

“Invasion Day” protests oppose oppression of indigenous Australians, genocide in Gaza

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30 January 2024

Protests took place in major cities and regional centres across Australia on Friday against the oppression of Aboriginals and the imperialist-backed Israeli genocide against Gaza.

The annual events, which have been held for decades, are named “Invasion Day” rallies. They are held in opposition to the official annual “Australia Day” celebrations which mark the British colonisation of the continent on 26 January 1788. For the Australian ruling class, Australia Day is used to celebrate nationalism and militarism.

This year the protests raised both the oppression of indigenous Australians and opposition to the imperialist-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza. In Melbourne, where more than 100,000 gathered, the weekly free Palestine protests, which have been held for the past three months, were folded into the “invasion day” event, partly accounting for a larger turnout than elsewhere. Even so, more than 10,000 turned out in Sydney and 15,000 in Brisbane, along with smaller rallies across the country.

Young people were heavily represented, reflecting longstanding anger over the brutal social conditions inflicted on the indigenous population, as well as their politicisation by the Gaza genocide and the support for it by all the governments, including in Australia. The attendances were diverse, in terms of both cultural and social backgrounds.

Among hand-made banners were those that included both Aboriginal and Palestinian flags, and slogans such as “No pride in genocide,” “Everyday in Palestine is Invasion Day” and “There is no justification for genocide.”

Many protesters, particularly middle-class layers, voted ‘Yes’ in the Labor government’s referendum to establish an Aboriginal “Voice to Parliament” on October 14 last year. These layers wrongly thought that the Voice may have gone some way to ameliorating the social crisis afflicting Indigenous people.

They attended the rally partly to express their disappointment that the referendum was defeated.

The Voice, as admitted by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese himself, would have been a powerless advisory body enshrined in Australia’s colonialist constitution. The aim of the Voice was to divide workers along racial lines, further entrench the position of a privileged indigenous elite and put a false “progressive” gloss on a government committed to war and austerity.

The overwhelming “No” vote did not express mass racism, but a sharp class divide. While affluent and middle-class areas of the major cities voted “Yes,” working class and regional areas

overwhelmingly voted “No,” reflecting correct skepticism that the Voice would improve social conditions for ordinary people, whatever their racial background.

Despite this background, the speakers made no assessment of the referendum. In the closest any of them came, Aboriginal playwright and director Kamarra Bell-Wykes referenced “the tragic, but unsurprising no vote to Aboriginal Australia having an undefined voice in the national constitution” which shows “just how far we have to go.”

The comment echoed the line, peddled by various middle-class commentators, that the Voice result showed widespread racism. That was refuted by the attendance at the protests themselves.

There was also an obvious contradiction. Bell-Wykes herself seemingly referred to the inadequacy of the referendum, branding the Constitution and attempts to alter it as reinforcing “colonial notions,” but she stated this was “a discussion for another time.”

In fact many of the speakers had advocated a “No” vote, having associated themselves with the mis-named “progressive No” campaign of indigenous independent Senator Lidia Thorpe. Branded as “progressive” to distinguish it from the right-wing and racist dog-whistling of the “No” campaign led by the Liberal-National Coalition, the concerns of the Thorpe wing were entirely tactical.

They were fearful that they would be sidelined from the Voice by a right-wing layer of the indigenous elite with even closer ties to the political and corporate establishment. Their primary objection to the Voice was of an even more virulently Aboriginal nationalist character, arguing that it did not go far enough in allocating resources and real political power to self-appointed indigenous leaders.

Thorpe’s positions are saturated with reactionary racialism aimed at dividing workers.

This line was reflected in some of the main demands of the rally, including for “Treaty and treaties for our mob; Land back and land rights, stop selling land promised to us ... Reparations.”

Robbie Thorpe, who spoke in Melbourne and is an uncle of Lidia Thorpe, bemoaned that “by the time colonialism got here [to Australia, unlike in the Americas], they didn’t bother with treaties.”

Ky-ya Nicholson-Ward, an Aboriginal artist, addressed the rally noting the high rate of incarceration and death of indigenous peoples in Australia’s penal system. “There have been 558 Aboriginal deaths in custody since the Royal Commission,” which

handed down its final report in 1991.

