

Aboriginal workers raise concerns about Australia's Voice to parliament

Our reporters
29 March 2023

Australia's Albanese government today introduced a bill to initiate a national referendum—to be held later this year—on its proposal to establish an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to the federal parliament. Made up of indigenous people, it would “consult” and provide “advice” to parliament on issues affecting Australian indigenous people.

The proposal is the end result of a process initiated in 2015 by the previous Liberal-National Coalition, that also led to the “Uluru Statement from the Heart” in 2017. It is backed by a socially privileged layer of Aboriginal leaders, academics and bureaucrats as well as big business, including the Business Council of Australia, Australian Industry Group, Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Minerals Council.

The Voice is being falsely promoted by the Labor government as means of overcoming the two centuries of devastating social oppression and anti-democratic attacks on Australian Aborigines. Prime Minister Albanese has declared that the Voice referendum would be a “historic democratic moment for a unifying Australian moment.”

Nothing could be further from the truth. Firstly, it will be part of the capitalist state, the very instrument responsible for decades-long attacks on Aboriginal workers—the racial oppression, endemic poverty, unemployment lack of proper housing, education, health and other basic facilities. Secondly, it is a mechanism to promote racial divisions and divert attention from Labor's assault on jobs, living standards and basic rights of all workers and its multi-billion-dollar preparations for war against China.

Labor and other representatives of Australia's political elite are cynically playing upon the deep-seated concerns of millions of Australian workers, youth and middle-class people about the ongoing social oppression of the country's indigenous population.

The WSWS has explained from the outset that the Voice will not overcome the social reality facing the overwhelming majority of Aboriginal people, that this can only be resolved through an independent unified movement of the entire working class fighting on a socialist program.

Following are two interviews, one with an Aboriginal welfare worker and one with a member of the Stolen Generations in New South Wales (NSW).

Melissa Stubbings is a manager at the Merana Aboriginal Community Association for the Hawkesbury in Richmond, NSW. She began by explaining some of the social problems confronting Aboriginal people in the area.

Melissa Stubbings: We deal with a lot: from mental health, drug and alcohol addiction, the removal of children, Aboriginal children in care with non-Aboriginal carers, to seniors who are isolated and not getting a lot of support from family.

We also deal with workers who are having issues in their workplaces. Some people think Aboriginal people don't still face discrimination, but they do. We also do a lot trying to raise cultural awareness and understanding.

WSWS: You've been involved in this for about 20 years. You've no doubt witnessed a lot of things and heard all sorts of promises from state and federal governments. What has changed during that time?

MS: Very little, very little at all. I've seen services and programs come and go. I've seen programs in schools that work very well but then get modified by the governments trying to save money, which then they don't work as well.

I've seen the implementation of short-term projects that are not funded properly and long-term projects go to organisations that do very little with that money. The checks and balances are very poor for some organisations. We had a short-term project last year and we go two lots of \$10,000 and I had to send in every receipt for that.

We get over-scrutinised in certain areas, and under-scrutinised in others. I've invited government officials to come out and see the work that we do but very few come through the front door.

WSWS: We've argued that the Voice is a political diversion from the social issues confronting not just the indigenous population but the working class as a whole. There are parallels between the Rudd government's Stolen Generations apology and its “Stopping the Gap” promises and proposals. Could you comment on that?

MS: People say we need a voice, of course, but nobody really knows what this proposal entails. You can't find out what this mechanism will deliver, who will be appointed and how many people? You can't find any real details.

I don't speak for the whole community, and there are probably those in this organisation that have a different view, but in my opinion, we need to know all the details before we vote on anything.

If we say yes to have a Voice, and I'm all for having some way of influencing parliament, but Aboriginal people as a community need to have a say on how it all works. If we say yes, and its implemented, then will it respond to any criticism by saying that you all voted yes.

Governments have implemented these things called Land Councils and they're a disaster to traditional custodians and most community members. If you're not connected to the people who run the Land Councils then you don't get any assistance. They often don't have authority to make the sort decisions that they do, and they break traditional protocols all the time. If they're the people that are going to be chosen, then I definitely wouldn't vote for it.

I want to know how we can get grass roots voices, like those from organisations like ours, to be heard. There are big organisations—and I could name them—that make a lot of noise. They get their names all over football jerseys and things like that and they get a say because they're big.

For the 25 years that I've been in the community sector we've been telling governments what we need but nobody listens.

WSWS: Are you concerned about the fact that the Voice is being promoted by Australian big businesses who are no friends of ordinary Aboriginal people or the rest of the working class? You've mentioned the Land Councils but they work with these corporate entities.

MS: And they sell our land to these entities.

WSWS: Could you speak about the Northern Territory Intervention? It was introduced by the Howard government in 2007 and continued by the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments, even after Rudd's apology to the Stolen Generations.

MS: I think the Northern Territory intervention was set up well before the official [Little Children are Sacred] report into child sexual abuse in Northern Territory Aboriginal communities was even written. They had legislation tabled in parliament within six weeks of the report being released, but the intervention legislation generally ignored the report's recommendations.

