

Aborigines: problems of race and class

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Over more than a decade, Aboriginal people have taken a battering on every front. In 1993 under pressure from mining companies, graziers and Liberal State governments, the Keating Labor government watered down the few gains that Aborigines had made under the 1992 Mabo judgement that recognised Native Title rights. This paved the way for a relentless assault by the Government of John Howard on the gains Indigenous people have made since the 1960s. The Liberals' concerted onslaught on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) was the spearhead for the dismantling of Aboriginal social services and the undermining of residual Aboriginal control over their own affairs. There was a relative decline in Aboriginal living standards in the key areas of jobs and education. Despite a period of sustained economic growth, the proportion of the Indigenous population employed full-time and in positions outside job creation schemes declined and the real jobless rate of Aborigines is projected to hit 61 per cent by 2011. The participation rate of Aborigines in tertiary education fell significantly between 1996 and 2001.¹

Howard's 'practical reconciliation' also led to a relative decline in the incomes of Indigenous workers compared to non-Indigenous. For Indigenous men employed part-time, there was a fall in real income of \$600, between 1991 and 2001.² Deaths in custody continued to increase.³ Aborigines make up only two per cent of the population but they account for 60 per cent of all youth in custody, 20 per cent of adult male prisoners and a staggering 80 per cent of female prisoners.⁴ The gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous life expectancy increased under the Howard government.⁵ At an ideological level, Aboriginal people's terrible conditions are increasingly blamed on 'anti-social behaviour' and 'welfare dependency'. This view was endorsed by prominent Aborigines like Noel Pearson, who declared that the root problem could be summed up in three words: 'it's the grog.'⁶ The 'history wars' have seen Aboriginal holocaust deniers like Keith Windschuttle whitewash the British invasion of Australia.⁷

The Howard government's unrelenting racism should hardly come as a surprise. The Liberals have close ties to big business and have traditionally championed capitalist interests against workers, Aborigines and other oppressed groups. Howard, however, turned racist scapegoating into an art form. Taking his cue from Pauline Hanson, Howard exploited the frustrations of sections of the middle and working classes generated by increased economic insecurity, longer working hours and the depredations of the global market, and turned them against Aborigines and refugees, rather than their real enemies: the giant companies and Howard's own government.

Labor's record is, however, little better. In 1986 the Hawke government abandoned land rights legislation under pressure from mining companies. There is a long history of ALP racism. In NSW it was the Holman Labor government, during the 1910s, that began taking 'half-caste' children from their parents. Support for 'White Australia' was only dropped from the ALP platform in 1965. Even under Gough Whitlam, during the 1970s, the 'same old bureaucrats who had supported protection then assimilation, were firmly entrenched.'⁸ Whitlam's Labor government was slow to grant unemployment benefits to Aborigines in remote areas and even slower to deliver on its promise of land rights; it was his Liberal successor, Malcolm Fraser, not Whitlam, who eventually legislated for land rights in the Northern Territory. The ALP's failure reflects its commitment to the existing social order. Rather than fighting for the interests of workers and Aborigines, Labor accepts the limits the ruling class imposes and attempts to bind the labour movement to capital. So it is hardly surprising that the Latham-led ALP backed Howard's abolition of ATSIC.

It would be naïve, therefore, to rely on governments to end Aboriginal oppression. And since this oppression is deeply entrenched in the structures of society, it is equally unrealistic to imagine that racism can be eliminated by education on its own, let alone by an education system with an inherent class bias.

