

Aboriginal people condemn police-military intervention in Northern Territory

Our correspondents
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Protests were held in Australian cities last weekend against the Howard government's police-military takeover of Aboriginal townships and camps in the Northern Territory, as well as last month's acquittal of a senior police officer for the manslaughter and assault of an indigenous prisoner, Mulrunji Doomadgee, on Palm Island. Some of the events commemorated National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) Week. Others were rallies called by various Aboriginal and radical groups.

In the course of the demonstrations, ordinary Aboriginal and other working people gave interviews to WSWs correspondents expressing contempt for the official claims that the intervention, complete with welfare cut-offs, land seizures and forced medical checks, was aimed at protecting children from abuse. They emphasised their deep hostility toward the Howard government, while a number also condemned the Labor Party, which has given bipartisan backing to the Northern Territory operation.

Most of those who spoke to the WSWs denounced the use of the military to accompany government teams arriving to take control of communities. Several drew parallels to the deployment of troops in Iraq and Solomon Islands. While those interviewed tended to regard the attack as directed solely against Aborigines, some recognised that it was part of a wider assault on the working class as a whole. On the eve of the Saturday rallies, both Prime Minister John Howard and Labor leader Kevin Rudd announced schemes to extend the cutting off of welfare to all those parents around the country who were allegedly responsible for neglecting their children or failing to send them to school.

A common feature of the events, however, was that the speakers said nothing about these political issues. They mostly sought to divert the anger felt by indigenous people and their supporters into blaming "whites" or individual "racist" politicians for the Northern Territory takeover. All of them avoided any mention of the class basis of the attack on Aborigines—the most oppressed and vulnerable section of the Australian working class—and thus any perspective of unifying Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal workers in a common struggle against the profit system—the ultimate cause of social inequality, poverty and oppression.

Last Friday, about 2,000 people joined the NAIDOC march in Melbourne, mostly Aboriginal people from across Victoria and Australia, including the Kimberleys in Western Australia and Palm Island in Queensland. Most of the speakers at Federation Square made no mention of the Howard government or the Northern Territory intervention.

The following day, a coalition of middle class radical organisations held a smaller rally at the city square, where speakers blamed white people generally for the situation facing the indigenous population. Michael Penrith from the Aboriginal Health Service said: "At the end of the day you are all responsible. Why are all our communities living in squalor? This is your fault. This has been going on for 200 years."

In Sydney's Redfern, where about 500 people rallied on Saturday, Aboriginal leader Lyall Munro attributed the Northern Territory

intervention to a "racial government". He and other speakers did not mention the extension of the welfare cut-off measures nationally.

The main speaker in Sydney, former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) CEO Pat Turner, who now heads the new government-funded National Indigenous Television Network, drew applause and cries of "shame" when she condemned state and territory Labor governments, as well as the Howard government, for ignoring previous reports on child sex abuse and for starving remote communities of funding for essential health services, schools and housing.

However, she also presented the issue as a racial one, and urged the audience to apply electoral pressure to both the federal government and Labor. While holding out the hope that Labor leader Kevin Rudd could be forced to "differentiate" himself from the government, she declared: "Vote for any politician who will carry out their responsibilities to the first Australians."

At a rally of about 150 people in Perth on Saturday, Ray Jackson from the Indigenous Social Justice Association called on the audience to protest to their local MPs and "put pressure on the politicians," whether Labor or Liberal. Jackson hence promoted the notion that changes could be achieved through protests directed against the very parties that have presided for decades over the appalling conditions experienced by the majority of Aboriginal people.

At the Melbourne NAIDOC march, **Di Murray** told the WSWs: "Howard hasn't consulted with the Aboriginal communities. This is a land grab for the leases. I, like other Aboriginal women, feel strongly about the abuse of children in indigenous communities. The problems of child abuse have been going on for at least 10 years. The government has turned a blind eye and it is not just happening in indigenous communities. There needs to be more health facilities and more women's refuges.

"When I first heard of Howard's plan I immediately thought of the Solomon Islands. People are just going to get frightened and take off into the bush. The government is trying to turn the Northern Territory into a war zone. They need to sit down with communities and indigenous health workers and talk. This is not what the Northern Territory Chief Minister Clare Martin has been doing.

"In the remote areas everything is linked to poverty. The cutting off of welfare is like a return to the old mission days—we are not taking steps forward but backward. Things need to improve—we need to be strong."

An Aboriginal woman from the Western Australian Kimberley region, who wished to remain anonymous, said she took Aboriginal children into her home when their families could not look after them.

"There are no adequate health services in these areas. For instance, there are massive hearing problems among young Aboriginal children that are poorly monitored. This means that they can't learn due to lack of hearing... The hearing problem is so bad [that] every town would need a hearing specialist. At the moment we can't even get a doctor or nurse in.

"I am really concerned about the future generations. What will happen to these kids? They not only need more funding for education and health

programs, but intensive one-on-one assistance to overcome their huge problems. It's like a vicious cycle. They can't get jobs; all they see is alcohol abuse, early pregnancies and just not enough to do. Many of the parents really care about their kids but are totally disempowered.

