

School closed in remote Australian indigenous community

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Queensland's state Labor government last month withdrew teachers and shut down the only school in the remote Aboriginal township of Aurukun, blaming violence by local youth, while boosting the number of police in the town from five to 21. It was the second time within weeks that the school was closed, depriving all the local students of the basic right to attend an education.

This repressive approach to the social crisis in Aurukun was backed by the federal Liberal-National government, as well as Noel Pearson, a high-profile Aboriginal figure whose organisation took over the school to operate as the "Aurukun Academy" in 2010.

Aurukun is in far north Queensland, on the west coast of Cape York, 811 kilometres from the nearest major town, Cairns. Home to about 1,400 people, it is one of the most economically oppressed and impoverished localities in Australia.

Like many other indigenous communities in Queensland, Aurukun was originally a paternalistic church mission. Aboriginal people were relocated from a large surrounding area, many against their will, to the mission settlement. Later it was placed under authoritarian state government control, then handed to a local Aboriginal council in 1978.

Since then, the chief beneficiaries have been a thin layer of indigenous businessmen, bureaucrats and lawyers. The economic and social conditions remained blighted and deprived of basic government funding. Aurukun's power supply is intermittent, blackouts are common and the local sawmill and butcher have long closed.

Joblessness has plagued Aurukun for decades. According to federal Department of Labour statistics, the unemployment rate in December 2015 was 57.6 percent, jumping up from 37.4 percent three months

earlier.

Unemployment is nearly back to the level of 69.6 percent in 2010. That was the year in which the then state and federal Labor governments handed school control over to Pearson's right-wing, pro-business Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership, which also runs the area's government-funded employment services.

Since 2010, the community has been turned into a social laboratory for the "welfare reform" agenda pursued by successive federal Liberal-National and Labor governments. Families are threatened with being cut off payments if their children fail to attend the "academy."

The school was halted at Year 7 two years ago. Pearson declared that offering classes to Year 10 was "extended child-minding" and had no value to students who did not wish to participate. The closest high school is a three-hour drive north to Weipa, a bauxite mining town. The other options are distant education courses operating out of Cairns, or far-away boarding schools.

Media reports have played up the allegations of violence against the academy principal and teachers. On May 8, the staff was evacuated after the principal's car was reportedly stolen and he was confronted by a group of teenagers.

Some teachers returned after a week but were withdrawn again after further incidents on May 23 involving reported car thefts, stones being thrown on the roofs of the academy and teachers' accommodation and other threats of violence.

In media interviews, Pearson backed the closure and complained that he previously asked the state government to send more police to the town. He contemptuously described Aurukun as "the Afghanistan of teaching," where "the buildings are

dilapidated ... and unfit for the teachers that live in them.”

Yet, Pearson claimed that Aurukun school “inspired a movement here and dozens of schools over the country to adopt the program that we have running in that school.” He said “the school has never been as good as it has been in these past five years.”

In reality, a report by Cape York Academy, released in 2014, showed that Aurukun’s student attendance rate had sunk to 58 percent, down from previous years. Aurukun and other Cape York Aboriginal Academy Schools at Hope Vale and Coen became testing grounds for a Direct Instruction (DI) program.

First developed in the United States during the 1960s for teaching disadvantaged students, DI is a strict instructional-type education that follows a step-by-step, lesson-by-lesson approach, placing intense pressure on students through constant assessment. It features repetitive teaching, a narrow curriculum and passive learning. What the teachers say and do is prescribed and scripted.

Participation in this program has been enforced by “welfare reform” measures, for which Pearson has been a vocal advocate. The *Australian* explained that Aurukun became a blueprint for “quarantining” welfare benefits. A Family Responsibility Commission would take control of a person’s welfare payments if they were “convicted in a magistrate’s court, breached a public housing tenancy agreement, were the subject of a child notification order or didn’t send their child to school.”

Pearson’s program also directs youth who leave school into low-wage exploitation. The *Australian* reported that Pearson’s “scheme has put eight Aurukun young people to work fruit-picking and in a South Australian abattoir.” Pearson said the program should be widened to cover the “shadow group” of youth who were at the centre of the recent “security scare.”

“We just need to scale it up by 10,” Pearson told the newspaper. “Instead of eight, we need 80. And after six months of fruit-picking or on a harvest trail or in an abattoir ... you will then have the basis for entry-level labourers to go on to work in a mine or in a fulltime job.”

Pearson is an archetypal representative of a privileged Aboriginal elite, cultivated by the political and corporate establishment over the past few decades. In

the name of “economic empowerment,” his schemes serve to prepare a layer of indigenous people to become business operators, often exploiting Aboriginal youth and workers as cheap labour.

The situation in Aurukun is an acute expression of the broader crisis facing many other remote communities, as well as other working-class areas. Youth in these areas face a lack of decent, well-paid employment, woefully inadequate health, education, housing and recreational services, and incessant police harassment. Among the results are alcoholism, drug abuse, domestic violence and other endemic social problems.

None of the underlying causes of the social and economic difficulties in Aurukun have been addressed in the corporate media. The truth is that the capitalist system, based on private profit, has nothing to offer most people in these communities except a lifetime of destitution and poverty.

To contact the SEP and get involved, visit our website or Facebook page.

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