

TUCAR NEWSLETTER

NSW TRADE UNION COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL RIGHTS
 First Floor, 300 Sussex Street, Sydney 2000. Phone 267 1761

ISSUE NO: 27

NOVEMBER 1989

The recent ACTU Congress, under the topic A Fairer Australia, adopted an important policy statement on Aboriginal affairs.

Pat Fowells, Aboriginal Education Officer of the Australian Teachers Union, presented the policy to Congress, and this is an edited version of her speech.

I am proud to become one of the first Aboriginal women to address Congress.

Although not always good, a relationship between the union movement and the Aboriginal people and our struggle has existed for a long time.

The ACTU, with considerable energy and vigor has ably represented Aboriginal people at the International Labour Organisation during the revision process of Convention 107, concerning indigenous and tribal peoples.

Land Rights

Land Rights is crucial to this reconciliation. There is a lot of unnecessary and unfounded fear of Land Rights on the part of non-Aboriginal people.

If you want to understand land rights from an Aboriginal point of view, you have to first understand some very basic differences between Aboriginal culture and European-Australian culture.

In many ways the two cultures are diametrically opposed. So much so that it has been virtually impossible to bridge the great gulf of misunderstanding that has lain between us for 200 years.

Mutual understanding between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people can only come about if European-Australian people actively seek a new basis for such understanding.

In the recent Noonkanbah dispute a heavy-handed, conservative government placed power and exploitation over many moral or spiritual ethics. The mining companies got a lot of bad press at that time. Their subsequent moves against land rights have been via very expensive and sophisticated publicity campaigns.

Aboriginal groups do not have access to similar resources.

In Western Australia the mining companies rolled back the Burke Government's commitment to land rights. Burke in turn, rolled the Federal Government.

Which proves that if you have got the money you can change the political agenda so much that even a government, whose very platform favors land rights is afraid to implement such a policy.

Let us remind ourselves of a few of the characteristics of European-Australian society.

The values of such a society are intrinsically bound to capitalism which in turn is founded upon the right to profit from labor and natural resources.

It encourages class division according to one's command of the factors of production. It is organized around a settled, structured urban life so that a mass of people can sell their labor to commerce and industry and at the same time form a ready and stable market for consumer products.

These characteristics are at the very base of European-Australian society.

On the other hand Aboriginal people did not labor for profit nor did they buy or sell labor. People used the natural environment to acquire adequate living standards.

Non Materialistic

Aboriginal society is non-materialistic, with the emphasis placed on spiritual or religious life. European-Australian society rewards excellence in the individual with material goods. Aboriginal society values collective, social responsibility.

The concept of private ownership was virtually unknown. Dependence upon the Land, the seas and the sky was total. Land was not our ancestors not ours to give, sell or even own. In a very real sense the land owns us. In Aboriginal society there are no rigid class structures, we do not have chiefs, kings, barons, lords or bosses. Authority was and is exerted by

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the old people by virtue of their knowledge of the land and the Dreaming and they see themselves as custodians not exploiters. An individual was sure of his/her role in society and was afforded maximum emotional and psychological security. Each generation thereafter is responsible for maintaining the social structure which has been passed on and which will in turn be handed on to our children.

Land rights, therefore, has two inseparable components: metaphysical or religious and economic.

The metaphysical element is at the very core of the Aboriginal way of receiving the world. The very land itself, the trees, rock, animal, fish, flowers - everything - is infused with the spirit of the creators.

The white miner who looks at a rock sees a dead, inanimate object which exists solely for his material benefit or otherwise it is useless. An Aboriginal sees a symbolic manifestation of a spirit and sees the spirit itself.

The capitalist system tends also to see people as objects - one of the factors of production. People sell their labor to the industrialist and then they buy his produce. To the Aboriginal person all life is sacred and its meaning and pur-

pose belongs ultimately to the mysteries of the Dreamtime.

Economic Factor

The second factor, I have termed economic. For Aboriginal people, the old life has gone forever. I do not mean the life of the spirit but rather the freedom to hunt fish and follow traditional food gathering paths, ceremonial paths, trading paths etc.

The early white settlers were very jealous of the Aboriginal freedom. When the blackman showed no interest in settling down to a 9 to 5 job in order to buy things he had no need of, the white bosses became frightened.

A free man who dismisses every value you hold dear as irrelevant is very dangerous. The fences went up and cruel war was declared. In many places traditional life was crushed so that the remnants of a proud, free people were forced to huddle around cattle stations, farms and small towns where the men were slaves and the women objects of sexual gratification.

