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The Hon. John Howard MP
Prime Minister
House of Representatives
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Prime Minister,

We refer to your Government's Intervention in Northern Territory Indigenous Communities.

The ACTU acknowledges the need for urgent action to be taken on the issue of violence in Indigenous communities, and supports measures to protect children. However, we reject absolutely the arguments that suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act, changes to the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976 and the elimination of the permit system have any relationship to genuine measures to protect children.

ACTU Affiliates represent members working in Indigenous communities. These workers work in many capacities in health, education and community work. Your Government's intervention has increased the pressure on those workers already working in Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory. We request an understanding as to what resources will be made available to expand and resource their role and an understanding that these workers will be consulted. Further we urge the Government to make transparent plans for sustaining such measures.

Since the announcement of your Government's intervention, the members of ACTU Affiliates working in remote Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory have raised with their Unions questions about the intervention.

The ACTU seeks your response to the following questions from these Union members.

Development of Government strategy and failure to consult

1. There been no consultation with the communities themselves and those existing workers within the communities. This has lead to an environment of hostility, uncertainty and distrust as to what is going to occur, how it is going to occur and how existing service workers will be involved. What is the government doing to address these problems?
2. Communities are not being informed of what is going to happen. Some NGO's have reported that up to two weeks after the Federal Government had announced the intervention that had still no brief from the Government in what it meant to them and how it would be implemented in their areas of responsibility. What is the government doing to address this problem?

Scrapping of the permit system

3. Why does the government feel it necessary to suspend the existing permit system for five years?
4. How is the Government going to enforce bans on alcohol and drugs when they are opening up access to communities to alcohol and drug smugglers?

Sharing of information

5. It is only recently after negotiations with the NT Government that there has been any reassurances that any information collected will belong to the NT Department of Health and Community Services (DHCS). However each NGO is expected to negotiate independently to maintain control of the information collected. There have been no reassurances that funding for these organisations will not be affected by these negotiations. What is the government doing to ensure workers aren't placed in these pressured and unreasonable situations?
6. Who is overseeing the monitoring and ethics of the data collection where there is no DHCS negotiation?

Referrals

7. There has been no planning or information from the Federal Government or their representatives about what will happen when medical or social issues are identified. What will happen? How will existing workers, like those in health, be consulted and involved?
8. Referrals to already stretched existing services within the communities and urban centres will only make the current waiting lists longer. Will the government make additional resources available to ensure these issues are followed up and not left by the wayside?

Long-term strategy

9. What is the government doing in the long-term to deal with the associated housing, education, health and welfare problems? Why has this not been made clear and transparent from the start?

Demise of CDEP

10. Your Minister for Indigenous Affairs has stated¹:

The biggest sum of money that comes into these communities is in fact CDEP money, and because of the way it actually is handled, the quarantining of the 50 per cent of welfare payments can't be achieved if we leave it the way it is.

As a consequence, CDEP will end in less than two months. How will communities and schools run without CDEP? What are the alternative strategies to provide meaningful

¹ Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Indigenous Affairs, 7.30 Report, 1 August 2007, CDEP scrapping causes unease in Top End.

training and employment for the thousands of NT people who currently receive training or find employment under CDEP?

Stigma attached to Aboriginal Men

11. Male Health Workers feel that with the hysteria being whipped up around allegations of paedophilia in the communities that they have been unfairly treated and as a result the long term staff- patient relationship has been damaged. What strategies has the government adopted to address this issue?

Link between Leasing back of Land and Intervention

12. The resumption of community leases is leading to a great deal of mistrust as communities feel that they will lose their land to the Government who has already linked funding initiatives to private ownership and 99 year leases on indigenous land. Can the Government explain how the resumption of community leases has been linked to the intervention?

Little Children are Sacred Report

13. Given that your Government has relied upon *The Little Children are Sacred inquiry* as the basis for the national intervention, has the Federal government plans to resource and facilitate the implementation of the 97 recommendations outlined in the inquiry report?

We look forward to receiving your Government's response to these questions from workers working on the ground in remote Indigenous communities affected by your Government's intervention.

Yours sincerely

Darcel Russell
Chair
ACTU Indigenous Committee

Sharan Burrow
President
ACTU