

## **Down With Racist State Terror!**

# **Black Deaths: Brutal Reality of Australian Capitalism**

At around 7.15 p.m. on 9 November 19-year-old Warlpiri man Kumanjayi Walker was gunned down by police when they came to arrest him at his grandmother's home in Yuendumu, almost 300 km from Alice Springs in the Northern Territory (NT). Accused of breaching a suspended sentence, Walker had received permission from the police to attend the funeral of a family member. The evening of the funeral would be Walker's last. One Yuendumu resident told NITV News that she saw the severely injured Walker being dragged out of the house by the leg and "chucked" in a paddy wagon. He was then taken to the new multi-million-dollar police station where he died about two hours later having received no professional medical care.

Anguished members of the community gathered at the police station that evening, desperate to know what had happened to the young man. As the station went into lockdown, family members were refused permission to see Walker. They were not informed of his death until the next morning, after NT Tactical Response Group (TRG) reinforcements, armed with assault rifles, had arrived. Part of the federal government's racist "counter-terrorism" taskforce, their role includes intimidating and repressing protest with deadly force. In November 2018, the TRG attacked Aboriginal youth protesting at the notorious Don Dale youth detention centre in Darwin. Ten days after Walker was killed, TRG officers ran down and seriously injured a 23-year-old Aboriginal man, Farren Schaber, in Alice Springs.

The killing of Walker was no isolated atrocity peculiar to the NT. Across the country Indigenous people are subject to racist cop, prison guard and vigilante terror. Several weeks before Walker had his life extinguished, police in Geraldton, Western Australia, shot dead 29-year-old Yamatji woman Joyce Clarke after her family had phoned for their assistance to get her to hospital. The community reacted in justified outrage, with protesters gathering outside the police station, one holding a placard asking "Is it open season on Blackfellas?"

After Walker's killing, a wave of protests broke out in all capital cities and in NT Aboriginal communities. Protesters in Yuendumu defiantly slapped red handprints on the police station where Walker died. This image of a blood-soaked hand has become a symbol of protest against racist police terror. Such was the level of outrage at this wanton killing that the state took the

highly unusual step of charging the cop who fired on Walker, Zachary Rolfe, with murder. Rolfe is a scion of a prominent Canberra family and an ex-army officer who "served" in Afghanistan where Australian military forces routinely barge into houses and terrorise the occupants. In the face of protests, the cops' story changed. Initially they alleged that Walker "lunged" at officers with an "edged" weapon, a claim refuted by witnesses. Later the cops announced that Walker had "stabbed" the police officer. Whatever the cops concoct, one thing is certain: Kumanjayi Walker was killed because he was black in Australia.

### **Mass Imprisonment and its Deadly Toll**

Across Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are systematically criminalised. "Crimes" that can land an Indigenous person in the lockup include being drunk, having unpaid fines or swearing at a police officer. While making up about three percent of the Australian population, Indigenous people make up 28 percent of the adult prison population. Today, 34 percent of female prisoners are Aboriginal, most of them mothers. The vast majority of children in detention between the ages of 10 and 13 are Aboriginal. The treatment of imprisoned Aboriginal youth is horrendous, including tear-gassing, strip searches and solitary confinement.

For Aboriginal people, being arrested can all too often be a death sentence. On 2 January, 37-year-old Yorta Yorta woman, Veronica Marie Nelson Walker, was found dead in a maximum-security jail cell in Melbourne after being refused bail for alleged shoplifting. Family members said Walker had bruises all over her eyes and ears. Her death came just weeks after a coronial inquiry into the death of another Aboriginal woman, Tanya Day, who died from catastrophic brain injuries in Castlemaine jail, Victoria, in 2017. Day had been arrested for "public drunkenness."

