Australia: Horrific abuse of children at Kinchela Aboriginal Boys Training Home

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The *Guardian* recently published a distressing account of the maltreatment suffered by hundreds of children at the Kinchela Aboriginal Boys Training Home. The revelations, which included the possibility of secret graves on site, are just one of the many hidden crimes of the dark and violent history of Australian capitalism against Aboriginal people.

The Kinchela boys' home in the state of New South Wales (NSW) was a government-controlled body, just one of numerous institutions established during the Stolen Generations era, when assimilation policies forcibly separated Aboriginal children from their families. Thousands of girls and boys, including infants, were placed in government-institutions, some managed by churches and other welfare agencies. The children were to be trained and exploited as a source of cheap labour, employed as domestic servants and farm labourers. Additionally, other children were adopted into non-Aboriginal families.

From 1924 to 1970, it is estimated that nearly 600 Aboriginal boys, some as young as five years old, were removed from their families and incarcerated at Kinchela. Many of them suffered horrific physical, sexual, and psychological abuse at the hands of those in authority.

Presently, only 56 survivors of the home are still alive. Although precise government records were not maintained, it is believed that throughout Australia, as many as 100,000 Aboriginal children were separated from their families, during the period spanning from 1910 to 1969. Many were never re-united with their families suffering life-long trauma (see: "Kinchela family member condemns the brutality inflicted on Aboriginal boys removed from their parents").

The Kinchela boys' home was located on the site of an Aboriginal reserve used for crops, a dairy herd, horses, chickens and pigs. The boys worked long hours on the farm, housed in large tin shed dormitories. Education was minimal. Some children were told their parents no longer wanted them, others that their parents had died.

In the *Guardian* interviews, the Aboriginal survivors describe the shocking conditions in the boys' home as like living in a "concentration camp," a "hell hole" with continuous and harsh punishments meted out.

When children arrived at the home their clothes and shoes were incinerated, their bodies covered with flea powder and all their hair shaved off. Shoes were only worn if government authorities visited. Each child was given a number to dehumanise and destroy their individual identity. If a child used a given name instead of the mandated number, they were punished. The practice was so deeply ingrained, that survivors still recall each other's numbers to this day.

Uncle Bobby Young explained: "We had animals in there and they had priority over us. They all had names. One horse we used to call Sue and they had three German shepherd dogs. One was called Prince and if you didn't call him by the name, they would cane you. It was a concentration camp…"

Punishments happened daily, were violent and inflicted for the most minor issue. Many of the staff were ex-military and implemented some of its most sadistic practices.

In 1937, complaints of cruelty and abuse were filed against the manager, A.J. McQuiggin, who was accused of sadistic behaviour, whipping boys with hosepipes and a stock whip, and withholding food. He was reprimanded and transferred to another mission, where his cruelty led to a walk-out by Aboriginal residents.

The survivors are still haunted by the shocking punishments. One involved being chained to a tree at the rear of the property overnight, sometimes for longer periods. The penalty was imposed for the most minor "transgressions," such as bedwetting.

Uncle Roger Jarrett recounted the experience. "There was a fig tree with a six-foot chain. If a boy did something trivial, they would cut the sleeves and neck out of an old sugar bag, make him wear it, soak it in water, and then be taken out to the tree, where they would chain you up, padlock the restraints, and leave you exposed." Throughout the night, a bucket of water would be tossed over the child, even during the coldest winter nights. Traces of the chains can still be seen on the tree.

Other punishments included the degrading and cruel practice known as being "sent down the line." This aimed to desensitise the children by forcing them to inflict pain on others, even upon their own siblings.

Survivors vividly remember, being arranged in line, often with 30 or more on each side. The boy singled out for punishment was then "sent down the line" and punched by everyone. If the punches were deemed insufficiently forceful, a staff member struck with a cane to administer further punishment. The punishment for not striking hard enough was to be sent down the line as well.

One survivor explained, they "made us hate each other and hate ourselves. When I left the home, I was in such a state…. What they taught us, these ex-army people, was how to hurt a person. We thought it was a natural thing to do because an adult taught us."

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In 1995, Kinchela survivors raised their concerns as part of a submission to the *Bringing Them Home* inquiry, the first national investigation into the Stolen Generations. The Kinchela submission recommended that an area at the home be investigated because of strong suspicions that some children "may have met foul play."