Such an approach assumes that inequality is caused by the racist attitudes of ordinary people. But Aboriginal oppression is not reducible to the attitudes of white workers, nor will it necessarily change just because attitudes improve. As early as 1964, a Gallup Poll recorded 92 per cent support for devoting all mining royalties gained from reserves to Aborigines. In 1985 a survey on funds used to improve Aboriginal conditions found 42 per cent thought too little was being spent and only 26 per cent too much.⁹ Yet these progressive attitudes had little impact. Similarly, the unprecedented display of mass popular support for Aborigines in the reconciliation walks in 2000 did not dent the Liberal assault on Indigenous living standards. This is because the hostility of pastoralists, mining companies and governments to land rights does not simply reflect racist attitudes. It is an assertion of their *class* interests, which are threatened if land is set aside for non-commercial purposes. The political structures of society tend to support these commercial interests. Racism has, moreover, been part of the ideological cement of Australian capitalism from its beginnings. It can only be challenged as part of a challenge to the social order itself. When workers are fighting to defend their own interests against capital they are more open to ideas of solidarity with Aboriginal people and all of the oppressed. They can begin to see that the injustices they suffer are part of a broader picture of capitalist oppression and that sexist and racist divisions are used by employers and governments to undermine the working class's ability to resist attacks on its living standards.

The origins of Aboriginal oppression

In 1788, the First Fleet transported not just convicts but also a new social system: a class society based on the accumulation of capital, the exploitation of wage labour, acquisitive individualism, hierarchy and inequality. In contrast, Aboriginal society was egalitarian. Conflict between two such radically different social systems was inevitable. Blacks did not lack the intelligence or skills to fit into white society. As G. A. Robinson, the Victorian 'Protector' of Aborigines, noted, 'they have been found faithful guides, able bullock drivers, efficient shepherds, stockkeepers and whalers'. However, by and large, Aborigines did not want to accept the discipline of wage labour,

They came from a society where economic activity was geared to immediate use not to the creation of a surplus for exchange. But it was not just the habit of labour that had to be induced but also... the subordination of servant to master... it was hard to convince the Aborigines that they were working for their own benefit and not for white employers.¹⁰

The new order was imposed ruthlessly.

By February 1788 it was becoming apparent... that the newcomers were not temporary sojourners... and that none of them had any respect for Aboriginal land management which for thousands of years had ensured food resources were not depleted.¹¹

The Aborigines around Sydney were facing starvation by the first winter. This inevitably led to attacks on convicts, even though they were not responsible for the invasion. A war of resistance had begun.

By the time the First Fleet set sail, British capitalism was in the midst of the Industrial Revolution. The needs of rising British manufacturing industry determined the development of industry here. Australia, after the 1830s, became a key supplier of raw materials, above all wool. It was this integration of the colonies into the rapidly developing British economy that drove dispossession of the Aborigines. Vast areas were opened up to sheep and the land cleared of people whose social system was an impediment to the development of pastoralism. It is commonly assumed that racist attitudes made the colonists violent and inhumane, but there were more fundamental reasons.

The success of their enterprise depended on the removal... of the contenders for ownership of the land... [Aboriginal] resistance was sufficiently effective to make their

total defeat necessary if the pastoral enterprise was to succeed. As in other wars, the physical violence was supported by a web of ideas and explanations.¹²

Racism justified the material interests of the squatters, making it easier to seize Aboriginal land. 'Another advantage for the entrepreneur' lay in preventing any 'working-class sympathy, let alone support for the blacks. On the frontier it could be argued that all white men had an equal stake in the struggle... with the blacks... even though most ended up with nothing while a few won principalities for themselves and their descendants.'¹³

If, from the 1830s, the expansion of the pastoral industry was the driving force behind Aboriginal dispossession, since World War II it has been mining capital that has campaigned hardest against land rights and attempted to drive Indigenous people off their few remnants of reserve land. The Queensland government cancelled reserves where there were resources of interest to miners, like bauxite at Weipa. In 1950 the Queensland Labor Government leased part of the Weipa Reserve to Comalco and by 1961 only 300-400 of the original 860 000 acres of the reserve remained. In Arnhem Land, Nabalco took over a reserve to mine bauxite, without any negotiations with the Yirrkala people, who protested with their famous bark petition in 1963.

In 1984-85 mining companies spent millions on an anti-land rights campaign. The NT Land Rights Act has been watered down a number of times under pressure from mining companies. Here too, racist ideas conveniently back up economic interests. Hugh Morgan of Western Mining declared in 1984 that land rights were a 'symbolic step back to the world of paganism, superstition, fears and darkness.'¹⁴

The emergence of an Aboriginal working class

From the earliest days of colonialism Aborigines participated in maritime industries. The Bass Strait sealers, for example, made extensive use of black women as virtual slave labour. Elsewhere they were exploited in similar conditions on road construction gangs, while many more were forced into prostitution. It was, however, the rapidly expanding pastoral industry that relied most on Aboriginal labour.

