Northern Territory intervention

The need for a socialist strategy

Part 7

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 last in a series of articles, interviews and video clips. Parts one, two, three, four, five and six were posted on June 21, June 26, July 2, July 15, July 24 and August 6 respectively. Click here to watch the video interviews.*

When the Howard government announced its NT "intervention" in June last year the overwhelming majority of Aboriginal people recognised that this was one of the most serious assaults on their democratic rights and living standards in more than forty years. Many denounced it as a "land grab" by the government and mining companies, and asked why, if Canberra were so concerned about the fate of Aboriginal children, was it necessary to suspend the Racial Discrimination Act and force "income management" on desperately struggling families.

Despite wall-to-wall media promotion of the NT intervention, many workers in Australia's urban centres were equally suspicious. After more than a decade of political attacks on democratic rights and living standards, fuelled by ongoing lies about the so-called "war on terror," few believed anything from the Howard government. On November 24, 2007, it was swept from office.

The intervention was not simply invented by the Howard government. It codified the demands of key sections of Australian big business and was enthusiastically endorsed by the corporate media, the Labor Party bureaucracy and various well-off Aboriginal entrepreneurs. It represented a continuation, albeit in modern form, of the brutal measures enacted against NT Aborigines by pastoralists, mining corporations and other representatives of the profit system for more than two centuries.

Why, then, has the intervention—and its extension by the Rudd Labor government—not been directly challenged by the working class? And how can the endemic unemployment, social misery and police harassment afflicting Aboriginal people be ended?

Without doubt, Rudd's "sorry" speech to members of the Stolen Generations in February this year was utilised as a means of diverting attention from his government's right-wing social agenda in general and its continuation of the NT intervention in particular.

But the overwhelming majority of working people—indigenous and non-indigenous alike—do not understand what Rudd's agenda actually is. Few recognise that "income management", seizure of land and other anti-democratic measures are, in the final analysis, not racial but class issues—the opening shots in a generalised assault on the living standards and basic rights of all working people.

This confusion is not accidental. It is yet another manifestation of the extent to which Australia's ruling elite, the corporate media and the labour and union bureaucracies have marginalised Aboriginal people and divided them from their class brothers and sisters around the country.

During our visit to central Australia we met older workers who had been sacked following the granting of equal pay to Aborigines in 1968. Some never worked again and, along with their children and grandchildren, were trapped in a never-ending cycle of poverty. For tens of thousands of young NT Aborigines today, the very concept of "working class" is something they find hard to understand, because neither they, nor the people around them, have ever had a job.

How has this happened? To answer, we need to examine some of the critical political experiences of the working class in the post-war period and, in particular, the betrayal of the mass movement that emerged in the 1960s, which fought to put an end to the racial oppression and exploitation of the Aboriginal people.

Dispossession and the expansion of Australian capitalism

Australian colonial capitalism developed in response to an expanding global market. It involved a series of bloody skirmishes over many decades to force Aboriginal people from their land and replace them with sheep, wheat and other agricultural products. The bloody conversion of tribal land into private property first began in the nineteenth century in the eastern coastline colonies of Victoria, New South Wales and Tasmania. It did not reach into central and northern Australia until the late 1800s.

More than 1,000 Aborigines are officially estimated to have been shot and poisoned in central Australia between 1881 and 1891, and such killings continued well into the twentieth century. One of the most infamous massacres occurred at Coniston in 1928, about 300 kilometres north-west of Alice Springs, when shooting parties led by a police constable murdered more than 100 Aboriginal men, women and children in revenge for the death of Frederick Brooks, a local white man.

Confronted with this sort of terror, dispossessed and starving Aborigines began moving towards the church missions and small towns like Alice Springs and Darwin. The Alice Springs town camps, for example, emerged as ration depots and then as recruiting grounds for pastoralists and local settlers looking for cheap labour. Aborigines had no basic democratic rights and those able to secure work were treated like virtual slaves; not paid wages but tobacco, flour, sugar, tea or other basic items.

At the same time, Aboriginal children of mixed parents were removed from their parents by missionaries and government officials. As in the current intervention, the official justification for taking these children, who became known as the "Stolen Generations", was "to protect them".

The real reason for the policy, which continued up until the 1970s, was to train them as maids, agricultural workers and other forms of cheap labour and to "breed out" Aborigines, then considered an "inferior race" by government authorities.

Class resistance

Notwithstanding their slave-like employment conditions and the ration payment system, increasing numbers of Aboriginal people became part of the working class, a process accelerated by a labour shortage in the Northern Territory following the outbreak of World War II. Many were brought into contact with socialist-minded workers, including members of the Stalinist Communist Party of Australia (CPA), which at that stage was the only political party with a substantial working class base that opposed the racist White Australia immigration policy and anti-Aboriginal laws.

Important sections of the Aboriginal working class began to recognise that the starting point of any fight against their oppression must involve unified class action and, in line with the post-WWII upsurge in working class militancy, began taking industrial and political action against their horrendous employment conditions.

One of the most significant battles began on May Day 1946, when Aboriginal workers on sheep stations in Western Australia's Pilbara region walked off the job, demanding a 30-shilling minimum weekly wage instead of rations.

