

# Alyawarr people speak out against the intervention: Banjo Morton

In June 2007, the federal Coalition government introduced the Northern Territory Emergency Response legislation, more commonly known as the NT intervention. The Labor government has continued this policy largely unchanged. Among the many powers the laws gave the government was the right to compulsorily acquire communities and force them onto five-year leases. The government has used this to try to blackmail communities into signing leases in exchange for basic services such as housing.

Ampilatwatja, 350 kilometres north-east of Alice Springs, is one community that has been forced onto a five-year lease. Despite this, in mid-2009, no new houses had been built and even basic maintenance had been neglected: sewerage was leaking onto the floors in many of the houses.

The community council had been dismissed and replaced with a government-imposed shire administration.

Fed up with the lack of consultation, and angry at the paternalistic laws that make up the intervention, in July 2009, the Alyawarr elders of Ampilatwatja walked out and set up camp outside the boundaries of the five-year lease, on their traditional lands.

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*Before the intervention, Banjo Morton was an elected, respected member of the Ampilatwatja community council. He explains why they decided to walk out.*

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The government got the lease. We walked out of there, and didn't go back. We've got a block of land around here, right around. But they've got the lease there.

All my family are here [at the protest camp], they're not working there [at Ampilatwatja]. We thought we were gonna get money from the federal government for work. But now we're staying here.



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*Another aspect of the intervention is welfare "quarantining", which converts 50% of Aboriginal people's welfare payments onto Basics cards ["green cards"], which can only be used at certain stores, for certain things.*

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We've got that green card, since the intervention, that one. We only get a little bit of money, through the intervention. Everyone calls it the green card. Two hundred cash, \$100 onto the card. I don't know why they do that.

Through the intervention, they give us that green card. Two hundred cash. A hundred dollars, to the intervention.

We're staying here [at the protest camp]. We hope for something good. Good news from the government, something like that.

We walked out because of the intervention and that card, and because they put us on that five-year lease. But there's no work for my mob. These [white] people are working for the shire. That's why we just walked out, you know, so we can listen from here.

We only walked out after we got the intervention. That's all I needed. Before we got that shire there, we wanted nothing to do with it.

Oh, [before the intervention, the Ampilatwatja community] council was working real good there. People were working. No work since the shire came in.

[Before that] I ran it. It was really good when we shifted here [to the protest camp]. We got a land claim all around here, that's why we came back. That's why we came back.



And that's why we walked out.

We fought long time for that place, Ampilatwatja. We'll make a new place, on our land here. But we ran it good, there [Ampilatwatja]. There was nothing wrong. I was the boss man. Before the shire, working for the [community] council. Everybody worked. There were jobs, there was no problem.

There's nothing [employment] now, they're just getting a little bit of money from the government. But we don't get any money.

There was plenty of work here, plenty of work. There was a little shop [and it] was like a community business here. We had a community shop.

We had everything. Different jobs. Lots of work — training, building. There was new building everywhere. Everyone was working. It was good. A big mob of houses built, everywhere.

But no more houses since the intervention.

[Donald Thompson: It's weak now.

No more houses. It's weak.]

Since that intervention came in, no houses. Just a little bit of fixing up windows. That's all, with this [new government] mob. They fix the windows, maybe some doors. But same old houses. No new houses.

It was good back then, all my mob working. All the young fellas. Everything — all those buildings there — that was [done during] my time.

We got Ampilatwatja a long time ago, under Whitlam. That old government. Back in the ration days.

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*Banjo was a skilled, respected drover all his working life, through the ration days and until the Alyawarr people were granted title over their land, and the Ampilatwatja community was established.*

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I was working here back then. I worked for Ben Aiken [at Amaroo station]. I'd been working for George Morton first. George was alright. Ben

Aiken come after. I helped shift cattle from Amaroo to Plenty Plenty station, near Hurstville .

We took 'em from [t]here, all the droving, me and my brother. We went droving right through, all through, cut across from here, over the Queensland border.

We caught a mail truck from Hurstville. Another drover came with me to Maree. I was droving for two years at Maree.

I worked for George Cromby. We were droving this country. He caught me at Maree and gave me a job there. Last mob we did was to take them to Pituri station in Queensland.

I started work at Lake Nash. I started in the '30s and '40s in the stockyard at Lake Nash. I grew up there. That's not my country - my mother and father took me there, took me from my country here to Lake Nash. My mother and father, they kept walking, up and down. From Lake Nash back to their homelands.

That's where I started as a stock-



hand ... at Lake Nash. All my life I worked. I was only a kid [when I got to Lake Nash]. I never went to school.

I drove cattle everywhere from Lake Nash. Taking cattle to Burnett Downs ... I went from Lake Nash to Argadargada. The government bloke sent me.

