

Australia: Labor government targets Aboriginal youth with draconian curfew in Alice Springs

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The Northern Territory (NT) Labor government this week introduced a draconian youth curfew in Alice Springs, banishing anyone under the age of 18 from the town centre after dark for at least the next two weeks.

Eva Lawler, NT chief minister, declared an “emergency situation” at a press conference Wednesday, announcing the curfew and the deployment of around 60 additional police officers to the Central Australian town with a population of less than 30,000.

The announcement was ostensibly prompted by an attack on an Alice Springs pub on Tuesday, although it occurred in broad daylight and involved people as old as 50. The NT government described this as the “final straw.”

This single incident, involving a few dozen people, is being used by the Labor government as a pretext to implement racially targeted martial-law policies, in line with the demands of the Murdoch press and the far right.

NT Police Commissioner Michael Murphy claimed “the main objective” of the curfew was to “suppress” behaviour in line with unspecified “unlawful conduct” that had taken place in the town centre over the past month, “and make sure that sort of offending does not occur.”

Murphy insisted that there would be no reduction in the “highly visible police” presence in Alice Springs during the day.

Lawler claimed that children found in the CBD after dark would not be arrested, unless they refused to cooperate with police efforts to remove them to a “safe place.”

This has nothing whatsoever to do with the “safety” of children. NT Police and the territory criminal justice system in general have a notorious record of brutality towards Indigenous youth.

Instead it is about blaming and punishing vulnerable and oppressed young people for the government-imposed social crisis in Alice Springs and throughout the NT, of which they are among the worst-affected victims.

While Lawler tried to play down the punitive character of the curfew, NT authorities have admitted that young people could be charged under the Emergency Management Act if they refuse to leave the town centre.

The reality is that for many youth in Alice Springs, no such “safe place” exists.

Almost six percent of young people in the town were recorded as

homeless in the 2021 Census, although this is likely a substantial undercount. Across the territory, homelessness affects 16.5 percent of people under 18.

Police will also be empowered to remove young people to “supported bail accommodation” facilities, which function essentially as minimum-security detention centres.

The harsh law-and-order measures, clearly targeted at the town’s oppressed indigenous youth population, were met with general bipartisan approval in the federal and territory parliament. The only critical comments levelled against the move have been to argue that they don’t go far enough.

Federal Labor Member for Lingiari Marion Scrymgeour suggested that the curfew could potentially be extended both in duration and geographical scope.

Scrymgeour said on ABC Radio National yesterday: “If it looks like things are settling down and it’s not infiltrating out in the suburbs under stealth and out of the eye of the police do we broaden this and does it go longer than [two] weeks? I think with the extra capacity into Alice Springs there’s no reason why that shouldn’t continue.”

“As a federal member, I’m going to try and call on CLP [Country Liberal Party] members and Labor for us all to try to work together because it’s not just Alice it’s right throughout the Northern Territory. We’re seeing this issue in Katherine, Tennant [Creek], Darwin is having this unrest.”

In other words, an Indigenous member of the federal Labor government is calling for young people to be banished from the streets after dusk indefinitely and throughout the NT.

Federal Indigenous Australians Minister Linda Burney welcomed the curfew announcement, declaring on Wednesday, “I hope this is a circuit breaker that will improve community safety.”

Burney endorsed the actions of the NT government, saying it was taking the situation “very seriously.”

Burney played the lead role in advocating a “Yes” vote in last year’s failed Voice referendum. The fact that she is now completely on board with the institution of police-state measures targeting Indigenous youth is a revealing demonstration of the fact that the Voice had nothing to do with improving the lives of the majority of Aboriginal people, who are among the most oppressed layers of the Australian working class.

Instead, the Labor-backed Voice was about furthering the

privilege and power of a tiny layer of upper middle-class Aboriginal academics and business people, while covering over ongoing and deepening attacks on the conditions of the broader Indigenous population and the working class as a whole.

