

Australia: thousands attend funeral for Van Nguyen

WSWS reporters
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More than 3,000 people attended a funeral service yesterday for 25-year-old Nguyen Tuong Van, expressing the deeply felt public opposition to his barbaric execution by the Singapore government last Friday.

Mourners lined up outside the entrance to St Patrick's Cathedral in East Melbourne up to an hour before the 11 a.m. service to sign their names on condolence sheets. Many wore white—the traditional colour of Vietnamese mourning.

While media outlets, including Melbourne's *Age* newspaper, had insisted the previous day that Van's funeral not become a protest against the death penalty, the thousands who attended his service were determined to register their abhorrence of a young life cut short and of the practice of capital punishment worldwide.

Those who filled the cathedral's wooden pews, and the aisles and church perimeters, represented a broad cross section of ordinary working people. Old people and young, Vietnamese and Australian, immigrants from every continent, university, TAFE and high school students and entire families attended the nearly two-hour requiem mass, many with small children in strollers.

Outside on the cathedral steps, speakers broadcast the service to the dozens of mourners spilling out into the forecourt. The funeral mass was conducted in English and Vietnamese.

An order of service handed to mourners contained the final words of Van Nguyen written just two hours before his hanging.

Nguyen was arrested at Singapore airport in December 2002, en route to Australia, carrying 396 grams of heroin. The offence carries a mandatory death sentence in Singapore, yet the Howard government made no attempt to save the life of the Australian citizen of Vietnamese descent, and opposed legal attempts to block his execution by an appeal to the International Court of Justice.

The outpouring of opposition by ordinary people was in stark contrast to the response of the Labor Party. Victorian Labor Premier Steve Bracks, who had earlier stated that he would go about business as usual on the morning of Nguyen's execution, told the press on Tuesday that he would not be attending the funeral because he did not want to "glorify" Nguyen.

Eulogies delivered at the service by Van Nguyen's friends and by his defence lawyer Lex Lasry QC, described Nguyen's sense of compassion and concern for others.

Lasry addressed the service both as a lawyer and on behalf of the family. "Those of us who practice law do so because we believe in the system of justice. For us Van was enormously defensible."

Quoting the words of Martin Luther King, "injustice anywhere

affects justice everywhere", Lasry made clear that Nguyen's execution had broad legal and political implications.

"Aside from the political debate on capital punishment which will go on, many ordinary people have felt for Van. He reawakened within them strong emotions of humanity and compassion."

Bronwyn Lew, a close friend of Van's who had campaigned tirelessly for the overturn of his death sentence, said that Van Nguyen had touched many lives. With just days left to live, he wanted to answer each and every one of the letters of support that he received in his prison cell. "He believed we have to make use of the time we have left. His selflessness was unparalleled.

"He was the baby in death row and the big brother to those in need." In Singapore, she said, relatives of Nguyen's fellow death row inmates attended a service in appreciation of Van's support for their own departed loved ones.

As Van Nguyen's mother Kim began her long walk down the cathedral's central aisle, followed by her son's coffin, the thousands of assembled mourners broke into spontaneous and sustained applause.

Outside crowds stood by in silence as Nguyen's coffin was placed inside a silver hearse. As the funeral cortege pulled out from the cathedral grounds, Kim waved at people through an open window to show them her appreciation for their support.

Hundreds of people took copies of an article published by the *World Socialist Web Site* condemning Nguyen's execution as an act of barbarism. People who spoke to WSWS reporters expressed their utter disgust at the Howard government and the Labor opposition for their desertion of the young man. They also spoke out against capital punishment and a range of other issues, making clear that they had taken the opportunity of the funeral service to demonstrate their solidarity with Nguyen's family and their hostility to what they regard as the increasingly cruel and inhumane nature of the present political and social order.

Stephanie Logan, an older woman, said: "I think this execution is completely barbaric. I come from Italy—this is what used to be done there in the 1800s. I can't believe this is happening. It is disgusting. I blame both Howard and Labor."

Mary, a mother, declared: "It is callous and barbaric. Van Nguyen should have got jail, not this hanging. It is just terrible. If it was John Howard's kid, they would have got him out. On Friday, Howard just went to a cricket match. The government just wouldn't do anything."