It was good, working. It was alright. Working with the station mob was good. Back then, everybody was working. As stockhands. Plenty of work. All the young fellas worked and most of us drovers were Aborigines. At one place, the head stockman was an Aboriginal man.

The young fellas would be working and the old people — fathers and mothers, aunties — would camp nearby and the managers would give them rations.

There was no money when we were working. We'd just get rations. Blankets. There was no money in the early days.

We were working together with whitefellas. The managers were giving

us too much work. Fencing, road building and land levelling. It was hard work, moving all the stones to fill in the holes, so the cattle didn't [fall down]. And it was just for rations.

It was hard work then. The old fellas thought to themselves, "The station owner/ managers have all that money there".

[So when the station manager] went to Brisbane, to all the stockyards, we walked out. Because of the hard work.

All that money. Us old fellas, we thought about money, about all the white bosses. We thought about doing a sit-down [strike], demanding our money. This was at Lake Nash. We walked off, all of us, because there was no money. All the stockworkers.

When the manager came back from Brisbane ... we walked out and waited there. We set up a camp. We saw a policeman there. He said, "Alright, when you walk out, just wait there." He was a policeman from Darwin who had a big truck.

He said, "I'll get you fellas on this [truck] and take you back to your country". He was going to get the truck from Darwin, he said. He was a good bloke.

So the station manager was coming back from Brisbane.

We were waiting in the camp. We were going to stay there, until he paid us a little bit of money. He said he'd give us one pound a week. That's what it would've been in the old days, pounds then.

**“No, we don't want the money.  
We'll keep this one  
[the land]. This one.”**

We were still not working and everyone was talking about what to do next. Then the manager said he'd give us two pounds a week.

But that's when the money started, after that everywhere there was some money. It was just four pounds a month. We worked all those years, all Aborigines working for the whitefellas, opening up the country. We worked in many places, [doing many different station jobs, like fencing and droving, etc].

The whitefellas are all rich now.

[DT: They got rich, nothing for Aboriginal people.]

That's why we walked out. It was during the Second World War.

[When we started living at Ampilatwatja], we were [still] working. I was teaching them young fellas. We did contract [work] with whitefellas, at Murray Downs. We took half the people from Amaroo, to teach them there with the whitefellas. Hunting, shifting cattle, sinking the bore. I worked at all the stations.

I was still working here when that sit-down money started. At Amaroo. Sitting down, but when people did a bit of stockhand [work] they got a little bit of pay [on top of sit-down money].

[DT: It's been two years now [of the government-imposed lease], eh? But, two years to go?]

That lease will run out now, and

they'll ask for more leases. They might ask for 40 years now, but what we're thinking about is saying "no". When the five-year lease runs out, that's it.

They're talking about how they're going to build houses. But the [shire] gotta pay for what they lease. Everything on the community is under [the lease]. They gotta pay for it. They're leasing it off us, but [they've given us] no money, not yet.

What we're thinking about, if they ask for another lease, another 40 years, [we're thinking] we'll say, "No, we don't want the money. We'll keep this one [the land]. This one." That's what we're going to say. It's the country we want. If we say no, then what are they going to say?

[DT: Everywhere, they're talking about.]

Everywhere, they're going.

[DT: Other places, too. Money, they (look at the) houses, and say "we'll build another one". Give 'em some money, 40-year lease. That's how they get (the land).]

Like here [at Ampilatwatja]. That's why we're thinking, you know? Everybody's thinking about [fighting it] one way.

We've been talking about having a big meeting [of all the language groups], because they're all getting the same idea [about walking off]. They might [walk off].

[DT: But this is the man that led

them. We're leading people.]

We walked out first. Everybody's watching us now. Everybody's come along [to visit the protest camp].

That lease. The shire put its lease [on our community]. It came in too fast. It's all about keeping us in order. "We come in and talk about it with you mob"— they never said that. No, they just ... that's all. Done. Like those early day times. Just like the welfare times.

[DT: That's why we can't go back. We've just gone backwards. We're not going back.]

Now we've got a new government, but he's just following John Howard's law. We all voted for Labor and it won government. John Howard lost that election.

But after that, we've been hearing a different story now. Two governments [with] only one idea. We were waiting for that Rudd government, [to see] what he's going to put up. What laws he's going to bring. It's a Labor government.

Next time, people are talking about Aboriginal people passing, not voting. Or maybe Aboriginal [candidates] might be alright. People up here voted for Warren Snowden. And he won. But Kevin Rudd won this time, Labor.

[DT: But they voted for the same idea. They got the same law, there. John Howard's laws. They're still following the same law.]

Nothing's changed. We've still got

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