Land rights can give contemporary Aborigines a degree of economic independence. However, it is my belief that too much emphasis has been placed on this particular aspect. While one white family may make a handsome profit from a station or farm, for 200 people there is not even a subsistence

living.

More importantly, land represents the ability to once more resume control over our own lives.

Survival

In conclusion, Aboriginal people are not in search of profit but the survival of our culture and, as we have seen, Aboriginal culture and individual profit are diametrically opposed.

To return to the land means to look after the land, to care for and cherish it, nurture it and make contact with the spirits who live there. On this foundation all else is based.

If you adopt this strategy you must also make a commitment to its implementation. Do not put your hand up and vote "yes" and then feel good because you have felt as though you have "dealt with" Aborigines and can then dismiss it.

Question what your union is doing or not doing. Talk to your Aboriginal members, some unions do have Aboriginal members. Negotiate with the National Coalition of Aboriginal Organisations. Do not merely go home and file it. We can learn from each other. Delegates I commend the policy to you. Aborigines could certainly do with a fairer Australia.

ACTU Action Plan

The ACTU, Labor Councils and unions:

- * will hold regular consultations with the National Coalition of Aboriginal Organisations, especially on 'social wage' claims for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders;
- * will run an Aboriginal awareness campaign among unionists; to lobby for funds for Aboriginal education institutions and to establish an Aboriginal Water Supply Unit aimed at adequate water supply to all communities before the year 2000;
- * lobby the federal government for National Land Rights legislation, and in the interim, state land rights laws;
- * encourage unions to bring basic social service needs of Aboriginal communities to the attention of all levels of government;
- * within 12 months work to ensure that no Aboriginal worker enterprise is award free, and that these enterprises are funded to pay award rates;

Helen Corbett addresses the UN

A presentation by Helen Corbett, National Chairperson of the Committee to Defend Black Rights, to the United Nations Working Group of Indigenous Peoples Conference, Geneva, August 1989.

Madam Chairperson,

My name is Helen Corbett. I am a Yamagee from Western Australia and I am the National Chairperson of the Committee to Defend Black Rights.

In 1987, I addressed this meeting to talk about the alarming situation of our people dying in Australian police and prison custody and said that we were seeking a Royal Commission Inquiry. It was in that year that on average, every eleven days, one of our people dies in custody throughout Australia.

I also spoke of the fact that we are the world's most imprisoned group of people, a fact which government reports themselves acknowledge.

Up to date figures show that although we make up 1.5% of the total Australian population, we comprise nearly 30% of all those in custody. 63.8% of these offences are for "drunkenness" and against "good order". They truly represent our social position and economic deprivation in colonial Australia.

In protest of this situation, there was a groundswell of civil unrest and riots in some Australian country towns throughout 1987 and 1988. The international criticism of the Australian Government also further embarrassed it into establishing a Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, two days after I spoke at this meeting last time.

The Royal Commission has now been in place for nearly 2 years and we strongly believe that because the Australian Government did not negotiate the real issues with us prior to its announcement, that it has quickly become a method of political expediency and has served as a

way of pacifying criticism against the Government during the bicentenary celebrations in 1988.

There is widespread disillusionment by our people as to whether the Royal Commission has the ability to deal with and address effectively the complex issue of Aboriginal deaths in custody.

The establishment of the Royal Commission alone has solved nothing. Just last month, during National Aboriginal Week, three Aboriginal people died in custody and police fired shots into a crowd of Aboriginal women and children celebrating our cultural heritage.

Altogether, in the two years since the announcement of the Royal Commission, another 32 Aboriginal people have died in custody. This effectively means that every 2 months, 3 Aboriginal people die in custody.

A comparison of the non-Aboriginal population would indicate proportionately that 2,562 non-Aboriginal people would have died in custody; or every two months, 222 non-Aboriginal people would have died in custody. This effectively means that 3 non-Aboriginal people would die per day.

Together with these figures and the repressive actions of the police and prison officers, supported by federal and state governments, what we are describing to this meeting is very much akin to government supported "death squads" operating in Australia.

The Australian Government should be adhering to the convention against torture and other cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment by ensuring that acts of torture are legally punishable of-

fences. Instead, emphasis is placed by governments and the mainstream media on the claim that deaths in custody is a law and order issue. Some reports have even suggested that we were committing "copycat suicides" to embarrass the government internationally during the bicentennial year.

In addition, various state governments have supported legal challenges to wind down the Royal Commission, for the sake of winning elections and gaining political power; have given wide discretionary powers to police to take our people into custody for "behavioural deviations" rather than criminal offences, and have called for the complete shutdown of the Royal Commission of Inquiry.

