

Australian federal parliament's "sorry" resolution: the real agenda

Socialist Equality Party
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Millions of ordinary Australians will undoubtedly welcome the federal parliament's formal apology to the Aboriginal "stolen generation" on Wednesday as a necessary step towards acknowledging the genocidal crimes inflicted upon Australia's indigenous population over the past two centuries.

After their forebears had been shot, poisoned, or deliberately infected with diseases such as smallpox, tens of thousands of indigenous children—mainly those of mixed Aboriginal and European descent—were taken from their parents as part of an official program that sought to "breed out the colour." Its aim was nothing less than the elimination of the Aboriginal race.

Between one in three and one in ten of all Aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their families between 1910 and 1970. Children were cut off from their culture and language, and often subjected to horrific physical and sexual abuse in institutions and foster homes. Survivors and their families continue to live with the daily effects of the trauma they suffered.

The newly-elected Rudd Labor government is touting its apology as a sincere gesture aimed at resolving past injustices and paving the way for Aborigines to "move forward". Every section of the media is endorsing and promoting it as a major national event. The ABC will broadcast proceedings live on television, and large video screens are to be erected on the lawns in front of Parliament House, where hundreds of people are expected to gather. Screens are also being installed in Sydney and Melbourne, and the broadcast will be followed by music concerts featuring indigenous artists. Rudd has stressed the bipartisan character of the apology and opposition leader Brendan Nelson has fallen into line. Former Liberal Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser will attend, as will former Labor prime ministers Gough Whitlam and Paul Keating.

State and federal governments are paying for more than 100 members of the stolen generation to be in Canberra for the event. Invitees include former Aboriginal tennis star Evonne Goolagong-Cawley and footballer Michael Long. Aboriginal leaders have unanimously welcomed the apology, although many have criticised the Labor government for ruling out compensation for any of the surviving victims.

To understand the real political calculations motivating the

apology, however, one must look behind this media-political hoopla.

All those hailing the Rudd government's apology as a major advance are carrying out a monstrous deception. The real aim of the "sorry" resolution is to facilitate Labor's plan to draw in a layer of privileged indigenous leaders and utilise them to continue and deepen the policies of the former Howard government. The Labor Party supported Howard's military-police intervention in the Northern Territory, along with the suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act and the arbitrary suspension of welfare payments to Aboriginal families. Moreover, Labor declared it would consider extending similar measures to Aboriginal communities throughout Australia.

Howard sought to ram through his draconian program while, at the same time, rejecting many aspects of the so-called "reconciliation" agenda, including recognition of the stolen generation. Rudd, on the other hand, wants to advance fundamentally the same program in a more nuanced and less abrasive manner.

There is an old maxim that when the ruling class apologises for past crimes, it is only in order to better commit those of the present. The record of the past 200 years demonstrates that the entire Australian ruling establishment is organically incapable of addressing the terrible conditions facing Aboriginal people. For decades, it deliberately covered up the crimes that accompanied the establishment of capitalist property relations.

The dispossession and massacres of Aborigines in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries formed part of protracted attempts by the emerging capitalist class to extinguish the communal system of land tenure, which was completely incompatible with private ownership. Both Labor and the conservative parties, along with every section of the media, suppressed any examination of the filthy underbelly of Australian capitalism, promoting instead the myths of a democratic and egalitarian society offering a "fair go" for all.

But by the 1960s international considerations—the need to engage more closely with the markets of Asia—together with mounting domestic opposition to the treatment of Aborigines required that the overt official racism of the past be supplanted with something more acceptable.

In 1967, the Holt Liberal government held a referendum to

grant the federal government authority to pass special legislation affecting Aborigines, and include indigenous people in the national census for the first time.

The referendum, which won the support of the overwhelming majority of the population, was widely viewed as a watershed that would quickly see a significant improvement in the social and economic position of Aboriginal people. But those hopes were quickly dashed.

Likewise there were hopes that the equal pay court rulings of the mid-1960s would end the virtual slave-labour conditions endured by Aboriginal rural workers. But the logic of the capitalist market took its revenge, and countless pastoral jobs were wiped out—ultimately leading to the establishment of the impoverished townships and settlements in the Northern Territory.

Promises by the Whitlam, Fraser and Hawke governments to improve the conditions of the Aboriginal population came and went, with no genuine advances—and reversals in many cases.

Then in 1992, the dawning of a new era was hailed with the Mabo decision and the Keating Labor government's subsequent land rights legislation. What a cruel joke! The real purpose of the legislation was to ensure security of tenure for mining and pastoral companies, while providing benefits for a very thin layer of indigenous leaders along the way.

Forty-one years after the first promises of “reform” following the 1967 referendum, what is the situation?

Aborigines continue to face conditions comparable to those in the poorest developing countries. They can expect to live for about 17 to 20 years less than the average Australian, with indigenous infants three times as likely to die before their first birthday as their non-indigenous counterparts. Aborigines are far more likely to be unemployed, and they comprise 22 percent of the prison population, while making up just 2.4 percent of the total population. Unemployment, alcoholism, drug abuse and violence afflict many Aboriginal communities and families.

Rudd is paying lip service to the need to provide decent living conditions and better medical and other social services. But what is his real agenda? Labor won last November's federal election after attacking Howard from the right—stressing his failure to push through sufficiently ambitious “free market” reforms. Rudd received the backing of decisive sections of big business and the media after pledging to boost corporate profits through a major wave of economic restructuring comparable to that engineered by the former Hawke-Keating Labor governments from 1983 to 1996. This period saw an unprecedented transfer of wealth from the poor to the wealthy as Labor and the trade unions deliberately suppressed wages and smashed all resistance to the program of privatisation, job losses, and business deregulation.

In the name of maintaining Australia's “economic competitiveness” against rivals including India and China, Rudd is now poised to launch a no less ruthless attack on the social position of the entire working class. The world financial

crisis sparked by the US subprime mortgage disaster has added further pressures. As a first step, big business is demanding Labor implement enormous cuts in social spending. The government has already foreshadowed a harsh austerity budget in April which will slash \$10 billion in spending, bringing with it, as Rudd declared last week, “screams and squeals” and “pain and difficulty” to ordinary people.

Labor's economic agenda will inevitably hit the most vulnerable layers of the working class, including Aborigines, the hardest.

That is why there is a major diversionary element to Wednesday's parliamentary apology to the stolen generation. Like Rudd's ratification of the Kyoto Protocol on climate change, the official apology costs the Labor government nothing, while allowing it to posture as a progressive alternative to the former Howard government.

The entire “reconciliation” agenda seeks to obscure the fundamental issues—above all that responsibility for the oppression of the Aboriginal people lies not with “whites” but with the capitalist profit system, and that it is impossible to overcome this centuries-old oppression within the framework of the present social order. To genuinely redress the historic injustices perpetrated against the indigenous people of Australia requires nothing less than the abolition of the system of property relations that gave rise to, and continues to perpetuate, these injustices. Society must be reorganised from top to bottom on socialist and genuinely democratic lines, ensuring that the basic needs of all are met.

The precondition for such a transformation is the development of a unified mass political movement of the working class—Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike—based on a socialist and internationalist perspective. That is the perspective advanced by the Socialist Equality Party and *World Socialist Web Site*.



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