

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

Developments since Congress 2009

The 2011 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Congress policy should be considered against the many changes that have occurred in the area of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social policy in the areas of health, education, employment and social welfare that have occurred over the past three years.

Changes that have seen the emergence of a new CDEP program, greater commitment to closing the gap in health, housing and education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and the repealing of aspects of the NTER legislation. The 2011 Policy deals with many of these issues and a range of others.

Key Issues

The Indigenous population is growing rapidly, with Indigenous Australians now making up 2.5% of the Australia population. The Indigenous population has more than doubled in the period 1991-2006. The Indigenous population is relatively young, with this growing and young population it is key that education and employment programs also grow in order to address the needs of the Indigenous population.

In the 2011-12 Budget the Australian Government announced a review of remote participation and employment services with a view to introducing improvements from 1 July 2013. Primarily this has resulted in a new CDEP program.

The four main programs currently delivering employment and participation services and community development in remote Australia – Job Services Australia, Disability Employment Services, Community Development Employment Projects and the Indigenous Employment Program – will be rolled into the new integrated service, the Remote Jobs and Communities Program.

The Indigenous Committee has raised the concerns with the Minister and also outlined in the policy the need for CDEP participants, who while not technically ‘employees’ are workers and can be vulnerable. The ACTU stressed a need for the fundamental protections available to workers should be extended to CDEP participants. Including, rights to time off for holidays and in cases of sickness, caring or bereavement, the right to

make complaints about their 'employer', including access to dispute resolution and the right to collectively negotiate with their 'employer'.

Closing the Gap, has increasingly become the focus of the government activities in the area of addressing the disadvantages that exists for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. In 2008 COAG agreed to:

- a) Close the life expectancy gap within a generation (2031);
- b) Halve the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five by 2018;
- c) Ensure access to early childhood education for all Indigenous four year olds in remote communities by 2013;
- d) Halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievement for children in 2018;
- e) Halve the gap for Indigenous students in year 12 (or equivalent) attainment rates by 2020;
- f) Halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and other Australians by 2018.

The last point is the most relevant to the work of the union movement, with several developments happening in this area including the launch in 2011 of the Indigenous Economic Development Strategy.

The NTER has also undergone significant changes, with the repealing of the suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act, and the removal of other aspects of the policy. However many of the policies remain, including income management and alcohol restrictions.

Agenda 2012-2015

The ongoing agenda for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy is to campaign to improve the situation for Indigenous Australians and to continue to ensure that this is a priority for the union movement as a whole.

It is also important that unions continue to work with the Indigenous Committee to develop and implement effective recruitment, retention and activism strategies, targeted at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.