

Northern Territory intervention

Aboriginal education: a portrait of government discrimination and neglect

Part 6

**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 sixth in a series of articles, interviews and videos. Parts one, two, three, four, five, and seven were posted on June 21, June 26, July 2, July 24 and August 25 respectively. Video interviews can be watched [here](#).

Having witnessed first hand something of the state of education for Aboriginal children in the Northern Territory we can make two fundamental points: basic educational facilities for Aboriginal people are a national scandal and the NT intervention, now being extended by the Rudd government, is drastically worsening this state of affairs.

Soon after we arrived in Alice Springs, the Murdoch press began heavily promoting a report by right-wing academic Helen Hughes entitled "Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory".

The report denounces Aboriginal education in the NT as a "separatist" system which has "failed", producing 10,000 illiterate and innumerate indigenous young men and women. Hughes's "separatist" claims, however, are spurious. They are simply based on the fact that Aboriginal languages and culture form part of the curriculum.

The real reason for such substandard education results is the disgraceful lack of teachers, schools, equipment and other basic facilities. While Hughes cannot ignore this state of affairs—along with the soul-destroying conditions in most Aboriginal communities—her report simply brushes it aside, blaming teachers and educational methods instead.

Hughes's report concludes by declaring that if "mainstream" schooling is not "viable" for remote settlements, then the government should "encourage" Aboriginal parents to move from their communities or send their children to boarding schools and dormitory education facilities.

In other words, schools have no right to exist in so-called unviable communities and whatever education is provided should fit the immediate requirements of big business. This perspective dovetails with the demands of mining, tourism and agribusiness corporations operating in the NT and other parts of Australia's far north and is a key plank of the Rudd government's intervention measures.

What is the real situation for Aboriginal children in the NT?

In this year's budget, the Rudd government promised additional

education resources for the NT, including 200 extra teachers over five years, 14 extra classrooms in 2008 and a few more literacy staff. These promises, even if fulfilled, are nothing more than an insulting drop in the ocean.

According to conservative estimates produced last year by the Australian Education Union, NT schools require at least 1,400 new teachers, 100 teachers' aides and a funding boost of at least \$1.7 billion. Not surprisingly, teachers' demands for this base-level funding have been studiously ignored by the government and media alike.

Education of Aboriginal children in the NT has never been a priority for any government—territory or federal. At least 7,500 kids or almost 30 percent of the 22,000 under-16-year-olds in the NT are not enrolled in any form of schooling. And six out of the 73 communities "prescribed" under the intervention have no schools at all.

Some settlements have primary schools or Community Education Centres with schooling to Year 10, but separate high schools are virtually non-existent, with up to 5,000 Aboriginal teenagers having no access to secondary education or any form of vocational training.

Pre-school education, which obviously has a profound effect on children's personal development and their acquisition of pre-literacy and numeracy skills, does not exist in many areas.

Only 29 percent of NT indigenous children have any pre-school experience and in remote communities 94 percent of children have no access to pre-schools whatsoever. This means that many indigenous children are already severely disadvantaged before they arrive at primary school. And as every teacher knows, gaps in a child's basic learning skills at the age 5 or 6 are difficult to overcome, even in the best conditions.

Children who are malnourished and from dysfunctional homes are obviously even more disadvantaged—less engaged, less active, with shorter attention spans. They virtually always score lower in educational tests.

Most indigenous children, moreover, commence school, particularly in remote settlements, with little or no English-language skills—English is often the third or fourth language spoken in their communities. Government cuts to bilingual programs in 1999 and their substitution with limited English as Second Language teaching, has been a factor in declining school attendance, according to NT teachers.

Another dirty government secret is that hundreds of Aboriginal children suffer from otitis media, a contagious but easily-treatable ear infection that spreads rapidly in overcrowded housing. Deafness caused by otitis media means that teachers in some schools have to use microphones in order to communicate with children.