Hardly a month goes by without a new atrocity or slap in the face for the family of a victim. In late November, a coroner outrageously ruled that none of the prison guards involved in the death of 26-year-old Dunghutti man David Dungay in Sydney in 2015 should face disciplinary action, let alone charges. Chillingly captured on video, five guards stormed his cell, ostensibly to stop Dungay, a diabetic, from eating some

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biscuits. They piled on top of him, pinning him down as a sedative was administered. After shouting twelve times that he couldn't breathe, Dungay lost consciousness and died. As his mother, Leetona, bitterly remarked after the coroner's ruling, "If Aboriginal men held down a white man until he was dead, where do you think those men would be? In jail for life."

Police terror against Aboriginal people today takes place in the context of a racist, anti-communist campaign against Chinese "influence" in the region and a relentless war against unions, minorities and the poor and oppressed "at home." Having legislated enormous tax cuts for the thin layer of filthy rich capitalists, and with the economy flat-lining on the back of falling wages, all the federal Liberal/National Coalition government has to offer (amidst tepid criticism from the Labor Party "Opposition") is cruel measures such as drug testing welfare recipients and denying sick refugees access to medical facilities, while tightening the state's stranglehold on the unions. In this environment of cuts and repression, the Indigenous survivors of "White Australia" capitalism are the hardest hit.

The apparatus the bosses use to enforce the oppression of Aboriginal people—the cops, courts and prisons—form the core of the capitalist state along with the military. These armed bodies are nothing other than a machinery of coercion to defend the class rule of the capitalists (bourgeoisie), who own the factories, mines, banks, agribusiness and other industries. This tiny class, which drove the original inhabitants from their land, sits on top of vast wealth accumulated from profits derived from the exploitation of the labour power of the working class (proletariat) who make the wheels of industry turn.

As long as capitalist oppression exists new struggles will break out. There is a burning need for a proletarian-centred struggle in opposition to the onslaught of the bourgeoisie. The proletariat uniquely has the social power to bring the whole capitalist system to a grinding halt by collectively withdrawing its labour. This gives the working class the potential to topple this rotting capitalist society through socialist revolution. What's needed is a revolutionary workers party—a tribune of the people—that fights to mobilise the working class at the head of all the oppressed, as part of the struggle to sweep away the entire system of capitalist tyranny and wage slavery.

### **Torture and Killing Dressed as "Protection"**

Australian capitalism was founded on the near-genocide and dispossession of the original inhabitants, alongside the expulsion and exclusion of other "non-whites," including Chinese. Frontier wars raged for over 100 years to the end of the 19th century. Massacres and disease along with suppression of heroic Aboriginal resistance decimated the Indigenous population. The knowledge of atrocities still lives within Aboriginal communities. Some Warlpiri elders have said that Walker's killing evoked memories of the police-led Coniston Massacre in 1928 in which at least 60 were slain, including many Warlpiri people. This was one of the last state-sanctioned slaughters of Aboriginal people. Many of those who survived the near-genocide

were treated as virtual slave labour (see "The 1966 Wave Hill Aboriginal Stockmen's Strike," *ASP* No. 229, Winter 2016).

The Australian capitalist rulers justified their racist brutality by declaring that the Aboriginal people were a doomed population that was destined to die out. To that end, from 1937 they pursued a conscious policy of "forced assimilation" towards those of mixed descent who were to be "made the same" as white people. Those considered "full bloods" were to be isolated on reserves to eventually die out. The Stolen Generations abductions (1910-1970) were central to this policy. Under state "Aboriginal Protection Acts," children were ripped away from their families and placed in children's homes, missions or foster care where all connections with their Aboriginal heritage was *verboden*. Once old enough, they were forced to toil as domestic servants or farm labourers for white families. Such "Protection Acts" also condemned others to be virtual prisoners on reserves or church-run missions where almost every aspect of their lives was controlled by mission keepers or reserve managers.