This has effectively given the green light to custodial officers to continue racist attacks on the Aboriginal community. The recent findings of the Human Rights Commission Inquiry into racism has clearly indicated that police attitudes to people have not improved. In fact the evidence shows that they have deteriorated. Police violence based on race remains a major area of concern.

Aboriginal deaths in custody are a breach of the United Nations International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights to which Australia is a signatory and thus legally obliged to observe. Federal and state governments have shown themselves to lack commitment in addressing the issue of Aboriginal deaths in custody. Under the covenant, they are required to promote, protect and restore human rights at national, regional and international levels.

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Sydney Support Group for Aboriginal Self-Determination

The former Bi-centennial Protest Group, now the SSGASD, is trying to win a prize for having the longest name of any support group ever! We're also trying to keep running for as long as a support group for Aboriginal people is needed - that is until Aboriginal people are accorded their sovereignty and land rights.

The BPG was formed in 1986 to provide a focus and an action group for Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals in protesting against the hypocrisy of Bi-centennial celebrations. By January 1988 BPG meetings were enormous: hundreds, thousands of people coming out to show support and work for justice for Aboriginal people. Unfortunately once the fan-fare of 1988 died down the numbers attending meetings or active in the BPG dropped off. However during the latter part of 1988 and into 1989 the BPG managed to organise various events, fundraise, do educational displays and lots more - including spending ages trying to find an appropriate new name for the group!

So now the SSGASD has come into existence we'd like to renew or make contact with any Aboriginal organizations who feel we could be of assistance. We'd also like to renew or make contact with any unions, or other organisations who are working in support of Aboriginal people. Very importantly we'd like to hear from any individuals or groups who feel they should become active in this support work and who would like to join our group.

It is essential that support for Aboriginal people's struggle for justice go further than attendance at the odd demonstration or the passing of the odd motion at a conference.

Come and join the SSGASD.

Meetings at Tranby College,
13 Mansfield Street, GLEBE
6.00pm 2nd & 4th Wednesdays of each month
Ring 523 7181



Aboriginal Land Rights

In an apparent about face the Greiner Government has abandoned its plans to repeal the NSW Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983.

This follows the appointment of Charlie Perkins as a consultant to examine possible amendments to the Act.

While the NSW Aboriginal Land Council has welcomed these moves it is, nonetheless, cautious about the type of amendments the Government may promote.

It is possible to rewrite the Act and still achieve the objectives set out in the Government Green Paper released last February.

That document, prepared by the Parliamentary Secretary on Aboriginal Affairs, Paul Zammit, established policies to abolish the system of Land Council democracy, wind back investment funding and "mainstream" Aboriginal services.

Faced by strong opposition from the ALP and Australian Democrats in the Legislative Council, Greiner had little choice but to back down and commence a new period of consultation and policy formation.

Hence, the advent of Perkins.

Meanwhile, the NSW Aboriginal Land Council has launched an aggressive public relations campaign to promote the achievements of Aboriginal Land Councils around NSW.

As the Council Chairperson, Tiga Bayles, explained at the launch on October 8th, "the Government should assist our goal of establishing a "black bank" with reserves of \$500 million to

enable Aborigines to free themselves from government aid."

"The term "black bank" is only a loose term but it represents our central objective for self-determination and self-sufficiency once the land rights funding ceases in 1998."

Each year the NSW Government pays 7.5 per cent of land tax to the Aboriginal Land Council system, half of which is placed and used in an Investment Fund.

At the campaign launch the Leader of the NSW Democrats, Elisabeth Kirkby, and ALP Spokesman, Colin Markham, vowed to combine their numbers in the Upper House to block amendments which were not supported by Aborigines.

Tiga Bayles made plain the opposition of Aboriginal Land Councils to any changes which included:

- * amending the Aboriginal Land Council structure of 117 Local Aboriginal Land Councils, 13 Regional Aboriginal Land Councils and the NSW Aboriginal Land Council;
- * cuts to the annual funding allocation and, in particular, the growth and development of the Investment Fund; and
- * alteration to the system of internal democracy whereby Aboriginal Land Councils are elected by the local community and responsible to them in their decision making.

The next stage in this debate comes in late November when Charlie Perkins delivers his report to the Government following consultation with Aboriginal Land Councils and other Aboriginal organisations around NSW.

For copies of the information kit "Self sufficiency - not dependency" please contact the NSW Aboriginal Land Council Office on (02) 601 4766