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## Wave Hill walk-off pivotal moment in bitter struggle

By Troy Lennon - History editor  
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1966 Fifty years ago today, work at Wave Hill cattle station came to a standstill when "head man" Vincent Lingiari called a meeting with his indigenous colleagues, Gurindji people, traditional owners of the land the station now occupied. His message was short and sweet: "We're going." He then led the 200 Gurindji workers (stockmen, house servants and their families) off the property and walked 16km to Jurnarni (Gordy Creek) and later to the sacred place known as Daguragu. They had thrown down the gauntlet in what became known as the Wave Hill "walk-off".

In a sign of their determination, the Wave Hill workers would not return to work for seven years. It was a seminal moment in the struggle for equal rights for indigenous employees on cattle stations, but it would also become a much bigger fight for land rights.

Wave Hill was one of the properties owned by Vestey, a British company that was at the time the biggest landholder in Australia, most of which was run as cattle stations. Vestey had owned Wave Hill since 1914 and had long been reliant on Gurindji labour to run the property.

The Gurindji had initially been reluctant employees of the cattle stations but the industry had a terrible impact on the traditional life as cattle soaked up, fouled or destroyed waterholes, trampled or ate vegetation that had supported either the Gurindji themselves or animals that were a food source. Many people who had been able to live off the land were forced to move closer to the stations to make a living.

At Wave Hill the station owners built wind breaks where indigenous workers could camp, but later built shacks for them to live in. Living conditions were never very good and for many years, despite government legislation insisting station owners pay indigenous workers, most Gurindji worked for meagre rations such as bread, sugar, tea, tobacco and blankets.

A 1945 inquiry forced Vestey to pay its workers properly, but the company continued to be lax.

Dissatisfaction lingered and in the 60s indigenous workers began to agitate for equal wages, given that they were doing as much work or sometimes far more than their non-indigenous counterparts. The Conciliation and Arbitration Commission agreed in March 1966, that Aborigines should receive equal pay but held off actually enforcing that ruling until 1968.

Lingiari was working at Wave Hill in 1966 when he was kicked by a mule and sent to Darwin for medical treatment. While he was there he met unionists Dexter Daniels, Bobby Tudawali and Brian Manning, telling them what conditions were like at Wave Hill. They promised that the North Australian Workers Union would get behind him if they decided to strike.

When he returned to Wave Hill, Lingiari had a new sense of determination. He warned the station manager Tom Fisher that he was thinking of calling a strike and, 50 years ago today, he instigated the now famous walk-off.

Despite predictions that they would soon be too hungry to continue their protest, the Gurindji held out. They had been used to living off the land when Vestey had failed to pay them in the past or when workers had been laid off.

Fisher tried to encourage them to come back, but they refused, having no faith in Vestey to improve their conditions. Despite government pressures, threats to cut off their food and to evict them from the land, the Gurindji remained steadfast. Their protest soon won support across Australia, helped in part by the efforts of people like author Frank Hardy, who helped publicise their story. He painted a sign for them that declared "Gurindji, mining lease and cattle station".

The strike had become something more than a labour dispute. It was about ownership of traditional lands. Lingiari said "I bin thinkin' this bin Gurindji country. We bin here longa time before them Vestey mob." In 1973 the government granted the Gurindji a small parcel of land. In 1976, at an official ceremony, prime minister Gough Whitlam poured a handful of soil into Lingiari's hand and said "Vincent Lingiari, I solemnly hand to you these deeds as proof, in Australian law, that these lands belong to the Gurindji people and I put into your hands part of the earth itself as a sign that this land will be the possession of you and your children forever.

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