# Australia: Protestors denounce Labor's Northern Territory intervention

**WSWS reporters**
**25 June 2008**

Demonstrations in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and other Australian state capitals last Saturday demanded the Rudd Labor government end the Northern Territory Emergency Response into Aboriginal communities. The protests were held on the first anniversary of the "intervention" which was introduced last year by the Howard government and is now being extended by the federal Labor government.

While the government and media insist that the purpose of the intervention was to "save Aboriginal children" from sexual abuse and other problems fueled by alcoholism, its real purpose is to cut welfare, break up remote communities and townships, and take control of Aboriginal land. It suspended the Racial Discrimination Act, appointed so-called business managers with wide-ranging powers over the Aboriginal communities and imposed "income management" on Aboriginal people. Already, some 50 percent of welfare for Aboriginal people in government "prescribed" areas is now being issued in the form of plastic cards or vouchers that can only be used in government-designated stores.

Protestors called on the Labor government to repeal all the Northern Territory intervention laws and provide increased government funding for health, education and other basic services that Aboriginal communities desperately need.

About 400 people heard speakers in the inner-Sydney suburb of Redfern and then marched to the Sydney Town Hall chanting "Repeal the racist legislation, human rights for all", "Aboriginal control over Aboriginal affairs" and other slogans. The Melbourne rally outside the State Library attracted about 150 while about 100 demonstrated in Brisbane with smaller numbers at protests in Wollongong, Canberra, Hobart, Adelaide and Perth.

In Sydney Vince Forester from Mutitjulu, a township adjacent to Uluru (Ayers Rock) in central Australia, said Aboriginal people had been given citizenship in 1967 but were "still waiting" for all their rights and entitlements.

Forester warned that Aboriginal people would resist government moves to shut down the remote communities it considered "unviable". He said Labor's agenda represented "ethnic cleansing" and called for "civil disobedience" around Australia. Forester warned that the Mutitjulu community would stop tourist climbs on Uluru to protest the intervention.

Lyle Cooper told the Melbourne protest that the intervention had "taken dignity away from Aboriginal people" and that the intervention measures had impacted heavily on old people and the chronically ill.

The main political theme, however, of the national rallies, which were organised by the Aboriginal Rights Coalition with the support of various middle class radical groupings, was that protest action could force Labor to repeal the intervention legislation.

None of the speakers in Sydney or Melbourne pointed out that the intervention was in fact part of a generalised assault on the working class by the Rudd government. Instead, several, including Robbie Thorpe who chaired the Melbourne meeting and Mitch, an Arrernte and Luritja woman and anti-uranium activist from Alice Springs, espoused the reactionary politics of black nationalism, falsely claiming that the intervention was a result of "white society".

Significantly, Thorpe barely mentioned the intervention, spending most of his time demagogically denouncing Australia as the "worst racist country" in the world, comparing it with Nazi Germany and South Africa under apartheid. Mitch told the Melbourne meeting that the problem was "whites control the land" and "make the laws". "This country has no right to be prosperous and you ought to be ashamed," she said. In other words, there was no difference between the ruling elite and the working class. Everyone was to blame for the oppression of the Aboriginal people—not successive Australian governments—including Rudd Labor—and the corporate interests they represented. Above all, not the capitalist profit system itself—which exploits all sections of the working class, both black and white.

In Sydney two union officials—Rita Mallia from the Construction Forestry Mining Energy Union and Simon Finn from the Fire Brigade Employees Union—and Warren Roberts, a member of Young Labor made various appeals to the Rudd government.

Mallia said that Rudd should hold a "genuine review" into the intervention and "honour the promises" contained in his national apology to members of the Stolen Generations earlier this year. In fact, Rudd carefully made very few concrete promises in his sorry speech which was aimed, not at transforming conditions of life for Aboriginal people but at securing political support from a layer of Aboriginal entrepreneurs and bureaucrats, along with sections of the "small l" liberal and so-called "left", while diverting attention from its expansion of the NT intervention.

A statement read out by Greens senator Rachel Siewert to the Sydney rally also called for Labor to "admit it has made a mistake" with the intervention and "return to its core values".

But Labor is operating precisely on the basis of its "core values"! These centre on fulfilling its commitments to big business to create the best possible environment for boosting productivity and amassing profits and private wealth. That is why Labor was backed by the Murdoch press and key sections of Australia's corporate elite in the November federal election and why it extended its unconditional bipartisan support for Howard's launch of the intervention last June.

Since winning office, Rudd has extended the intervention into north Queensland and Western Australia and imposed "income

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management" on more than 13,300 Aboriginal people.

In a press statement issued on Friday, Minister for Indigenous Affairs Jenny Macklin declared that Labor was "fully committed" to the intervention and that more than 20,000 Aboriginal people would be placed on income management in the next few months. She also told the media that Labor would slash all welfare to Aboriginal families if they failed to regularly send their children to school.

The Labor government has also announced an intervention "review board". This body, the government claims, will make an "evidence-based" assessment of its new measures. The review board, however, is dominated by pro-intervention bureaucrats and right-wing Aboriginal leaders. According to an intervention taskforce report released last Friday, the provision of health, education, welfare and other basic services will be determined on the basis of whether or not each Aboriginal community is "economically viable".

*World Socialist Web Site* reporters interviewed some of those attending the Sydney and Perth demonstrations.

In Sydney **Stephen Langford** said: "I came here to protest against the intervention and the non-coverage of the intervention in the media. What's happening in the Northern Territory might as well be happening in Mars. But if you know nothing else, the suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act should set the bells ringing.

"Under the current intervention I've heard that programs like the CDEP [Community Development Employment Projects] and women's refuges have been de-funded. You just get scraps from the mainstream media but the bits and pieces I've got all point in the same direction, of it being exploitative and photo opportunities for the soldiers involved.

"When Howard initiated the intervention a year ago I didn't swallow the official line. Anything that Howard did was criminal, or verging on it. The fact that Rudd is continuing the policy is disappointing but not a surprise, given that Rudd has not got rid of the 'WorkChoices' legislation. Rudd's done some feel-good stuff but he's not actually doing the job."

"I don't think the intervention had anything to do with rescuing children but about getting Aboriginal land, breaking up communities. They have problems in the Northern Territory for sure but actually engaging with people is surely the way to go, not doing what has been done far too long to Aboriginal people.

**Penepole Grace** attended the rally not primarily as a protester but as a member of Human Rights Monitor, a Sydney group which attends demonstrations to collect evidence of improper or illegal activity by the police. She told the WSWS that she had nevertheless been concerned about the intervention for several months. "There were programs initiated by Aboriginal communities that were going well and doing a lot of good things. They were crying out for money but none was forthcoming and yet there's all this money being splurged on the NT intervention," she said. "A lot of that money could have been given to people who have been doing these programs for years and have now been stopped in their tracks.

"I feel very strongly that Aboriginal people were not consulted. Okay, there were some bad situations but there are bad situations in every community and I think the welfare quarantining has been very hard on some people.

"Howard's actions in the Northern Territory are like his actions in Iraq. Did they really talk to the Iraqis before they invaded their country? And it's the same with Aboriginal people—they didn't talk to them but just barged in."

**Emily Bullock** told the WSWS that while the intervention promised to improve conditions for Aboriginal people "it has made life more degrading for those living in the Territory. It hasn't improved the lives of children and it has taken power away from the local communities.

"I think it was a land grab and there were other issues which will eventually come out in history. It wasn't about the welfare of Aboriginal people, it was about controlling them.

"I'm not surprised about Rudd continuing the intervention. I heard former Labor leader Gough Whitlam speak on television last night. Whitlam, too, promised to improve the lives of Aborigines but he petered out," she said.

**Annette**, an Aboriginal student nurse, who attended the Perth rally told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "The Howard government went about the intervention the wrong way. He may have done this because he knew he was on his way out but there was no discussion with elders or the medical services in the communities.

"I was attending a nurses' conference in Alice Springs last year and we were told by the medical services there about the intervention. We were all shocked. There were over 100 nursing students there at the conference we had tears in our eyes. We could only imagine how terrified Aboriginal people must have been when the police and the army came into the communities. Many of them would have been afraid that the police and army would take away their children even though they can't take our children away because we stick up for ourselves now.

**Rhianwen**, a young mental health worker, said: "I don't agree with cutting benefits because it's not an issue of lack of budgeting skills. Most indigenous people are struggling to survive on unrealistic levels of welfare.

"Mental health issues arise because we live in a competitive society—there is the stress of living and the use of methamphetamines is increasing and many are still struggling at the bottom of society. I want to see more accountability and empowerment of people with mental health issues.

"I would like to see public housing works as a priority and I'm against discrimination towards indigenous people. We need better services for people with mental health problems and disabilities because these people always get fobbed off at the moment."

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