

Twenty years since the death of Australian Trotskyist and Aboriginal worker, Comrade Yabu Bilyana

By Linda Tenenbaum
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On April 5, 1999, Yabu Bilyana, the first indigenous Australian to join the International Committee of the Fourth International, died at the age of 54. This obituary was written by then Socialist Equality Party assistant national secretary, Linda Tenenbaum, and published by the WSW on April 7, 1999.

Yabu Bilyana, 1944–1999

Aboriginal socialist dies in Brisbane, Australia, aged 54

Yabu Bilyana, a member of the Socialist Equality Party of Australia, and the first Australian Aborigine to join the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), died on Monday, April 5 at a hospital in Brisbane, almost exactly two years after a severe stroke which left him permanently disabled. He was 54 years old.

While the exact cause of death has yet to be determined, Bilyana had become progressively weaker during the past several months. On Sunday, he was transferred from his nursing home to Logan hospital, where, due to extensive hemorrhaging, he rapidly lost blood pressure. The medical staff were unable to save him.

Throughout his adult life, Yabu Bilyana championed the rights of Australia's indigenous workers and youth. When he joined the Socialist Labour League (forerunner of the SEP) in 1990, he was a well-known Aboriginal activist and cultural leader. But, as he explained in a speech to Aboriginal students at Tranby College in Sydney in 1994, "when I met the Socialist Labour League, I understood for the first time in my life, that human emancipation can only be achieved through the class struggle—through the abolition of class society by the international working class."

From then until the stroke in May 1997 that tragically cut short his political life, he committed himself, body and soul, to the fight for socialism.

Born in Brisbane on December 2, 1944, Yabu Bilyana grew up with his sister and three brothers in the rural town

of Springsure, in the central highlands of Queensland. Conditions were harsh for Aboriginal families. Like many other children, Yabu's formal education finished early. By the age of nine, he was already assisting his father, a drover and sheep shearer on outback properties. At 14 he left home and began working in Brisbane and then Sydney. His first jobs were in storm-water and sewerage installation, then as a factory hand. Eventually he became a builder's labourer in the construction industry.

It was not long before Yabu's sense of outrage at the lack of safety conditions on the building sites saw him elected by his workmates to the position of union delegate. When one of his closest friends was killed in an industrial accident, the third on that site, Yabu led a strike that spread throughout Brisbane. For that, he was blackballed from the industry.

Many other jobs followed, including iron worker and truck driver. In 1976, after years of defending the rights and conditions of Aboriginal people, he was elected Queensland state president of the Aboriginal Legal Service. He soon became disenchanted, however, not only with the Legal Service, but with the political perspective of black nationalism.

He resigned his position and began to search for an alternative through which the concerns and aspirations of Aboriginal people could be genuinely addressed. In 1986, he decided to resume his education, entering the Mt Gravatt Teacher's College in Brisbane. The following year, aged 43, he enrolled as a student of social work at the University of Western Sydney.

Yabu never tired of explaining what it was that attracted him to Trotskyism. It was the recognition that Aborigines were part of the international working class, and that the solution to the terrible conditions they continued to face lay in unifying with their class brothers and sisters of all skin colours, races and nationalities in a common struggle against the profit system.

He began to understand this basic truth at the first party

meeting he attended, in May 1989. Addressed by David North, then national secretary of the Workers League in the United States—now the Socialist Equality Party (US)—the meeting had been called to defend the workers and students involved in the explosive confrontation that had erupted with the Chinese bureaucracy, soon to be drowned in blood in the Tiananmen Square massacre. Yabu explained later that he was profoundly moved by what he heard at the meeting. It revealed to him something of the complex history and experiences of the international working class, about which he had known virtually nothing.

Yabu's political break with black nationalism earned him many enemies among the milieu of radical Aboriginal activists, who perceived it as a threat to their increasingly privileged positions and their ties to the Labor and trade union apparatuses. Any perspective of independently mobilising Aborigines as part of the working class cut directly across their orientation and appeals to the capitalist state via its politicians, judges and commissioners.

Yabu never adapted himself to the pressures they exerted upon him. Once a member of the party, he immersed himself in the fight for a socialist perspective. He began reading extensively, intent on developing a Marxist understanding of Aboriginal history, society and religion. He became a postal worker, working first at the State Mail Centre in Alexandria, then at the Seven Hills Mail Centre in Sydney's western suburbs, and he campaigned tirelessly for the party among all sections of the working class.

In 1991, he attended, as an SLL delegate, the World Conference Against Imperialist War and Colonialism, organised by the ICFI in Berlin, in response to the US-led war against Iraq. His address to the conference was a passionate denunciation of the genocide carried out against Australian Aborigines and the continuing deaths of Aboriginal workers and youth in the country's police cells and prisons.

In the 1993 Federal elections, he stood as the SLL's candidate for Chifley, in Sydney's western suburbs.

In March 1994, Yabu served as one of six commissioners on the Workers Inquiry into the Death of Daniel Yock, organised by the Socialist Labour League ([SLL], now the SEP). Prior to the hearing, he played a crucial role in the extensive investigation, conducted by the inquiry, into the circumstances surrounding the death of this 18-year old Aboriginal youth in broad daylight, at the hands of Brisbane's police. He participated in interviewing Daniel's friends and other witnesses in the Brisbane suburb of West End, where the killing took place, as well as Daniel's family in the Aboriginal community of Cherbourg, some 300 kilometres north of Brisbane.

Following the inquiry and the publication of its findings,

Yabu spoke extensively to audiences of Aboriginal students and youth in schools, colleges and universities, drawing out its political significance for all young people.

In 1995, Yabu represented the party in the New South Wales state elections, in the seat of Heffron, in Sydney's south-eastern suburbs and in the following year, 1996, stood as the SLL's candidate for Kingsford-Smith in the Federal elections.

Yabu Bilyana brought to all his political work a tremendous reservoir of humanity, warmth and humour, born of years of first-hand experience with racism, poverty and exploitation. He had, like the majority of Aboriginal workers, more than his own share of personal crises. For many years he fought an on-going battle with alcoholism, a battle he eventually won, but not without leaving its scars, both emotional and physical. The circumstances of his childhood, coupled with the difficulties of his adult life, left Yabu suffering diabetes, chronic high blood pressure, heart disease and asthma, conditions that contributed to his stroke and eventual death. This is the reality behind the statistic that the life expectancy of Aboriginal males is some 20 years less than the rest of the male population.

In the final two years of his life, after the stroke, Yabu dealt with his terrible condition with extraordinary courage and dignity. Suffering permanent damage to those areas of the brain concerned with movement, balance and speech, he was nevertheless able to understand and appreciate everything that was going on around him. Visitors to his hospital or nursing home ward would be welcomed with a huge smile and a voracious appetite for news. He followed as closely as he could the party's political analysis, and looked forward to every visit, letter, message and tape from his comrades in Australia and around the world.

Yabu Bilyana adored his nine children and 11 grandchildren. He loved painting and the arts, as well as sports, especially rugby league football. He had a loud, bellowing laugh that infected anyone within earshot with instant mirth. Physically large he was nevertheless a kind and gentle man, fiercely loyal to his friends. But the great passion of his life was the struggle for equality, justice and freedom for all mankind.

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