Today, the Australian capitalist state continues to use the language of "protection" to rationalise the brutality meted out to Aboriginal people. The Howard Liberal/National Coalition government's 2007 "NT Intervention," which saw contingents of cops, backed by troops, rolled out across Northern Territory Aboriginal communities, was launched under the lying pretext of stopping systemic child sexual abuse. In reality, this was a smokescreen for the seizure of large tracts of land that had been reclaimed from the capitalist rulers and on which Aboriginal people had some degree of autonomy. Under this colonial-style military occupation, a puritanical ban was placed on pornography and alcohol while thousands of Aboriginal children were forced to undergo demeaning "medical examinations." Of those "examined," barely 0.5 percent were assessed as "at risk" of abuse while 40 percent were referred to specialists for poverty-related health problems. The state used the code word "neglect" to remove children from their impoverished families. From 2008, the year of ALP prime minister Kevin Rudd's "Apology" to the Stolen Generations, to 2015, the number of children taken away had increased by 65 percent. Rudd's "Apology" was a racist hoax designed to sugar-coat the Intervention.

Strengthened by the Rudd/Gillard Labor governments, the Intervention has resulted in greater state intrusion into Aboriginal lives. Under NT "paperless arrest" laws, police can jail people for up to four hours without charge. They have the "right" to enter houses of Aboriginal people without a warrant and arrest them for being drunk in their own homes! Under the anti-paedophilia frenzy that was whipped up, the number of prosecutions of teenage sexual relationships noticeably increased. We oppose reactionary age of consent laws and the criminalisation of consensual sexual activity. We demand government out of the bedroom! It is obscene that today's deeply oppressive capitalist governments should portray themselves as defenders of Aboriginal children! As a result of the Intervention, rates of incarceration and suicide, particularly amongst youth, has skyrocketed.

Alongside the beatings, torture and killings in prison, many more Aboriginal people die every year through racist neglect. Lack of potable water, decent health, housing and education services are the norm. Life expectancy for Aboriginal people is about eight years lower than the rest of the population. The blame is always shifted onto the victims themselves. Yuendumu provides a case study: when Walker was shot there were no staff at the local medical clinic. They had been evacuated over “safety concerns” following alleged break-ins. The Royal Flying Doctor Service was not dispatched also because of “safety concerns,” conjuring absurd racist images of a “savage” violent people attacking the forces of “civilisation” sent to help them. While the rulers were willing to pull out basic medical services from this community of about 1,000 people, make no mistake, the cop shop was kept open to do its grisly business!

Today the NT, whose population is about 30 percent Aboriginal, is the most heavily policed state or territory in the country. This overlaps with a broader militarisation of the north, including U.S. bases and thousands of Marines stationed in Darwin. The purpose of these forces is to enforce imperialist “stability” to ensure a smooth flow of profits from the super-exploitation of the toiling masses across the Asia-Pacific region. This military build-up also targets the bureaucratically deformed Chinese workers state, where the imperialists aim to reverse the 1949 social revolution that liberated the Chinese masses from capitalist-imperialist exploitation and oppression.

### **Police Reform is a Hustle**

In the wake of the outrage at Walker’s death, politicians and police rushed to do damage control, offering up weasel words about “engagement,” “healing” and “finding the truth” at community meetings. Some Aboriginal elders have called for officers not to wear guns while patrolling remote communities. It is utopian to think the cops will put down their guns. Even if new weapon restrictions were introduced for cops walking the beat, lethal firepower would only be a radio call away. In Geraldton, some have argued that the police should have used a Taser or other weapon to subdue Clarke. But the list of black people killed at the hands of the cops without the use of firearms is long and horrific. To name but a few: John Pat, beaten to death by police in Roebourne, Western Australia, in 1983; “TJ” Hickey, impaled on a fence during a police chase in Sydney, NSW, in 2004; Mulrunji Doomadgee, beaten to death by a cop on Palm Island, Queensland, in 2004; Ms Dhu, accused of “faking it” as she died in agony of septicaemia and pneumonia while in custody in Port Hedland, Western Australia, in 2014. Police body cameras are another reform touted as a measure to prevent brutality. However, both Rolfe and his partner were wearing cameras at the time Walker was shot.

