

Yabu Bilyana 1944-1999

Aboriginal socialist buried in Brisbane

Mike Head
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Yabu Bilyana, the first Australian Aborigine to join the International Committee of the Fourth International, was buried in Brisbane on Monday. Bilyana, 54, a member of the Socialist Equality Party of Australia, died on Monday April 5, two years after a severe stroke left him permanently disabled. More than 300 people filled the St Barnabas church in the suburb of Sunnybank for his funeral service.

The attendance at the service was a powerful demonstration of Bilyana's standing among wide sections of working people, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, young and old. It was an entirely working class congregation, reflecting the admiration and respect that Bilyana, formerly known as Jim Tyson, earned throughout the five decades of his life.

Former workmates, neighbours, young Aboriginal people and fellow rugby league followers joined Bilyana's brothers and sisters, nine children and other family members. One young man, whom Bilyana had once helped as a child, came in handcuffs, accompanied by two prison officers.

A delegation of Socialist Equality Party members and supporters from Sydney, Newcastle and Brisbane attended the service. SEP national secretary Nick Beams delivered a moving opening tribute and read a message of condolence from David North, the national secretary of the SEP of the United States. (The text of the tributes is linked below) Following Beams' address, the audience rose for the playing of *The Internationale*.

Gavin Tyson, Bilyana's eldest son, delivered the eulogy. Fighting back tears, he briefly traced his father's life, from his birth in Brisbane and early years in the rural town of Springsure. "Dad left school in Grade 8, and that is when he began his football and boxing career. He left Springsure for Brisbane at the age of 14". At 21 he married Nettie Pickering, with

whom he was to have seven children--Gavin, Ricky, Toni, Angela, Darin, Julie and Leanne. Later he married Natalie, with whom he had two children--Gandhu, 11, and Ellebana, 9.

"Dad defended many people in his life," Gavin said. In the early 1970s he had worked as a labourer and furniture removalist, before assisting at Brisbane's Opel Hostel for Aboriginal youth. "Not everyone is aware that he was very active in the Aboriginal movement, becoming Queensland president of the Aboriginal Legal Service in 1976."

Gavin recalled that Yabu had been a dedicated follower of the Brisbane Broncos rugby league team and had once played in a Brisbane metropolitan team. His father had played the game at a local level until the age of 38--so determined to continue, despite age and injury, that it had taken "eight rolls of tape for him to take the field".

Yabu had resumed his education later in life, enrolling first as a trainee teacher and then as a social work student.

Then he met the Socialist Labour League, which was "the start of one of his great passions". Gavin related how his father had been determined to convince everyone he knew of the socialist cause. "He would try to convert us in the best possible way, even if he knew we didn't want to be converted," he said to laughter.

"Dad represented the party at the 1991 World Conference Against Colonialism and War at Berlin." In 1993 he stood as a socialist parliamentary candidate for the first time. In 1994 he participated in the Workers Inquiry into the death of Daniel Yock, the 18-year-old Aboriginal youth killed by Brisbane police. "He would always talk about the Workers Inquiry. He felt strongly about it--he wanted answers to Daniel's death. As one of the six commissioners on the inquiry, he spoke to

Aboriginal students at schools, colleges and universities."

After his massive stroke in May 1997, "Dad met his terrible condition with great courage and dignity. Throughout this ordeal he appreciated the love from all around him--from his children, family and friends."

Gavin concluded by reading a poem from Yabu's 11 grandchildren. Called "Hearts broken in two," it expressed both their sadness at knowing they would never see him again, and their happiness at knowing that his pain had ended.

One of Yabu's brothers, Roderick, added his own short tribute, describing Yabu as a "larrikin" who had been misunderstood on occasion.

At the burial in Mt Gravatt Cemetery, George Simpson, one of Yabu's sons-in-law, played an Aboriginal didgeridoo before the coffin was lowered into the grave. On the coffin was a wreath from the members of the International Committee of the Fourth International, floral tributes from the family and an Aboriginal flag.

After the service, Yabu's family, friends and comrades gathered for a wake. The SEP presented his children with photograph albums of their father campaigning in the working class, addressing public meetings and with groups of workers, youth and Aboriginal students. On behalf of the family, his son Gavin expressed appreciation for the messages of condolence that had come from Yabu's comrades in the international Trotskyist movement.



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