Yabu Bilyana's speech to 1996 election rally:

'The oppression of Aboriginal people is not a race question but a class question'

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Yabu Bilyana was one of seven candidates for the Socialist Labour League (the forerunner to the Socialist Equality Party) in the 1996 federal elections in Australia in March 1996. He stood for the seat of Kingsford-Smith in the eastern suburbs of Sydney which include Redfern and La Perouse--areas where many Aboriginal people live in substandard housing. Yabu Bilyana delivered the following speech to the SLL Election Rally held in Sydney on February 25, 1996.

One of the greatest frauds perpetrated by the Australian Labor Party in this election is the assertion that they stand for justice for Aboriginal people, and somehow justice for all workers.

This is centred on the Mabo High Court decision and the native title land act, which the Labor government claimed represented a move to end 200 years of oppression.

As a fifty one-year-old Aborigine who has fought for the rights of all workers--black, white and immigrant--I can tell you from first hand experience that this is a lie and it is exposed by examining the social conditions for Aboriginal people. The oppression of the Aboriginal people shows the real face of Australian capitalism.

The government and the capitalist media like to feature Aboriginal art, music and dance in galleries and theatres in New York, Paris and London but the overwhelming majority of Aboriginal people face social misery.

Let us examine a number of key indicators--health, housing and social facilities, unemployment, imprisonment and black deaths in custody.

The National Aboriginal Health Strategy, which was supposed to eliminate the inequality that existed in health services for Aboriginal people is a farce. In fact, the vast majority of the country's Aboriginal Medical Services don't even have sufficient funds to carry out the work they need to do.

Aboriginal infant mortality is one of the highest in the world. Forty percent of Aboriginal children end up in hospital with acute respiratory illness with admissions for pneumonia 80 times higher than for non-aboriginal children.

The incidence of rheumatic fever amongst Aborigines is more than three times the rate reported anywhere else in the world and has failed to improve over the last 30 years. Among children it is greater than the rate among poor urban Australians 50 years ago.

The life expectancy for Aborigines is 15 years less than for the rest of the Australian community with Aborigines in their 30s and 40s dying at a rate 12 times higher than other Australians of the same age.

Health is directly connected to social facilities, which under Labor have reached an all-time low.

Almost 200 Aboriginal communities are without any local medical service. More than 300 communities have water supplies that fail National Health and Medical Research Council guidelines. And more than 250 communities have no electricity at all.

Thirteen percent of Aboriginal five year-olds are not participating in any form of education and only 25 percent of Aboriginal children finish secondary school.

Despite promises of 1,000 Aboriginal teachers in schools by 1990 only 572 were employed as teachers in 1991.

In places like Redfern and La Perouse in Sydney, Inala in Brisbane and many other city areas, unemployment has forced Aborigines into overcrowded and substandard housing which breeds serious health problems.

Let us look at the current situation in Redfern. This housing estate dates back to the Whitlam Labor government in the early 1970s when it granted the land and housing to Aborigines in the area. This was hailed as a genuine reform. But what has been the result?

Housing conditions have deteriorated year after year. Basic maintenance has not been carried out and when homes have caught fire they have not been reconstructed.

Now this devastation is being used by the Aboriginal Housing Company to claim that Redfern housing must be bulldozed and new business ventures set up on this prime piece of real estate to be run and controlled by Aboriginal entrepreneurs.

This shows above all else that the oppression of Aboriginal people is not a race question but a class question. Having collaborated in the running down of the Redfern estate the aspiring businessmen of the Housing Company are now moving to oust Aboriginal people from their homes to clear the way for their profit making ventures.

As for unemployment, the jobless rate is as much as 90 percent in some areas. In country towns of NSW and throughout Australia the social conditions which flow from this can only be described as a disaster.

What has been Labor's response. It has employed a number of Aboriginal leaders through the Community Development Employment Project (CDEP) scheme to force more than 25,000 Aboriginal workers and youth to work for the dole.

Under threat of being cut off unemployment benefits, Aborigines are forced to carry out tasks, which should be carried out by full-time workers on decent wages.

And this has been used as a means to test out Labor's "Working Nation" and youth training wage program, which are bogus training schemes to provide a ready source of low-cost labour for employers.

At the same time, Aboriginal imprisonment is at record rates and increasing every year. The number of Aborigines in prison has increased from 1,800 in 1991 to 2,700 in 1995. This means that Aborigines are incarcerated at 26 times the rate of other Australians and that 1 in 7 people in jail are Aborigines or Torres Strait islanders.

And the number of Aborigines killed in police custody has escalated dramatically. In fact, since 1989, 88 Aborigines have been killed and the number is growing every year--from six killed in 1992 to 15 in 1995. And already this year three Aborigines have died in custody.