Also revealing is the fact that Burney's position on the Alice Springs curfew differs only in degree from that expressed by the most right-wing opponents of the Voice.

Jacinta Price, shadow minister for Indigenous Australians in the federal Liberal-National opposition, and a prominent "No" campaigner, is now demanding a federal police-military intervention in Alice Springs, "whether it's a riot squad or the presence of ADF [Australian Defence Force personnel] on our streets for some time."

Alice Springs Mayor Matt Paterson concurred, calling for the federal government to take over control of the NT.

Lawler had previously refuted the call for the deployment of federal police on the most reactionary racist grounds, saying, "they probably don't have the skill set to be managing violent Aboriginal people."

She continued: "We've got absolutely outstanding police in the Northern Territory... they understand what needs to be done."

The disturbing reality of this "understanding" was made explicit in the publication of text messages written by Zachary Rolfe, the police officer who fatally shot Aboriginal youth Kumanjayi Walker in 2019 and was subsequently found not guilty.

Rolfe wrote: "Alice Springs sucks ha ha. The good thing is it's like the Wild West and f*** all the rules in the job really... but it is a shit hole."

This "understanding" has not only been endorsed, but expanded, by Labor governments at state and territory level over the recent period.

Early last year, the Albanese government announced \$14.2 million in funding for additional police in Alice Springs, as well as \$2 million for CCTV cameras and lighting. At the same time, a paltry \$2 million was earmarked for services to aid victims of domestic violence—a significant contributor to the high rate of youth homelessness.

The Alice Springs curfew is only the latest example in a long history of governments imposing authoritarian and discriminatory "law and order" measures in an attempt to protect business interests from the symptoms of a massive social crisis.

Overall median weekly household income in Alice Springs at the time of the 2021 Census was \$2,142 (higher than national average of \$1,746). But the situation is very different among the 20.6 percent of the population that is Indigenous. The median weekly income of households with at least one Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander member was just \$1,355, less than two-thirds of the overall average.

Total unemployment in Alice Springs is relatively low—3.5 percent at the time of the 2021 Census, when the national rate was 5.1 percent. But at the same time, 14.4 percent of Indigenous adults in Alice Springs were unemployed. The rate of youth unemployment across the NT is 9.9 percent, and 13.3 percent in the "NT Outback" region, which includes Alice Springs. These official figures, which only include those who have actively looked for work in the preceding week, massively understate the

scale of joblessness.

The indigenous population of Alice Springs and the NT more broadly, especially the youth, are already subjected to aggressive over-policing and high incarceration rates. With 749 police officers per 100,000 residents, the Territory has almost three times as many police per capita as the country as a whole.

According to a report published yesterday by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), on an average day in the Territory, 1.75 percent of Indigenous children aged 10-17 are in youth detention or under "community-based supervision." This is 44 times the rate at which non-indigenous children are incarcerated.

While there was a slight downturn in mandatory "supervision" and detention of Territory children in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a sharp increase over the past two years, with the 2022-23 rate almost 50 percent higher than that recorded in 2018-19.

These dire conditions were in large part created by the 2007-2012 NT intervention, launched by the Howard Coalition government, but supported and continued by the Labor governments of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard. Military personnel were deployed to the NT to enforce discriminatory measures, including alcohol bans and welfare quarantining.

The curfew now introduced in Alice Springs by NT Labor, with the enthusiastic support of the federal government, is entirely in line with this history.

Labor's attitude to the most oppressed sections of the working class is also sharply expressed in its attempt this week to ram through harsh deportation laws, building upon previous legislative attacks on immigrant and refugee rights. This is of a piece with Labor's full-throated support for the Israeli regime as it murders tens of thousands of Palestinians in Gaza, many of them children, and seeks to starve the rest.

These actions are a warning of what Labor, as a pro-business party of the ruling elite, has in store for the working class as a whole.



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