

The Aboriginal “intervention” in Australia: four years on

By Susan Allan
30 May 2011

As the fourth anniversary of the Northern Territory (NT) intervention approaches, calls are being made for a new round of regressive measures against Aboriginal people, including a “second intervention”. Like the Coalition government’s intervention in June 2007, which was preceded by a lurid media campaign about child sexual abuse, similar coverage has come to the fore centred on crime and violence in Alice Springs in central Australia.

Nominally the intervention, which involved the use of police and military, was directed at helping children and alleviating social disaster in Aboriginal communities. The expressions of humanitarian concern were, however, a smokescreen for a socially retrograde agenda.

Blaming Aboriginal people for their terrible conditions, then prime minister John Howard used their plight to enact a long prepared plan to close “economically unviable” communities, open up Aboriginal land for exploitation and private profit, and develop a cheap labour force by undermining welfare benefits. Aborigines, the most oppressed section of the working class, were used as a test case for punitive measures against welfare recipients nationally.

The Northern Territory intervention involved a number of unprecedented steps. The government, fully supported by the Labor opposition, rushed a series of draconian measures through the federal parliament that required the suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act and the Land Rights Act 1976. These included: compulsory quarantining of 50 percent of welfare payments to be spent on food and clothing, the banning of alcohol and pornography, increased policing and the imposition of business administrators in Aboriginal communities.

To enforce the new regime, Major-General Dave Chalmers was appointed as head of the taskforce of police and military units sent into the prescribed Aboriginal communities. The operation was conceived in military terms where resources were to be “deployed”, and towns “stabilised” and “secured”—all part of a “three-phase operation” to rescue the children.

When the Labor Party took office in November 2007, the intervention was expanded. By the end of 2008, welfare quarantining had been forced on 15,000 Aborigines in 73

communities. By June 2010, the Labor government had extended it to all welfare recipients across the Territory. The new legislation allowed for welfare quarantining to be imposed nationally, including cutbacks to welfare payments if children did not attend school.

Meanwhile, the federal and NT Labor governments were preparing a further assault on Aboriginal people with the unveiling of the *Working Future* policy in May 2009. Under the guise of overcoming “indigenous disadvantage”, the plan involved the establishment of 20 economic hubs or growth towns. Virtually all the growth towns were situated on Aboriginal land. Traditional land owners were required to sign long term leases allowing open access to business as a precondition for government infrastructure aid.

At the same time, government funding for hundreds of remote homeland settlements was either frozen or axed. As a result, settlement residents would be forced over time to move to the growth centres to obtain health and education services. Aborigines, professionals and academics warned that forcing people into growth towns would only cause further dislocation and compound the social crisis.

In the two years since the plan was announced, the growth centres have been provided with very little funding and virtually no economic development has taken place. For instance, in the most recent NT budget, just \$3 million has been allocated for bus services and upgrading airstrips to link “growth towns” separated by thousands of kilometres.

In February this year, the Labor government was forced to acknowledge in its intervention report that virtually no progress had been made in “closing the gap” between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians on a range of social indicators. Prime Minister Julia Gillard declared that it would be “extremely challenging” to attain parity by 2031.

After noting improvement in only two of six benchmarks, Gillard turned on Aborigines—the victims of two centuries of government repression, abuse and neglect—demanding that they work harder and take more personal responsibility to improve living conditions. “Indigenous people know that when the child starts attending school, when the drinker stops abusing alcohol, when the adult takes the job that is there, then change begins,” she told parliament. “And indigenous people know these

decisions are not made by governments. They are made by people.”

Gillard’s comments set the stage for a new media campaign, particularly in the Murdoch-owned *Australian* and *NT News*, to pave the way for another round of punitive measures against Aborigines.

In the lead up to the 2007 intervention, then Indigenous Affairs minister Mal Brough made unsubstantiated claims, later proven to be false, that paedophile rings were running rampant in Aboriginal communities. The theme now is that crime and anti-social behaviour are out-of-control in Alice Springs, the main town in Central Australia, where a significant Aboriginal population lives in squalid camps on the outskirts.

Shortly after Gillard’s speech, Nicholas Rothwell wrote a lengthy article for the *Weekend Australian* entitled “Destroyed in Alice”. A specialist in breathless colour pieces, Rothwell painted a picture of a town engulfed by alcohol- and drug-fuelled violence due to “bad, reactive politics, a lack of new ideas, a need for drastic measures and a refusal even to debate the reforms that might have a chance.”

Rothwell did not spell out what “drastic measures” should be implemented but as a supporter of the first intervention it is safe to assume that he backs more of the same. His partner, Alison Anderson, a former NT minister, added more fuel to the fire with claims, picked up by the media, of “an indigenous child sex trade” and “child prostitution”—a revamped version of Brough’s allegations.

Absent from Rothwell’s article was any serious examination of the social disaster confronting Aborigines in Alice Springs, or the failure of successive governments to provide the resources necessary to address it.

The official unemployment rate among Aborigines across Australian is over 20 percent, or almost four times higher than for the rest of the population. Around 29 percent of young indigenous people are neither working nor attending school. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare reported an “alarming” housing crisis facing indigenous families with 20,000 extra dwellings urgently needed.

A growing number of indigenous people are moving from remote communities, where funding had been cut, into Alice Springs where they live either in the already overcrowded town camps or on the streets. Homelessness is growing in major towns across the Northern Territory. In the territory’s capital Darwin, at least 800 people are sleeping rough each night.

Over 500 people are homeless in Katherine, a town with a population of just 5,600. Recent figures from the NT’s Sunrise Health Services, revealed that almost 8 percent of residents in Katherine East had negative or nil income and 57.9 percent received between \$1.00 and \$249.00 per week.

The response to this worsening disaster is not to provide much needed housing, jobs and services, but to blame Aborigines for the inevitable social ills and demand tougher punitive measures.

The media attention has spurred on a right-wing lobby group “Action for Alice” to finance racially-divisive TV advertisements, that demand the NT government implement tougher law-and-order measures. The NT government responded with a three-week police operation last month that led to the arrest of 102 people and another 1,243 people being taken into protective custody in the town of barely 30,000.

In this context, federal opposition leader Tony Abbott made a much publicised visit to Alice Springs late last month to announce his plan for a “second intervention”. He called for an extra 100 police in Alice Springs, for the parents of “delinquents” to be fined and for school attendance enforced through a truancy authority tied to schools and the police. Abbott called for “a military man” to be put in charge and insisted that no additional funding would be required.

Abbott directly linked the “second intervention” in the Northern Territory to a national plan for welfare “reform”. Like the first intervention, the aim is to use Aboriginal people to trial regressive measures to be imposed on the working class as a whole. Abbott especially foreshadowed nation-wide welfare quarantining, a compulsory scheme of work-for-the-dole and the suspension of welfare payments for unemployed who refuse unskilled jobs or to take jobs in other areas.

The Gillard government is yet to call for a second intervention. Warren Mundine, Aboriginal leader and former Labor Party president, did, however, publicly endorse Abbott’s welfare proposals, only adding that they did not “go far enough”. If Labor has not come up with its own NT plan it is because it is already pressing ahead with “welfare reform” across the board, including the extension of welfare quarantining of up to a possible 70 percent of payments and more trials in working class suburbs throughout Australia.

As far as Labor is concerned, the first intervention has already served its purpose as a spearhead for draconian measures against welfare recipients. Any turn to a second intervention against Aborigines would inevitably mean a dramatic new escalation of the assault on the living conditions of the most impoverished layers of the working class throughout the country.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>