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The Royal Commission into Black Deaths cleared the police and prison authorities of responsibility for every one of the 99 cases it examined and has given the green light for the killing to go on. And all its 339 recommendations were designed to strengthen the operations of the state with the assistance of Aboriginal consultative and "watch" committees, which have become part of the system itself.

The Royal Commission was never aimed at halting black deaths in custody, but at diverting the movement which was developing, not only against the prison and watchhouse murders, but against the terrible social conditions facing Aboriginal families.

So what is the real purpose of Labor's Aboriginal legislation?

The situation I have already outlined shows that this legislation has done nothing to improve the conditions of Aboriginal people. In fact, Mabo, land rights treaties and the legal service exist for definite political reasons.

The land rights legislation was never to secure justice. Its aim has always been to establish a legal mechanism for the exploitation of land for mining and other purposes without the danger of long legal challenges.

The basis of the entire capitalist legal system is the codification of the rights of property. The aim of Labor's land title legislation is to codify the property rights of traditional owners. Once this is done, the legal basis is then established for the so-called representatives of these owners to negotiate with mining and other companies for the exploitation of these resources on a secure basis.

This is the sole purpose of land rights legislation. It has nothing to do with rectifying the crimes of the past, but it is concerned with the establishment of a secure environment for the accumulation of profit in the present, and the future.

The Aboriginal Legal Service, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) and other semi-government formations run by Aboriginal bureaucrats serve another, no less important, political role. They are mechanisms set in place by the state--the same state that is responsible for 200 years of oppression--to prevent the development of a struggle against the profit system and its entire state apparatus.

Capitalist governments select a layer of Aboriginal people, give them a few crumbs and use them to maintain control. The role of all these agencies was revealed in their campaign to try and disrupt the workers inquiry into the death of Daniel Yock organised by the Socialist Labour League (SLL).

Within hours of Daniel Yock's murder in Brisbane in November 1993, the hired servants of the Aboriginal Legal Service (ALS) were called on to earn their keep.

While the chants of the demonstrators were "No CJC"--in other words, opposition to any inquiry conducted by the Criminal Justice Commission in Queensland, which had already covered up every case it had examined--Sam Watson and the other ALS representatives were working to set up a CJC inquiry, the sole purpose of which was to protect the police who carried out the murder.

The legal service formally requested the CJC investigation, promoted illusions in it and told Aboriginal people to await its investigation. When the CJC exonerated the police and declared that Yock died of a Stokes-Adams attack, a medical condition that is rarely fatal, the ALS supported the CJC's medical lies.

Sam Watson and the policies of the Aboriginal leadership were endorsed by groups such as the International Socialist Organisation and the Democratic Socialist Party. Watson, it was later revealed, received an extra $6,758 from the government on top of his salary for working overtime to maintain control over angry Aboriginal youth and workers.

This lineup opposed the Workers Inquiry into the Death of Daniel Yock.

I was proud to serve as a commissioner on this inquiry which, to this day, remains the only independent investigation into a police killing.

It proved conclusively how the police were responsible for the death of Daniel Yock and tore apart the official CJC decision that he died of a mysterious Stokes-Adams heart attack.

The sole activity of the Aboriginal leaderships was to try and disrupt the inquiry and prevent it taking place. But they did not succeed.

The Workers Inquiry established the truth, and nearly two years after its decision, the findings of the Workers Inquiry remain unchallenged.

The Aboriginal middle class leaders have a definite interest in covering up the truth. Their social interests are bound up with securing their position within the capitalist state, and establishing themselves in the lucrative business of marketing Aboriginal culture and art, as well as deals with the mining companies, tour operators and real estate developers whether it be in Cape York, Uluru, or in Redfern.

This is the content of black nationalist politics.

The Aboriginal leaders promote black nationalism which claims that the oppression of Aboriginal people arises from white society. But the continuing oppression of the Aborigines is not the result of "white society" but of capitalist society which attacks all sections of the working class--whether they be black, white or immigrant--for the profits of a few.

The oppression of Aboriginal people began with the global spread of the capitalist system which led, in turn, to the colonisation of Australia.

Two hundred years on, the contradictions of the profit system have reached such a point that the poverty, misery and degradation inflicted by it on the indigenous population indicates the social conditions that are being created for all sections of the working class.

There can be no social justice, secure living standards or democratic rights of any section of working people within the framework of the profit system.

Aboriginal people can only advance their struggle as part of the struggle of the international working class to put an end to the profit system and for the socialist transformation of society.

This is the great task that confronts workers of all countries and the SLL and the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) are the only force with the program and historical record that can take forward this fight.

It is a proud moment in my life to be a candidate for the SLL and fighting for the only program which can bring about the liberation of the working class. I urge you to join us in this struggle.

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