

Utopia: A confronting but politically flawed documentary

Susan Allan
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Written and directed by John Pilger

Utopia, the latest documentary by veteran journalist and filmmaker John Pilger is currently showing at selected venues across Australia with a television screening tonight on SBS. The feature-length work, which exposes shocking social conditions in Australia's remote indigenous communities, opened last November in Britain to mostly praiseworthy reviews.

Pilger has twice won Britain's journalist of the year prize, as well as Emmy and BAFTA awards for his documentaries. His anti-war stand on Iraq, exposure of war crimes, criticism of the corporate-controlled media and consistent defence of Julian Assange and WikiLeaks have won him a wide following.

Utopia is Pilger's fourth documentary on the brutal history of genocide, dispossession and discrimination against Australia's indigenous population. *Secret Country* [1983] was his first, followed by *The Last Dream* [1988] and *Welcome to Australia* [1999].

Utopia presents a confronting picture of Aboriginal disadvantage, contrasting the soul-destroying poverty, chronic ill-health and third-world housing against the comfortable lifestyles of the rich in Sydney and other Australian capitals. It also touches on high indigenous incarceration and suicide rates, deaths in custody, forced assimilation and Aboriginal resistance.

While Pilger is clearly concerned about the plight of Aboriginal people, the underlying political line of the documentary is deeply flawed and serves to divide indigenous and non-indigenous workers. Rather than indict the capitalist system, and the economic, political and social interests it serves, as the root cause of this social catastrophe, he falsely argues that the horrendous conditions facing Aboriginal communities are a result of the inherent racism and ignorance of "white" Australia.

Utopia opens with a television interview with mining magnate Lang Hancock from the early 1970s. He is the father of multi-billionaire mining heiress Gina Rinehart, Australia's richest individual. Hancock is asked about his solution to the "Aboriginal problem?" He says, "Those that have been assimilated... I would leave them alone. The ones that are no good... dope the water up so they are sterile and that would breed them out."

Pilger cuts to a handcuffed Aboriginal boy being repeatedly tasered by police and then to CCTV footage from Alice Springs police station where an Aboriginal man is violently assaulted by police and left semi-unconscious in a cell. He dies three hours later without receiving any medical attention.

The documentary crosses to the Utopia region, about 200 kilometres north-west of Alice Springs in central Australia. This is one of the country's poorest communities with up to 20 Aborigines living in

each house, forced to suffer dysfunctional toilets and kitchens, with no electricity or running water. Many indigenous families are homeless, sleeping on mattresses on the ground.

Ampilatwatja medical centre manager David Smith explains how the lack of decent housing contributes to a range of illnesses—trachoma, gastroenteritis and Otis media, which causes deafness. It is not uncommon for cockroaches to crawl into the ears of adults and children, Smith says. Many diseases eliminated in underdeveloped countries still thrive in Aboriginal communities.

It is to Pilger's credit that he exposes these terrible social conditions. Likewise, his interview with Arthur and Leila Murray, parents of Eddie Murray, a young Aboriginal man who died in police custody in 1981 at Wee Waa in New South Wales. Pilger has had a long relationship with this family and *Utopia* sensitively reveals their difficult and protracted struggle to uncover the truth about their son's tragic death.

This is one of the few occasions in the documentary where Aboriginal people are shown as part of the working class. In 1973, Arthur led a strike of 500 Aboriginal cotton-chippers, demanding a wage increase above \$1.12 per hour and better conditions. The local paper described the strikers as "radicals and professional troublemakers."

Utopia reviews the Liberal-National Coalition government's "intervention"—the police-military takeover of Northern Territory (NT) indigenous communities in June 2007, which falsely claimed to be protecting indigenous children from sexual abuse.

Under this pretext, Canberra enacted a series of draconian measures, including the suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act in the Northern Territory, the quarantining of welfare payments, compulsory acquisition of land and other anti-democratic legislation. It was preceded by a sensationalised media campaign involving bogus allegations by then Minister for Indigenous Affairs Mal Brough, who claimed paedophile rings and drugs were rampant in Aboriginal communities. The NT intervention, in fact, was the first stage of a long-planned assault on social welfare—to be first trialled on Aborigines and then applied nationally.

While *Utopia* exposes the government's lies, it covers up the anti-working class nature of the NT intervention and whitewashes the record of the Labor Party. The Labor opposition at the time voted for all these anti-democratic measures and, following its election in late 2007—first under Kevin Rudd and then Julia Gillard—extended these policies to other sections of the working class.

Utopia's silence on the class issues is a backward step from *The Last Dream*, Pilger's 1988 documentary. While this film had political weaknesses, it gave a sense of the economic and political climate that

existed under the Hawke Labor government, exposing the rapid growth of social inequality and the intimate connections between the Labor administration and sections of the ruling elite, such as Rupert Murdoch, Kerry Packer, Alan Bond and Sir Peter Abeles. The documentary noted that under Hawke, Australia's Richest 200 increased their combined wealth from less than \$5 billion in 1983 to over \$25 billion during the next five years.

