

TJ Hickey and the plight of young Aboriginal Australians

Rick Kelly
6 May 2004

Less than three months after the death of seventeen-year-old Aboriginal boy Thomas “TJ” Hickey on February 14 this year, the Australian media has virtually buried the issue. To the extent it is even referred to, it is portrayed as a tragic and unfortunate accident, with no wider social significance.

Young TJ died after he catapulted from his bicycle and was impaled on a metal fence. While police continue to deny they hold any responsibility, witnesses reported seeing police chase the youth moments before. The youth’s death sparked an explosive confrontation on February 15 between heavily armed police and Aboriginal residents in the Sydney suburb of Redfern.

There are definite political interests underlying the reticence within official circles to investigate the wider social and economic conditions behind TJ’s death. Even a brief examination begins to provide a damning insight into the consequences of decades of official indifference to the plight of Australia’s Aboriginal population.

Conditions in regional Australia

TJ Hickey’s life was, to a significant degree, representative of an entire generation of Aboriginal youth. While born in Sydney, he grew up in Walgett, a small rural town in northwest New South Wales. Like many other rural and regional towns in Australia, Walgett offers no real future for young working class people, particularly those who are of Aboriginal descent.

The town is one of the most isolated in New South Wales, lying 690 km north-west of Sydney, and 700 km west of Queensland’s capital, Brisbane. There are approximately 2,000 residents, of whom 40 percent are Aboriginal.

Walgett essentially serves as a transport centre for the surrounding district’s agricultural produce. The regional economy is based on wheat production, as well as cattle and sheep farming. Farming in the Walgett region, as for the Australian agricultural sector as a whole, is increasingly dominated by large agribusinesses.

The decline in small farming in the area was accelerated by a devastating drought in 2002, which saw the local Barwon River completely dry up. As an entire wheat crop was lost, the Walgett silo, one of the biggest grain delivery points in Australia, had to be

closed. Walgett’s mayor estimated the total cost to the local economy at \$250 million.

The drought only compounded the town’s protracted economic and social crisis. A number of families were forced to leave, contributing to the declining population. As in much of regional Australia, Walgett’s social services are scarce and its infrastructure ageing.

The general deprivation is especially pronounced among Walgett’s Aborigines. Perhaps the most striking indicator is the massive level of unemployment. In 2001, the unemployment rate for Aborigines in Walgett was 29.2 percent.

Even for those Aborigines who are lucky enough to find employment, it is predominantly at low pay. A Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) study found that “[o]n average, indigenous workers in the region receive between half and three-quarters of what non-indigenous workers earn”. Moreover, the complete dearth of employment possibilities for indigenous people in rural areas is masked by the official unemployment measure. Government unemployment statistics exclude those Aborigines who work in Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP).

CDEP is a forerunner of the “work for the dole” scheme, and forces unemployed Aborigines into low skill and low pay work. While CDEP benefits a small layer of indigenous bureaucrats in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), the scheme exploits unemployed youth and workers as a cheap labour force.

The CAEPR has estimated that were it not for CDEP, the official indigenous unemployment rate would be between 41 and 48 percent. In non-urban centres, CDEP plays an even larger role in concealing the true level of unemployment. In 2000, 92 percent of all employed Aborigines in Walgett were in CDEP.

TJ Hickey never experienced any gainful employment in the rural town, with his work experience limited to menial and casual agricultural labouring jobs. The boy had left school when he was just 14, after he struggled to develop his reading and writing skills.

The under-education of Aboriginal youth like TJ is a common phenomenon. Aborigines in Australia graduate from high school at almost half the non-indigenous rate. According to a 2000 study, Aboriginal children in Walgett’s public schools make up 95 percent of those in Years 1-6, but only 57 percent in Years 7-12.

The absence of any hope of employment combines with a chronic lack of recreation facilities for young people: This extends

to the most elementary organisation of team sports. TJ, a keen rugby league player, found that beyond the under-12s level, there was no competition for Walgett teenagers.

One Walgett resident described the conditions facing youth to the *Australian*. “Why go on at school when there’s no jobs? Why try to play sport when there’s no organised competition? The local pool closes at 7 o’clock at night in summer, when it’s still 35 or 40 degrees [centigrade]. The community centre doesn’t open when it’s supposed to be open every day after 3. There’s just nothing for the kids to do except get into trouble.”

