

# Ampilatwatja house is a victory for genuine Aboriginal leadership

by Nick G.

**Elders of the Alyawarr people of Ampilatwatja, 340kms northeast of Alice Springs, have won a decisive victory over the racist Northern Territory intervention.**

Last July they led their people away from the Ampilatwatja township, where they had been subjected to compulsory welfare quarantining, had lost their community store, and where inadequate and overcrowded housing had continued to deteriorate, with sewerage spilling across floors.

They set up a protest camp 3 kilometres away and immediately issued an appeal to trade unions and other groups for support.

On February 14 they welcomed supporters and friends to the opening of a new house built at the protest campsite.

Martin O'Malley, SA State Secretary of the CFMEU, spoke to *Vanguard* about the house and its significance.

"We first heard about this from John Hartley, an Aboriginal man originally from Queensland who works with us, and who has close links to elders on the Anangu-Pitjantjatjara-Yakunytjatjara (APY) lands up on the SA-NT border. The elders up there come to the conclusion that something very important was going on at Ampilatwatja.

"A bit later I had a phone call from our National Secretary Dave Noonan who put us in touch with Paddy Gibson from the Stop the Intervention Collective in Sydney, and then Richard Downs from Ampilatwatja phoned. He'd been talking to John Hartley, so that connection had already been made.

"Richard came to Adelaide over the holidays and we met and arranged to go to see a bloke who builds dongas (prefabricated transportable accommodation) for the mining industry. He and Richard had a mutual friend and through him this builder had offered to provide a new concept house for the protest camp. He already had a great regard for Aboriginal people, having worked with them out in the bush, and he was happy to help.

"Through the union we agreed to get a few trades people up to Ampilatwatja to help build the house.

"There were a few problems, chiefly with transporting the stuff up there, but we worked through it to the point that when the builder finished cutting the last panels on a Saturday, two trucks were up at Ampilatwatja delivering it on the following Wednesday.

"By the weekend, the house was erected and virtually complete."



Alyawarr people and supporters celebrate the completed house

Martin was particularly appreciative of the volunteers who went to Ampilatwatja to help put up the house.

"A group of volunteers, including some from overseas, went up to do the concreting for no other reason than to send a message to the Federal Government about why virtually no houses had been built under the Intervention.

"They worked their rings off. They had two mixers, out in the bush and in the 40 plus degree heat. Can you imagine putting a house slab down like that and getting it level...it's quite bloody amazing! It took them three days – anyhow, they did it."

For most of the three years of the Intervention and despite the allocation of hundreds of millions of Federal funds, no houses had been built for Aboriginal communities. It was a scandal of such huge proportions that two NT Aboriginal politicians resigned in protest and the survival of the NT Government was threatened.

"The carpenter we sent up said that in five days, with this method, you pour the concrete, you've got the right equipment and you've got a house up and finished within a few days. The most the Federal Government has done in three years is to have just recently finished six houses.

"The significance of this is that if the hundreds of millions of Federal Government money went straight to the people it was intended for, instead of passing through the bureaucracy and the profiteers along the way, and if those people came straight to us, to the unions, or someone else commercially prepared to do the right thing, in a year

you could have thousands of houses put up."

However, Martin does not believe there is any commitment at senior Government levels to addressing the housing needs of Aboriginal communities.

"It's all window-dressing because they don't want to build homes where the people want them, because that's in areas where mining camps might want to go.

"In a general sense, it's all about assimilation, about moving the Aboriginal people away from their traditional grounds, traditional culture and assimilating them into the mainstream of white capitalist society.

"These people who are leading the country have no interest in having a black person who is intimately involved with their own traditional culture because while there's a single black person living in a traditional way it's proof of the theft by colonialism, that's still going on.

"And there are some good people, decent people with good hearts working in the bureaucracy but they can't see past the next piece of paper. Whole careers are built on preserving problems, making sure they don't go away because the jobs that take up so much of the money that never gets to the Aboriginal people would go away with the problems.

So what, according to O'Malley, was the significance of the house?

"Well it's more than the unions just patting themselves on the back – justifiably – for taking action in solidarity with the Aboriginal people.

"And it's more than just heaping

shame on Macklin and the Government and exposing their hypocrisy and lack of action, although that's important too.

"The very powerful thing about this is that it has brought to the forefront the voice of the elders, the people who represent the Law, the Land and the Languages of a continuous culture that capitalism is still trying to annihilate.

"Around the country, the elders are saying 'Now is the time, we've got to do something.' They're really at a crossroads and they know if they don't retain their fundamental culture and their laws side by side with our culture and our laws then a surviving culture of 40-60,000 years will be lost, and with it will go the last barriers to the multinationals and the money-makers grabbing whatever they want in this country.

"It just takes a bit to think about the enormity of what all that means. Capitalism is happy for this just to die – it wants and needs it to go away so they can get on with making all their money.

"But the elders of the Alyawarr walked out on the Intervention and showed Macklin how easy it was to get a house built.

"In doing so they showed where leadership in the Aboriginal communities is really based.

"This is the real challenge to capitalism. No matter how many false 'leaders' they put forward, the real leaders of the Aboriginal people are still there and with the example of the Alyawarr they will find ways to cut through all the crap and make their voices heard."