

# Australia: Aboriginal town camp residents organise first-ever rally

Susan Allan  
14 July 2006

Late last month more than 400 Aboriginal residents of town camps situated on the outskirts of Alice Springs, in the heart of central Australia, participated in a powerful rally in the city centre. The event was organised by the Aboriginal community to protest its treatment at the hands of the Howard government and the media.

The rally followed several months of sensationalised media coverage of the desperate social problems that plague the town camps. In April, an Aboriginal teenager died after being sexually abused and then abandoned. Soon after, Alice Springs Crown Prosecutor Nanette Rogers went on national television to claim that violence and sexual abuse were rampant in Aboriginal communities and that strong action had to be taken. In response, politicians and the media alike have proposed a series of repressive measures, centred on more policing, along with a revival of the paternalistic policies of the past.

In the lead up to the rally Eileen Hoosan, one of the organisers and a resident of the Mount Nancy town camp, attacked both state and federal governments for ignoring numerous reports recommending action to deal with the problems of abuse and violence that had existed for decades. Hoosan, a former women's officer with the Aboriginal-controlled Tangentyere council, said, "Our women don't want domestic violence and sexual abuse in our communities. We have been fighting for over 25 years to change things. The communities need money for housing and programs against domestic violence."

The rally, the first-ever held by town camp residents, was addressed by speakers from 6 of the 18 camps on the fringe of Alice Springs, which have a total population of 2,500. Most of the speakers had never addressed a public gathering before.

Speakers included children as young as 10 years, teenagers and adults. Some spoke in their Aboriginal language and then in English. Many said their families had been residents of the camps for over five generations, and that they were proud of their history. They described how, over the past two or more decades, they had struggled to bring up the next generation in a safe environment, without even the most basic infrastructure such as power, water, street lighting or sewerage, all of which were routinely provided for the rest of the population.

Walter Shaw, an executive member of the Tangentyere council, which has administered the town camps for over 25 years, made an impassioned speech calling for a constructive solution to the violence in the town camps. Referring to the current media coverage of the situation in Aboriginal communities, he said it was creating the wrong impression of indigenous people. The government's approach, Shaw declared, was reminiscent of the early assimilation policies. Nothing had changed "except the chains have been swapped for handcuffs."

Kathy Abbott from Palmers camp spoke about the need for ongoing and recurrent spending by government for rehabilitation and mental

health programs. She said one program alone was not the answer. "Governments must look at working with the whole range of living conditions that are under-served. From education, to training, to health and housing—it won't be fixed with more police." She described how the government had threatened to end funding for a successful family well-being program in July.

Kevin Wirri, president of the Abbots camp housing association, explained how his community had fought the government and police for six years to make their camp a dry (alcohol free) area. Surrounding Abbots camp were three liquor outlets that made life intolerable and unsafe for the community. "We want people to know that it was us from Abbots camp, not the government or police, who applied for that dry area so that our people could be safe in their homes. For six years we applied for a dry area and we were refused. Last year we got our dry area, and already our people are feeling safer and the camp is much quieter. We can sleep at night."

Alice Springs, with a population of around 28,000, is served by more than 94 liquor outlets. In 1982, local laws were introduced forbidding drinking within two kilometres of an alcohol outlet. This has seen the police push drinkers out to the very edges of Alice Springs and into the town camps, away from the public eye and creating enormous problems for camp residents.

Despite its unprecedented character, official media coverage of the rally was virtually non-existent, apart from a short report on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. This is typical of the way the media routinely ignores the lives and struggles of ordinary Aborigines—while, at the same time, presenting a distorted and one-sided picture of the problems they confront.

In order to come to a genuine understanding of why such a terrible state of affairs exists in the town camps, it is necessary to review—even briefly—their history.

European settlement in central Australia began more than 130 years ago. However, the Aboriginal inhabitants at that time, the Arrrente people (some of whose descendants were at the rally) date their history back many thousands of years earlier.

An overland telegraph line was established in the 1870s, opening the way for pastoralists, mining companies and the establishment of church missions like Hermannsburg—a Lutheran mission. As the settlers made their way north and into the interior, appropriating the land for their exclusive use—in particular waterholes and soaks—and introducing cattle and sheep, they dispossessed the Aboriginal population, degrading the land that was vital to the indigenous way of life. By 1881, it was estimated that the whole of central Australia was either under lease or lease application. Over the next decade, approximately 1,000 Aboriginal people were killed.

As a result of growing dispossession, the “fringe camps” as they were known, grew, initially as ration depots and then as labor camps around settlements such as Stuart, later to be named Alice Springs. In 1928, Alice Springs was declared a prohibited area for Aborigines, which remained the case until 1964.

The town camps provided virtual free labor for the railways that were being built between Adelaide and Alice Springs, and for the pastoralists. Aborigines were paid in rations of food and clothing, with no rights, and their movement was severely restricted by the police and by racist government legislation. It was during this time that hundreds of half-caste children, the “Stolen Generation”, were forcibly removed from their mothers in the camps and taken to missions such as Hermannsburg—a policy that continued through to the 1970s.

The 1920s was a time of severe drought in central Australia, with up to 85 percent of Aboriginal children on the missions dying of malnutrition. So complete had been the dispossession of the land that starvation became one of the main killers. In 1928, nearly 100 Aborigines were massacred by the police at Coniston, as a result of a dispute that had begun between farmers and the local Aboriginal population over control of a waterhole.

During the Second World War, Alice Springs was transformed into a military camp, with up to 8,000 troops stationed in the town. By the end of the war, many indigenous men had served in the military and were eligible for citizenship. They had to carry papers designated as “dog licenses” with them at all times, to prove their citizenship.

Citizenship was granted to very few Aborigines. Most were regarded under the law as wards of the state, with restricted movement and no rights. Some historians have compared the forced incarceration of Aboriginal people in government institutions and missions as comparable to the confinement of enemy aliens in times of war.

Throughout the 1950s and 60s, government policy was to forcibly remove Aborigines from the camps to settlements or missions in the bush. There were, however, notable exceptions, where Aborigine people could be used as cheap labor. One such case was the “Night Soil camp”. It operated as a labor force, with Aboriginal workers carrying and burying sewerage from Alice Springs during the night. The sanitary camp closed in 1965 when the Alice Springs infrastructure was modernised. Most town camps today still lack proper sewerage.

In 1966, the federal Conciliation and Arbitration Commission brought down a decision on equal wages for Aboriginal people working in the pastoral industry. The response of the pastoralists was to sack their indigenous workforce. For many workers, this was the beginning of life-long unemployment. Squalid conditions in the town camps became a permanent feature of Aboriginal life.

Throughout the 70s, the indigenous population survived in what can only be described as ghetto conditions, living in makeshift shelters, made from tin sheeting, old car bodies, in dry creek beds or hidden hills. Government policy was hardly different than that of apartheid South Africa.

In 1977, the town camps began to be administered by the newly formed, Aboriginal-controlled Tangentyere council. While the new “self-determination” policy was claimed as a step forward for Aborigines, in practice it meant that both state and federal governments were absolving themselves of all responsibility for the welfare of the indigenous population. Self-determination was accompanied by totally inadequate funding and professional assistance, given the nature of the camps and their requirements.

In 2001, a commonwealth government census reported that the Alice Springs town campers, then numbering just under one thousand, represented the most oppressed section of the Australian population, with a socio-economic profile similar to that of indigenous people living in remote communities. At the time of the census, 87 percent of town campers were unemployed, with a weekly income of approximately \$145 per week. Some 60 percent had never attended school or had only attended to year 8 or below, and 85 percent spoke an indigenous language at home—with English being the second, third or even fourth language for most residents.

Since then, as funding cuts to services in remote communities have deepened, the population living and visiting the camps has more than doubled. But the slashing of much-needed social programs—including the closure of community learning centres established by the Aboriginal communities themselves—many of the camps have struggled to deal with the growth of myriad social problems such as substance abuse and domestic violence.

Last April, in the midst of the hysterical media campaign, Jane Vadiveloo, a social services worker and former employee of the Tangentyere council, prepared a background paper attempting to provide some insight into the complex problems confronted by town campers. The report was circulated to the media and to both the federal and Northern Territory (NT) governments, but has not rated a mention in the ongoing media commentary.

In her detailed assessment, Vadiveloo outlined how, historically, the town camps had been discriminated against, used as a dumping ground and scapegoat for the many social problems in Alice Springs. She pointed to the lack of the most basic infrastructure—power, sewerage, water, rubbish collection, and postal services—in the camps, while at the same time, newly built suburbs in Alice Springs had been provided with all these basic facilities.

Government neglect and discrimination is evident in every aspect of social life. Across the 18 town camps, for example, the Tangentyere council has been allocated federal funding to provide intensive support to six old people. There are, however, estimated to be 60 people with aged and disabled needs, all of whom are left with little or no support. The same applies to infant and maternal health. While all other residents in Alice Springs receive follow up visits after leaving hospital to address maternal and infant care, the NT Community Health Care Centre staff have received written advice that they are not to provide services to town camp residents.

It is precisely these attitudes and social conditions that are responsible for the tragedies that now afflict the daily lives of today’s town campers.



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**