After the most violent periods in the invasion of each region, Aborigines were rapidly drawn in to work in the settler economy... This occurred because it offered an advantage to employers of... skilled labour which gathered some of its own food, built its own housing and was committed to permanent residence in areas many white labourers regarded as too remote... It continued as long as property size allowed Aborigines to continue to subsidise pastoralists with subsistence foraging.¹⁵

In remote areas where white labour was scarce, the development of the pastoral industry would have been considerably slower without Aboriginal labour. In 1881, 2 500 Aborigines worked on WA pastoral properties; by 1900 there were 4 000. As late as 1964, 1 500 Aborigines worked in the NT pastoral industry (compared to 880 non-Aborigines), receiving less than one-fifth of white wages.¹⁶

The dependence of this section of capital on black labour brought horrendous oppression. Queensland Aborigines were concentrated on reserves similar to South African labour compounds. In WA the importance of Aboriginal labour was indicated in 1892 by the imposition of a penalty of three months jail for absconding from employment and the re-introduction of flogging. In 1945, in the NT, girls as young as eight worked in the homesteads and boys of nine and ten worked in the stock camps of the British multinational Vestey's. Even in the late 1960s, 'whilst the managers... sat down to dine in virtual baronial splendour... the husbands and children of the maids sat in the dust picking at the offal from their disgusting pottage and eventually crawling into "dog-kennel-like" structures to sleep.'¹⁷

Capitalist development bred oppression but it also laid the basis for resistance. Aborigines began to gain industrial muscle and to organise. The experience of World War II was catalytic. Aborigines

were drawn into the workforce and became more aware of the contrast between their situation and that of white workers. In the NT many took jobs with the Army where rank and file white soldiers were critical of the harsh conditions black people faced. Soon after the War Aboriginal workers organised a number of important strikes in the NT, and most famously the 1946 Pilbara strike in WA. Industrial action also opened up greater possibilities for winning solidarity from white workers in the south, who were themselves engaged in numerous strikes.

In NSW and Victoria the pattern of Aboriginal entry into the workforce was different. Kooris were a small minority in a predominantly white workforce and were under more pressure to suppress their identity to gain employment. This meant that they could not wage their own strikes, as black pastoral workers did in the north. A number nevertheless became prominent union activists and won the support of white workers.

By the early years of the twentieth century, increasingly segregationist government policies began to force Kooris out of the workforce. Furthermore, as the huge sheep stations were broken up, Kooris had to move their makeshift homes to reserves. The 1930s Depression reinforced this trend, as Kooris who had supported themselves all their lives were forced onto settlements to get unemployment relief.

During World War II Aborigines were drawn back into the labour force and for the first time moved in significant numbers from rural areas to the cities. Hundreds came to Sydney to work in munitions factories at St Marys or crowded into the slums of South Sydney. This trend was reversed in the immediate post-war years, as housing shortages and a slump in employment drove many from the cities back to camp on reserves and riverbanks.

The rural recession of the late 1960s reduced the number of labouring jobs. This hit both black and white workers but it was much more difficult for Aborigines to get other work. Unemployment in towns such as Wilcannia at times exceeded 70 per cent. It also meant black workers became more separated from white workers. When rural work was more plentiful, black and white shearers and labourers worked together and this helped break down racial division.

While the work place may foster notions of racial difference, and rivalry may encourage antagonism, there are also many occasions where common interest prevails... For some working-class people, the blacks are fellow sufferers from the snobbery and contempt of those that rule the town. Contrary to the popular notion that the working class displays more racism than the enlightened middle class, it is among the wage labourers that the racial divide is most regularly and intimately breached.¹⁸

Aborigines' class position today

The last twenty years have been notable for two important trends. The first is the increasing proletarianisation and urbanisation of the Aboriginal population; the second, the emergence of a small but politically important Aboriginal middle class. Aborigines are often portrayed as an 'underclass' and the idea that the mass of the Aboriginal population is working class is controversial. Nevertheless, the latest statistics clearly demonstrate that a very large proportion of Aborigines are in a particularly poor segment of the working class.