The extraordinary three-year strike, which was led by Dooley Bin Bin and Clancy McKenna, along with their friend Don McLeod, a member of the Communist Party, involved more than 800 Aboriginal workers from 20 properties across a 10,000-square kilometre area.

Strikes by Aboriginal workers were illegal at that time and the Western Australian state Labor government responded viciously against the walkout. Scores of workers were arrested at gunpoint, put in neck and leg chains, and forced to return to the farms. Appeals to Herbert Johnson, Labor's federal Minister for the Interior and a former Australian Workers Union president, fell on deaf ears. Johnson defended the wage inequality and declared his support for the use of neck chains on Aboriginal prisoners.

While McLeod and other strike leaders were jailed numerous times, on one occasion more than 300 Aboriginal strikers marched on the Port Hedland jail forcing McLeod's release. The strike, moreover, won political and financial support from workers nationally and union bans were placed on the movement of Pilbara wool. Although the workers' demands were not fully realised, and they never returned to their jobs, the High Court ruled in 1949 that Aboriginal employees had the right to organise and elect their own representatives. Several sheep stations also began to negotiate wage agreements with their Aboriginal workforce.

Most importantly, the Pilbara walkout encouraged other protests in the late 1940s and 50s. The employers and the state apparatus inevitably responded with brutal repression, but working class opposition intensified.

Strike action by Aboriginal workers in Darwin during the early 1950s, the tuberculosis allowance campaign in 1963 and, most famously, the 1966 Wave Hill strike by Gurindji stockmen, were key events in the rising militancy of Aboriginal people and part of a growing wave of political action by the international working class. These battles gathered support from workers and students in southern Australian cities, powerfully manifested in the 92 percent national referendum vote in 1967 for citizenship rights for Aboriginal people.

Also in 1967, Australia's industrial courts ruled that Aboriginal workers should be paid equal wages and directed employers to begin doing so in 1968. NT pastoralists and other employers responded by sacking hundreds of Aborigines and introducing new farming technology—motorbikes and helicopters—to cut their reliance on Aboriginal labour. This produced a mass exodus of unemployed Aboriginal workers and their families from remote stations into the town camps, where they were forced to live in abandoned cars, tin sheds and other rudimentary shelters.

The Wave Hill strike

Led by Vincent Lingiari, the 1966 Aboriginal stockmen's strike at Northern Territory's Wave Hill cattle station—a huge property owned by the British-based Vestey agribusiness—was a seminal political experience, highlighted in several contemporary songs, including Paul Kelly and Kev Carmody's popular "From little things big things grow". The political lessons of this struggle, however, are little understood by Aboriginal people and the rest of the working class.

There was mass support for the extended six-year walkout, with public meetings, demonstrations and thousands of dollars donated by working people across Australia. But the full political potential of this determined battle—the development of a unified socialist movement of indigenous and non-indigenous workers against the profit system—was never realised.

Responsibility for this lay with the Stalinist CPA and writer Frank Hardy, one of its leading lights, who argued that the key issue facing Aboriginal people was "land rights". The striking Wave Hill stockmen and other Aboriginal people, including hundreds of those being sacked by cattle station owners and other employers following the introduction of equal pay in 1968, were told that their salvation lay in "land rights". These, it was claimed, would guarantee "Aboriginal control of Aboriginal affairs" and end racial oppression.

Likewise, the CPA and an alliance of so-called "lefts" and black nationalists told workers and students that the principal task was not the development of socialist-minded Aborigines and a unified movement of the working class. Such a development might arise, they argued, at some future undisclosed date, but the immediate task of urban workers was to provide subsidiary support for Aboriginal "land rights". In other words, the fight against racial oppression, which had long been associated with the fight for a socialist perspective to put an end to the profit system, was replaced by the demand for land rights—an entirely bourgeois perspective.

These demands were a godsend to Australia's ruling class and, notwithstanding nationwide popular support for the Wave Hill strikers, represented a political betrayal of the entire working class, laying the basis for divisions along racial lines. While "land rights" was a democratic demand, its realisation could never liberate Aboriginal people from poverty and racism, because the source of their oppression and exploitation was the capitalist system itself, with its private ownership of the means of production, including land.

The most conscious section of Australia's political elite recognised this fact and, in the early 1970s, embraced the "land rights" perspective. Like the Nixon administration in the US, which promoted "black capitalism" in an attempt to dissipate explosive social tensions in major American cities, Australia's ruling elite began cultivating a layer of black entrepreneurs, bureaucrats and middlemen that would defend private property and the profit system.

In 1975, the Whitlam Labor government granted the Gurindji stockmen freehold title to most of the Wave Hill cattle station and went on to enshrine this policy shift in the Northern Territory Land Rights Act, which was eventually passed in 1976 by the Fraser coalition government.

Thirty years on, it is worthwhile considering what the land-rights perspective, native title and other measures claiming to offer "Aboriginal control of Aboriginal affairs" have produced.