A group of young journalists from Indonesia doing a short course at RMIT university attended the funeral and expressed their opposition to the death penalty:

Yuven said: “My opinion is that I reject the death penalty, because everyone has to be given a chance to rearrange their life and future. I think everyone has a right to improve their life. In the church, people are in tears, many Australians are crying. There was a feeling last Friday that protests took place everywhere in Australia.”

Augustinus added: “The service was very respectful of Nguyen. I am totally against capital punishment. Nguyen had already prepared himself to face death. He is at peace now. This is the same as in Indonesia. There should not be the death penalty.”

Otniel said: “I hope this is the last time for an Australian to face the death penalty.”

A retiree who attended, Jenny Lovell, told WSWs: “The government is a bunch of corrupt cowards. They do what they do for political expediency and nothing else. The execution is barbaric. What has it improved in the world?

“All they care about is big business and their mates in government. I suspect that Howard actually concurs with the death penalty.

“The leaders in Australia don’t win the respect of other countries. They’re hypocrites. I’ve just written a letter—in it I said that the symbolism for Howard as prime minister is a gantry with four nooses surrounded by nine rifles. It is a frightening image.”

Jim Felkins, a driver, together with his younger friends Steve, unemployed and Denise, a housewife, expressed their anger at the government. Steve said: “Look at all this legislation going through parliament—industrial relations, anti-terror, welfare to work. We can’t win—it’s either one party or the other. Most people aren’t aware, they’re just going about their daily duties. I’ve got a degree, but I can only get part-time or casual jobs. When I go to Newstart they want me to do work for \$14 an hour, or they keep sending me to do the same course over and over again. I don’t know how many times I’ve learnt to write a resume.”

Denise agreed: “I’ve got three children. Under the new law I have to find work next year. I haven’t worked for 12 years. Look at the way they’re treating people with disabilities. The service was really moving, I didn’t know Van—but I feel as though I have known him. He seems like a lovely person. I didn’t cry as much at my own dad’s funeral. To die like that for a silly mistake! I’m so glad I came to the funeral.”

“Look at the media,” Steve pointed out. “They talk about potential terrorists, but is it a beat up? The Muslim cleric who said something two weeks ago—there is great outrage. The media plays a big role in all this.”

Jim Felkins said: “It’s all owned by Kerry Packer or Murdoch, they own every paper in the world. Look at the ploy with China—they go along with all the crimes against humanity—Murdoch will give them good press so he can get his place in China.

“As for Van Nguyen, after what we did to Vietnam, they deserve a bit better than this. It was very moving. It has touched me so much. I’ve lost two sons, and this was like another one.

“Personally, I can’t retire, I can’t afford it. I’ll have to work till

I die. This is what it will be like for a lot of people under the new legislation. I work for \$15 an hour, a 12-hour day, no holiday pay, no sick pay and no penalty rates in the middle of the night. The government is looking after their rich mates, getting richer and richer. I voted Liberal, I’ll never vote for them again as long as I live.”

Jan, a mother, said: “I’m from Ireland and my mother’s cousin was hanged in prison there in 1946, so this execution has really affected me.

“I was in the UK for five weeks recently and the government wanted legislation to keep people locked away for 90 days. It didn’t get passed for 90 days, only for 28. We know all about that sort of treatment in Ireland.”

Charlotte Lobo, a 20-year-old Engineering-Computer Systems student from RMIT, declared: “I don’t believe in the death penalty. I know he did something wrong but he should not have to pay with his life.

“I think that if the government had got involved three years ago rather than before the last clemency appeal, then something might have been done. But from what I can see, I don’t think that happened.”

Charlotte attended the service by herself. She said that many RMIT students had “put in their hands” for Nguyen. The hand became a symbol for the “Reach Out” campaign initiated by Van Nguyen’s friends Kelly Ng and Bronwyn Lew. Charlotte said thousands of high school and university students had traced copies of their hands with a message for Nguyen and calling on the Singapore government to grant him clemency.

Lobo said her whole family was opposed to Nguyen’s execution.

Con, a small businessman, asked angrily: “Is there an opposition on anything? The way society is now, it is just all about money. At the end of the day you have to have social equality and social justice. There is no social justice in what has happened with this execution. Van Nguyen co-operated with them completely. It is really sad—he realised he had made a mistake.

“The Singapore government and the Australian government are both only interested in international co-operation with the big boys and big business. The small fry get sacrificed.”



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