

Australia: Labor to extend NT “intervention” for a decade

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The Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard is intensifying its social austerity cutbacks with a raft of proposed new laws that continue the Northern Territory (NT) “intervention” for another ten years and expand its punitive measures to include all welfare recipients, indigenous and non-indigenous alike, Australia-wide.

First enacted in 2007 by the Howard Liberal-National government, the Northern Territory National Emergency Response, or “intervention,” suspended the Racial Discrimination Act in the Territory and imposed a series of anti-democratic measures against Aboriginal welfare recipients and their communities.

While specifically targetting the NT’s indigenous population, the laws, which were backed by the Labor opposition, were the first stage in an assault on the entire social welfare system. (See: “The Aboriginal ‘intervention’ in Australia: four years on”)

The latest chapter in this regressive program involves three separate laws: the Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Bill 2011, the Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory (Consequential and Transitional Provisions) Bill 2011 and the Social Security Legislation Amendment Bill 2011.

The new measures extend the existing program, School Enrolment and Attendance through Welfare Reform Measures, or SEAM, which targets all parents receiving social welfare whose children are not enrolled in school or regularly attending.

If a student has 10 days of “unexplained” absences in one term of the school year, then his or her parents will be hauled before a “conference” of school officials, Centrelink staff and a NT government truant officer. The meeting will “agree” to an attendance plan. If the child is over 14 years, he or she will have to sign the plan. If the agreement is not followed, the parents will have their benefits suspended until the child follows the plan. In May, over 50 parents from NT schools in Hermannsburg, Tiwi Islands, Wadeye and Wallace Rockhole and Katherine schools had their welfare payments suspended under the SEAM program.

While the Gillard government claims that these measures will “assist” children and boost school attendances, SEAM has been

run in six indigenous NT schools with no marked improvement in student numbers. In fact, the most recent statistics reveal that indigenous school attendances throughout the Territory have declined from 64.5 percent to 62.7 percent, with total enrolments down from 8,960 to 8,914.

Despite this, SEAM will be extended to 17 new communities, including Alice Springs, NT’s second largest city, and Tennant Creek. Seven of these communities had their bi-lingual programs cut in the past year, producing further declines in school attendance.

The Gillard government also plans to make its “welfare quarantining” regime against those suffering from alcoholism even more repressive. Under current income management laws, the government withholds 50 percent of regular social welfare payments. This money can be spent only via a “Basics Card” on authorised purchases such as food, clothing and rent.

Labor’s new laws will give nominated state and Territory authorities the power to authorise the quarantining of up to 70 percent of the welfare income of alcoholics. Blanket bans of alcohol in prescribed communities will continue, with increased penalties for the unlawful transport of alcohol into “dry” areas. Those prosecuted for transporting more than 1.3 litres of alcohol into “dry” areas will face six months’ jail. Labor cynically titles these measures “Tackling Alcohol Abuse.”

“Intervention” pornography bans will also be maintained in Aboriginal communities, along with the star-chamber powers of the Australian Crime Commission to question residents, who have no right to reveal any information about their interrogation. Labor claims this will stop child sex abuse. The original pretext for the intervention was a series of sensationalised, unproven news reports claiming that paedophilia and child prostitution were rampant in indigenous communities.

As part of the 2007 “intervention” legislation, Aboriginal land granted under the 1976 Land Rights Act was compulsorily acquired by the government through five-year leases. These will be replaced with “voluntary” forty-year leases that remove all previous restrictions on how town camp and “Community Living” land could be used. Over the past four years the government has

attempted to press local communities to sign long-term leases by cutting funds for essential services to the homeland communities.

The Community Development Employment Program (CDEP), which employed 7,500 people before the intervention, will be completely eliminated in 2012. Labor claims this below-poverty-line, work-for-the-dole program, which provides the only work in many Aboriginal communities, will be replaced by "real" jobs. Labor's new intervention measures will provide just 50 new ranger positions, 100 traineeships and some public service jobs for indigenous students who complete Year 12, but only in so-called "Territory Growth" towns.

Indigenous Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin insists that NT Aboriginal communities were "widely consulted" in 100 meetings held between July and August and that Labor's policies were given overwhelming support. These claims are a fraud.

The "consultation meetings," which were convened by Indigenous Affairs bureaucrats and local "business managers"—i.e., government-appointed officials hired to impose the "intervention" on communities—were exercises in manufacturing consent.

Government officials refused to make available transcripts of these meetings and have provided no concrete evidence of the so-called support. Transcripts provided by the Concerned Australians group, which attended 10 of the meetings, revealed that proposals for cutting welfare to parents whose children fail to attend school were introduced by government "facilitators."

Aboriginal communities, in fact, voiced their concerns about low school attendance rates and made various suggestions to improve attendances. These included reinstatement of bilingual language programs and teachers, school buses, school internet access and music classes. Others denounced the intervention and called for measures to overcome the drastic lack of housing in indigenous communities that has a major deleterious impact of the children's health of children and regular school attendances. These pleas fell on deaf ears.

Labor insists that it is reducing Aboriginal socio-economic disadvantage but the general health and psychological well-being of Aboriginal people continues to deteriorate and is regarded by aid and human rights groups as an international scandal.

The federal government's July-December 2010 *Closing the Gap* report revealed that between 2008 and 2009, children's skin infections increased by 8.8 percent, upper respiratory infections by 25 percent, middle ear infections by 124 percent, and malnutrition and nutritional anaemia by 66 percent. The nutrition rates for Aboriginal children under 5 years are comparable with those in Ethiopia.

The *Closing the Gap* January-June 2011 report reveals that attempted suicide/self-harm incidents increased from 174 in 2007-2008 to 272 in 2010-2011, a more than 100 percent increase in four years, with reports of domestic violence almost doubling

from 1,612 incidents to 2,968 in the same period.

The incarceration rate of Aboriginal people in NT has increased by over 40 percent since the intervention. The jails are overcrowded with conditions that have been described by lawyers as "Dickensian." Darwin's Berrimah jail, which was originally built for 110 prisoners, now houses 700. Over 80 percent of prisoners in NT are Aboriginal.

While a growing list of Aboriginal health and welfare organisations, academics and lawyers have denounced Labor's planned intervention legislation, the Gillard government will not change course.

As the past four years of the Labor government demonstrates, such appeals are futile, with various intervention measures being implemented via pilot schemes in the major urban and regional cities. These target the most impoverished sections of the working class, the unemployed and teenage single parents. (See: "Labor's 'welfare quarantining' trials target unemployed")

Like its counterparts around the world, the Gillard government is slashing spending on education, health and welfare in response to the deepening global financial crisis. In the first three months since Labor's May budget and its "tough-love" approach to welfare, more than 20,000 unemployed Aboriginal people have had their welfare payments suspended. This amounts to 20 percent of all Aboriginal people on welfare. Nationally, 10 percent of all unemployed have incurred suspensions.

Labor's Mark II intervention is part of a dramatic escalation of the assault against the living conditions and democratic rights of all sections of the working class. It can be defeated only by a unified independent movement of all working people, indigenous and non-indigenous alike, and the establishment of a workers' government based on a socialist program.



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