In the wake of such killings, politicians wax eloquent about “reconciliation” or talk of police reforms in order to whitewash cop crimes and relieve a bit of social pressure, allowing the state machinery to continue its deadly work. Tellingly, Rolfe was swiftly granted bail and allowed to return to Canberra, suspended from the force with full pay. Bail, which is rarely granted in murder cases, was arranged in a special after-hours

phone call hearing with a judge. Rolfe has also been allowed to attend court hearings via video link from his cosy den in Canberra. Turning the victims into supposed perpetrators of violence, Judge John Birch said Rolfe’s “security” could be dealt with by using video conferencing “for the entirety of the proceedings.” Even in the incredibly unlikely scenario that Rolfe is convicted, the aim would be to pin responsibility on one “bad apple” and absolve the police and their masters as a whole. It would of course not bring Walker back nor change the repressive role of the police.

Justice and equality for Aboriginal people will not come from the capitalist cops, courts or politicians. The reality is that *no cop has ever been convicted for killing an Aboriginal person in Australia!* The impunity with which the police can extinguish Aboriginal lives spurs on vigilante terror, like the racist who ran down and killed 14-year-old Elijah Doughty in Kalgoorlie in 2016 because he claimed Doughty had stolen a motorbike. Found “not guilty” of manslaughter, the killer was sentenced for dangerous driving causing death and out of jail in 19 months.

### **Mobilise Multiracial Working Class Against Cop Terror**

The capitalist rulers wield racism to tie workers to their exploiters and divide them against their fellow workers and the many millions-strong proletariat of Asia. Additionally, measures used against the working class are often first trialled against the most vulnerable, for example, extending welfare quarantining through the cashless welfare card. The multiracial working class has the power and interest to fight Aboriginal oppression. The Spartacist League calls for a *class-struggle fight for Aboriginal rights!* This means mobilising the social power of the integrated, organised labour movement, independent of the bosses, to defend the deeply marginalised Aboriginal people and to champion their rights. We are for strikes and proletarian-centred protests against police brutality. Under a class-struggle leadership, the unions would fight for complete social equality; for jobs for all with equal pay for equal work, for union-run training programs for Indigenous people and other minorities, as well as women; for massive public works, health and education programs, with services and materials in Aboriginal languages, to address the wretched state of housing, schools and medical facilities in Aboriginal communities. Opposing incursions like the NT Intervention, such a leadership would also defend whatever measure of political autonomy Aboriginal people with a land base have been able to wrest from the bourgeoisie. Unrelenting proletarian defence of Aboriginal rights will be inextricably linked to the fight of the multiracial working class to overturn this racist capitalist system.

One vital step in any proletarian-centred fight for Aboriginal rights would be a loud and clear declaration that cops and prison screws are not workers and have no place in the union movement! The NT Police Association is among the most aggressive defenders of Rolfe. The same cops that kill Aboriginal people in the lockups and in their communities also bust picket lines, raid union headquarters and arrest union militants. As an elementary act of self-defence, as well as a powerful sign of solidarity with Aboriginal people and other

victims of police, the union movement should eject the police and prison guards from the unions. The same goes for security guards, who serve as private auxiliaries to the state.

The main obstacle to this fight is the current union leadership, whose commitment to upholding the capitalist system is expressed through their loyalty to the Labor Party. The ALP pushes the lie that the state can serve the interests of the workers as well as the bosses. The illusion that the exploited and their exploiters can share common interests is the basis of all bourgeois nationalist ideology. The oppression of the original inhabitants of this country has been a cornerstone of Australia's national identity as a "white man's country." The ALP was founded on this ideology, more recent lip service to racial equality notwithstanding.

