

# KOORIE BOOGAJA— LAND OCCUPATION IN THE DANDENONGS

By Dave Davies

**MELBOURNE:** "You could go to meetings and vote for resolutions until you were white in the face—but with no effect. Now is the time for us to do something concrete." For 22-year old Aborigine Lin Onus, the "white in the face" remark is a stock joke, and he is good at putting it over.

But he and his Koorie friends are deadly serious about their land rights claim in Sherbrooke Forest in the Dandenong Ranges near Melbourne.

They moved in with their tents on Saturday, February 6, and when I arrived last Wednesday they were carrying timber for flooring down the muddy track to the camp.

The main immediate point of their action is support for the land rights issue in general, and for the Gurindji people at Wattie Creek in particular.

In addition, Lin Onus explained, they wanted to direct attention to other questions such as the high infant mortality rate of Aborigines, and the large number of Aboriginal lepers.

They feel strongly about the repressive Aborigines and Islanders Act in Queensland.

Is the camp more than a solidarity action with Aborigines in other States. Lin Onus feels strongly that it is. "It is closely bound up with the preservation of the Koories as a people and preservation of their culture".

The camp itself is called the Bunnorrong Land Rights Claim after the Aboriginal tribe that used to inhabit the area.

"Being Aboriginal is not just a matter of genetics," Lin went on. "It's an economic, social and cultural matter as well. And although

some of us are not very dark-skinned, and are not living in a tribal manner we feel that our culture is very important to us—just as it is important to migrant groups—it is part of their heritage and upbringing."

Like many young Aborigines, Lin Onus regards his equality as beyond question, and makes no attempt to establish it by, for example, referring to Aborigines who have "made good" in the European system of values. And it is not long before he brings up the words "black power".

"Black power has connotations of violence for some people, but we see it as black autonomy. It is the right to be self-determining. And black power is a reality—it's here to stay. It's not separation we want, but we do want to retain our identity, the result of thousands of years of our heritage." He went on to speak enthusiastically of groups who are developing the Aboriginal dances and other cultural forms.

I asked whether the Aboriginal activists were moving away from welfare work in the direction of political campaigning. He agreed in general. "We haven't given welfare away. But we think that fund-raising by selling buttons and rattling tins in the street carries on a begging attitude, it is crude. We are finding new ways and means to integrate even fund-raising

with our aims. For example, we have a scheme called Koorie boogaja (boogaja means 'heading for a special place')."

What has been the impact of the occupation? "Tremendous", says Lin. "The local shire council passed a resolution supporting us, although the forest is not under their control as it comes under the Forests Commission. People are calling all the time, especially on the weekend, and they are all welcome. Local people have brought scones and cooked chickens. Seventeen people have offered shower facilities in the locality.

Lin hadn't heard of any knockers at that stage, but before I left word came that the Premier, Sir Henry Bolte, had described them as a "lot of cuckoos". There was laughter and talk of land rights claims near Meredith, where Sir Henry has his farm.

What kind of support are they seeking? "This ties in with our plans for the area", said Lin. "We are not asking for money, because what we are aiming for is a self-sufficient community which will deal in Aboriginal craftwork, art and culture. It will be tourist-oriented, but we certainly won't be monkeys in a cage performing for bananas. We want a genuine presentation of Aboriginal culture.

"So we need material support in the form of build-



Lin Onus, one of the initiators of the Bunnorrong Land Rights Claim in Sherbrooke Forest, Victoria.

ing materials and assistance with building. We want publicity, and would be grateful if people expressed their support for us—to their Member of Parliament or to the government for example."

The Bunnorrong claim has caused consternation in government and official circles. The Victorian director of the Aboriginal Affairs Ministry, Mr. Worthy, is said to have put strong pressure on the Aborigines Advancement League to denounce the action, stating that their attitude would determine the future of financial grants to the League. The eight Aboriginal employees of the Department protested when they heard of this, and two of them have now resigned.

So far the authorities such

as the Forests Commission have played it cool, and have not invoked any laws relating to camping on the site.

The Bunnorrong Land Rights Claim is situated a few miles out of Belgrave on the road to Kallista. The forest consists mainly of mountain ash—the tallest hardwood tree in the world. I got the impression that the Koories feel just as tall at present.

Genuine supporters of the cause have always said they looked forward to the day when Aboriginal action would be determined by the ideas and initiative of the Aborigines themselves. Now that that time has come, they deserve the wholehearted support of all progressive Australians.