

Australia: “Stolen generations” speak out in Canberra

Our reporters
14 February 2008

Thousands of Australians—Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, young and old alike—attended rallies and watched live broadcasts throughout the country as Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd delivered a formal apology to surviving members of the “stolen generations” yesterday from the federal parliament in Canberra.

More than 8,000 gathered in Melbourne’s Federation Square to watch the proceedings on huge screens, as did thousands at similar events in Sydney. School assemblies and other gatherings were held in all state capitals, as well as in outback towns and communities.

Along with a small group of Aborigines invited into the parliamentary gallery, over 1,500 people gathered in the parliament’s Great Hall in Canberra and another 4,000 rallied outside.

Aboriginal people, including many whose families were irreparably destroyed by the policies of forced separation, came to the national capital from every state and territory, some travelling thousands of kilometres. They were joined by thousands of non-indigenous supporters, registering their opposition to the ongoing legacy of Aboriginal dispossession and giving voice to widespread sentiments for change.

A majority of those in attendance expressed illusions that the Rudd government’s apology was a step toward redressing the historical crimes against the Aboriginal people. Many were swept along by the event’s undoubted emotional impact as Rudd acknowledged just some of the crimes committed by government authorities aimed at the destruction of Aboriginal society and culture.

Some of those who spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site*, however, recounted the betrayals and broken promises by Labor and Liberal governments alike, stretching back over decades, and were deeply sceptical of Rudd’s motivations.

Several of those we interviewed spoke of the need for “Aboriginal sovereignty” and a “treaty”, echoing demands promoted by sections of the petty-bourgeois Aboriginal leadership. These policies are premised on the mistaken notion that “white society”—not the capitalist profit system—is to blame for the ongoing oppression of Aborigines.

But one overwhelming sentiment was articulated by everyone: that fundamental change must begin, and the appalling treatment and suffering of the Aboriginal people must finally be ended.

“I came to hear—at long last—an apology for all of the wrongs against us,” said **Rose**, an Aboriginal elder who now lives in Sydney’s western suburbs. One of seven brothers and sisters who were seized by government welfare men in the 1950s, Rose said: “They ruined my family. Only two of us from that original seven survived.”

“Today is a significant day in our history,” said **Jo Wilmott**, a campaigner for Aboriginal rights since the 1960s. “It is a huge step and I commend the government on its ability to be humble about the stories of Aboriginal people, to acknowledge and recognise our stories. Compensation has to be the next step. Australia is a wealthy nation and it can afford it. I think the government can be forced to change its mind about compensation—we must be positive for the next generation, for our

children and grand children. We need to look to the future.”

Wilmott lives in Adelaide, and worked for many years in Aboriginal Legal Aid. Her experiences are typical of the trauma suffered by tens of thousands of Aborigines:

“I came from Adelaide but I was born in South East Queensland—I grew up in Cherbourg in an Aboriginal mission raised in the girls’ dormitory. I was only a baby when I was put there. My mother and father were sent out to work. My father was a drover on the pastoral leases; he also worked in the union as a sugar cane worker. My mother was a domestic servant. All of my mum and dad’s children were taken. I was totally separated from the family. My brothers were in the boys’ dormitory. We stayed in Cherbourg until my mum remarried and we left the mission.

“It was a very Christian, very strict place—we were not allowed to speak our language, not allowed to eat bush tucker, we were flogged and we went to church seven days a week. This was my life until I was 13-years-old. My mother worked as a domestic with no pay—there was the ration shed where you were given rations of flour, tea, tobacco, sugar and beef. At the mission we were fed.

“There are what I would call degrees of the stolen generation—the forced removals created disruption to the social fabric of the families and our way of life. We were disconnected from our family and country.

“As a five-year-old I remember standing out in the open land, near the dormitory and crying ‘why me?’. We were told every day that our parents did not want us, did not love us, and that was why we were here.

“I did not know who my direct relatives were—my parents and my brothers and sisters were all put in a mission. I met my dad when he was 50.

“My father was never allowed to buy a house, never given wages for his work and there is still a struggle for that going on, for stolen wages in Queensland.”

Her friend **Sandy Miller**, a former employee with the Department of Health in South Australia, listened to Rudd’s apology from parliament’s Great Hall.

“I came because my mother was stolen when she was a baby only two-years-old. She was born somewhere in the Nullarbor Plains. She does not know the exact date, but they gave her a birth date of June 1921. She was taken to a children’s home at Koonabi and she was never told that the woman who used to come and visit and call out her name was her mother. Although her mother used to visit the home and stand outside the fence they never made a connection. She was 11-years-old before she understood, and then there was no connection.

“My mother lived and then worked at the Children’s home but she was never paid for her work. She lived there until her 20s and then married our father.

“I thought that Rudd made a genuine apology today. I think Rudd left it open in his speech for financial compensation. If people are wrongly imprisoned then they always receive compensation—why not the stolen generation. I know many parents have already died—we need a system

where the families get the money. The government needs to make room for compensation.