And the government's response? There are currently only two specialist teachers of the deaf in Alice Springs and they have to cover all the schools

and communities in the region.

Most teachers in the NT are employed on short-term contracts, some for only seven weeks, with the average tenure of a remote community teacher just seven months. And in some small communities, when teachers fall ill and have to leave the area for treatment, the school simply shuts down until a replacement can be found.

Discriminatory funding

Government funding of the NT's remote community schools is highly discriminatory and determined according to annual attendance rates. This means that remote schools are trapped in a Kafkaesque nightmare, with government bureaucracies refusing to increase education spending until it is "absolutely sure that children consistently attend school". (In the rest of Australia, government education funding is calculated on student enrolment numbers.)

One of the worst examples is at Wadeye, a poverty-stricken remote community of about 2,500 people, situated about 400 kilometres south-west of Darwin and one of the largest Aboriginal settlements in the NT.

There are more than 800 children of school age in Wadeye, but only one grossly under-funded primary school. Despite the fact that 600 kids enrolled at the school in 2006 and then again in 2007, the NT government only provides facilities and funding for about 300 students, which it claims is the average number attending each year.

The reason for the discrepancy between enrolment and annual attendance figures is obvious. More than half the enrolled students don't bother attending after the first few days because there are not enough class rooms, desks or even teachers. The inevitable drop in attendance is then cited by NT government bureaucrats to "prove" that their funding model is "correct", thus ensuring that the next year nothing will have changed.

Unemployment in Wadeye is over 85 percent; the average personal income for residents is somewhere between \$4,000 and \$8,000 a year, less than 20 percent of the national average; and the average dwelling in the settlement accommodates about 19 people. How are children supposed to learn in this environment—conditions replicated to a greater or lesser degree in remote communities across the NT?

"We need more resources"

Whilst we were unable to visit Wadeye, the conditions of life for many children in Alice Springs and Tennant Creek town camps are not much different. Housing is impossibly overcrowded with children frequently growing up in homes where family members suffer physical disabilities, mental illness or drug and alcohol abuse.

Carmel Ryan, an Aboriginal language teacher, discussed some of the difficulties with us during a conversation at her Mt Nancy town camp home. Mt Nancy is a 10-minute drive from the centre of Alice Springs, but the camp has no access to public transport or a school bus, forcing Ryan and other parents without vehicles to spend a considerable portion of their wages on taxis to get to work and to go shopping.

"Kids come to school from homes that have all sorts of problems and this affects their learning," she said. "Sometimes there are drunks at home and there is no money, no food, no transport and no school bus.

"What we need is breakfast programs and support for kids to have uniforms and for stationery," she added. "At the moment there no holiday

programs here for kids and no support for young people.

These comments were echoed by **Rodney Barnes** from Tennant Creek. He recalled that as a child he was sometimes sent to school without a decent night's sleep or breakfast, forcing him to steal food from other students, which inevitably led to conflict with the school authorities.

"I always remembered this and would never send my own kids to school without a meal," he said. "If we had money difficulties I would say 'stay home'. And if the kids had problems at school, I wouldn't let them go until we talked it out. People who just talk to you about your problems at school don't really understand this predicament."

Empty promises

During our central Australian trip we visited 16-mile outstation, a small community just north of Alice Springs where we met **Benedict Stevens** and several members of his extended family.

Stevens is employed as an Aboriginal liaison officer at Yipirinya School in Alice Springs, which teaches several indigenous languages and literacy and numeracy in line with the NT curriculum. Extensive research indicates that indigenous education workers like Stevens increase participation rates of Aboriginal students, helping to provide a bridge between the tremendous difficulties at home and the class room.

Stevens speaks five indigenous languages and told us that since the intervention his work involved visiting parents in Alice Springs town camps and nearby communities to explain that unless they sent their children to school, they could be punished by the government.

He explained that although Yipirinya had a health clinic, the school "needs indigenous health workers who can speak to the kids in their language and see exactly what the problems are. They can then take this back to the parents and tell them that they need to attend Congress [local Aboriginal health clinic] or the hospital."