Punitive and racist policing practices only add to this crisis. Aborigines in regional Australia are usually the primary target for charges of a petty criminal nature. In Walgett, the rate of court appearance for offensive language is fourteen times the New South Wales average. Police “moving on” powers are also overwhelmingly directed against Aborigines.

Nationally, Aborigines constitute approximately 20 percent of the total prison population, despite making up just 2.4 percent of the total Australian population. Not surprisingly, this level of incarceration has a terrible effect on families and communities. At the time of Hickey’s death, for example, his father, three uncles, and a number of cousins were all in gaol.

Given these appalling conditions, large numbers of young Aborigines like TJ inevitably seek to move out of towns like Walgett as soon as they can. Rural Australia offers little beyond a life of unemployment, poverty and isolation.

As a teenager, and with relatives in both areas, TJ divided his time between Sydney and Walgett. In December last year he left Walgett and moved to the city for what was to be the last time.

Life in Redfern

Like most young Aborigines arriving in Sydney from regional New South Wales, TJ made the inner-city suburb of Redfern his first point of call. The area has long been a traditional meeting place for Aborigines from across the state.

In the 1920s, significant numbers of Aboriginal people were attracted to Redfern by the availability of low rent housing, and stable employment at the Eveleigh Railway workshops. Over the following decades, local factories and manufacturers provided them with employment opportunities.

The vast economic restructuring that has taken place over the past three decades has radically affected the local Redfern economy. Almost all of the old manufacturing base has been eliminated, and this has especially impacted on the Aboriginal minority. In 2001, the rate of Aboriginal unemployment was officially 24.7 percent, although unofficially much higher. Such levels of mass unemployment carry with them the inevitable social consequences—drug dependency, marriage breakdown, domestic violence. They also bring constant police harassment and intimidation.

Within days of his arrival in Sydney, TJ Hickey was assaulted by police, in what one media report described as a case of “mistaken

identity”. One can only surmise the effect this had on the young teenager. Soon after, he began to commit various petty crimes. Before his death, he had faced the local children’s court on charges of stealing, resisting police, and possession of a small quantity of marijuana.

Having come from Walgett seeking some kind of better life, TJ found himself trapped in an environment that was little different to the one he had escaped. For young Aborigines in Redfern it is almost impossible to find a decent job, and there are few recreational facilities available.

The impoverished conditions create a vicious cycle: unemployment and poverty lead to drug addiction which itself leads to petty crime. Police treatment of young Aborigines compounds the problem. TJ’s assault by the police was not an isolated incident. Every young Aborigine in Redfern has experienced similar police intimidation or surveillance.

These policing practices arise directly out of the massive social inequality that exists in Redfern. While many Aborigines live in what can only be described as slums, large sections of the suburb and its surrounds have become gentrified in recent years. Significant numbers of young professionals have moved in, attracted by the area’s proximity to the Sydney’s city centre. Government sponsored “urban renewal” projects have encouraged this influx.

The state Labor government has openly declared its intent to incorporate Redfern into Sydney’s central business district. The corollary of its agenda is a push to eliminate all low income housing in the area, and to drive out the Aboriginal population.

Almost all of the houses in what is known as the “Block” have now been torn down, and the Aboriginal residents have moved to outlying Sydney suburbs. The “Block” has for decades been the traditional meeting place for Sydney’s Aboriginal community, and it was here that TJ Hickey spent most of his time with his friends.

The few houses that remain on the “Block” are run down, dilapidated and vermin infested. The Aboriginal Housing Company (AHC), which owns the properties there, has for years refused to do any repair or maintenance work. The AHC is now working with the state government to redevelop the area as part of the government’s pro-business Redfern-Eveleigh-Darlington (RED) plan, which is being implemented without any consideration of the consequences for Aboriginal residents. The question of providing decent housing and jobs programs for young people like TJ Hickey is simply never even raised.

The official response to the Redfern riot demonstrated that, in the face of rapidly developing social inequality, the only solution as far as both the Liberal and Labor parties are concerned is the strengthening of the state’s repressive powers.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact