

## Indigenous issues are union issues



Since the start of the British colonial invasion of Australia in 1788, Australia's indigenous people have resisted the take over of their lands. While successive Australian governments have carried out genocidal policies against indigenous people, they have not succeeded in destroying Aboriginal culture in Australia.

In the last 220 years of white domination, the history of indigenous people has been hidden so that not only their culture is rendered invisible, but also their contribution to the development of Australia has been totally denied.

### Stolen Wages

In the state of Queensland, for instance, Aboriginal people were widely employed in the pastoral industry, the men as stockmen, the women as domestic helpers. They were paid much lower rates of pay than their equivalent non-aboriginal workers, and even then, their pay was quarantined and held by the state. Not only did all these workers have to endure terrible working conditions, but even these measly wages were never released back to these workers, so that now their families and descendants are still suffering from those decades of exploitation in the 20th century.

The Stolen Wages campaign in Queensland has now become a nationally recognised campaign where by

the workers and their families are fighting successive state governments in order to get their wages back. While originally their story had been hidden, once their plight became known among workers and trade unions, much support has been offered to their campaign. The Stolen Wages Campaign is now officially endorsed by the Queensland Council of Unions, as well as having the support of many other trade union organisations in other states.

### Indigenous Resistance

One of the most well known example of indigenous resistance is the Gurindji people of the Northern Territory during the 1960's. Many of the Gurindji were employees of Vestey's, a huge British owned pastoral company with many different leases, including a large pastoral tract at Wave Hill.

In August 1966, one hundred and seventy Aboriginal employees of the company went on strike over poor working and living conditions. Led by spokesman Vincent Lingiari, the workers and families walked off Wave Hill to an important sacred site nearby at Wattie Creek, and began what developed into a seven-year strike.

While the initial demands centred around wages and conditions, the matter soon became centred around their demand for return of their land. To publicise their cause, leaders like Vincent Lingiari, Billy Bunter Jampijinpa and others toured Australia. Much of the support came from trade unions which contributed both financially and with resources.

After seven long years, the Australian government agreed to hand back to the Gurindji people a portion of their land. On the 16th of August 1975 at Kalkaringi, Prime Minister Gough Whitlam addressed Vincent Lingiari and the Gurindji people and officially handed back their lands. The 16th of August is now commemorated as 'Freedom Day'.

While many people saw this win as a start for the roll out of Land Rights for Aboriginal people around Australia, 35 years later, the situation is very different.

## NT Intervention

In August 2007, the then Australian government, introduced the Northern Territory National Emergency Response, commonly known as the NT Intervention, a package of changes to welfare provision, law enforcement, land tenure and other measures. Launched amid a flurry of publicity about saving kids from paedophiles and bringing respect back into indigenous people, the results have been devastating for Aboriginal communities in the NT.

The Intervention has seen Aboriginal communities invaded by the military, civil liberties and freedom of movement curtailed, wholesale quarantining of welfare payments, as well as restricting the ability of people to spend their money. In addition, the Government offered to pay for social services if the Aboriginal communities agreed to give up the rights to their lands and sign long term leases to the government. While this represents a bonanza for mining and pastoral companies in their ability to access previously owned Aboriginal land, for Aborigines it not only represents a whole new chapter in the theft of land from them, but it has also created a new wave of dispossession for a new generation of indigenous people.

Fortunately, many people around Australia are organising in support of Aboriginal people and their fight to get their land and culture back. Workers are at the forefront of this movement and recently there was a trade union workers brigade that travelled to the desert community of Ampilatwatja. The Ampilatwatja community walked off their community to set up a protest camp against the NT intervention and its failure to provide housing or services. The trade union brigade will offer practical support to the Ampilatwatja people by donating labour, and resources to build shelter and housing.

## Invasion Day

The 26th of January 2010 was only a few weeks ago and while officially it is known as Australia Day, for Aboriginal people it is known either as Invasion Day, to mark the beginning of colonialisation, or Survival

Day, as an appreciation that even after the suffering of more than 200 years, indigenous people and culture are still alive today.

One of the calls by Aboriginal activists is for the Australian government to recognise the real history of this land, to recognise the war that was waged against indigenous people, to recognise the economic, social and cultural dispossession that indigenous people have had to endure for the last 232 years. This can be acknowledged by the signing of a Treaty.

## Treaty

The purpose of this Treaty would be to formalise the invasion of the Australian continent by the government of the UK and the damage that this act caused to Aborigines. The Treaty, would then allow a legal framework to be put in place where compensation and reparations can be paid to Aboriginal people for what has happened.

The struggle for land, culture and equality for Aborigines is still continuing, and in the Australian labour movement, indigenous people have a solidarity partner in their shared fight for justice.



*This is a report of the discussions held at the AAWL public meeting 'The Labour Movement and Solidarity with Indigenous People', 3 February 2010.*

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po box 45 carlton south victoria 3053 australia tel: + 61 3 9663 7277 email: [aawl@aawl.org.au](mailto:aawl@aawl.org.au) web: [aawl.org.au](http://aawl.org.au)