People didn't understand. All they knew was the child sexual assault allegations and the government response. Nobody looked deeper and the government then sent in the army and set up these health tents and forced people to be checked.

Community members I've met told me that four or five [Mitsubishi 4WD] Pajeros would just drive into town and the army would just set up these big camps. It was like back to mission manager days and they'd put a fence up separating the local community from the out-of-town people. They couldn't socialise with or be around the community. It was horrific.

And there was the introduction of the Basics Card, which created many problems for people. Centrelink offices are sometimes hundreds of kilometres away, which meant that if you had a problem with the Basics Card it was really difficult to try and sort out.

The Intervention was appalling and the measures to Close the Gap haven't worked either.

We've got things going here like the Koori Knockout Health Challenge, which is an initiative that has changed people's lives. People would do a ten-week challenge and learn about getting healthy, but two years ago the funding for that dried up for that. We were making inroads into changing people's lives but we have to fight for every dollar to do that.

The grandiose Closing the Gap style measures don't work. They put on these big Closing the Gap days but all that happens is people come along, get all the freebies, go home and don't learn anything. You need programs that operate on a grass roots basis. We've been telling this to governments for ages but they don't listen. Governments want to merge us into big communities because it is cheaper for them, but it doesn't work.

We now have a situation where there are close to 100 percent of all young people being held in juvenile detention in the Northern Territory are Aboriginal kids. Most people don't know that. The number of Aboriginal kids in out-of-home care in New South Wales has barely changed in over 20 years.

All these government measures are aimed at big business and what suits it. We often say, if it doesn't suit big business then it won't happen. They hold the purse strings, and they hold the power. Governments make the announcements but they're only puppets for big business.

I have to say that most of the people I've spoken with in the community—people that I respect and the seniors we're involved with here—feel the same way about the Voice. We're just not being provided with information about this mechanism—how it will work, will people be elected and how we're supposed to interact with it.

Debra spoke to the WSWS in Lismore about the Voice and the social crisis affecting indigenous families. She is one of the Stolen Generations of Aboriginal children who were taken in their thousands from their families as official government policy up until the 1970s.

She began by talking about the worsening social problems facing Aboriginal youth, 15 years on from the official parliamentary apology to the Stolen Generations, delivered in 2008 by the then Labor Party Prime Minister Kevin Rudd.

"Indigenous kids are up against a lot," Debra said. "And I'm finding that racism is more prevalent today that it has been for a long time. I

found the Stolen Generation apology process traumatic. A lot of it goes on deaf ears. We want change."

Debra drew a parallel between that official apology and the Voice proposal. She spoke about the fact that the number of indigenous children separated from their families has grown to over 20,000, more than double the number of about 9,000 a decade earlier.

She said: "We have massive drug problems in communities. Where do these drugs come from? I'm sure the Aboriginal people aren't making them up out back over there. I don't know how they get hold of them, and that affects their mental health. There's a lot of mental health problems. It's sad to watch the youth struggling..."

"I've lived in a housing department area for a while now. That was a real eye-opener for me. You see the trauma first-hand... The youth are struggling to fit in to how society wants them to be. I'm glad that language is starting to come back. They're starting to teach language."

Debra said she knew nothing about the Closing the Gap program that was launched after Rudd's apology, supposed to reduce the gulf between indigenous and non-indigenous people on social indicators such as life expectancy and imprisonment rates. "What did they do with the gap?" she asked rhetorically.

She pointed to the intensifying social crisis affecting the working class as a whole. "How do they afford to live? The rents are ridiculous, the food, everything. It's all through the roof. There's a lot of homeless people, even when they're working."

Talking about the proponents of the Voice, Debra asked: "What's a Voice? I thought there was a voice. Don't they have a voice?" She spoke about the growing class polarisation in society. "Is there even a middle class anymore? It's just the poor and rich. I notice the scales of it even in my area. All the rich live in one area and you have all the poverty in another area..."

"A young indigenous girl asked me the other day: 'How come all these people have so much money, and you can see it, but they are living surrounded by bad poverty?' And I don't think it's a fact that poor people don't want to help themselves, because they do but then they run into brick walls all the time."

Debra commented on the broader political atmosphere affecting young people. "What hope is there for them?" she asked. "We are constantly talking about a world war. For the youth it's a terrible way to grow up. You see a lot of them struggling."

She pointed to the diversion of spending for corporate bailouts and war preparations. "Why is there so much want in the world? That's what I can't understand. The media say we have got this problem now because the government threw a heap of money around during COVID... But they have to buy submarines and stuff. They come up with money all the time... They're talking, and the next minute they say, we are spending \$5 billion on this, or \$10 billion on that. You ask: 'Where are they getting all that money from?'"

Debra returned to the issue of racism and how it was used to divide the working class. Speaking of those in power and those who promote racial politics, she commented: "They are always creating division... These people say, 'They're getting more than us' and 'You get given all that.'" But they don't."



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact