

Australian Labor government promotes indigenous “Voice” amid mounting class tensions

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At the end of last month, amid fawning coverage throughout the corporate media, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese announced plans for a referendum to enshrine an unspecified indigenous “Voice” to parliament in Australia’s 1901 colonial-era constitution.

With great fanfare, the proposal was brought forward, as one of the Labor government’s first major domestic initiatives, at the Garma Festival in the Northern Territory—the venue for an annual gathering of indigenous and non-indigenous political elites.

Albanese provided no detail of the proposed “Voice.” In fact, he rejected the need to do so before asking voters to approve it, in the name of keeping it “simple.”

“We should consider asking our fellow Australians something as simple, but something as clear, as this: Do you support an alteration to the Constitution that establishes an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice?” This was, Albanese insisted, “A straightforward proposition.”

The exact proposal is to add three sentences to the 1901 Constitution to create “a body, to be called the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice.” This body “may make representations to Parliament and the Executive Government.” Parliament itself would “make laws with respect to the composition, functions, powers and procedures” of the body.

The Labor government is appealing to widespread sentiments among all working people of revulsion toward the more than two centuries of massacres, epidemics, removals and separation of children by British imperialism and Australian capitalism.

Like many similar measures over recent decades—such as the establishment of land rights, the creation of “native title” and the 2008 parliamentary apology to the “Stolen Generations” of children removed from their families—Labor is cynically seeking to divert the deeply-felt hostility to that barbaric history into the cultivation of an indigenous elite as an arm of capitalist rule.

The “Voice” was conceived by government-funded consultations with hand-picked indigenous representatives, initiated by the previous Liberal-National Coalition government in 2015. That operation led to a gathering that adopted the 2017 “Uluru Statement from the Heart” calling for the “Voice,” a treaty and “truth-telling.”

In a television interview, Albanese said he was “very heartened” by the “significant support” from business leaders, the “trade union movement” and “churches.” That reflects the real base of support for the Voice. It lies in the corporate boardrooms, union apparatuses, churches and other capitalist institutions, not among indigenous workers. Even right-wing Liberal-National leaders and the Murdoch media’s most frothing commentators are backing the project—another warning of the underlying agenda.

In essence, the plan is to establish an indigenous advisory body to parliament. That is, a new institution within the heart of the same capitalist state apparatus that has been directly responsible for the destruction of Aboriginal society and its incorporation into the working class as one of its most oppressed layers.

More than 200 years of Australian capitalism has demonstrated the utter incapacity and opposition of the ruling class to put an end to the oppression of Aboriginal people, any more than it can end the oppression of the working class as a whole.

A “Voice” in the capitalist state, the chief instrument of class rule, will do nothing to redress the shocking conditions of the vast majority of indigenous people—those living in impoverished working-class suburbs in cities and towns across the country, or in outskirt settlements or remote communities deprived of basic facilities.

The “Voice” is brought forward now, under conditions of rapidly sharpening class tensions in Australia, to serve definite class purposes.

It is a bid to erect a progressive façade on the Labor government’s confronting agenda of imposing “tough

medicine” as the cost-of-living crisis intensifies, continuing the disastrous “let it rip” COVID policies, and preparing for frontline involvement in a US war against China.

The same government that claims to be rectifying historical injustice is insisting that, after more than a decade of falling real wages, soaring corporate profits and accelerating social inequality, the working people must pay for the worsening global crisis of capitalism that is impacting every country, including Australia.

The claim that a “Voice” will in any way ameliorate the atrocious conditions facing Aboriginal communities is a transparent lie. These conditions will continue to deteriorate, as they have for decades, along with those of the working class as a whole.

Under conditions of rising working-class struggles in Australia and globally, this is another effort to divide workers along racial lines and block a unified fight against the social disaster being created by the same private profit system that has devastated indigenous people.

The latest annual “Closing the Gap” report further exposes the fraud of such exercises. Fourteen years on from Labor Prime Minister Rudd’s parliamentary “Stolen Generations” apology, the socioeconomic, health and education conditions of indigenous people are declining, as they are throughout the rest of the working class.

Launched to supposedly address the damage done by the removal of indigenous children from their families by “closing the gap” between indigenous and non-indigenous welfare and health indicators, the results of this operation have gone into reverse.

In fact, the report shows that the rate of indigenous children in out-of-home care is rising, representing a new “stolen generation.” Imprisonment and suicide rates are increasing as well.

Moreover, the very conception of the “gap” camouflages the reality of declining social conditions for all working people, necessarily hitting hardest the vast majority of indigenous people, who are among the most vulnerable and oppressed members of the working class.

Other reports have revealed that, after years of indigenous people being used as guinea pigs to trial “work for the dole,” “welfare quarantining” and other programs to push jobless workers into low-paid insecure work, the proportion of the indigenous population classified as “employed” has dropped below 50 percent.

Increasingly impoverished and subjected to Third World conditions, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander working-class people have become, together with immigrant and refugee communities, some of the worst victims of the widespread imposition of poorly-paid and casualised employment, while corporate profits and wealth have

climbed to record heights.

At the same time, social polarisation is becoming even starker among indigenous people. Alongside terrible poverty, a “black” capitalist class has emerged. According to a 2019 trade department report, “the Indigenous business sector is one of the fastest growing in Australia.”

Creative Spirits, a website promoting indigenous entrepreneurs, estimated that by 2016, the top 500 “Aboriginal corporations” employed over 15,000 full-time employees. That makes them significant exploiters of the working class.

These employers are just part of the privileged layer represented by the “Voice.” Whether in lucrative posts in parliament, the media or academia, they employ racist politics to claim to be the only ones who can speak on behalf of the indigenous population. In reality, they are trading on the social misery created by the capitalist profit system, into whose state apparatus they are increasingly integrated.

It is not “whites” and “white society” that is responsible for the history of oppression of indigenous people, as self-appointed “black” spokespeople proclaim, but the capitalist profit system. This upper-middle-class layer is pushing for a “Voice” in parliament as a means of advancing their own privileges, influence and wealth, even as the social conditions of the vast majority of Aboriginal people continue to worsen.

This divisive ideology of racial identity politics should be rejected. The true allies of indigenous people lie not in this venal milieu but throughout the working class, in a common struggle against the program of austerity, ever-widening social inequality and war being implemented by Labor and every other capitalist government.

Decades of false promises and bitter experiences have demonstrated that the only means of resolving the appalling situation confronting indigenous workers and youth is through a fight by the entire working class to abolish capitalism in Australia and internationally, to end the socio-economic order that has produced it. That means overturning the capitalist profit system as a whole, and replacing it with a socialist society, based on genuine social equality and democracy.



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