In *The Last Dream*, Pilger touched on the history of working-class struggle. He included footage of indebted farmers being evicted and poverty-stricken families in caravan parks. The film included statistics revealing that 10 percent of residents in the national capital Canberra, and one-in-five nationally, were living below the poverty line.

In *Utopia*, the Australian working class is entirely absent. Australia is constantly referred to as the "lucky country" and the impression given that everyone in "White Australia" is living in suburban bliss. The conditions of the vast majority of ordinary working people, along with the unemployed, single parents and the disabled, do not rate a mention. Nor does the documentary refer to the emergence of the new privileged Aboriginal elite, figures such as Marcia Langton and Noel Pearson, who have aligned themselves with mining corporations and denounce so-called "Aboriginal" welfare.

Pilger's constant blaming of "white society" is not a mistake but the political outlook of a privileged section of the Aboriginal leadership. Racial identity politics have been promoted in particular by various pseudo-left organisations to divide workers on ethnic and racial lines and to block a unified, independent movement of the working class against the capitalist system.

In an attempt to bolster the claim that 'white' Australians are inherently racist, Pilger interviews people celebrating the annual Australia Day holiday. Some are wrapped in the Australian flag and several make ignorant comments. This is nothing but a cheap journalistic ploy, designed to imply that the working class is overwhelmingly backward and racist.

Such an implication is politically dishonest and falsifies the historical record. The working class has repeatedly demonstrated its sympathy for the plight of Aboriginal people. *Utopia* refers, for example, to the struggle of Gurindji Aboriginal stockmen, at the Wave Hill station in the NT, who walked out on strike in 1966 demanding equal pay and basic rights. What it does not show is anything of the financial and political support provided to the stockmen by students and workers across Australia, as the strike continued for seven years.

The Gurindji struggle was eventually diverted by the Stalinist Communist Party of Australia and the Labor and union bureaucracies into a demand for Aboriginal land rights. This occurred right at the point when a mounting wave of industrial struggles across the country was raising the prospect of a broad, unified movement of the working class—indigenous and non-indigenous alike—against the employers and the profit system.

Far from ending Aboriginal oppression, "land rights" provided the economic basis for the development of an Aboriginal elite with capitalist aspirations. The past four decades, in fact, has seen the expansion of this milieu—Aboriginal CEOs, top government officials, academics and lawyers—which espouses affirmative action, land rights and the dead-end perspective of Aboriginal self-determination. This upper middle class layer and its associated apologists, are deeply hostile to any unified struggle by workers against capitalism.

Utopia's associate producer, Chris Graham, who is interviewed in the film, epitomises this social stratum. Graham is a journalist and former editor and founder of *National Indigenous Times* and *Tracker*

magazine, financed by the New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council (NSWALC). He has been listed as one of the NSWALC's media contacts.

The NSWALC is one of Australia's wealthiest indigenous organisations, with over \$600 million invested in land, commercial properties, international hedge funds and a growing involvement in the resources industry, including petroleum, uranium and coal. Its nine elected councillors each receive an annual salary of more than \$127,000 as well as generous allowances.

In 2012, the organisation called for a new relationship with the mining sector. A press release said this would allow it to break into "the real economy" and direct "financial benefits back into the land rights network... It is about us having a seat at the table, rather than waiting for the crumbs." Those who benefit from these arrangements, however, will not be indigenous workers and their families, but the well-off elites.

The film's other associate producer, Paddy Gibson, is a senior researcher for Jumbanna Indigenous House of Learning at Sydney's University of Technology, and a leading member of the pseudo-left organisation Solidarity, a promoter of racial identity policies.

Utopia ends with a call for an indigenous treaty that "shares this rich country, its land, its resources, its opportunities, the benefits." Like land rights, a treaty would only benefit a tiny privileged minority of Aborigines, while the overwhelming majority continue to suffer appalling living conditions and chronic unemployment. In Canada and New Zealand, where such treaties have been concluded, the indigenous population remains among the most oppressed layers of the working class with child poverty of 50 percent and 30 percent respectively.

Contrary to *Utopia*'s central theme, the principal division in society is class, not race. The only way to redress the historic and continuing injustices perpetrated against Australia's indigenous population is on the basis of a socialist perspective that unites all sections of the working class, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike, in the fight to abolish the profit system and establish freedom, equality and justice for all. Notwithstanding his concerns about the plight of Australia's indigenous population, Pilger's documentary only serves to reinforce one of the chief ideological tools for blocking any struggle for this perspective.

The author also recommends:

Northern Territory intervention: The need for a socialist strategy
[25 August 2008]



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