

On-the-spot report from central Australia

# Conditions of Aboriginal people in Alice Springs and the town camps

By a WSWs reporting team  
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For most Australian residents, the Northern Territory (NT) town of Alice Springs—population 26,000 and located in the centre of the continent—is little more than a series of striking picture postcards of spectacular rocky desert scenery, native animals and brilliantly coloured contemporary Aboriginal paintings.

Few have any conception of the harsh conditions endured daily by the central Australian city's Aboriginal population, or the real social and political impact of the federal government's 10-month old NT intervention, now being expanded under Rudd Labor. The brutally anti-democratic character of the intervention is being systematically suppressed, as is its negative effect on the already scandalous levels of poverty confronting Aboriginal people.

This is hardly a surprise. Alice Springs is located thousands of kilometres from the east-coast cities of Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane. Australian or foreign tourists rarely get to see the more than twenty town camps surrounding Alice Springs. Mainstream media reportage of the ongoing crisis facing the camps' residents is generally lurid, sensationalised and cynically designed to blame the Aboriginal population itself.

According to the corporate press, the NT intervention, initiated by the Howard government in June last year, was, and continues to be, motivated by concern over the plight of Aboriginal children. This claim is bogus, as any discussion on the streets of Alice Springs, or a short visit to one of the town camps, quickly demonstrates.

Everyday brings news of further attacks. Last Tuesday, for example, four more communities—Galiwinku, Atitjere, Engawala and Nguui—and another 1,190 Aborigines had their welfare quarantined, bringing the total to 7,700 and 29 communities in the Northern Territory. Income management and the destruction of the limited work opportunities provided by CDEP (Community Development and Employment Programs) is shattering remote communities, forcing growing numbers of Aboriginal residents into NT towns and cities. More than 8,000 CDEP jobs have been axed since the intervention began.

Police surveillance and harassment of Aboriginal people is also on the rise. In Alice Springs police regularly carry out sweeps of the Todd and Charles dry riverbeds, where numbers of indigenous people—either homeless or just visiting the town for local football matches—attempt to find a place to camp for the night. Last Thursday night more than 120 Aborigines were detained by police and last year council rangers reported that they were doing “five river runs a week” to move on “illegal campers”. According to the *Alice Springs News*, the rangers were “talking to” between 80 to 100 people in a two to three hour period.

At the same time local newspapers, the *Alice Spring News* and the *Centralian Advocate*, serve up an ongoing diet of “law and order” rhetoric with regular articles about a so-called crime wave afflicting the

town and blaming the Aboriginal ~~Adv~~population. The issue had no less than six articles, including a front-page splash, with headlines reading: “I was mugged by teeny gang,” “Lawlessness running riot”, “Lock it or lose it say police”, “Fury at vandals mayhem”, “Siege café owner fears for family” and “Shops called to turn away kids”. This material and the intervention itself have emboldened more right-wing elements who are demanding ever harsher government measures against the indigenous population.

During the last fortnight, the focus has been on Aboriginal education.

On March 26, millionaire Aboriginal leader Galaway Yunupingu from the Northern Land Council called for Aboriginal children to be taken from remote areas in the Northern Territory and placed in government built school dormitories. In a chilling echo of the rationale advanced by successive Australian governments to justify the Stolen Generations, he claimed that this would ensure that children were fed, clothed, bathed and attended school. “The missionary days were good. The missionaries looked after the kids much better than the government does today,” he said.

Yunupingu was supported a few days later by Tracker Tilmouth, a well-known member of the Stolen Generation. “We've got to move away from these socialist policies that through your poverty you remain pure,” he told the *Australian*.

Tilmouth, a former director of the Northern Land Council, is now an adviser to the NT mining company Compass Resources. He is currently involved in Centafarm, a Central Australia Horticulture project, which is planning to build an agricultural boarding school at Ali Curung, about 370 kilometres from Alice Springs.

Likewise, Aboriginal affairs minister Jenny Macklin immediately endorsed Yunupingu's proposal and told the media that Labor would provide funding for three Northern Territory boarding colleges.

On April 5, the *Australian* newspaper reported that academic Helen Hughes was soon to release a paper claiming that Aboriginal students were being subjected to “make-believe learning” methods and calling for cuts to Aboriginal Learning Centres.