Despite high rates of unemployment (20 per cent in the 2001 Census), 40 per cent of all Indigenous people aged over 15 were employed compared to about 60 per cent of non-Indigenous people. The total number of Indigenous workers grew significantly from 42 696 in 1986 to 112 982 in 2001, 57.6 per cent of whom were in full-time jobs.¹⁹

The Community Development Employment Project (CDEP), under which Indigenous people are forced to work for the dole, accounts, however, for part of this increase. Under the Howard government the number of CDEP participants has risen to a record 35 000, almost a third of all Indigenous employment. The Indigenous unemployment rate would more than double to 44.8 per cent if the scheme did not exist.

Indigenous workers are concentrated in low paid, 'unskilled' jobs (31.2 per cent of Indigenous men are labourers compared to 9.9 per cent of Non-Indigenous men) with limited industrial strength, although more Indigenous men are getting skilled trades jobs in manufacturing. They are concentrated in the public sector and a higher proportion of them are employed in part-time jobs. Indigenous youth unemployment remains a serious problem and there is considerable evidence of discrimination against Aborigines by employers.²⁰

There is a continuing shift to the cities. In 1961 just 4.9 per cent of Indigenous people lived in the major cities compared to 77.6 per cent in rural areas. Even in 1971 the urban figure was only 14.9 per cent.²¹ But, by 2001, 38 per cent lived in the metropolitan zone and only about a third in remote Australia.²² This urbanisation has political ramifications: in the cities Aborigines are much more likely to have a job and consequently to work alongside white workers, opening up greater possibilities for common struggles that break down racial divisions. While land rights remain a key question for urban blacks--an assertion of their identity as Aboriginal people--the issues which affect their daily lives are lack of jobs, low wages, police harassment, racial discrimination at work, poor health, education and housing. They share many of these problems with other workers, which opens up possibilities for solidarity.

There has been some expansion of Indigenous businesses over the past thirty years. This process is being encouraged by mining companies, tourism operators and the Howard government, which trumpeted projects such as the spectacular new five-star resort on Poruma Island in the Torres Strait. Nevertheless, 'black capitalism' remains marginal to the national economy. According to the 2001 census, there were only 1 077 Indigenous employers, less than one in every 350 employers despite the fact that Aborigines make up two per cent of the population. Aboriginal-run businesses are overwhelmingly small, precarious concerns.²³

Judging from the 2001 census, no sizeable Aboriginal middle class has yet emerged. Only 4.7 per cent of employed Indigenous men and 3.1 per cent of women were managers or administrators compared to 12.5 per cent of Non-Indigenous men and 5.9 per cent of women. Even these figures probably overstate the size of the middle class. Some of those listed as 'administrators' could well be workers. Similarly many of the 8.4 per cent of employed Indigenous men and 15.4 per cent of women who were 'professionals' are undoubtedly workers – teachers, nurses and social workers.²⁴

The small size of the Aboriginal middle class means it has little economic or political power within Australian capitalism (even compared to the Black middle class in the USA where, by 1999, 22 per cent of Blacks had managerial or professional jobs).²⁵ But, it has gained a significant influence in the black community. University educated professionals occupy prominent positions in Land Councils, Legal and Medical Services and government agencies. These professionals can have a disproportionate influence because other Aborigines have little social leverage.

The small layer of black professionals, bureaucrats and business people has become the target of ruling class strategies of cooptation. It is easier for the state to incorporate a small group of relatively privileged 'leaders' than the mass of black workers, unemployed and rural poor. The educated leaders of the Land Councils played an important role in helping the Keating government defuse the Mabo issue, accepting a deal of which Aboriginal activists were highly critical. The endorsement of Keating's legislation by figures like Noel Pearson also made it easier for Labor to sell it to whites as a substantial reform.