“I was in the Great Hall today and when [federal opposition leader Brendan] Nelson spoke, I walked out. All he tried to do was rationalise why white society behaved in the way it did. He just kept stressing that Aboriginal society was dysfunctional, that all there is child abuse.

“I personally don’t want money. We need services for Aboriginal people. What Aboriginal people want is to be treated as equals, we want a better health system, a better education system, better housing—which is such a problem—there is so much over-crowding which is creating all sorts of problems. We’ve had Aboriginal homeless people living in parks for years, but the governments never take this up as an issue.

“Both my parents were totally committed to their children. They kept us together—my father was a hard worker—he was a ganger on the railways. He served in the army in World War II. He did not go overseas, but he never received any payment for his service. My mother never received a returned services pension, she never received any child endowment.”

While those assembled in front of parliament broadly supported Rudd’s apology, criticism and mistrust were not far below the surface, reflecting the many bitter experiences of Aboriginal people with successive Labor and Liberal governments.

The remarks of **Vince Forrester**, from Mutitjulu community at the base of Uluru, were fairly typical: “Rudd has said some good words, but words can pretty easily blow away in the wind. We need to build upon what Rudd has said. He is talking about long term plans, let’s see... There has to be treaty, a declaration of indigenous rights. The government needs to address all the issues that Aboriginal communities confront—the whole lot—we need schools, housing, education, everything.

“They were talking about this in 1967 but nothing has happened and it is now 2008. Governments come and go and they make all sorts of good words. The only one that delivered anything was Malcolm Fraser who sat down and talked to us.”

The response of **Mark McMurtrie** was even more pointed: “The apology was warmly received—despite its hollow nature. And if saying you’re sorry is an acceptable remedy for such atrocious crimes against humanity, I would hope they would extend the same leniency for any current [illegal] actions by Aborigines.”

McMurtrie said the Rudd government was presiding over measures in many respects identical to those once used against the stolen generations: “Rudd’s support for the Northern Territory intervention includes removing children from their parents’ homes and trespassing into Aboriginal homes and lands. While he is sorry for the actions of previous governments, his apology lacks integrity. Let people wake up tomorrow and see what’s changed.”

Jah Coe, a 22-year-old carpenter’s apprentice from Griffith, was completely sceptical about Rudd’s “sorry”: “They’re trying to suck people in. I’m not a fool. They’re just telling us what we want to hear. He’s just getting it out of the way, trying to get brownie points. That’s why most Aborigines don’t vote: because of past experience.

“We don’t have a say. That’s how most of us feel, not just me, pretty much all of us. Only time will tell his [Rudd’s] true colours.”

Ron explained that his wife, Margaret Dodd, is part of three generations of stolen children. Margaret, her mother, and daughter were all taken by government welfare officers.

“My wife comes from Geraldton, she is a Yamaji. Margaret was in the home that you would have seen in the movie *Rabbit Proof Fence* and was in the mission with the characters in the story. People wanted to make a story about my wife’s life, but she didn’t want to do it because it is very hurtful. There is a lot in it, a lot that people do not understand and won’t ever fully understand.

“What Rudd has done by apologising is good, but whether it is going to be kept up is the point. They are probably going to squash it like the other

governments. How many promises have been broken by governments? How are we going to force the government to abide by what they say if they don’t carry through?

“What will happen to the Aboriginal people if they don’t fix things. There will be a hell of a tragedy.”

Isabelle Dingaman-Taylor also welcomed the apology. “Today is good. It needed to happen. For all the old people that were stolen I am very sorry and it hurts me too.

“But there is the intervention happening in the Northern Territory and the government needs to stop that if they are sorry. Rudd needs to take action to back up his words. If they were really sorry they would stop the intervention.

“The government is giving the Aboriginal VIPs cups of tea, but the VIPs should speak out against the intervention. I tried to go into parliament and get a glass of water and they said ‘VIPs only’. Basically they know our views and wanted to keep us out of parliament.

“The ‘sorry’ is okay, but it did not say anything about Aboriginal sovereignty. I’m from Port Augusta. I am currently fighting to stop the expansion of the Uranium mining on our traditional land.”

Leon lives in Canberra and is a hotel night manager. “I came here to make sure that someone said sorry. In 1961, when I was 14-months-old, I was taken from my parents to a mission south of Perth. My six brothers and I were taken there and we didn’t come out until 1970. In that time I saw my mother twice.

“The sad thing was that when I was ten, the authorities said ‘you have to go and live with your parents’. I said ‘who?’ I thought the mission was my parents, because I hadn’t experienced anything outside that mission. There was no bond between me and my mother. I went my own way into alcohol, drugs and crime. I’ve now moved on from that.

“The sorry is fine, but we—the stolen generations—must move on. We can’t change the past and must move on and be satisfied within our own selves.”

Asked for his views on the NT military intervention, Leon replied: “It was wrong. There was no talking to the communities. The government just raced in and said ‘we will do things our way’. In a way, it was like first settlement—no consultation and instead the idea that we will just subdue the Aborigines.”



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact