

Funeral oration by Nick Beams

Tribute to Yabu Bilyana

14 April 1999

The following tribute was delivered by Socialist Equality Party (Australia) national secretary Nick Beams at the funeral of Yabu Bilyana in Brisbane on April 12.

On behalf of the Socialist Equality Party and the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement, let me extend our deepest condolences to the family and friends of Yabu. You have lost a much-loved father, brother, grandfather and friend. We have lost a treasured and valued comrade--a loss which we feel deeply not only here in Australia but all over the world.

Recently I had occasion to re-read the political testament of Adolf Joffe, one of Leon Trotsky's closest political collaborators in the struggles of the Left Opposition in the 1920s.

He makes the point that "human life has meaning only to the extent that, and as long as, it serves the infinite, which for us is humanity."

Yabu's life has come to an end. But there is no question that it had the fullest meaning in precisely the sense indicated by Joffe. It was connected with the infinite, that is, the struggle for the interests of all humanity.

Yabu lived by these ideals. In an address to students at the Tranby College in Sydney, he recalled the words of Andre Breton: "Human emancipation remains the only cause worth serving."

I once asked Yabu what his name meant. He told me wedge-tailed eagle.

Over the past few days, since we heard the news of his death, and considered the meaning of his life, I have been thinking about what an appropriate name it was, how well chosen.

What are the characteristics of an eagle? It both flies higher and sees further. Yabu lived up to his name in every way. He rose higher, saw further and pointed the

way forward.

Yabu was the first Australian Aborigine to join the international Trotskyist movement and charted the road that will be followed by many others in the future. He did not come by accident. Like everyone else who is drawn to the revolutionary movement, he came with a striving for justice, for equality, for an end to oppression, a deep-going dissatisfaction with the present political set-up, and a well-founded sense that nothing could be resolved within its framework.

I well remember the first public meeting he attended. It was held in May 1989 and was addressed by David North on the tumultuous events in China. Yabu later remarked that it was at this meeting that he understood that the working class was an international class and that the party was international in its scope and outlook. It was from this time that Yabu understood that the goals for which he had striven all his life--the ending of the oppression of Aboriginal people--were inseparably bound up with the wider struggles of the international working class.

And it was this understanding that provided the granite-like foundation upon which he fought as a member of the world Trotskyist movement. I recall several vital discussions with Yabu as we fought to examine and deepen our understanding of the historical connection between the struggle of Aboriginal people and that of the international working class.

As we reviewed this whole history the issues came into clear focus: How could the crimes committed against the Aboriginal people be overcome through the establishment of new forms of property, so-called native title, by decision of the High Court? The oppression itself was the inevitable outcome of the system of property upheld by this court and all the institutions of the state.

We discussed how the values of Aboriginal society,

which did not know of wages, profits, rents, interest, much less property in land, but were based on collectivism, would be reproduced at a higher level in the development of an international socialist society.

The thrashing out of these questions--the significance of an international outlook, the nature of the capitalist state, the origins of oppression, the nature of property--were by no means abstract discussions. They provided the guide for the daily work in which the party and Yabu were engaged.

They formed the basis for the work carried out by Yabu in this city as part of the Workers Inquiry into the police killing of Daniel Yock. This inquiry, which insisted that the truth could only be discovered by an independent investigation, established precisely how this crime took place and the role of the Criminal Justice Commission inquiry--and all those who supported it--in covering it up.

I vividly recall sitting next to Yabu at public meetings called during election campaigns of our party. How could I, or anyone else, forget that voice, which filled the meeting hall.

But my memories of Yabu are not just of him on the public platform, indelible as they are. I remember him at the education camps conducted by our party struggling to get to grips with complex questions of history, of political economy or of philosophy. This was hard work--sometimes he would quite literally sweat with the exertion. But for Yabu there was no more important question than developing a scientific outlook and in that way contributing to the work of the party.

The same attitude was evident as he prepared his speech to be delivered to the Berlin conference against Imperialist War convened by the International Committee in November 1991. I remember going to bed one night as he was changing and rehearsing his remarks only to encounter him the next morning doing the same thing. He wanted to make sure it was right, that it was the very best contribution he could make, that it developed the maximum clarity and understanding.

With the death of Yabu, our party has lost a treasured comrade. The international working class and the Aboriginal people have lost a powerful fighter. But we take strength from the fact that while Yabu has gone, the principles for which he fought will help guide a

new generation in the struggles ahead.

Long live the memory of Yabu Bilyana.

Long live the Fourth International.

Forward to the emancipation of the international working class and the ending all oppression.



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