a state of emergency, busing thousands of police in from around the state to confront protests by students and unionists.

Aboriginal activists played a prominent role in these anti-apartheid mobilisations. Their militancy and passion helped convince many on the broader left

of the need to confront the apartheid-style conditions oppressing Aboriginal people within Australia. And the real social power of the working class in action made a strong impression on the black activists. It was in the wake of the Springboks tour that the idea for the Black Moratorium was born.

The tactic of a Moratorium was lifted directly from the campaign against the Vietnam War.

Holding the demonstration on a weekday meant that supporters would need to carry a serious argument in their workplace about why solidarity with Aborigines was an important issue for the working class movement. Skipping work alone to attend the march could mean victimisation by your boss. But successfully convincing others to strike with you both disrupted the economy and demonstrated a depth of understanding and conviction.

Union involvement in Aboriginal struggle had a long history in Australia. Many generations of black activists had been schooled in politics through the union movement—from Bill Ferguson in the 1920s and 1930s through to Chika Dixon, who had a strong influence over the movement in

the 1960s and 1970s.

Patient work had been done over decades building consciousness within the broader union movement about black oppression. Union delegations had followed student "Freedom Rides" organised by Charles Perkins and Chika Dixon into segregated rural NSW towns in the mid-1960s. Speaking tours by the striking Gurindji had addressed countless stop-work meetings across the country. Union affiliations to FCAATSI had provided a substantial bulk of the funding and activist base for the 1967 referendum campaign.

Preparations for the Moratorium in 1972 took this to a new level. In Wollongong and Shell Harbour, more than 400 council workers took their first ever decision to stage a political strike.

In Sydney, one BLF delegate was sacked for hanging a massive banner advertising the Moratorium off the central crane on a major Sydney building site. The whole site came to a standstill as workers demanded his reinstatement.

The NSW Teachers Federation was compelled to threaten similar industrial action, after five teachers were victimised by the educa-

tion department for their role in the Moratorium. The demonstration had pushed the debate about black rights into hundreds of staff rooms and classrooms.

On July 20, less than a week after the moratorium, police moved in to take down the Aboriginal Tent Embassy on the front lawns of parliament house. Three days later hundreds of Aboriginal people and supporters rallied to defend the embassy. Big numbers came from Sydney and off reserves from across NSW.

A bus paid for by the Queensland Trades and Labour Council brought "black power" militants down from Queensland. The ACT Trades and Labor Council swelled the ranks of defenders. The rally was brutally attacked by police.

Calls went out for further support, co-ordinated through the networks established by the Black Moratorium. On July 30, more than 2000 people successfully defended the embassy in another showdown with police. Union funds helped keep the embassy running.

In an interview in 1972 Chika Dixon summarised the new mood:

"Even up until 1968, when we tried to March down George St to support the Gurindjis, you could count the blacks on your fingers. Now we can muster 600 or so, so the pendulum has swung... You've got to link up all the things together—bad housing, land rights, infant mortality, bad education facilities, all the things we'd bashed at for years while nothing was done. Yet, when the blacks stood up on their feet, then things started moving. And I believe that we've only scratched the surface".

The confidence of Aboriginal people to move into action came as thousands of workers across Australia were doing the same.

The extent of union involvement in the Moratorium showed that organised workers were among the strongest potential allies in the fight for Aboriginal rights. This remains an important lesson in rebuilding the strength of the movement today.



## ABORIGINAL CHILD REMOVAL RATES SKYROCKETING A NEW STOLEN GENERATION

By Paddy Gibson

ONE OF the first acts of the Labor government in 2008 was to apologise to the Stolen Generations. Then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd said “the injustices of the past must never, never happen again.” But Aboriginal children are being removed from their parents in numbers far higher than during the Stolen Generations and the rates are skyrocketing.

The paternalism of the Protection-era that saw thousands of Aboriginal families ripped apart has been reborn. The numbers of Aboriginal children removed has increased five times in the past 15 years. The majority of children are not placed with relatives or kin. Aboriginal Legal Service workers say that child protection agencies often refuse to engage with families before babies are removed and consistently favour non-Indigenous carers.

The rate of removal is highest in NSW, where in 2011, 9.6 per cent of Aboriginal children were in out of home care. Nationally it is 5.5 per cent.

The Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry found that “up to 197 babies were taken from their parents hours after birth in north Queensland hospitals between July 2009 and June last year”. Witnesses said, “People in communities are calling it a Stolen Generation, just with another name”. Many women who have their babies taken away are not represented at their initial court appearances—or don’t challenge the order because they do not know they can.

At a conference of the Secretariat of Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) in 2013, advocates reported a shocking rate of surveillance. Up to 62 per cent of Aboriginal children



in Queensland are currently “known to child protection”. From every state, there were stories of armed police accompanying child protection workers to raid houses and rip children away.

Delegates at the conference voted unanimously to initiate a national campaign to stop the removals, reunite children who have been taken and win resources for Aboriginal controlled agencies to support struggling families.

### Neglect?

Most removals occur because of supposed “child neglect”. But the real neglect begins with a racist system that holds Aboriginal people in extreme poverty and squalid living conditions.

A recent United Nations Human Development Index report rated Australia second in the world for quality of life. But according to researcher Gerry Georgatos, on the same indica-

tors Aboriginal people would be 122nd. Overcrowded housing is endemic in communities, with more than 20 people commonly cramming into one house. Third world health conditions such as otitis media (ear infections) and trachoma, eradicated in the rest of the developed world, are common.

Aboriginal family support services are barely surviving. Howard-era funding cuts and the abolition of Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) destroyed many. Funding agreements for 33 Aboriginal child and family centres are set to expire in 2014, yet neither major party has committed to continue the funding.

One former worker from the Daguragu family centre in the NT told the Intervention Rollback Action Group about the terrible consequences of the closure of her program, “It’s really hard for them now... if their little babies don’t

put on weight for two or three weeks, they be taken away from their mother’s arms by welfare”.

Where support services do exist in the NT, they can’t be accessed unless parents agree for 70 per cent of their Centrelink payments to be quarantined under “income management”.

### Paternalism

According to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women’s Legal and Advocacy Service, “the child protection system is too closely related to the historical discriminatory policies of the past which deemed Aboriginality to be sufficient grounds for removal of children.”

This is the result of many years of a blame-the-victim approach in Aboriginal politics, aiming to shift responsibility for chronic social problems away from government neglect and racism and onto the Aboriginal people who are suffering. This culminated with the Northern Territory Intervention.

Liberal NT Chief Minister Adam Giles has even called for more removal—he wants to change NT laws that specify that agencies must try to give a child a home with Aboriginal people before giving them up for adoption to non-Aboriginal people. (These laws, however, have done nothing to stop two thirds of current foster placements being with non-Indigenous carers).

According to Giles, “People were too scared of the Stolen Generation. And I believe that’s why there’s a lot of kids out there with such social dysfunction”.

A.O. Neville, the Commissioner for Native Affairs during early years of the Stolen Generation, put it similarly in 1934: “They have to be protected against themselves whether they like it or not.”