Large parts of the NT are currently under the control of Aboriginal land councils. While various minimal concessions were made during the past three decades, including the right to social welfare and pensions, they have produced no lasting advances. Aboriginal people remain the most socially marginalised section of Australian society, suffering the highest rates of unemployment, poverty and substance abuse.

At the same time a small but privileged layer of Aboriginal entrepreneurs has emerged, proclaiming the necessity for black capitalism whilst enriching themselves at the expense of the vast majority of Aboriginal people. This group includes figures such as Cape York Institute director Noel Pearson, former Northern Land Council chairman Galarrwuy Yunupingu, Tracker Tilmouth and a growing list of others, who are now collaborating with the Rudd government and its big business backers. Their actions are motivated not by any genuine concern for ordinary Aboriginal people but in the hope of securing lucrative business deals with mining and other corporations.

Town camp and remote community administrations have been unable to offer any sustainable future for their Aboriginal residents. For the youth, who constitute almost half of the NT's Aboriginal population, the situation is particularly dire.

The Community Development Employment Program (CDEP)—introduced by the Fraser government in 1977, axed by Howard's intervention and now selectively being restored by the Rudd government—likewise offers no way forward. It is simply a below-poverty-line work-for-the-dole program, used in Aboriginal communities to provide a few rudimentary social services—which are taken for granted in the rest of the country. In many settlements, basic health and education services do not even exist.

Moreover, in the past six months, Tangentyere and other NT town camp councils have begun accommodating themselves to the Rudd government, negotiating deals to hand over their land to the federal and NT Labor governments via 40-year or longer lease arrangements in exchange for government promises of future funding. Government funds will be offered only to so-called viable Aboriginal communities. Even where this happens, it will do nothing to seriously address the endemic poverty and social dysfunction.

These are the results of thirty years of so-called "Aboriginal control of Aboriginal affairs".

Appeals to Labor and other blind alleys

While opposition on the part of Aboriginal people to the intervention is deeply felt, it has been unable to find expression within the official political framework. Aboriginal people are being paralysed by a leadership that wants to make yet more deals with the powers-that-be, and by a layer of "lefts" that promotes illusions in Rudd Labor, covering up the essential class nature of its agenda.

Organisations such as the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission (HREOC) and the Greens, for example, posture as opponents of the intervention, while offering advice to the Rudd government as to how it should be modified. They work to disguise the fact that it represents an assault on the social position and democratic rights of the entire working class.

Last month Greens senator and indigenous affairs spokesperson Rachel Siewert called on Labor to return to its "core values", implying that Rudd's backing for the intervention was all a terrible "mistake". In fact, the Labor government's embrace and extension of the intervention is a particularly clear expression of its "core values"—the defence of Australian big business and the profit system.

HREOC, likewise, has called on the Rudd government to reform the intervention on the basis of a ten-point plan. This would include reinstatement of the racial anti-discrimination legislation and the CDEP, a review of "income management" and alcohol management, and a "stringent monitoring and review" of the NT measures to make them "consistent with Australian and international human rights law". These "reforms", however, even if adopted, would not fundamentally change the living and social circumstances of ordinary Aborigines.

As for the Aboriginal Rights Coalition and other ad hoc coalitions, they likewise cover up Labor's social agenda and historical record, repeating ad nauseum that bigger protests will force the government to "change course". Appeals such as these are generally combined with denunciations of the intervention as the product of "white society", thereby laying the blame for the predicament facing Australia's indigenous population on ordinary working people, not where it actually lies—with the profit system and its political representatives.

The primary division in Australian society is class not race, a fact graphically underscored by the support given to the intervention by a layer of wealthy Aboriginal entrepreneurs and indigenous leaders.

It is not possible for Aboriginal people in the town camps and remote communities to find a way out of poverty and misery within the present social order. In the era of globalised capitalist production, there is no "independent" road of economic and political development for any oppressed minority, whether in Australia or anywhere else.

While Labor may find it opportune to modify some elements of the intervention in coming months—various minor amendments or a name change here and there—its essential purpose of driving down the living standards and democratic rights of working people will remain.

These and other attacks being driven by the deepening global recession will bring wider sections of the working class into conflict with the Labor and union bureaucracies, creating the conditions for the development of a new political movement of working people against the profit system.

Our brief visit to central Australia highlighted a fundamental truth—that the working class will never be free as long as Aboriginal people remain trapped within the terrible social nightmare of the town camps and remote settlements. Nor can these circumstances be overcome by Aboriginal people alone; this task is the political responsibility of the working class as a whole.

The liberation of Australia's Aboriginal people from more than two centuries of oppression can only be carried out on the basis of a revolutionary socialist perspective, aimed at putting an end to capitalism and establishing a workers' government that will fundamentally reorganise economic, political and social life to meet human need, not corporate profit. Such a government would have as a major priority the allocation of all the resources necessary to rectify the historic crimes perpetrated against the indigenous population.

The only party fighting to unify all sections of the working class on the basis of this perspective, against all forms of nationalism and identity politics, is the Socialist Equality Party (SEP). We urge workers and youth to read the *World Socialist Web Site*, study our program and seriously consider joining the SEP.

Concluded