Australian “Closing the Gap” report reveals worsening conditions for Aboriginal workers and youth

Sue Phillips
25 January 2023

The annual “Closing the Gap” report released at the end of last year by the federal Labor government pointed to an alarming economic and social crisis afflicting Aboriginal workers and youth.

The Closing the Gap program was launched in 2008 by former Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd following his parliamentary apology to the “stolen generations”—the many thousands of Aboriginal children forcibly removed from their families between 1910 and 1970. Despite the political establishment’s rhetoric that the apology constituted a historic turning point, more than a decade on, the horrendous conditions endured by the vast majority of Aboriginal people have not only been maintained but have worsened.

In 2020, the federal Liberal-Coalition government of Scott Morrison established a new Closing the Gap “national agreement.” The agreement was endorsed by all state Labor, Liberal and territory governments, the Australian Local Government Association, and the Coalition of Peaks—an alliance of 80 Aboriginal and Islander groups involving legal services, housing associations, media groups and native title organisations.

The purported aim of the agreement was to improve, over a decade, 18 socio-economic outcomes across health, education, employment, housing, justice, safety, land and waters, culture, and language. In numerous areas, the targets were extraordinarily conservative. Nevertheless, two years on, only four of the targets are currently deemed “on track,” while four are getting worse, and the majority reportedly have insufficient data to assess their progress.

Targets assessed as “worsening, not on track” are the number of Aboriginal adults in prison, the number of suicides, the number of children in out-of-home care, and the proportion of Aboriginal children who start school while not being “developmentally on track.” These are all critical social indices, and their further deterioration amounts to a devastating indictment of the Australian ruling elite.

The Closing the Gap agreement’s targets assessed as “good improvement and on track” are land ownership, the number of young people in detention, the proportion of children enrolled in preschool, and the proportion of babies born with a healthy birth weight.

The self-satisfied tone of the Closing the Gap report on these statistics is entirely unwarranted. Aboriginal babies are still nearly twice as likely as non-Aboriginal to be born underweight, a condition associated with numerous serious health risks. The number of Indigenous youth, some under the ages of 14 years old in detention continues to stand as an outrage. They comprise 6 percent of the Australian youth population, but make up 48 percent of the youth prison population.

Amid the 164-page gap report, the reality of the terrible situation facing the vast majority of Aboriginal people is largely buried. One statistic alone—the escalating number of indigenous children in out-of-home care—points to the monumental political fraud involved in government apologies for past injustices and pledges to overcome indigenous poverty and disadvantage.

Figures not included in the Closing the Gap report underscore the scale of the crisis. According to a 2020 report from the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Childcare, more than 20,000 indigenous children were living in out-of-home care. This compares with about 9,000 a decade earlier. The report also underlined a growing trend towards permanent placement—81 percent of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care live permanently away from their birth parents until they turn 18.

© World Socialist Web Site

The Closing the Gap report makes no attempt to explain why this situation continues to worsen. Basic issues of poverty and unemployment are downplayed—for example, data not referred to in the report includes that 30 percent of indigenous households live in poverty and the unemployment rate is twice that for Indigenous compared to non-Indigenous people.

The situation is even worse for those living in remote communities where poor infrastructure, overcrowded housing, and diseases long-eradicated in other areas continue. These are clearly some of the social and economic determinants that have led to the mass removal of children from their families.

The Closing the Gap report revealed that the suicide rate for Aboriginal people increased by 11.6 percent between 2018 and 2020. Indigenous people are more than twice as likely to die by suicide than are non-Indigenous.

A similarly appalling situation exists for incarceration rates. The Closing the Gap agreement set a target of reducing the number of Indigenous adults in prison by at least 15 percent by 2031. Even if met, this would leave Aborigines significantly over-represented within the country's prisons. However, the Gap report acknowledged that the proportion of Indigenous people in prison *increased* by nearly 4 percent between 2019 and 2021.

In 1992, one in seven prisoners were Aboriginal. The ratio is now more than one in four, with Aborigines comprising 29 percent of the adult prison population but only 3 percent of the overall population.

The terrible disadvantage of the vast majority of Aboriginal people sharply contrasts with the conditions of a layer of the Aboriginal elite, including CEOs, academics, politicians, and business operators who are enriching themselves. They represent a growing Aboriginal capitalist class.

This process has been encouraged by governments for several decades. The Gap report promotes this process, described as "empowering" Indigenous business, "capacity building" and driving an "entrepreneurial spirit."

The Indigenous Procurement Policy, first introduced by the Liberal-Coalition government in 2015, established annual targets for all government departments for contracts to be awarded to Indigenous enterprises. Government agencies are mandated with targets to make Aboriginal organisations and businesses the "preferred service provider for relevant grants where all requirements are met."

Since 2015, 41,000 contracts worth $6.2 billion have been made to 2,800 indigenous businesses. The Gap report noted that since the 2020 agreement, there has been a "marked increase in the number and value of contracts to First Nations business."

The Department of Defence is one of the larger procurers of goods and services, awarding $610.6 million in contracts to Indigenous businesses in 2020–21. In addition to this drawing together of Aboriginal-owned corporations and the military-industrial complex, the mining and fossil fuel energy industries represent an important sector for Indigenous corporate "partnerships."

To take one example, the Jawun Partnership is a capitalist enterprise developed by Noel Pearson and the Cape York Institute in 2001. Jawun aims to foster partnerships between the corporate sector, the local Aboriginal leadership, and all levels of governments. Its founding members were the Boston Consulting Group and Westpac Bank. Among an array of other multi-billion dollar enterprises, Jawun is partners with Rio Tinto, the second biggest mining company in Australia operating in 35 other countries, and Woodside, Australia's largest oil and gas company.

These developments underscore the reality that the fundamental "gap" in society is that of class, not race. The claim that the Closing the Gap measures will overcome the atrocious conditions confronting the mass of Aboriginal people is a lie.

The Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese is an instrument of finance capital and big business, and is committed to making the working class bear the burden of the worsening economic crisis. Resolving the disaster confronting Aboriginal workers and youth requires a unified political struggle of all races, nationalities, Indigenous and non-Indigenous directed against the source of the disaster, the capitalist system itself.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site