Ward, too, presented a treaty as the way forward, lamenting the fact that “Australia is the only Commonwealth country without a treaty with its first peoples.”

Such a treaty would be an anti-democratic deal between representatives of the indigenous elite and the capitalist state responsible for the dispossession and continuing oppression of most Aboriginal people. It would leave intact the profit system, the banks, the corporations and all the repressive institutions of the state. In those countries where treaties were enacted, inequality has soared within indigenous communities and no social issues have been resolved.

Unfettered land rights would similarly place direct and immediate control over lands in the hands of the Aboriginal leadership, enabling them to strike lucrative deals with mining companies and other corporations. Those land rights that have been granted have not improved the plight of the vast bulk of Aboriginal people, instead enriching a minority.

In August 2023, Thorpe highlighted in a press conference the grasping aspirations of the layer for which she speaks. She declared that if “reparations” were paid in full to the Aboriginal population, the “country would go broke.”

The rally advanced other demands, including: “End Aboriginal deaths in custody; Climate justice; End the theft of black children and return all black children to their families and kin; Abolish police and prisons; For the Australian government to stop arming Israel.”

The perspective offered by the speakers at Friday’s rallies was utterly bankrupt. It consisted of promoting the illusion that governments could be pressured into ending the attacks on indigenous Australians through protest and lobbying.

A similar position was put forward in relation to the Australian government’s support for the genocide. President of the Australia Palestine Advocacy Network lobby group, Nasser Mashni, addressed the rally and stated “No coloniser has ever looked at the people they’ve colonised as human beings. ... They look at us as someone or something to take advantage from, to kill, to steal, to murder, and to rape.”

His only call to action was to increase pressure on the government and political establishment.

The Socialist Equality Party alone raised the fundamental class questions and advanced an alternative socialist and internationalist perspective in discussions with attendees. The SEP explained that the social crisis afflicting indigenous people was a component of the onslaught against the social rights of the entire working class. It could only be fought by uniting all workers, regardless of their background, in a movement for their common class interests against capitalism and all its representatives.

Similarly, they pointed out that the genocide in Gaza was a crime of capitalism and a warning of what it has in store for workers, not only in the Middle East but internationally. It underscored the end of any “red lines” for the major powers, as they oversee an eruption of imperialist militarism amid the deepest crisis of the whole capitalist nation-state system since the 1930s. The alternatives were socialism or barbarism, threatening the very existence of humanity.

SEP campaigners spoke with attendees at the rallies.

In Melbourne, **Cassia** told an SEP member that the January 26 holiday is “not celebrating anything other than the genocide of the Aboriginal people and I think that’s incredibly embarrassing.”

“And I also think Palestine ties into that 100 percent, because the indigenous Palestinians are being colonised by the Israeli people. I think they are one and the same in a lot of ways and that’s why I’m here today,” she added.

Cassia added: “As long as the system is set up to support profit over people, we will always have governments that support genocide because it’s profitable.”

Bridgid, an artist, drew the link between the plight of Aboriginal people and Gaza.

“It’s a big colonial power that comes in, takes over, like in Australia. It has a mass genocide and puts down the Indigenous people, leaves a few and cuts down the environment. It plays out the same way all over the world. With Gaza it seems much the same.”

She denounced the Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese’s support for the Gaza genocide.

“I just don’t understand why they can be so bad. Obviously, they’ve got their own agenda that’s pro-Israel, which is pro-imperialist, pro-capitalist.”

Bridgid added: “In a way, I didn’t quite believe where they were coming from with the [Voice] referendum. I didn’t really believe that they were doing it for the right reasons.”

Jacob, a journalist, said “there are definitely parallels between the Palestinians in Gaza and the Aboriginal people of Australia.”

Jacob denounced the sacking of Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) journalist Antoinette Lattouf for expressing pro-Palestinian views.

“That was not good at all. It’s really good to see that ABC employees and her colleagues are coming out and being very vocal in support of her. We need to be vocal about our beliefs and also support people for what they believe in and they shouldn’t be discriminated against for that.”



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