

green left Weekly

Redfern tent embassy discusses Aboriginal resistance

Saturday, January 31, 2015

By Richard Fan, Sydney



The Redfern Block has been the site on an ongoing tent embassy and occupation.

On a blistering hot Sunday in January, a group of Aboriginal activists and allies delivered their impassioned accounts to a captivated crowd at The Block, Redfern. The banners behind them displayed powerful messages: “Justice Now! Reopen the TJ Hickey inquest”, “Black Law on Black Land”, and “You may kill our warriors, but you’ll never kill our fight for justice”.

Aunty Jenny Munro, a Wiradjuri Elder and long-term activist, who was involved with the founding of the first Tent Embassy in Canberra 40 years ago, spoke first. She was instrumental in the founding of The Block, as well as the establishment of the Redfern Tent Embassy in May last year and remains its linchpin.

“We are looking back on the slow but gradual destruction of Aboriginal nations, first by white settlers, and now by the federal and state governments with a flick of the pen,” she said.

“First Nations never ceded their sovereignty, and white Australia needs to recognise their land rights and deal directly with the Aboriginal community. We have a proud culture that is slowly losing hope and opportunity due to forced relocations and a cycle of incarcerations and suicide.”

Jeff McMullen, a former ABC journalist, recently returned from the Aboriginal Rights Conference, Freedom Summit, in Alice Springs.

“I have seen firsthand the results of discrimination in the Northern Territory, where it not only kills, but causes generations of young Aborigines to lose hope,” he said.

“There is the ongoing theft of Aboriginal land through the manipulation of the *Land Rights Act*, to the degree that corporations have more rights than local Aboriginal communities.

“Canberra has begun cuts into vital community services for Aborigines, including water, electricity and food, resulting in dispossessed communities being slowly turned into ghost towns. There is little choice for Aborigines in relocation — they are forced into large hubs and the end result of this social engineering program means overcrowding, unemployment, and crime, only compounded with the ‘three strikes’ laws on crime.”

Activist and journalist Gerry Georgatos said: “We need the wider community not only to mobilise, but also to undergo a radical cultural shift in their discourses to challenge the policies of Canberra. The efforts of four young men in Canberra and the establishment of the Tent Embassy in 1972, led to the landmark recognition of Aboriginal rights by the Whitlam government.

“Right now, however, those gains are gradually being eroded, with more laws to shut down and assimilate Aboriginal communities. I have travelled far and wide and can say the shantytowns in the Northern Territory are no better than those in Apartheid South Africa. Homelessness is a common occurrence, and marginalised Aborigines are living below the poverty line, in one of the wealthiest countries in the world.

“Such communities are trapped in a cycle of imprisonment and dispossession, where one in 13 Aboriginal adult males are in prison, and worse, Aborigines are slowly becoming ashamed of their heritage, seeing it as a liability. Such a lack of support and urgency from Canberra are a betrayal of the gains from the Whitlam government.”

Murri writer and poet Ken Canning also addressed the crowd. “Aboriginal oral history has no concept of ‘Australia’, but instead is hundreds of individual nations that currently have no say in Australian politics,” he said.

“Australia is the nation-state that colonised them in 1788 and is still eroding their traditions.

“The NT intervention is a new type of land theft, one that is still not acknowledged by either politicians from the major parties or the mainstream media, which sells itself to the highest bidder. I hope people power can force the mainstream media to acknowledge Aboriginal history and various historical injustices, and in turn, give a voice to the dispossessed.”

Felon Mason, a young Aboriginal activist, said: “I want to note the sham of the NT intervention, which not only failed to deal with the pretext of the intervention, but also drastically increased suicide and incarceration rates. Also, since the NT intervention, there has been not one proper commission into Black deaths in custody.

“Closer to home in suburban Redfern, the story is the same, where police and ‘heavies’ employed by the Aboriginal Housing Company who want to get poor Aboriginal people out of here, regularly harass and attack Tent Embassy residents, particularly women and the vulnerable.

“The systemic racism and corruption causes fear among the remaining Aborigines in Redfern, as they’re slowly pushed away from their ancestral lands to make way for high-rise developments. But we are not going away. Redfern Tent Embassy is here to stay, and we are calling on people to come and show us their support.”

[Richard Fan is a member of Resistance: Young Socialist Alliance in Sydney.]