

## **Indigenous activist's long struggle for justice**

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Sam Watson, candidate on the Socialist Alliance's all-Indigenous Senate ticket in Queensland, spoke to Green Left Weekly's Tim Stewart about his long-term involvement in Brisbane politics and Indigenous struggles. Watson grew up in Mt Gravatt and is currently working on a number of books and a film. He continues to be involved in community organising.

### **What triggered your interest in political activism?**

Mt Gravatt State High was a great school. When I was in grade eight and nine, the big issue was the "white Australia" policy and we used to discuss this at the debating club. The teachers used to set up a PA system in the playground and we used to deliver these speeches. We had a lot of Asians at our school, but they were easily picked on. Black fellas copped a certain amount of flack but we were all good fighters and we stuck together so white fellas were very cautious about doing the wrong thing by black fellas because otherwise they'd cop a hammering.

They certainly used to give our Asian mates a fair bit of curry, so we used to stick up for them. Because the white Australia policy was mainly aimed at Asians, we took up the cause. We talked about it during our public speaking and in the school newspaper as well. There was an underground student network that sprung up in a lot of the major schools called *Students in Dissent*. They took on issues like the white Australia policy and the Vietnam War.

### **Can you remember the first political events you went to?**

On the weekends I used to play tennis at Lang Park and I used to get off the trams and walk past Centenary Place where the soapbox speakers were. On any Saturday afternoon there was always a crowd listening to different speakers. The Communist Party was very strong back in those days. I used to drop into the CPA headquarters in Barry Parade.

As we went through the 1960s and the 1965 Freedom Rides I was in grade 10. We got involved in discussing the impacts of racial segregation in Australia, the US and South Africa. I used to do assignments on Malcolm X, Martin Luther King. It was the year after the Sharpeville massacre in South Africa. I was starting to develop a broad awareness of the political struggles of the day.

My family was at the centre of the Aboriginal community, always managing to help people with a spare bed or food. There was a huge groundswell of movement in the '60s around the right to equal wages; a lot of talk about people going on strike in the Aboriginal reserves. We also had the lead-up to the [1967] referendum. There was a lot happening around our home, in the Aboriginal community - so it was inevitable that I should gravitate towards the black political leadership that emerged in Brisbane.

### **Who stand out as some of those early leaders?**

Aunty Kath Walker [Oodgeroo Noonucal]. At the time her poetry and writing was published by Jacaranda Press. She was a real straight shooter. She was one of the main people behind the push for the referendum. She was not only pushing the black political angle, when so many women were totally subservient to the men in their lives, Aunty Kath was a single parent and she didn't take shit from anybody. She really did impress me.

Kath Walker, her son Dennis Walker and Pastor Don Brady were part of the core political leadership in the Brisbane Black movement. Brady was given a Churchill scholarship and he visited and worked with a number of First Nations and communities in the US. He also visited the urban ghettos of New York - the same time Malcolm X was big in Harlem. Kath Walker had also visited overseas. Don Brady and Kath Walker brought back their

observations on how indigenous and colonised communities in other parts of the world were able to deal with the challenges that confronted them. The most significant factor that emerged was that Indigenous communities were forming their own Elders Councils. That gave rise to our first political slogan: "*Black control over black affairs.*"

Indigenous people in Queensland were ruled by so-called "*protectionist*" acts which controlled every single aspect of Indigenous people's lives. We were told how to live, how to raise our children. We weren't allowed to own assets worth more than 100 pounds. We weren't allowed to buy a house. We weren't allowed to enter hire-purchase contracts without the signed consent from the minister of native affairs. We weren't even allowed on the street without the police asking for your "*exemption papers*". You had to go through the courts to obtain an exemption to leave an Aboriginal reserve.

We were lucky, as my father petitioned the courts arguing that he didn't need to be brought up in a reserve as he was quite capable of working and running his life. The court was sympathetic and he was exempted from the act. So we were very, very fortunate in that my family was not threatened with the act.

### **What were the early political organisations of that era?**

The Federal Council for the Advancement of Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) was formed out of a mass meeting in Adelaide in 1967. It was made up of sympathetic church leaders, trade unionists, activists, welfare workers and the Aboriginal political leadership to provide a national forum. Aunty Kath Walker was the state secretary.

The first campaign was for a change in the constitution to recognise Aboriginal people. Thousands of signatures were gathered - enough so that every week of the year a member of the Senate would present a petition to the Menzies government for a referendum. We needed 10,000 to present to parliament and in the end we got around 80,000. The Menzies Liberal government kept sidestepping the issue. It wasn't until the Holt Labor government that a referendum was held on recognising Aboriginal people as citizens.

That was an enormous victory and it taught Aboriginal people the power of the political process. It was an important lesson in building alliances between the Christian mainstream, trade unions and students. These political alliances worked all the way through the '60s and '70s.

### **Tell us about the Black Panthers.**

We set-up the Brisbane Aboriginal and Islanders Tribal Council in 1969. We had a major split with FCAATSI. We pressured FCAATSI to exclude whites from the voting process and this came to a head in 1970. We were forced to walk out in 1970 after the whites continued to out-vote us. And we set up a National Tribal Council with a Brisbane chapter, which looked at the major areas of need: housing, employment, legal aid, social welfare and health.

We also ran a major campaign called Smash the Act. The Queensland Aborigines Act and the Torres Strait Islanders Act gave enormous power to the state director of Native Affairs. We couldn't even leave the reserves to go shopping without permission. Where it had the most effect, though, was in wages - white workers were paid the award wage of the day but Aboriginal workers under the Acts could be classed as slow workers and paid less wages. The white bureaucracy was able to control Aboriginal income and keep people dependent. This gave rise to the stolen wages - millions of dollars of income were paid into Native Affairs and our families were given \$10 and \$20 a week to live on. This was through the 1940s, '50s and '60s when Aboriginal wages were held by the Department of Administration. We know that some of the money from the so-called Native Welfare Fund was used to build the Royal Brisbane, Redcliff and Maryborough hospitals.

There was a massive demonstration in September 1971. We gave the state government seven days to remove the acts from legislation. We came back with our supporters - around 200 of us. There were 300 police. We decided to march through their lines. The police attempted to resist. A number of us were arrested, but the only casualties were those in blue uniform. There were two centuries of hate, anger and frustration meted out on the police that day.

The state and federal governments moved in and closed down the Tribal Councils and the older people went off to carry out community work and myself and Dennis Walker started the Black Panther Party of Australia's Brisbane chapter. We imported boxes of literature - the writings of Huey P. Newton, Eldridge Cleaver, Angela Davis and George Jackson. We published the 10/10 program that addressed the needs of the Aboriginal community.

We set up a base in Red Hill and undertook a recruiting and education campaign. One of the programs was setting up a "*pig patrol*" - monitoring police harassment of our community. We encouraged people to enter pleas of "*not guilty*" when they were picked up on minor charges. The police changed their practices to hit people with "*the trifecta*" - resisting arrest, disorderly conduct and assaulting police.

Police and courts have always used the legal system to intimidate and terrorise Aboriginal people. Through the Black Panthers we were able to form strategies to combat that. We formed links with members of the legal fraternity, which led to a series of public meetings and then the establishment of the ATSI legal services in 1972.

The Panthers hosted a conference on racism at the University of Queensland in January 1972. Over four days we ran panels, discussions and workshops delivering far-reaching overviews of the situation here and in Australia. We established important links with other groups. The year before, in 1971, was the campaign against the [South African] apartheid regime's Springbok tour. Aboriginal people were there in July 1971 leading the marches against the tour. We took the university out on strike for the duration of the tour, suspending lectures and tutorials so students could discuss and debate racism.

That year paved the way for establishing the Aboriginal tent embassy on January 26, 1972 on the lawns of parliament. I was appointed by the conference to go down to the tent embassy and I stayed there until July 1972.

With the election of the Whitlam government in December 1972, there was a massive amount of funding for the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. We were able to wind down Panther work and get into mainstream specialist services such as legal work, medical services and set up real delivery systems for Aboriginal people - giving people real relief.

### **What were some of the triggers that made you identify as a socialist?**

I believe that traditional Aboriginal society, the coping structures, are a primitive form of socialism. I have had relations with mainstream political parties - the Labor party - but there comes a time when you can no longer cop the lies and the bullshit, you can no longer walk with that mob. I haven't reached that point with the Socialist Alliance.

There is no way that SA will be held hostage to the interests of corporate Australia. While the captains of industry are in control of the steering wheel, the people of Australia will never have a fair go.

The Socialist Alliance is committed to delivering a real and viable living standard to our people.

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