The treachery of the union leadership was shown clearly following the 1996 storming of federal parliament by unionists, youth and Aboriginal people. This powerful action, during a 35,000-strong rally protesting the Howard Liberal/National government's attacks on welfare and union rights, was sparked when cops attacked an Aboriginal contingent that was leading a march into the rally. Building workers and others rushed to defend the Aboriginal protesters, forcing the cops back. Some workers even stormed the parliament building and hoisted the red Soviet flag and the Aboriginal flag over the roof. In response, the leaders of the ACTU helped finger union militants to the state for prosecution. The struggle for Aboriginal rights and the struggle to break the working class from its reformist misleaders go hand-in-hand.

### For a Revolutionary Workers Party

The social-democratic left fringe of the ALP plays its own role in keeping workers and Aboriginal people tied to the capitalist system. Groups like Socialist Alliance (SA) might show up to protests in solidarity with victims of cop killings, but the only program they have to offer is faith in the capitalist state. Their perennial response to cop killings is to push for the implementation of the recommendations of the 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. Like other police reform schemes, this promotes the illusion that police violence and racism can be legislated or trained away. Such illusions are an obstacle to the struggle for socialist revolution, which requires a revolutionary vanguard party with a program rooted in the Marxist understanding of the state.

In the 1980s, while the reformist left were fervently campaigning for the Royal Commission into Black Deaths in Custody, we Marxists warned that this commission would at best be a whitewash of the cops' crimes. Sure enough, the Commission *endorsed* the police and coroner verdicts in all 99 cases it reviewed. Not one cop was prosecuted. According to the bourgeois *Guardian*, 424 Aboriginal people have died in

custody since the Royal Commission.

The position of reformist groups on the Royal Commission was no aberration. In 2012 Socialist Alternative (SAIt) hailed a walkout by Queensland prison screws. Describing it as a "wild-cat strike," SAIt declared, "This is the kind of action there needs to be more of" ([www.sa.org.au](http://www.sa.org.au), 16 September 2012). SAIt, along with SA, Solidarity and the Communist Party, were at it again in 2015, this time championing "strikes" by Border Force officers, whose job it is to help enforce the capitalist rulers' racist immigration laws (see "Reformists Support Border Force 'Strikes,'" *ASp* No. 227, Spring 2015).

Among those groups who most crudely foster deadly illusions in the capitalist state are Socialist Action, formerly the Socialist Party. In 2018 their British co-thinkers ran an aggressive PR campaign promoting the screws' "union" and retailing its demands for more resources to make the prisons "safe"! It is axiomatic for Marxists that better conditions for cops and screws simply means they are better able to repress workers and minorities. As for Socialist Action, their January/February edition of *The Socialist* includes a piece on the cop killing of Kumanjayi Walker and a *separate* article about the police that argued "contradictions exist" within this force and that it should be "controlled by elected committees made up of ordinary people" with the power "to weed out racist, sexist and homophobic officers." This garden-variety reformism sows illusions that this apparatus of repression can be cleaned up and made to serve the interests of working people and the oppressed.

To put an end to state terror and provide decent health, education and other services to Indigenous people will take a thoroughgoing social revolution that sweeps away the capitalist state and brings a new ruling class—the workers—to power. In a collectivised socialist economy, vast productive resources will be freed up and put at the disposal of the whole people, providing the material basis to do away with racism, poverty and war. Only under the rule of the working class will it be possible to address the special needs of Aboriginal people created by more than two centuries of injustice and savage oppression, promoting their voluntary integration on the basis of full equality while providing the fullest possible autonomy for those who prefer it. The Spartacist League seeks to build a multiracial Leninist-Trotskyist vanguard party that will lead the working class in the struggle for a socialist future. As we wrote in "Cops/Military Out of NT Aboriginal Communities!" (*ASp* No. 202, Spring 2008): "Only under the rule of the working class, and on the basis of an internationally planned, collectivised economy, will humanity begin to address the needs of indigenous peoples and the diversity of human cultures begin to flourish." *For a Workers Republic of Australia, part of a Socialist Asia!* ■

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