

Australian workers oppose the Voice, call for better conditions for Aboriginal people

Our reporters

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On October 14, a referendum was held in Australia to enshrine an indigenous Voice to Parliament, which was resoundingly defeated. Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members and supporters campaigned at polling booths in Sydney, Melbourne, Newcastle and Brisbane calling for an active boycott of the Voice.

In advancing an active boycott the SEP warned that the promotion of the Voice by the Labor Party was to cloak its support for US-led wars and its continued assault on the living conditions of workers behind a progressive façade.

The proposed Voice would, if implemented, have primarily benefited the affluent Aboriginal elite. The already dire conditions confronting indigenous communities would only worsen, as part of a broader offensive against the working class.

Both the official Yes and No factions were steeped in divisive racial politics and staunchly defended the anti-democratic 1901 constitution. The reactionary No camp led by the Liberal/National Coalition, feared the Voice would weaken, rather than strengthen the state apparatus. The SEP's call for an active boycott aimed to unite workers against the escalating assault on their social conditions and the looming spectre of war.

The *World Socialist Web Site* is featuring further comments from workers and young people from the working-class suburb of Mt Druitt in Sydney, the Melbourne working-class suburb of Meadow Heights, Mayfield East in Newcastle, two hours north of Sydney and Richlands East in Brisbane.

Various prominent Yes supporters are claiming the referendum's defeat was due to racism. What the SEP campaign revealed, however, was that workers and youth are deeply concerned about the plight of Aboriginal people. They rejected the Voice proposal because they are deeply distrustful of, or openly hostile to the Labor government, and the political establishment more broadly.

In these interviews, workers outlined their own experiences of the horrendous living conditions forced upon the Aboriginal population. They draw a link between this and the broader assault on workers social conditions.

At the Mt Druitt polling booth in Sydney the SEP spoke to **Adnan**, 26, who has a small construction company. He was born in Pakistan, immigrated to New Zealand where he lived as child, and then moved to Australia.

Adnan said he decided to vote informal after taking the SEP's leaflet call for an active boycott. "I'm glad I met you guys because I didn't know how I was going to vote. I'm suspicious of the government. I don't think it ever represents us. This is something that I found out as soon as I turned 18," he said.

"The referendum seems like a fraud. The government is not doing anything for Aboriginal people or the average citizens. We have the vote, but nothing changes for ordinary people. You see that as soon as you drive into western Sydney. Look at the situation in this area—there's no proper infrastructure or social facilities—take a look at the health system.

"The conditions facing Aboriginal people are horrendous. I've travelled a lot through Australia and once you get outside of Sydney—to places like Dubbo or Alice Springs and Darwin—you start seeing what's going on with Aboriginal people and other people. They have [Native] title and things like that but the government gives them nothing. There's no proper water, electricity, medicine or health care," he said.

Referring to the billions of dollars for the military and weaponry, Adnan said, "Why isn't the government talking about addressing the health and education problems facing workers all over. Why aren't they lifting people out of poverty instead they're funding wars. The amount of money they're spending [on war] is

disgusting.”

Samantha, a young admin worker in Brisbane said she intended to vote no. “I strongly believe that voting yes on the Voice is not something that we should be doing. We should be voting for no. There are other things going on in the world that need urgent attention, and this is simply not good enough. I distrust the government on everything. We are not racist.”

Samantha explained that she and her partner both worked full-time and had a four-year-old son. “We are feeling the cost-of-living crisis. Back in the day, you used to be able to live on one income. Now it comes to the decision that both partners have to go to work full-time just to make a living.

“And you have small children who aren’t even in school yet that have special needs, like my child. How are we going to fit in time for appointments and things like that?

“This living crisis has ruined so many Australians. It’s mentally draining on a lot of families. We should all stand together and put a change to this... The rich control every aspect in this society, and they are making working-class people suffer.

“Even the rent increases. It’s just ridiculous. How can people who are working live when they are paying \$560 plus a week? And that’s just a standard rental these days. And the cost of food on top of that. We don’t get a vote on that!” she said.

Hunter, an 18-year-old student in Newcastle is completing the HSC. He said he wasn’t sure what he would do following the HSC, but knows he is, “already a socialist. I’m still new to politics, but it seems to me that any official political body never makes much difference.”

In discussing what needs to happen to address the social crisis in society, he said, “we need to take more money from the people who don’t need it, and then send it down the slope.” Giving an example, he stated, “Sydney property developers build 30-storey buildings and make banks, but the houses are empty and there’s people on the streets.”

Asked what he thought about the war preparations against China, he said, “They are demonising China, poking the bear. Australia is the US’s new base of operations, and I don’t want to be a part of that. I just want to live in peace. It is like how they provoked Russia into a war against Ukraine; NATO pledged decades ago that they would not move an inch closer to Russia and they kept moving year after year after year. America has carried out this kind of invasion so many times, but the

second the other side wants to resist, they are the hideous evil enemies,” he stated.

Chris, a retiree who used to live in Coonabarabran, was met in Newcastle. She voted no. “I have many Aboriginal friends from where I come from who are all voting no. They say this will all end up like their local land council, which is all corrupted. There is no racial prejudice there.

“The plight of Aboriginal people is not due to colour,” she said. “History holds them back and we put chains on them. But land councils only self-perpetuate the upper echelons. They talk it up, get all the money and the ones at the bottom get nothing, absolutely nothing.”

Chris continued, “The Labor government is not working class. It is an elite group of people, setting up a puppet called the Voice. A movement against capitalism would be good, I am just so opposed to the Voice becoming entrenched that I voted no. I just hope we can come up with better methods. I am definitely against capitalism, it is such a wasteful system.”

Libnur, a factory worker we met at the Meadow Heights polling booth, told the WSWS, “I’ve been living in Australia for five years, and I’ve never experienced racism. There is not a lot of racism here. Why is it that if I say yes on the Voice, I’m not racist, but when I exercise my voice and vote no, I am racist? This whole thing was meant to be about having a voice, but you only seem to have a voice if you vote yes. You can’t put a stamp on someone and say they voted no so they are racist.

Libnur spoke of his support for properly resourced programs for indigenous people. “Why doesn’t the government just give the money spent on promoting the Voice to the poor Aboriginal people?” he asked. “People are homeless, no one can afford anything. If you want to change something it must be resourced. Albanese should do something that is real. I think he is doing all this for fame, to get re-elected. Indigenous people won’t get anything out of this.”



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