

Northern Territory intervention

“Unintended consequences” or deliberate destruction?

Part 2

A WSWS reporting team

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World Socialist Web Site *journalists Susan Allan and Richard Phillips and freelance photographer John Hulme recently visited central Australia to report on the social and political impact of the federal government's Northern Territory Emergency Response or police/military intervention into Aboriginal communities. This is the second in a series of articles, interviews and video clips. Parts one, three, four, five, six and seven were posted on June 21, July 2, July 15, July 24, August 6 and August 25 respectively. Video interviews can be watched here.*

Over the last two months a number of newspaper commentators have begun describing the exodus of Aboriginal people out of remote communities and into town camps and urban centres as an “unintended consequence” of the federal government’s intervention into the Northern Territory. Their descriptions are entirely cynical—the break up of remote communities is not an accident but a key aim of the government measures.

Former indigenous affairs minister Mal Brough spelt this out when he told the *Australian* on August 9 last year: “Some communities are going to be very challenged to remain as they are and we are going to have to have honest conversations with people.... If you want to live there that’s OK but don’t expect the government to somehow build a clinic and put a school in for kids or whatever it may be ...”

Here it was in black and white. The future of remote settlements would be measured according to market requirements. Those communities that failed the test would be left to wither and die, precipitating population relocations even more socially destructive than those that followed the mass sackings of Aboriginal stockmen in the late 1960s.

Brough’s comments echoed those of Gary Johns, a minister in the Keating Labor government of 1992-96, who told the Bennelong Society in October 2006: “Moving will not be easy, nor will it be possible or sensible for all. But mobility will be a big part of the structural adjustment story in remote Aboriginal society.... The challenge for government is to stop funding programs that militate against the migratory solution.”

This is the Rudd Labor government’s real agenda. It was confirmed by everything we witnessed during our visit to central Australia. And, as if on cue, on the first anniversary of the intervention, the Northern Territory Emergency Response Taskforce has recommended that the government consider the sustainability of smaller communities and provide only those deemed economically viable with basic services such as schools and health clinics.

Many of the long-term Alice Springs residents to whom we spoke told us that the number of homeless Aborigines seeking shelter in the town camps and elsewhere had increased since the intervention. Police activity around the town centre was intensifying and there were larger numbers of Aboriginal people sleeping rough under trees and in the dry bed of the Todd River.

While we were there, the local press reported on the desperate overcrowding in Bagot, a Darwin town camp, whose population has more than doubled, growing from 500 to 1,200 residents. According to community officials, one dwelling in the camp had become home to nine families. Only one in five homes has either a stove or a refrigerator, creating unbearable living conditions for the vast majority.

The reason for this population drift became very clear. Increasing numbers of residents in remote Aboriginal communities were moving towards the urban centres trying to escape the measures introduced by the intervention, or to use their Centrelink-issued “income management” store-cards. It appears this displacement of remote Aboriginal communities has resulted in a movement not only to urban areas in the Northern Territory, but to towns in South Australia and Queensland as well.

Welfare organisations in the South Australian town of Coober Pedy, more than 600 kilometres south of Alice Springs, for example, report many NT Aborigines moving into the town. This is placing severe burdens on the Umoona Community Council, which provides local assistance to alcoholics in Coober Pedy, but has recently been inundated with new arrivals and is now unable to cope.

In Mt Isa, Queensland, the North West Queensland Indigenous Catholic Social Services told the *North West Star* newspaper that the number of homeless people living in the riverbed and on church grounds had more than doubled in the past year. Local residents have also reported cases of Aboriginal children who had not eaten for three days at a time.

Mt Isa mayor and former police officer John Molony responded to this escalating social disaster by denouncing NT Aborigines in the town as “boozers and losers” and demanded that the state government force them back across the border.

Comments of this general type were being repeated ad nauseam in the letters page of the *Alice Springs News* with right-wing layers demanding that the government breakup and bulldoze the town camps and disperse their residents. Such is the social constituency being encouraged by Labor’s intervention.

Desperate overcrowding

Yuendumu

One of the largest remote communities in Central Australia is Yuendumu, which lies about 290 kilometres northwest of Alice Springs and has a population of more than 900 people. The main road to the town is asphalt-sealed only half the way. The remaining dirt road is subject to flooding during the wet season

Whilst we were unable to visit Yuendumu we spoke with several residents, including **Valerie Napaljarri Martin**, 53, who was visiting relatives in Alice Springs. She, like every other Aboriginal person we met, explained how income quarantining had made life all but impossible.

“How are we supposed to survive if our money is quarantined? How do we pay our bills? How are we supposed to pay for Austar [television services], car repairs or fuel or get to Alice Springs and back to Yuendumu with all the prices so high?” she asked.

Martin said Yuendumu residents were determined to resist the intervention, but pointed out that their voices were being ignored by the government, the media and the local business manager.

“Aboriginal people thought that if Labor got in they would stop the intervention—that they’d get rid of it—but it hasn’t happened and instead they’re fully supporting it. We are the first Australians and the government should be looking after us. We were supposed to have equal rights in 1967.

“We’re not perfect—we struggle with our problems—but no one listens to us. How are we going to be treated in the future? I am worried about my grandchildren and I’m fighting for the future of my grandkids.”

Yuendumu was officially established in 1946 by the federal Labor government’s Native Affairs branch to provide rations to local Aborigines. It was run by a government-appointed superintendent who allocated rations on a policy of “no work, no rations”. The population remained largely static at around 400 until the late-1960s, when it doubled to about 800, following the mass sackings of Aboriginal stockmen in the wake of the equal pay decision.

The first-Aboriginal elected Yuendumu Council, which assumed responsibility for the administration of the community, was established in 1978. But the council is entirely dependent on government funding to provide housing, power and water. Opportunities for work are limited, with the jobs and services provided via government-funded CDEP programs.

According to Yuendumu resident **Colin Wilson**, there are more than 30 families in the community waiting for housing and a longer waiting list for basic home maintenance. The community has no qualified plumber or electrician, which means that contractors have to travel from Alice Springs—a 600-kilometre round trip—to make repairs. Nor are there any facilities for training tradesmen in the community.

Colonial-style arrogance

Yuendumu was among the first “prescribed” NT Aboriginal communities to be allocated an intervention business manager. Mr Noel Mason moved into the community last August.

Mason and other business managers are paid up to \$200,000 a year and have wide-ranging, almost dictatorial powers, not unlike the Native Affairs superintendents of yesteryear. They treat Aboriginal people with the same sort of contempt.

While Aboriginal residents battle to deal with seriously overcrowded and substandard homes, no government expense is spared for the business managers, who are provided with brand new housing as part of their assignment. Mason’s residence is surrounded by a six-foot wire fence, topped with barbed-wire.

Much of the government spin about the intervention has centred on official claims that “consultation” with local communities would take place. What a cruel hoax! Just how cruel was exposed in an incident in Yuendumu in February this year, when construction workers dumped cement waste on an Aboriginal ceremonial site. Angry local residents protested this violation of their history and culture, but were arrogantly brushed aside. Intervention employees simply told them: “Oh well, don’t worry about it”. Such ignorant and provocative behaviour by government representatives towards remote Aboriginal communities is no aberration. But one can only imagine their response if Aboriginal people were to dump cement waste on a Darwin or Alice Springs church graveyard!

Soon after his appointment, business manager Mason circulated a document entitled *Yuendumu—School Attendance Proposal*. In it, he suggested that police should round up children who wagged school and conscript them into work gangs. He further proposed that “the names of children staying up late at night will be collected and those children will be used to assist with the cleanup of the town site the next day.... The aim is to make children who want to avoid school, have a busy, tiring day.”

Under the so-called emergency legislation, business managers, many of whom are ex-police or military officers, have the power to terminate or vary all federal government funding agreements in the community and place local organisations under administration for “failures” relating to the provision of services.

Yuendumu people are therefore confronted with an obvious Catch-22: how can the Aboriginal-controlled council maintain services when it has no real independent income? When it remains dependent on the utterly inadequate government handouts and grants?

This highlights the most fundamental issue facing Aboriginal communities: namely, that any genuine and lasting solution to such inhuman conditions will never be found within the framework of the current social and economic setup. As long as the profit motive drives social priorities, none of the problems of education, health or housing will be resolved. This requires the intervention—not of the military, police and government-sponsored business managers, but of a new, independent and unified, political movement of the working class guided by a socialist perspective, which aims at nothing less than the complete reorganisation of social life to meet human need, not private wealth and corporate profit.

To be continued



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