Aboriginal Rights and the ALP Uranium Decision

Vince Forrester, Northern Territory Chairperson of the National Aboriginal Conference (NAC), has called on the ALP to ensure that the rights and wellbeing of Aboriginal people are considered when the ALP national conference decides on its uranium platform. He spoke at a forum organised by the Darwin Trades and Labor Council, on behalf of the NAC, to coincide with the NT ALP conference.

Mr. Forrester said that the NT branch of the NAC was drafting a policy on uranium mining and the nuclear fuel cycle which would be considered by National Aboriginal bodies for presentation to the ALP national conference in July.

Below we reprint excerpts from Vince Forrester’s speech.

I follow the culture of my people. We belong to the land, we are the caretakers of the land. Our lifetime on this earth is only a blink in time, so our lifetime is spent protecting and caring for this land for future generations.

It is our land which Australia rips apart to extract the poisonous yellowcake, and it is on our land where you dump the polluted tailings.

It is on Aboriginal land that the British, with support from the Australian government, put aside all regard for our people, their land or their future. And it is on Aboriginal land that the present Labor government is examining the possibility of dumping deadly radioactive waste in untried synthetic rock.

Our people in Arnhem Land, and right throughout Australia are not sufficiently informed about the extent of damages occurring from uranium mining. Nor do we know the extent to which they are being exposed to radiation in the atmosphere. Nor do we know the extent of contamination already present in the food chain.

The monitoring scientists in the West Arnhem uranium province have made no attempt to interpret their findings to affected Aboriginal people.

The Fox Report into the Ranger Inquiry said that a certain amount of environmental impact into the area was to be expected. The impact is now being fully realised. There are scores of scientists monitoring and making recommendations of what is the best way of dealing with the problem of the Ranger tailings.

Fox also recommended that all contaminated waters should be kept on the site. Both Ranger and Narbalek are looking at ways to get rid of the waste waters.

The problem the mining companies have now is to find an acceptable impact. The local Aboriginal community has no involvement in this and must depend on the government or on statutory bodies dependent on royalties from uranium mining. This dependency, I believe, is a form of ransom.

White Australia says to the underserviced, fledgling outstation movement “You can have money for Toyotas, for bores, to help you set up” but if mining stops, the money stops too. We must break this dependency on mining activity for money for essential services.

It is morally bankrupt and no Aboriginal community should be put in the position of deciding on development that is tied to the uranium industry. Until all Aboriginal service needs are met by direct grants, from federal Treasury, our people have little choice in this matter.

No real substantial study has been done on the radiation levels in Aboriginal people’s diets in the uranium regions. We can only guess what amount of radiation they have in their bodies or in the food chain.

Aboriginal people in Arnhem Land and in Aboriginal Australia are concerned about radioactivity safeguards. Aboriginal anxiety has been growing ever since the spillage at Narbalek which was not reported immediately to the community or with factual details.

The health of our people throughout Aboriginal Australia is already so poor that it cannot take any more damage. The continuing 200 years of exploitation of our lands and our existence must stop.

We wish to remind the Australian Labor Party of its election policy commitment to Aboriginal people on uranium mining. This policy stated that: “The provision of Australian uranium to the world nuclear fuel cycle creates problems relevant to Australian sovereignty, the environment, the economic welfare of our people, and the rights and wellbeing of the Aboriginal people.”

We demand that our rights and wellbeing are recognised. All of our people need to be fully and equally informed of the problems of mining uranium on our lands. Only then will we be in a position to exercise our right to veto mining of any kind.

Finally, I would like to say that some of the ideas I’ve touched on tonight are being drafted into a policy on uranium mining and the
whole nuclear cycle by the Northern Territory branch of the National Aboriginal Conference. This policy will be considered by national Aboriginal bodies for presentation to the Labor Party at its national conference in Canberra next month.

I hope that ALP delegates here tonight are genuine in their commitment to self-determination for our people. If you are, you have a responsibility to consider our concerns when you decide on your uranium platform over the weekend.

**Industry Development Policy**

Union leaders of the left and right have set out to mobilise Australia's 350,000 metal workers in a campaign to change the Hawke government's industry policy.

All 13 metal unions will call on their members to attend stopwork rallies to support a plan aimed at rescuing the country's engineering base. The metal unions' chief spokesperson, Laurie Carmichael of the Amalgamated Metals, Foundry and Shipwrights Union (AMFSU) says the influence of unions and employers on tripartite advisory councils has been undermined by "theorising free traders in the bureaucracy and academia".

seeks a five percent cut in imports to be a chieved through a combination of the many non-tariff protection devices in common use overseas.

This would create 84,000 factory jobs in three years and a further 270,000 jobs indirectly, according to a computer study commissioned by the unions.

Linked to the protection scheme are proposals to modernise industry and promote exports. These would involve the use of "key policy instruments available to the government" including:

- investment incentives and depreciation allowances;
- development finance, plus assistance to research and develop technology;
- new government purchasing practices and new foreign aid arrangements;
- full use of "offset" credits;
- marketing assistance and removal of franchise restrictions on exports.

The unions suggest that such initiatives be tied to investment agreements to bring unions, employers and the government into a process aimed at modernising manufacturing industry.

The alternative, they say, is a continuing loss of jobs and eventual destruction of heavy engineering. About 80 percent of Australia's imports are manufactured goods. If this imbalance is not corrected the worsening trade deficit will further restrict the government's ability to pay for the social welfare measures promised under the prices and incomes accord.

The extent of the crisis has produced rare unanimity among the metal unions. All have committed themselves to the industry plan which has won broad support from the ACTU and employers under the Metals Industries Association.

The government has yet to respond to the plan which won't be fully released until it is presented to the Prime Minister. Sections of the government — in particular the Department of Trade — are likely to support it. But the Department of Industry and Commerce under Senator John Button is almost certain to strongly oppose any move toward greater protection for manufacturing.

Many unions hold Senator Button and his advisers responsible for the government's over-reliance on "market forces" to sort out the mess manufacturing is in. They believe the minister is deliberately holding them and employers at arm's length when deciding policy affecting manufacturing.

Senator Button seems reluctant to debate the merits of the union proposals. His only response to the release of the plan was to label it a ploy by AMFSU officials to assist their chances of re-election. For this the minister was roundly condemned by rightwing leaders of the Federated Ironworkers Association who stressed they were at one with the AMFSU in wanting to change the government's attitude to the depressed metal industry.

**Correction**

The front cover of the last edition of *Australian Left Review* featured a painting by Noel Counihan, titled *Self portrait*. Unfortunately the painting was reversed in the reproduction so that what you saw was a mirror image of the original. We apologise to Noel for this misrepresentation of his work. The painting is reprinted below, the right way around.

**Policing**

Policing: Practices, Strategies, Accountability is a new book just published by the Alternative Criminology Journal. Its 143 large pages are packed with information and analysis about police harassment and the relationship between police practices and the law. The book costs only $5.00 and is available from The Editor, Alternative Criminology Journal, Faculty of Law, University of NSW, PO Box 1, Kensington, NSW 2033. In the next edition of ALR we will publish a full review of the book.