The academic is a leading figure in the right-wing Centre for Independent Studies and a former World Bank employee. She has played a crucial role in providing the theoretical justification for the NT intervention, and the Labor government will no doubt seriously consider her proposals.

## Income management and store cards

Claims by the government and media that “income management” has assisted Aborigines to buy food, rather than alcohol, turns reality on its head. Prior to the NT intervention, Aboriginal people were able to have their welfare payments quarantined on a voluntary basis by Aboriginal

community and welfare organisations—i.e., a set portion was put aside and provided in the form of food and other coupons.

Under the intervention this is no longer an option, and half of all welfare payments are now quarantined. In other words, the government has transformed a previously helpful financial measure into its opposite. All purchases must now be made through government designated stores, such as K-Mart, Woolworths, Coles, via plastic store cards. Roger Colbert, one of the leading figures on the intervention task force, is a former Woolworths CEO. The cards have no pin numbers and can be easily stolen or lost and Aborigines in remote communities have to travel long distances, sometimes several hundred miles, to use their store cards.

People have told us that calls are being made for separate lines to be set up in the supermarkets for Aborigines using store cards. Apparently, in schools with breakfast programs, children from quarantined families or communities are already having to stand in separate lines to receive their food.

Many local small retailers have been drastically affected by the new system and have told the local media they are facing closure. Grocery outlets as well as second-hand clothing and furniture stores, which were patronised by mainly indigenous clients, have also been hard hit.

Under intervention rules, small stores must operate a manual system, and they have to register before welfare recipients can use their quarantined payments there. These retailers must keep a separate bank account to keep track of payments for Centrelink, as well as identify customers, requiring hours of additional labour. So far, small business have lodged more than 220 complaints about the government measures with NT's ombudsman.

"The intervention is the finish," said Tony Phillips, owner of the Gap Road Smart Store in Alice Springs, which is facing total closure. "All of our shopping business has gone to Coles and Woolworths," he told the local media on April 2.

### Overcrowding

The level of poverty in the town camps we have visited is heartbreaking. One cannot but be struck by the sheer magnitude of the social problems facing Aboriginal people—the product of decades of oppression and deliberate government neglect. It is difficult to imagine how children even make it to school or why there are not more cases of child abuse and social dysfunction than there already are.

Town camps on the outskirts of Alice Springs are becoming chronically over-crowded as increasing numbers are forced out of remote communities. According to a 2006 report, Abbots' camp had seven residents per house while at Warlpiri camp, there were only seven houses for 80 people or 11.4 per house. Post intervention figures have not been produced, but overcrowding is now far worse.

Simon Fisher from the remote Aboriginal community of Yuendumu, about 270 kilometres from Alice Spring, told the WSWS that he opposed the Northern Territory intervention. Fisher was visiting Alice Springs last weekend because his son was playing in a local football competition.

"The intervention is like another sort of genocide with Australian politics pushing us back to the 1950s and 60s," he said. "People have told me that it is now being used in Northern Queensland and the Kimberlys and some are saying that it will happen to black and white people. This is wrong and isn't going to help people at all. We need jobs with award wages but instead of that the government seems to have a psycho mentality.

"There was no consultation and lots of people didn't understand what it was all about. I knew, but hardly any body else at Yuendumu knew what was going on. We've had a business manager brought in and a demountable was set up for him, but I don't know what he does. The people in Yuendumu don't get on with him.

"I don't follow politics but there doesn't seem to be any difference

with the parties. My philosophy is that all people should be treated fair and equal, not as second class citizens."



Desmond Booth

Desmond Booth, a 41-year-old artist and musician from the Amoongunu community 13 kilometres south of Alice Springs, denounced welfare quarantining. "I have the right as an Australian to manage my own money," he said.

"I was born in 1967, the year that Aborigines were given the right to vote and become citizens. Now it's like we're going back to the time of the Gurundji people when they were working for Lord Vestey and paid in sugar, flour and tea.

"The government is always pointing the finger at indigenous people—like in the old days when they used to go about shooting Aborigines. Now they are killing us with the law." Booth rejected calls by government MPs and Alice Spring local councillors for more police: "We don't need more police—we need to trust each other."

"Back in the days of our ancestors—we would go hunting in the bush—but now if you go hunting there are trespassing signs everywhere, the signs of the pastoralists. What happens is you end in court for going onto our own land, land passed on to me by my ancestors."

### The health crisis

Large and expensive government signs proclaiming alcohol and pornography bans have been placed outside the town camps and sometimes directly next to people's homes. These do nothing to stop alcoholism but are another humiliation, implying that Aborigines living in town camps and remote communities are serial violators of the repressive new laws. Contrary to media and government claims, alcohol and substance abuse has been on the rise since the intervention.

According to statistics cited in one NT newspaper, the number of violent abuse cases is higher than pre-intervention levels. The intervention alcohol bans have also produced a shift to cruder forms of alcohol and substance abuse. Listerine and other mouthwashes are being used as an alcohol substitute. Aborigines are strictly limited on the amount of alcohol they can buy in local liquor stores, but Centrelink-issued store cards allow them to buy mouthwashes at K-Mart, Coles and Woolworths.

Tristan Ray, a local youth worker, told the WSWS that petrol sniffing had also increased since the intervention. There had been an initial decline in the destructive practice in remote communities, he said, when non-sniffable Opal fuel was first introduced two years ago. Complementary support measures, including an expansion of youth activities that were to accompany the new fuel roll out, however, had not eventuated and the number of petrol sniffers was again increasing. Some petrol stations in Alice Springs are still selling ordinary petrol.

The health statistics are appalling. According to Oxfam, non-indigenous women in Australia live to an average age of 82. By contrast, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women can only expect to live to 64.8 years and Aboriginal men to 59.4 years. Medical agency Alzheimer Australia reported last week that 12.4 percent of Aboriginal people aged over 45 in NT have dementia, compared to 2.6 percent in the general Australian

population of the same age. A recent study reported that dementia in NT Aboriginal communities had reached epidemic proportions, with 800 reported cases and another 200 expected this year.

In late March the federal Labor government announced it would introduce measures to overcome the health and life expectancy gap between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians by 2030. Last week Prime Minister Rudd said he would issue an annual report on the issue. But Labor's first funding proposals were a woefully inadequate \$A33.5 million (\$US30.8, €19.7).

The money, which will be used to train additional indigenous health workers and to cut high rates of smoking, is an insult. It is less than one tenth of the approximately \$460 million required in annual funding to even begin to overcome the escalating health crisis within the NT's indigenous population.

Alice Springs doctor, Hilary Tyler, told WSWs that the intervention would not overcome the chronic health problems facing Aborigines.

"Health problems in the remote communities in Central Australia have been known for years, she said. "The World Health Organisation says that if chronic glue ear problems are more than 4 percent then it constitutes a massive public health emergency. In some remote communities the problem is as high as 50 percent. What we need here is long-term, ongoing sustainable funding for health professionals and infrastructure to deal with the crisis. We never needed the intervention to tell us the health problems we have known for decades.

"The intervention has fritted away so much money—for air flights in and out for all sorts of things. There has been no consultation with the health professionals here—they never asked us what we needed," Tyler said. "Health in Central Australia overall is incredibly under-resourced. We need so much infrastructure, staffing—we need huge resources—but it is so hard to fight for and to have extra staff members approved. The alcohol/drug services are also terribly underfunded. Surely we need more resources for these problems?"

Anissa Thompson, a child health nurse, does some work in the town camps, referring children and families who are at risk. She told WSWs:

"We work closely with communities, building rapport and a sense of trust with families over a whole period. Many children who have been referred to us by the intervention have been misdiagnosed because they have no ongoing record. These are children we have treated previously. There is so much duplication.

"The intervention medical team is rotating staff every 3 weeks—one week for orientation and then a couple of weeks on the ground and then the team are finished and a new team come in. There is no continuity of care," she said.

"In the early stages of the medical checks, parents were fearful so they went out bush to lay low. There was not enough information. In fact, Howard even verbalised in his statements that children would be taken away as a last resort and that's what the families remembered. This response was totally understandable considering our history of the Stolen Generation."

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