It goes without saying that appeals by ordinary Aborigines like Benedict Stevens and countless others are ignored by the powers-that-be. The Labor government, like its predecessors, blames Aboriginal parents and punishes them with 100 percent "income management" of their welfare entitlements if their children do not regularly attend school. And rather than address the underlying social problems, the Rudd government, in conjunction with the NT Labor government, is expanding these punitive measures.

On the first anniversary of the intervention, the Labor government announced that in 2009 in six NT communities—Hermannsburg, Katherine, Katherine town camps, Wallace Rockhole, Wadeye and the Tiwi Islands—parents would have all welfare payments suspended if their children were not at school.

Minister for Indigenous Affairs Jenny Macklin told the media that this would be policed by school principals working in conjunction with the government welfare agency Centrelink. The scheme, she added, would be rolled out nationally, if "successful".

How this measure, which will cost over \$17 million to implement and will slash all financial support to parents in poverty-stricken communities, is supposed to improve education for Aboriginal children was not explained.

Another Stolen Generation?

The Rudd government claims that it is “closing the gap” between Aboriginal and non-indigenous education. This is a monstrous fraud. Its real agenda is to restructure Aboriginal education to better serve the profit interests of mining, tourist and agribusiness corporations in the NT.

This was spelt out in late March, a few days before we left for Alice Springs, by Jenny Macklin at the “New Agenda for Prosperity” conference, a big business gathering sponsored by Murdoch’s News Corporation.

Macklin told the conference that Labor would establish three hostels or boarding facilities in the NT to accommodate years 8 to 12 students who would be trained to meet the employment requirements of corporations in the region. The proposals were worked out in collaboration with Rio Tinto, BHP Billiton and other mining companies.

Macklin praised a new agreement between Chinese mining company Chalco and Aboriginal leaders in Cape York, involving “large scale work-readiness programs”. Ten days later she promised another \$10 million in federal funds for the immediate construction of four hostels near TAFEs and mining sites in Western Australia.

Several Aboriginal people to whom we spoke in central Australia compared Labor’s new boarding schools with the so-called “protection” policies that produced the Stolen Generations—when children were forcibly removed from their parents by government authorities. Whilst Aboriginal children today are not being seized from their parents and placed in missions to be trained as domestic servants or agricultural laborers and paid in food rations, the conditions are being created where young people will nevertheless be forced to leave their communities.

Macklin’s proposals were immediately supported by wealthy Aboriginal entrepreneurs such as Galarrwuy Yunupingu, former chairman of the Northern Land Council, and Tracker Tilmouth, former director of the Central Land Council and current adviser to Compass Resources, a NT Mining company. Tilmouth and Yunupingu represent the interests not of ordinary Aboriginal people but of a small layer of indigenous leaders who are collaborating with the government and the mining companies to further enrich themselves from the intervention and new future investment initiatives.

Labor’s boarding schools and hostels are not designed to provide Aboriginal children with an all-rounded comprehensive education incorporating science, technology, music and the arts, but to simply make them a “work-ready” cheap labour force. The few that gain access to these institutions will simply be given basic literacy and numeracy skills—enough to read a work manual to run a machine or obtain a licence to drive a truck.

To provide a high quality education to poverty-stricken Aboriginal children from town camps and remote communities is a complex and difficult task. It requires, at the very least, a major allocation of resources and teaching personnel so that pre-school, primary and secondary education is available for all.

At the same time, it requires the serious addressing of social problems affecting these children’s ability to learn—including poverty, inadequate housing, poor health, and alcoholism—beginning with the sustained development of social infrastructure and the provision of genuine full-time jobs with decent wages.

Such measures will never be implemented by the Rudd, or any capitalist, government. They require the development of a new political movement of the working class—Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike—based on a socialist perspective aimed at the complete reorganisation of society from top to bottom on the basis of human need, not corporate profit.

To be continued



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