This process went much further under the Howard government which cultivated a group of Aboriginal leaders who have embraced 'practical reconciliation'. Lawyer and entrepreneur Noel Pearson became the most vocal spokesperson for this conservative trend. He identified 'welfare dependency' as the primary cause of Aboriginal poverty, not two centuries of dispossession, exploitation and impoverishment. In what must have been music to Howard's ears Pearson declared that

Salvation won't come on a plate. We have a lot to learn from the conservatives about social uplift and economic inclusion.²⁶

Pearson's proposals included stepped up policing, legally enforced prohibition and cutting back welfare services to Aboriginal communities. In an April 2003 lecture, he purported to find support for his blueprint in the 'mores of traditional Aboriginal society', which he declared, were 'strict and based on a "real economy": gather and hunt or starve'.²⁷ In reality, his views are based on far more recently developed 'mores', those of free market capitalism. His lecture featured on the web site of Indigenous Enterprise Partnerships (IEP), a pro-business organisation established by Pearson, backed by leading corporate executives, to encourage investors to move into Aboriginal enterprises.

Leading mining companies have sought to incorporate Aboriginal leaders by embracing 'reconciliation' and even criticised Howard for refusing to say 'sorry'. Pasmaingo gave regional Aboriginal leaders control over a \$60 million compensation fund as the price for native title rights at the \$1 billion Century zinc mine in northwest Queensland. Chevron cleared the way for a \$3.5 billion gas pipeline along the Queensland coast by allocating \$6 million to the First Nations Joint Company to disperse among Aboriginal groups with native title claims.

Overall, Aborigines' political and social power remains limited and their prospects under Howard are bleak. There have been, nevertheless, sparks of resistance such as the inspiring riot by black youth in Redfern, on 15 February 2004, against police harassment. More significant in the long term is the fact that the Aboriginal population is now overwhelmingly working class. They are becoming better placed to find allies among white workers. This does not mean that Aborigines should restrain their demands or wait for potential supporters to act. On the contrary. Aboriginal people have a magnificent history of resistance and it is precisely their struggles that have inspired solidarity from white workers. The struggles have also been vital for the survival and reforging of Aboriginal identity. Indigenous culture has been reshaped time and time again, as Aborigines adapted to and entered into conflicts with capitalism. Aborigines clearly have not just been passive victims but actors in their own right.

Consequently there is an important element of truth in the desire, expressed by some writers, to avoid portraying Aborigines as 'mere victims being done to by whites'.²⁸ While it is important to emphasise the history of resistance, it is important to avoid overstating the effectiveness their own actions can have, without support from other social groups. At the Yarrabah mission, for example,

Aborigines... could follow the rules; perform small acts of rebellion... or sink into apathy. Few other choices remained... The priest/supervisor made all the decisions... Aborigines could be searched at any time, had their property confiscated, their mail read, their children confined to dormitories and their traditional practices prohibited.²⁹

Although emphasising that Aborigines are autonomous actors can appear to be a radical stance, it can become a justification for working within the existing oppressive social institutions rather than challenging them. It can take the onus off governments to deliver reforms. It can imply that it is up to Aborigines alone, as a small minority, to win their liberation or, even worse in the arguments of Pearson and his like, it means Aborigines are blamed for their own oppression. In reality the rest of the working class has both an interest in and an obligation to champion black liberation. While black people's own resistance is vital, if that resistance is to succeed against powerful odds they need powerful allies.

White workers--inevitably racist?

It is sometimes argued that white employers and white workers both benefit from racism, and that this makes interracial working class unity next to impossible.³⁰ But, to take a particularly stark example, how did the miserable wages paid to the Stolen Generation, the Aboriginal children employed as servants in ruling class and middle class homes, benefit white workers? In fact the whole argument is false. Lower wages for Aborigines place downward pressure on wages generally,

which is why white workers at the Weipa bauxite mine in 1962 opposed Comalco's attempt to pay Aborigines below award wages. Where Aborigines were poorly paid in itinerant jobs like fruit picking, whites also earned low pay. Whites on NT cattle stations had the lowest wages of any white workers in Australia 'because they allowed the bosses to treat the Aborigines like dogs.'³¹ US surveys show that where racism is greatest the living standards of both Black and white workers are lowest.³²

It is true that unions have sometimes supported segregation. In 1938 the North Australian Workers' Union (NAWU) sought to exclude Aborigines from the pastoral industry. But such stances were self-defeating.

Unions generally accept the capitalist system as a given. They attempt to obtain limited concessions within its framework. So there is a tendency for them to accept the system's ideology, including reactionary prejudices. Pressures to accommodate with capitalism particularly affect the union bureaucracy because of its intermediary role between capital and labour (see chapter 4). But the exploitation that workers face periodically pushes them to fight back. To achieve the solidarity that is often necessary to win struggles, workers need to challenge the ideas which divide them. It is not surprising, therefore, that when workers are militant they are more likely to break with racism. In addition, there is a continual left-right struggle inside the labour movement and the left generally argues for a more anti-racist stance.

Historians such as Andrew Markus, in properly highlighting the depth of racism, have tended to imply that it embraces the entire working class, or even to suggest that the labour movement was the main prop of the White Australia policy. This is erroneous. Ray Markey points out that the call for 'White Australia' was backed by a populist movement with a strong middle class and small farmer base, while Verity Burgmann demonstrates that it had strong ruling class support, since it served the interests of capital.³³ Within the labour movement, on the other hand, there were always some prepared to fight against the policy.

Consider the early Amalgamated Shearers' Union (ASU), notorious for its exclusion of Asians. The undoubted racism of the ASU leadership became more pronounced, after defeats in the Great Strikes of the 1890s weakened the position of militants and a conservative bureaucracy strengthened its control of the union. Yet ASU members were more open to ideas of interracial unity than most historians contend. In 1889 Robert Stevenson, a militant organiser, won the support of the Bourke branch for a proposal to allow Chinese shearers to retain their membership.³⁴ The Bourke shearers, predominantly landless labourers, were more open to ideas of class unity than shearers nearer the coast where more were small farmers.

The ASU paper, *The Hummer*, in 1891 exposed the terrible conditions of Aborigines, who were exempt from the racist exclusion clause. Indeed at the 1891 ASU conference the Adelaide branch moved to admit Aborigines for half the normal fee. A compromise was reached: Aborigines received full benefits by paying an annual contribution, without an entrance fee. It was not only militants who supported this measure. The moderate general secretary, David Temple, thought it would be a 'graceful act to those from whom the country has been taken' and it would be good for the union's image.³⁵

Thanks to the efforts of governments, the largest political parties, daily newspapers and employers, most workers were, of course, influenced by racist ideas. The point is that it was always possible to challenge such ideas. The revolutionaries of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) campaigned against racism prior to World War I, as did the Communist Party of Australia (CPA), from its formation in the early 1920s. In 1943 the CPA adopted a policy of complete economic and legal equality for Aborigines. Under Communist leadership from 1946-1952, the NAWU campaigned strongly for equal pay and Aboriginal rights. Don McLeod, the prominent organiser with Aboriginal workers in the Pilbara, was a CPA activist. In the 1950s when there was less political support for Aborigines, the CPA was again the only party to champion their cause. A

number of leading CPA figures, such as Brian Manning, helped to form the Northern Territory Council for Aboriginal Rights which had over 300 black members.

Over time, such efforts have improved official union policies. In 1937 the left wing NSW Labor Council voted to support 'the setting aside of large tracts of fertile land for the exclusive use of the Aborigines', as well as the 'cancellation of all licenses, indentures and other forms of exploiting slave and forced labour', equality in wages and unemployment relief.³⁶ By 1963 the ACTU declared it was 'the natural right of the Aboriginal people to enjoy social and legal equality with other Australians', adding that they were 'entitled to special facilities for self-development'.³⁷

Aborigines and the labour movement

Aborigines were active in the labour movement from at least the 1880s, when they fought alongside white shearers in the great shearers' strikes. A few, like Jack Kinchela, became early Labor Party activists. In Adelaide, Ted O'Reilly organised unemployed demonstrations and was a 'capable soap-box orator for the IWW over sixteen years'.³⁸ The CPA had numerous black activists in the 1920s and 1930s.

William Ferguson, an Australian Workers' Union activist in western NSW, emerged as a key leader. This shearer and rural labourer was elected union delegate by his fellow white workers, joined the ALP in 1913, campaigned against conscription in World War I and formed a Trades and Labour Council at Gulargambone in the 1920s. In 1929 Ferguson, along with other black ALP activists and white working class supporters, began to agitate against the Protection Board, which exercised a dictatorship over Aborigines' lives. While racism was strong in many country towns, there was also a reservoir of support among rural workers in western NSW for Aboriginal rights, including working class opposition to black children being taken from their families. This led a number of western NSW Labor MPs to defy their own government on the issue. In Cowra during the Depression workers in the local ALP branch protested against the expulsion of members of the Murray family from the local reserve.³⁹

In 1937 Ferguson launched the Aborigines' Progressive Association in Dubbo. It demanded the abolition of the Protection Board and full citizenship rights for Aborigines. It organised a 'day of mourning' for 26 January 1938, the 150th anniversary of the British invasion. A number of women activists also came forward: Pearl Gibbs organised stop-work meetings of pea-pickers in Nowra and a boycott of a local cinema to protest against segregation.⁴⁰

The next major period of Aboriginal resistance occurred during the immediate post-war years and coincided with a generalised upsurge in working class activity. The Pilbara dispute was the first Aboriginal strike to gain national prominence. Beginning on 1 May 1946, it affected 6 500 square miles of pastoral country. CPA activist Donald McLeod and black leaders Dooley and Clancy McKenna were jailed, as it was illegal to 'entice Aborigines from their employment'. Support was organised in Perth and by unions. A march on the jail by the strikers forced the government to back down: the Aborigines were freed and McLeod fined a minimal amount. To raise funds, McLeod arranged for the strikers to help unload the steamer Dorrigo. When police ordered them from the wharf, McLeod persuaded the white wharfies to refuse to work without them. The police tried to organise returned soldiers to unload the cargo, but seamen refused to work with non-unionists. The Pilbara strike became the longest strike in Australian history, with the black stockmen victorious after three years.⁴¹ The NT also saw increased industrial action in 1950 and 1951. Eight hundred station hands struck for a minimum wage of thirty shillings a week and, although a number were arrested they struck again the following year with general workers and domestics. Domestic workers in government service made considerable gains.

A militant working class upsurge in the late 1960s and early 1970s, combined with the strength of movements like that against the Vietnam War, helped inspire a generation of black activists. The movement gained new momentum with the 1965 'Freedom Rides', prompted by events in the US

South. They exposed the appalling conditions in NSW country towns, such as exclusion from swimming pools and council facilities, and whites-only sections in cinemas. While the Freedom Riders were mostly white students, they began to shift the mood in society amongst blacks *and* whites. One Aborigine involved was Chicka Dixon, a wharfie and Communist. He recalled that

From the time we went on the 1965 Freedom Rides to Moree and Walgett, things have changed tremendously. In those days you could only get two blacks involved--me and Charlie Perkins--with a lot of white students... Today when you ask blacks to move on a certain issue, you can get a heap of them... Even up until '68 when we tried to march 'em down George Street to support the Gurindji you could count the blacks on your fingers... Now we can muster 600 or more.⁴²

On 7 March 1966 the Arbitration Court finally awarded equal pay for NT Aboriginal pastoral workers, but it was to be phased in over three years and exemptions allowed Aborigines to be classified as 'slow workers'. On 1 May 1966 stockmen on Newcastle Waters station struck, an action organised by Dexter Daniels and Lugna Giari. In August 1966, 170 Aborigines at Wave Hill station walked off. So began the epic Gurindji struggle that initiated the modern land rights movement.

While many years of appalling conditions sparked the Gurindji strike, it was much more than an industrial dispute. The Gurindji set up their own camp at Wattie Creek and demanded part of their traditional land. Their actions inspired numerous other Aboriginal groups to fight for their land, over the next decade. Left wing unions in the south rallied to the cause. The Waterside Workers gave \$10 000 and other unions organised demonstrations, collected money and regularly sent supplies to the strikers' camp. Four hundred Sydney carpenters paid a weekly levy. Actors' Equity sponsored tours by leaders like Lugna Giari who received enthusiastic backing at workplace meetings. The Gurindji strike and the others that followed eventually led to the 1976 Northern Territory Land Rights Act. Because it was won through struggle, it gave Aborigines greater control over mining on their land than later State legislation.

Urban Aborigines supported land rights as an assertion of black identity. Young urban activists were central to setting up the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra on 26 January 1972, the day after Liberal PM Billy McMahon stated there would be no land rights. In early July police removed the tents, but three days later they were re-erected as the police arrested 26 protestors. The Embassy became the symbol of a new black assertiveness uniting urban and rural people. It attracted significant support from militant unions like the Builders Labourers Federation. On 30 July, about 400 black activists and 1 000 white supporters defied the police again to re-erect the Embassy.

The Whitlam Government tried to contain the working class and radical upsurge by granting limited reforms. In this it had some success. As the Vietnam War wound down there was a decline in mass protests. While working class militancy did not decline as quickly--indeed strike action reached record levels in 1974--the onset of recession pushed workers onto the defensive. Working class defeats during the 1975 Kerr Coup and the subsequent conflict over Medibank reinforced this trend.

The Fraser years were difficult for workers and, despite important struggles society shifted significantly to the right. This trend was consolidated with the 1983 election of the Hawke government, whose Prices and Incomes Accord successfully restrained industrial militancy. Many left wing militants, black and white, dropped out of political activity or drifted rightward, trying to work within mainstream institutions. There were still important Aboriginal mobilisations during the 1982 Brisbane Commonwealth Games and the 1988 Sydney bi-centenary celebrations. But the downturn in struggle meant that Aborigines won fewer gains. It became harder to win support from white workers who were on the defensive.

At times, the links could still be made, in the anti-uranium struggles of the late 1970s and early 1980s, for example. Aborigines defended their land as mining companies, backed by the Fraser government, sought to open up new uranium mines. In the cities, the Movement Against Uranium

Mining, with union support, mounted impressive protests. This opened up the possibility of a firm alliance, as the black women's paper *Koori-Bina* argued.

There are two ways in which we must proceed. First we must support the Aboriginal communities in developing the kind of determination and solidarity that began the modern land rights struggle... The other way to proceed is to enlist the support of the white Australian working class culminating in union action to prevent the destruction of our lands.⁴³

Workers in a number of industries banned uranium shipments and supplies to the mines. The highpoint was a one-day national rail strike when a shunter was sacked for implementing union policy. Unfortunately the right wing ACTU leadership demobilised the campaign.

The late 1990s saw a determined campaign by the NT Mirrar people to prevent the development of the Jabiluka uranium mine on their land in Kakadu National Park. In March 1998 they and their supporters initiated a blockade of the mine. Over the following six months more than 2 000 protestors travelled there to back the action. More than 600 were arrested. The action spread to southern cities. Because the Accord and then the attacks of the Howard Government had dramatically undermined working class self-confidence, union involvement in Jabiluka actions was limited. But a concerted campaign of civil disobedience by students and workers, including a four-day blockade of the Melbourne headquarters of North Ltd, organised by the Jabiluka Action Group, put sustained pressure on the company. Its share price plunged. The mine was mothballed and then filled in with 50 000 tonnes of backfill. It was a decisive victory.

Solidarity is possible because black and white workers have fundamental interests in common. As John Maitland of the mineworkers union wrote in 1993, during an outbreak of capitalist hysteria over the Mabo Native Title decision,

What is driving CRA, BHP, MIM and the rest in their campaign of vague and dreadful threats about withdrawing investment is exactly the same pressures that drives them to lecture the United Mineworkers Union about 'unreasonable wage claims' and 'restrictive work practices'--the lust for profit. The blackmail is the same, only the targets differ.⁴⁴

Further reading

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