Survivors wondered about the sudden disappearance of children. Had they been adopted out, thrown into the river or buried somewhere? All knew that male staff had sexually abused many boys, raising the horrific possibility that boys had died at the hands of the abusers. No-one dared ask out of fear. No investigation was carried out.

In 2008, after Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's cynical apology to the Stolen Generations, the son of a Kinchela survivor reported that his father had been traumatised for life after being forced to bury other boys who had been bashed to death by drunken supervisors. Again, nothing was done.

It was not until 2016 that the NSW government agreed to work with survivor organisations to "locate the remains of any Aboriginal children." A further six years elapsed before a ground-penetrating radar survey took place. Its report to the state government earlier this year highlighted "high priority anomalies" in the ground showing "signal patterns that in other contexts has to be human burials."

In 2022, the Kinchela Boys Home Aboriginal Corporation released a two-part video retelling the history of the home titled, *We Were Just Little Boys.*

The video powerfully explains the terrifying moment when the boys were taken from their families, the crimes perpetrated at Kinchela and the ongoing trauma once they were released. Some boys unsuccessfully attempted to rejoin their families, others turned to alcohol and drank themselves to an early death, others ended up in prison. In many cases, their trauma impacted their families, contributing to family violence, self-harm, and suicides.

In response to the report, the NSW Labor Premier Chris Minns has agreed to further investigations and evacuation of the Kinchela site. Linda Burney, the federal Labor government's Indigenous Affairs minister endorsed the call for an investigation, declaring that the claims of secret burials were "deeply disturbing."

Such comments from state and federal Labor politicians are utterly hollow and contemptible. Why is Burney suddenly "deeply disturbed" when the information in the *Bringing Them Home* report was available 28 years ago. Why has no government acted on the survivors' requests or implemented other recommendations from that inquiry?

The very belated expressions of concern take place amid the federal Labor government's campaign of a Yes vote in the October 14 referendum to insert a Voice, an indigenous advisory body to government and parliament, in the constitution.

The Voice is being presented as the means for redressing past crimes as well as the appalling conditions that continue to face most Aboriginal people. In reality, the federal Labor government is using the campaign for the Voice as a means of putting a progressive face on its regressive program of war and austerity.

Those who are justifiably shocked by the revelations about the Kinchela Aboriginal Boys training home and are considering voting Yes should recall the long history of similarly disingenuous exercises that have done nothing to improve the lot of indigenous people—one of the most oppressed layers of the working class.

Over many decades there have been multiple government inquests, Royal Commissions, public apologies, promises and lists of recommendations to supposedly address the crimes against the Aboriginal population. Yet the conditions facing most Aboriginal workers and youth—along with the working class as a whole—have only worsened as governments, including the current Labor government, have imposed their austerity agenda.

The only beneficiaries have been a privileged Aboriginal elite of businesspeople, academics, media personalities and self-appointed representatives who are promoting the Voice as a means of further advancing their privileges and wealth.

The official opposition to the Voice—the No campaign—led by the federal Liberal-National Coalition offers no progressive alternative and is as responsible as the Labor Party for the continuing oppression of Aboriginal people.

That is why the Socialist Equality Party is campaigning for an active boycott of the Voice referendum. It is the only vehicle for workers, indigenous or non-indigenous, to take an independent stand and build a unified movement to abolish the capitalist system which is responsible for the crimes against the indigenous population.

The horrific treatment of children at Kinchela is not an aberration. The *Guardian* has published similar stories from Western Australia where it is thought hundreds of Aboriginal children may be secretly buried in unmarked graves at former religious and government institutions.

Nor are the crimes against indigenous populations as capitalism expanded globally limited to Australia. Similar policies were implemented in Canada where it is estimated that as many as one in three children in the first half of the 20th century were captives of the government enforced church-run residential system. Indigenous children suffered severe neglect and abuse and thousands died from disease.

We call on workers and youth to join our campaign for an active boycott and the fight for a socialist future as the only means for addressing these crimes and providing decent conditions for the working class as a whole.

Note: Under conditions of compulsory voting, which makes it a crime to urge a boycott of the vote itself, the SEP calls on workers and youth to register their opposition by casting informal ballots and join our active boycott campaign in the lead-up to October 14, that goes well beyond the individual act of voting.

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