"I just don't think the government has done the right thing. They have come in like bully-boys rather than assisting these people. Who wants to listen to bullies? No wonder everyone wants to run away. They don't want to just listen to an authoritative voice. There needs to be a whole society approach to solve the problem, not just throwing in the military."

Jo James from the Bass Strait islands, who is studying at the Koori Education Unit at Deakin University, Geelong, said: "This is going to be another Stolen Generation. They're sending in the troops as if it is a war. They're taking it back to what it was in Tasmania when they attempted to carry out genocide. They didn't succeed then—I'm still here. It has gone back to what it was 208 years ago, it's just under a different name and a different banner.

"What worries me is that the result of forcible medical examination of these children will be just the same as if they have been raped. It is a form of sexual abuse in itself. Human rights in Australia are a sham job, across the board, not just for Aboriginal communities."

At the Redfern rally, **Hilda Hererahi**, originally from New Zealand, said: "If the government really wanted to help the children, it could have done so 10 years ago by giving funding for basic services. There are still people living in the outback with no running water, no toilets; living in tin shacks. Sending in troops and police with guns is absolutely horrific."

Hererahi, a Maori, said she agreed with the New Zealand Maori Party, which had called Howard a "racist". After some discussion, she conceded that the issue was not simply a racial one. "This government approach is affecting people in the cities as well, and not just Aboriginal people. DOCS [Department of Community Services] is coming in and taking kids off people."

Asked about the Labor Party's support for the Northern Territory takeover, she said: "It's disgusting. The Labor Party and the Liberals are the same aren't they? There's no difference between them, just a very fine line."

NAIDOC events were held in several Sydney working class neighbourhoods. At Emerton, in the far western suburbs, **Eric Ellis**, who works as a traditional dancer, said: "What they're doing, it's like they're going in to occupy another country... These people up in the Territory know there has to be change, but I don't think sending in the military is very healing. It's not bringing down barriers; it's only putting up fences.

"I've got people from Tennant Creek and Katherine (in the Northern Territory). That's where my grandmother came from. She was born there and taken away to the city to live and work for white people... Up there, it's bad. There's nothing for the people. There's just the town and the dole office. What are you to do? It's like being in your own little prison. They've got to get some things in there for the Aboriginal communities, not this CDEP [Community Development Employment Program] stuff and working for the dole. With CDEP you get paid each week, and it's a way of making you feel like you've got a job. But it's slave-money really.

"When I first started working I started in that, but it wasn't enough because you're still living from week-to-week. It's way below the poverty line. But now things are getting better. I work in schools and teach about Aboriginal culture and perform around Australia at contemporary arts and traditional arts events. But it is hard making a living that way, because it's not a 9-5 sort of thing and you don't get a weekly wage."

Ellis related his experiences to the situation facing working people generally. "Look at the minimum award wage; it's something like \$15 an hour. You work an eight-hour shift and you're getting something like \$120 a day and then tax takes about \$30 of that, so you're worse off. The government brought in the industrial relations laws and it's the worst

thing they ever could have done. It's set the workers back probably 100 years. You've got higher petrol prices, higher food prices, and wages are going down."

Raymond Smith, who also attended the NAIDOC event at Emerton, distrusted the agenda behind the Northern Territory intervention, pointing to the mining resources on Aboriginal land. He said: "Well, you don't need to be Einstein to work out that it's got a little bit to do with uranium and what's in the ground. The markets are worldwide for uranium. The mineral boom is another thing.

"It's good there's something being done to protect children, but isn't it a little bit late? These children have needed this protection for many, many years. Why all of a sudden is it high on the political agenda? If the government was fair-dinkum they'd be going and talking to the traditional owners, talking to the communities and working with them. You go back to the Whitlam era—they tried to solve the problem by throwing money at it, when the solution is education of the people and getting the resources there so the people can live longer lives. Look at the state of health in indigenous communities."

At the Bankstown NAIDOC event, **George Fischer**, an older Aboriginal man, commented: "I watch pay TV and read Internet news and it is frightening what is going on in this world. The way people are dying in Iraq. It is on two fronts that I am concerned: the way people are dying in wars and global warming.

"What Howard is doing is frightening... To declare a national emergency about pedophilia is crazy. Pedophilia in these communities is a dysfunction of western society. We never had the problem before that. And now to declare a national emergency! If you are Lebanese, Muslim, Arab, Chinese or whatever—look out! If the politicians think that what is happening in your community is a national emergency then the troops will be there on your front door.

"My wife said: what are the children who are seeing the military going to think? Is this going to help?"

A number of people at the rally in Perth said the intervention in the Northern Territory was designed to seize Aboriginal lands that include substantial uranium and other mining deposits.

Rachel, an Aboriginal woman from Roebourne in northern Western Australia, said: "Howard is talking too much to Bush. He has put it into Howard's mind that you must bring in the military if you want to get resources out. It's like Bush invading Iraq, where the military have gone in to get the resources like oil. In some of the Aboriginal communities there are resources such as land and minerals that the government wants.

"We need good role models in our communities, and we need to show people that they do have a future, that we don't need police. We need a belief in the future and we need our spirit and that applies to people everywhere. Teenagers need education and jobs.

"We are not the bogeyman as Howard is trying to say. We want to teach people our culture. People need to understand our ways. We have something to offer and we must not be treated as animals and criminals."



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