

Indigenous Voice leaders denounce Australian voters

Mike Head

24 October 2023

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders of the Labor government's failed campaign to entrench an indigenous advisory body, named the Voice, in the country's 1901 Constitution issued a vitriolic open letter on Sunday. In it, they branded the referendum's defeat as a "shameful act" by the majority of Australians.

The unsigned letter, addressed to Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and members of the federal parliament, said it represented "the collective insights and views of a group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders, community members and organisations who supported Yes."

The document bitterly declared the result to be "so appalling and mean-spirited as to be utterly unbelievable" and asserted: "It will remain unbelievable and appalling for decades to come." It blamed the outcome on a "tsunami of racism," essentially accusing most No voters of embracing racism. It also charged them with "ignorance" and "abandonment of civic responsibility."

This is a slander against the substantial majority of voters, mostly in the working-class areas, who voted No. Their rejection of the Voice proposal was bound up with mounting distrust and anger toward the Labor government and the entire political establishment.

The open letter, issued by a privileged layer of indigenous figures who sought to cement their places in the parliamentary and governmental corridors of power via the Voice, further highlights the immense class chasm shown in the referendum's overwhelming defeat on October 14.

In the first place, a striking feature of the letter is that it evinces no concern for the deteriorating social conditions of ordinary indigenous people, who represent the most oppressed layer of the working class.

What the authors are outraged about is that their project for acquiring a guaranteed place in the existing political set up was rejected.

Although described as an advisory body, the Voice would have bolstered the state apparatus responsible for the oppression of indigenous people. The Voice would have become a pillar of the system of rule through which the capitalist class defends its power, suppresses workers' struggles and prosecutes its imperialist interests throughout the Indo-Pacific region and beyond.

Secondly, voters rejected the Voice proposal by 61 percent to 39 percent after an intensive 18-month Yes campaign that was heavily backed by big business, as well as Albanese's government.

The vote was sharply divided along class lines. The highest Yes votes—up to 77 percent—were recorded in inner-city enclaves containing the wealthiest or most gentrified upper middle-class electorates. That was in stark contrast to the working-class outer suburbs of the capital cities, where the Yes support fell to as low as 30 percent.

Far from being motivated by racism, millions of working-class voters recognised that the Voice plan would do nothing to redress the appalling conditions of most indigenous people, who constitute a particularly vulnerable layer of the working class. Rather it would only strengthen the hand of the government and the ruling class as they inflict on the entire working class the greatest assault on living standards since World War II.

Confronted by an intensifying cost-of-living and housing crisis—falling real wages, soaring mortgage interest rates, rents and prices for essentials such as food, electricity and petrol—workers no more believed the Labor government's Voice campaign slogan of "better outcomes" for indigenous people than its discredited May 2022 election slogan promise of a "better future."

Rather than a "better future," working-class households, including Aboriginal ones, are being thrust into insufferable deprivation. To take just one limited indicator, as many as 3.7 million households are estimated to have battled "food insecurity" in the past year, according to Foodbank Australia's 2023 Hunger Report. That was up by 10 percent in 12 months.

More than a third of the population either "compromise their meal choices" or are forced to "skip meals or whole days of eating," with 77 percent of food-insecure households experiencing such conditions for the first time.

Adding to the disaffection and disgust over the social crisis was the escalating government commitment to US war operations, such as the \$368 billion AUKUS submarine project, and Albanese's unconditional backing of the Israeli atrocities against the people of Gaza, which was on full display in the week before the vote.

Noticeably, the open letter is also silent on the onslaught on the indigenous people of Palestine, supported by the same Labor government that claimed to be concerned by the plight of Australia's indigenous population.

As interviews conducted by Socialist Equality Party (SEP) supporters in working-class areas on polling day showed, there was an understanding that the only beneficiaries of the Voice would have been a narrow layer of the well-off Aboriginal elite, not working-class indigenous people.

Moreover, the referendum offered only a false “choice” between two ruling capitalist class camps, both of which are committed to the underlying program of preparing to join a US-led war against China and cutting workers’ real wages and living conditions.

Significantly, the open letter attributed the collapse in support for the Voice, from more than 60 percent according to media polls at the beginning of this year, to the withdrawal of bipartisan support for it by the Liberal-National Coalition. That reflects the orientation of the Yes campaign to counting on the support of the corporate political establishment as a whole, including its most detested figures such as Liberal leader Peter Dutton.

In reality, opinion surveys indicated that support for the Voice plunged as it became clear that the decimation of working-class living standards was not a temporary phenomenon that could be blamed on the Ukraine war, but would worsen as the Reserve Bank of Australia, backed by the Labor government, continued to raise interest rates—12 times so far.

In many ways, the referendum became one on the Labor government, not just the Voice. As the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) belatedly reported after the vote, focus group polling had produced “countless reports” of people saying they would vote No in the referendum to “send the government a message” on issues ranging from the cost of living to how much it was spending on AUKUS submarines for a war against China.

Likewise, a post-referendum JWS Research True Issues survey, reported in the *Australian Financial Review* this week, indicated that support for the Labor government has fallen to the levels of the previous Morrison Liberal-National government just before the Coalition lost office in 2022, largely due to hostility with the Albanese government over the cost of living.

The open letter’s charge that No voters were guilty of an “abandonment of civic responsibility” is revealing. It displays the authors’ support for the referendum’s underlying political and geo-strategic agenda of bolstering the capitalist state apparatus, both for domestic and foreign policy purposes.

From the outset of the Voice referendum campaign, which Albanese proclaimed as his key priority on election night in May 2022, his government and its supporters tried to exploit the widespread demand for action to redress appalling indigenous conditions to put a false progressive face on Australian capitalism.

Revamping Australia’s image was regarded as essential for war purposes, especially to justify backing the US aggression against Russia and China in the name of “human rights” and help in bullying Asia-Pacific states into lining up behind Washington. Their largely indigenous populations have bitter experiences with British-Australian colonialism and neo-colonialism.

Significantly, one of the Yes campaign’s indigenous leaders, Thomas Mayo, made this motivation a focus of his remarks on ABC Radio National this week. Mayo, the Maritime Union of Australia assistant national secretary, described the Voice’s defeat as an embarrassment that would make it difficult for Australia to use alleged “human rights” violations as political ammunition against China. “It’s hard for Australia now to talk about human rights to other countries like China when we still have such marginalised people and still make decisions about them,” he said.

The Albanese government said a vote for the Voice would

“unify the nation.” That appeal was bound up with developing a war economy and imposing the inevitable sacrifices of lives and livelihoods in war. As the referendum results underscore, Australia is far from “united.” Like the rest of the world, it is more divided than ever by social inequality and class tensions, producing rising strike struggles.

The open letter also blamed the referendum defeat on “scare campaigns” funded by “conservative and international interests” that fed “deliberate disinformation and misinformation” which “proliferated, unchecked, on social media.” Such claims dovetail with the Labor government’s planned legislation, justified in the name of cracking down on misinformation, that would inevitably be used to target political dissent as the social and military conflicts intensify.

The truth is that the corporate-financed Yes campaign was full of misinformation, not least that the Voice would improve indigenous lives, when Albanese and other Yes leaders insisted that the plan would “save money,” not spend more on badly-needed health, housing and social programs for Aboriginal communities.

The only progressive alternative was that advocated by the SEP for an active boycott of the referendum. We urged workers and youth to reject the equally reactionary Yes and No camps, which both conducted the referendum on a racially-divisive basis, trying to pit indigenous workers against their class brothers and sisters.

The SEP advocated an independent road to unite the working class, indigenous and non-indigenous alike, against the root cause of oppression and war, which lies in the capitalist profit system. The seething discontent in the working class is not enough, by itself, to answer the plunge into war and austerity. It must be transformed into a conscious movement, as part of the global struggle against capitalism, for socialism, based on human need, not corporate profit.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact