

Australia: Black People's Union doubles down on censorship of socialists

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In a barrage of social media posts, prominent members of the Black People's Union (BPU) have defended its anti-democratic censorship of Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaigners at a rally in Melbourne on June 6 over the police killing of 24-year-old Indigenous man Kumanjaya White.

Witnesses described how White was handcuffed and lying face down outside a shopping centre. An officer forced his knee into the back of White's head, recalling the killing of George Floyd that provoked widespread protests across the US.

White's killing set off a series of rallies and vigils, raising the need for an independent inquiry, which the NT government has rejected. At the Melbourne rally, many present were interested in and took the SEP leaflet, which called for the unity of Aboriginal and non-Indigenous workers against the growing attacks on living conditions and democratic rights by Labor and Liberal governments.

The leaflet also highlighted the abject failure of the 1987–1991 Black Deaths in Custody Royal Commission and its recommendations. Aboriginal deaths in custody have increased yearly since it was called by the Hawke Labor government.

The rally organisers were deeply hostile to rally participants reading this analysis. SEP members were intimidated, denounced as “colonisers” and “white supremacists,” and had leaflets torn from their hands. When threats failed, rally organisers called the police to remove them.

A comment published on the *World Socialist Web Site* on June 16 condemned this blatant political censorship, which had not taken place at a similar rally the following day in Sydney. It explained that the BPU's anti-democratic actions stemmed from its black nationalist politics and hostility to the SEP's class analysis of the oppression of Aboriginal workers as the most oppressed section of the working class as a whole. It particularly opposed the calls for a united fight for a socialist perspective.

The WSWs article explained:

The BPU's attacks stem from the racist foundation of its politics. It treats all non-Indigenous people, including working-class youth and socialists, as part of a homogenous “White settler” population. Within this

reactionary framework, the vast majority of the Australian population is deemed inherently complicit in and responsible for colonial oppression and the ongoing horrific conditions facing the majority of Aboriginal people.

“The BPU is particularly hostile to the SEP which explains that capitalism was responsible for the colonisation of Australia and the ongoing oppression of the Indigenous people. The profit system based on the private ownership of land was incompatible with tribal society that in a loose sense acted as the communal custodian of the land and its resources.

The response to the article from the BPU—Keiran Stewart-Assheton, former BPU president, and member Jesse—has been a vitriolic attack, which only confirms the racist basis of its decision to censor the SEP and force its campaigners to leave the June 6 rally.

They claimed the right of the rally organisers and Senator Lidia Thorpe to ban the distribution of leaflets which the SEP had “disrespected.” Jesse demanded an apology and the retraction of the June 16 WSWs article.

The attitude of Stewart-Assheton epitomises the racist identity politics on which the BPU is based. He declared the SEP's assertion of its right to distribute a leaflet with an alternative perspective to that presented by the platform and rally organisers was “paternalistic racism.” In other words, the BPU claims proprietary rights over all Indigenous people, based on skin colour and ethnicity and no-one else has any right to address “our issues” unless they bow to the demands of these self-appointed leaders.

Neither the BPU nor Thorpe has the right to suppress political discussion. The fact that the BPU does not distance itself from the racist slanders hurled at SEP campaigners or the decision to involve the police in forcing them to leave is a warning of the methods it will use against anyone with whom it disagrees—Indigenous or non-Indigenous.

In reality, the accusations of “disrespect” are simply to divert from the fact that the BPU representatives are fundamentally hostile to the SEP's politics and were stung by its analysis of

black nationalism as representing the interests of a grasping upper middle-class layer of the Aboriginal community.

Unable to address the issues and arguments raised in the June 16 comment, Jesse objected that the BPU did not act in “the interests of the First Nations bourgeoisie” as was “easily disproven by a cursory glance at their communications and publications.”

An examination of the BPU website demonstrates the opposite. The BPU was established in 2022 amid the Labor government’s campaign for a “yes” vote for the establishment of the Voice—an Indigenous advisory body to parliament to be embedded in the Australian constitution.

While significant layers of the Aboriginal elite backed Labor’s campaign as a means of boosting their privileges, Thorpe, with more “radical” black nationalists including the BPU in train, called for a “progressive no” vote.

While pointing out that the Voice would do nothing to ameliorate the disastrous social conditions facing many Aboriginal people, Thorpe was demanding a treaty with the very same political establishment that the Voice was seeking to advise, to ensure greater control over land, resources and money, which likewise would benefit the Aboriginal elite.

In other words, the “progressive no” campaign reflected a tactical difference within the Indigenous upper middle class. It was the diametric opposite of the socialist perspective advanced by the SEP in the referendum, which rejected the Voice and the official “no” campaigns, and called for an “active boycott” of the entire referendum by the working class—Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

The BPU declares itself to be a revolutionary organisation. Its website is replete with radical declarations that it is anti-capitalist, anti-colonial and anti-imperialist and its solidarity with oppressed indigenous peoples in the Pacific and internationally, including the Palestinians. It even declares the need for the international working class to overturn capitalism.

But, for all this radical-sounding demagoguery, the BPU does not declare what its “revolution” is for, or what it intends to replace capitalism with. The word “socialism” does not appear on its website. As for its references to the working class, its claim that “as many as 3 in every 4 non-Indigenous people” in Australia are racist amounts to a slander against workers. It underscores the objective political role of black nationalism, along with every other form of nationalism and racism, as a means to divide the working class.

The BPU’s radical rhetoric is simply camouflage for its utterly reformist program. As the BPU explains, its growth will put pressure on the capitalist system in Australia: “With the push for change growing from strength to strength, the achievement of significant reform and relief from the scourges currently afflicting their communities will come.”

Its demands include lists of proposals that governments should adopt, but it is devoid of any explanation as to why such pressure has only improved the lot of a thin layer of well-off

Indigenous businesspeople, academics, media personalities, and public servants. This stands in stark contrast to the worsening conditions facing both Indigenous workers and youth, who, as one of the most oppressed layers of the working class, have been forced to bear the brunt of the deepening crisis of capitalism by governments—Labor and Coalition.

The political orientation of the BPU was on display at the June 6 rally. While determined to prevent those present from discussing the SEP’s revolutionary socialist alternative, the BPU provided a platform for Thorpe, a former Greens member, to appeal to the Albanese Labor government for an “independent” inquiry into Kumanjayi White’s death, which would inevitably be another in the long line of cover-ups of police killings.

That was in line with Thorpe’s repeated calls for governments to implement the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal deaths in custody. The Royal Commission, established by the Hawke-Keating Labor government in 1987, was never intended to deliver justice. It was a whitewash designed to defuse widespread public concern and anger. At the same time, its recommendations opened lucrative new avenues for the Aboriginal elite, which is why Thorpe and others call for their full implementation.

For all its “revolutionary” and “anti-capitalist” rhetoric, the BPU has no criticism of Thorpe, who accepts entirely the framework of capitalism and promotes illusions in Labor. The BPU provided Thorpe with a platform, while it directed its racist vitriol against the Socialist Equality Party.

The BPU’s hostility to the SEP is rooted in its hostility to the working class. The suppression of the rights of a socialist organisation to fight for its perspective at the rally was aimed as much at those in attendance as it was at the SEP. Having read the SEP leaflet, an important layer of rally participants upheld the SEP’s right to distribute its analysis, threatening the apparent dominance of the BPU over the rally participants.

The SEP fights to unite Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal workers in a common struggle against the capitalist system, the same system behind both racial oppression and social inequality. The BPU’s attempt to silence socialists was not an accident but an expression of its role, to suppress class politics in defence of an aspiring Indigenous elite.



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