

On-the-spot report from central Australia

CAAMA radio interviews WSWS on NT intervention

Our reporters
9 April 2008

World Socialist Web Site journalists Susan Allan and Richard Phillips, who are reporting from Alice Springs on the social and political impact of the Northern Territory intervention, were interviewed on “Strong Voices”, a morning radio show produced by the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA), yesterday.

The network covers the Northern Territory, South Australia and a large part of western New South Wales. That the WSWS was invited to speak by CAAMA radio reflects the depth and breadth of opposition to the government’s measures among Aboriginal people.

CAAMA journalist Steve Gumerungi Hodder began by asking how the approach of the WSWS was different to that of the mainstream media and what the journalists hoped to achieve.

Susan Allan said that the WSWS had decided to visit Alice Springs in order to “establish the truth about the Northern Territory intervention and to give Aboriginal people and others the opportunity to speak out about what is really taking place.”

While the Rudd Labor government and the corporate media were “promoting people who say that the intervention is a great success,” she continued, “what we’ve found is that there is growing opposition to the intervention but that these voices are being suppressed.”

Hodder noted the most recent WSWS article about the situation in the town camps in Alice Springs and asked Richard Phillips to elaborate. Phillips referred to the ongoing media promotion of the intervention and the recent SBS “Insight” television program. “[M]ost of the audience was hand-picked by the program’s producers and there were pre-recorded clips from Labor politicians and others backing the intervention. Those that did oppose it were given a few seconds and were not able to elaborate their reasons.”

Nor did the show, he continued, seriously debate “the underlying causes for the problems of poverty, alcoholism, substance abuse, child abuse ... It reduced itself primarily to law and order measures and ultimately blamed Aboriginal people themselves.”

Phillips went on to explain that the government measures were a class issue. “Obviously it has a racial component—it is being directed against Aboriginal people—but we think it is also a test run for the use of these sorts measures against all working people.” He referred to a recent conference in Melbourne sponsored by the Murdoch owned *Australian* newspaper and attended by Labor

government ministers, including Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. The conference discussed a series of measures to cut government spending, including lowering wage costs, slashing welfare and other measures in order to cut taxation for corporate businesses.

Phillips warned that the government and the media were attempting to “divide working people and prevent them from understanding the real issues of the day and that the source of the increasing inequality—not just in Australia but around the world—was the profit system.”

Susan Allan told CAAMA listeners that the WSWS had carefully exposed the government and media campaign that led up to the NT intervention. She pointed out that the recommendations in the *Little Children are Sacred* report, which was used by the Howard government to justify the intervention, were being ignored.

“Seventy-seven of these proposals were about providing resources for Aboriginal communities—pre-schools, child-care and other measures—but none of these are being implemented,” she said.

Allan noted that many of those interviewed by the WSWS were angry about the promotion of the NT intervention by Aboriginal leaders such as Noel Pearson, Galarrwuy Yunupingu and Warren Mundine. “Many of those we have met here say these people don’t speak for us—they speak for a different class,” she said.

Hodder asked Allan to comment on a racist cartoon in the Murdoch-owned *Australian* last Saturday which pictured an unemployed Aboriginal man asking for a job with no basic English reading, writing and numeracy skills. He was told he could find work at an Aboriginal Learning Centre. The cartoon was on the same page as an editorial praising right-wing academic Helen Hughes from the Centre of Independent Studies and who helped prepare the theoretical rationale for the NT intervention. She is now denouncing separate education programs for Aboriginal children.

Allan said that in 2005 Hughes published a series of articles on the “unviability” of remote communities: “Her policy was that if remote communities can’t stand on their own two feet economically, then they should be shut done. These policies were taken up by the Howard government and implemented through the NT intervention.

“Now she is arguing that Aboriginal education is ‘apartheid’

and that schools which teach Aboriginal languages and culture should be closed because they don't reach national benchmarks. This is the new agenda being pushed and it is a further extension of the intervention. The government doesn't want to spend money on schools, health resources and so on in these areas."

Last Friday a CAAMA news broadcast told listeners about the WSWs reporting team. It pointed out that the web site had issued a statement opposing the intervention on June 23, 2007, only two days after the government measures were first announced.

It quoted from the WSWs which insisted that the government was using Aboriginal people "as guinea pigs for quarantining and other welfare-cutting measures that will be used against all sections of the working class—indigenous and non-indigenous alike." The report, which included a brief comment from Susan Allan, concluded by encouraging its listeners to contact WSWs reporters.

Rodney Barnes, 51, from Tennant Creek, some 500 kilometres from Alice Springs, was among those who phoned CAAMA radio and later spoke with the WSWs.

He strongly denounced the intervention: "It's like the days on the stations [farms] when you'd get rations but you were a kept people. It is very hard for Aboriginal people in the Territory. When you try to get people to complain about it they say there is nothing that can be done. The government claims that there is no discrimination or racism in the Territory but this is not true, it just isn't reported.

"I've noticed that the racism is growing in Tennant Creek and in Alice Springs I recently witnessed four policemen chasing an Aboriginal man into the caravan park where I live. They treated him like a dog and continued to spray him [with mace]. Tennant Creek is more isolated than Alice Springs and there are a lot of Aboriginal people here with huge problems that are not addressed or that people know about.

"We've heard it all before—they say 'we're going to help you but first we're going to take away this right from you.' I read in 1979 that Labor stood for the Aboriginal people but Labor in the government is no different from the Liberals. And even if Labor gets kicked out somebody else will come along that is exactly the same. The Liberals bring nothing.

"I've been educated by the sheer hardship of experience and what I've been through, and I try to be honest. If somebody asked me what I want, I'd say that I want my land, to go back to my country. I've been denied that but I have a need for a relationship with other Aboriginal people and if the government cut us off from the land then we will die as a people."

Asked to comment on Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's apology, Barnes said: "I've witnessed people who had family members taken from them and heard them talk about it. My uncle was taken away and died in another country—up in Darwin.

"I suppose Mr Rudd's apology is an acknowledgment of the genocide that has been done to Aboriginal people but if I was the government I would put out grants for the families affected. A lot of these people could have retraced their steps back to their families but the government opposed this.

"There is still opposition against the Stolen Generations and I don't think that the apology will heal these people at all. Of course

there is a moment of good feeling but an apology on its own doesn't change your life or get you out of all the difficulties you face. It doesn't get you out of the economic ditch.

"I was surprised that Yunupingu brought up the question of dormitories. My goodness, this will break up families. There are better ways than this paternalistic treatment or policing methods. What I hear from people like Noel Pearson and others like him, is not the truth. He can be a leader for his family or maybe his community but not for all Aboriginal people. It doesn't work that way.

"At the start of the intervention I managed to speak to Mr Lindsay Murdoch from the *Sydney Morning Herald* and sent him a letter but never heard from him. Later I did manage to contact him and he told me he was riding around with Mr Brough."

Mal Brough was the former Liberal government minister in charge of the NT intervention. He was voted out of office at the November 2007 federal election.

See Also:

On-the-spot report from central Australia Conditions of Aboriginal people in Alice Springs and the town camps
[7 April 2008]

New pamphlet from Mehring Books in Australia
[5 April 2008]

Australia: SBS television's bogus debate on Northern Territory intervention
[2 April 2008]

Australia: Federal and NT Labor governments expand punitive measures in Aboriginal communities
[28 March 2008]

After Rudd's "apology" to indigenous people

Australian government extends welfare "quarantining" and land grab
[4 March 2008]



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact