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## BLACK AND RED: THE PILBARA PASTORAL WORKERS' STRIKE, 1946<sup>1</sup>

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For most of the period of white settlement in Western Australia the labour of Aborigines was an essential factor in rural production. This was especially true in the pastoral industry. Not only was it an industry based on the expropriation of Aboriginal lands by white settlers, it was also an industry largely maintained by the exploitation of cheap Aboriginal labour. Despite the fact that these workers had the reputation of being 'the best stockmen in the world' they were excluded from the provisions of industrial awards and worked and lived under conditions that would not have been tolerated by a white workforce.

On 1 May 1946 workers on some two dozen stations in the Pilbara region struck. The degree of co-ordination and solidarity they displayed first amazed and then infuriated both the white pastoralists and their representatives in the State Government. While the mass media either ignored or condemned the strike, sections of the metropolitan labour movement sprang to the defence of the strikers and notable actions of solidarity were organised. The dispute took a number of turns with some employers agreeing to the conditions the workers sought. At one stage the State Government also agreed to substantial reforms but this was later withdrawn. Some workers returned to the industry but others decided that their withdrawal would be permanent.

### Aboriginal labour in northern Australia

The first Europeans to arrive in Australia were quick to note the lack of the three most important pre-conditions for colonial exploitation. There were no easily accessible raw materials to fire the imagination of colonial entrepreneurs. There were no existing markets to be exploited by the introduction of new products and there were few native inhabitants whose condition was sufficiently miserable to render them easy targets for labour recruitment. By comparison with other regions the foundations of colonial exploitation had been laid very poorly in Australia. This ought not, however, to blind us to the reality of colonial penetration nor to the fact that the malevolent effects of that penetration observed elsewhere are also evident in the 'development' of Australia.

In the pastoral industries at the edge of the colonial frontier Aboriginal labour has been a vital factor ever since the crushing of initial resistance. Yet not only was that labour very poorly treated, as indeed was much white labour, but it was denied the most fundamental right associated with labour under capitalism: it was not 'free labour'. Stevens' work on the

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Australian Canadian Labour History Conference, University of Sydney, 12-16 December 1988. Subsequent re-writing owes much to anonymous referees, to the editors of *Aboriginal History*, and to suggestions from Don McLeod, Paul Roberts, Lloyd Davies, Joan Williams and Raelene Frances. The views expressed, however, are my own.

cattle industry in northern Australia during the 1960s provides a good example of how the colonial character of both white settlement and government policy acted to prevent the emergence of a free indigenous labour force in the north capable of partnering capital in the region's development.

Not only did their exclusion from the industrial award system leave them almost totally at the mercy of their employers,<sup>2</sup> but they were generally unable to leave a station and seek work elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> McGrath's revisionist study of the moral economy of Northern Territory cattle stations notes the compatibility of Aboriginal socio-religious traditions with pastoral work. She stresses that employment in the industry was part of the strategies used by Aboriginal groups to survive the white invasion of their lands and even played a role in ameliorating their conditions of exploitation.<sup>4</sup> This revision has the advantage of presenting a more positive picture, rejecting the stereotype of Aboriginal workers as passive victims of white enterprise. On the evidence of her own informants, however, it is clear that the situation McGrath has described would fit comfortably into the category of pragmatic accommodation or at best may be seen as 'bargaining at the margins'. It is very difficult to see it as a challenge to white colonial control and this is presumably why commentators such as Wheelwright and Buckley have concluded that Aboriginal workers did not in fact mount any serious challenge to exploitative working conditions.<sup>5</sup> It may well be that this more positive view of the position of Aboriginal workers arises from the fact that McGrath's study focuses on family run stations. By contrast Rose's collection of reminiscences of Aboriginal former employees on company stations paints a much less happy picture, in which 'while Aboriginal labour was required, Aboriginal people were treated as if they were expendable'.<sup>6</sup>

The general history of the regulation of the Aboriginal pastoral workforce supports Rose's conclusion. When the Federal Pastoral Workers' Award was granted on the application of the Australian Workers' Union (AWU) in the mid-1920s, the AWU sought to use it to restrict the employment of Aborigines, who it felt competed unfairly with its white members. The Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration, however, refused this aspect of the union's application, arguing that Aboriginal labour was vital to many properties whose economic viability would be threatened if it was restricted. In 1936, the AWU applied to vary the award to bring Aboriginal workers within its provisions, but the court again rejected the demand 'on this occasion without explanation'.<sup>7</sup> Including Aboriginal workers within the award would, of course, have given them access to the bargaining process and neither government nor industry wanted that.

As with so many subject colonial peoples, the Second World War seems to have made a considerable difference to the position of Aboriginal workers. During the period of white male labour shortage Aborigines in the north worked in many skilled and semi-skilled jobs which had previously been the preserve of whites, and were employed and paid by the Army itself.<sup>8</sup> Their reward was that both the Federal Labor Government and the Acting Administrator of the Northern Territory took up their case for inclusion in a special 'Aboriginal Award'. The Government's view, which was a normative one in white Australia of this period, was that this award should provide black workers with wages equal to about

<sup>2</sup> Stevens 1981, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Berndt and Berndt 1987, p. 97.

<sup>4</sup> McGrath 1987.

<sup>5</sup> Buckley and Wheelwright 1988, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Rose 1991, p. 151.

<sup>7</sup> Stevens 1981, p. 68.

<sup>8</sup> Morris 1965.

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half the basic wage plus food and accommodation.<sup>9</sup> A special report prepared for the Administrator took the view that 'the value of the work of the average native is about 70% of that of the average white'.<sup>10</sup> When it came to a conference with employers, however, their offer of a cash wage of 15% of the basic wage plus food and accommodation was accepted by the administration! On paper this represented a 5% lowering of wage rates for these workers, but then few employers had ever bothered with the official rate.<sup>11</sup>

Subsequently the hidden agenda of the negotiations became clear when a new Liberal-Country Party Coalition Federal Government, with strong support from the pastoral industry, introduced regulations to more strictly control Aborigines in general and Aboriginal workers in particular. The new Welfare Ordinance, which applied in the Northern Territory, introduced the concept of 'wards', who once 'declared', could be employed under the Wards Employment Ordinance. The regulations were administered in a blatantly racist manner and their effect was to continue to deny Aboriginal workers access to any sort of bargaining process regarding their conditions of employment and even to deny them freedom of movement or the right to refuse to work.

The result, as Stevens has extensively documented, was that in 1965 when the AWU mounted its equal pay case, the northern cattle industry was still reliant on Aboriginal labour, which was being administered under a set of regulations which were basically colonial in character. There is no space here to detail the striking similarities with both the spirit and letter of colonial labour regulation in the Australian administered Territory of Papua and New Guinea.<sup>12</sup> It is, however, hard to believe that such similarity is coincidental.

### Background to the strike

While there have been many anthropological studies of Western Australian Aboriginal groups there has been relatively little written about the role of Aboriginal labour. In general the same elements of colonial exploitation are evident as in the Northern Territory but there are also particular features which give the history of Aboriginal labour in the West an interest of its own.

In 1889 the British colony of Western Australia was granted self-government by an Act of Parliament. A condition of the passage of that Act, insisted upon by progressive British politicians, was that the colonial Government take upon itself the responsibility of caring for the region's Aboriginal inhabitants. This condition was enshrined in s. 70 of the Constitution, which read:

there shall be payable to Her Majesty, in every year, out of the Consolidated Revenue Fund a sum of Five Thousand Pounds ... to be appropriated to the welfare of the Aboriginal Natives, and expended in providing them with food and clothing ... and in assisting generally to promote the preservation and well-being of the Aborigines.<sup>13</sup>

This money was to be paid to the Aboriginal Protection Board by the Treasurer and spent at the Board's discretion with the proviso that when the annual revenue of the Colony exceeded £5000 an annual amount of not less than one percent of annual revenue would be substituted.

<sup>9</sup> Berndt and Berndt 1987.

<sup>10</sup> Carrington 1945.

<sup>11</sup> Stevens 1981, p. 71.

<sup>12</sup> Hess 1983.

<sup>13</sup> *Statutes of Western Australia*, vol. 2, p. 384.

Within a few years the revered leader of WA's white settlers, John Forrest, had engineered the repudiation of s. 70.<sup>14</sup> Forrest's argument was that the clause was never meant to stand and was simply a useful sop to the British anti-slavery lobby, which might have had the influence to delay self-government had it not been included.<sup>15</sup> While by no means the most outstanding piece of white settler treachery, the incident illustrates the attitude of the WA Government to the region's prior inhabitants. This incident was to have a profound effect on the thinking of at least one member of the white community, Don McLeod. He came to see it as a symbolic starting point for systematic government denial of the rights of the 'beneficial owners' of the land.<sup>16</sup> It also provides a fitting path into consideration of the events in the Pilbara pastoral industry in 1946, when Aboriginal workers asserted their rights against those of their self-styled 'protectors'.

These events have been described elsewhere. The autobiographical material by Don McLeod and Clancy McKenna provides valuable insights into the thinking of two of the strike's leaders.<sup>17</sup> Brown and Biskup have dealt with the strike in the context of more general histories of the black-white relationship.<sup>18</sup> John Wilson's work includes a more scholarly account as background to his study of one of the post-strike communities, while Mandle has provided a study concentrating on the role of Don McLeod as a champion of Aboriginal rights.<sup>19</sup>

Despite these efforts the strike has not been accorded the place it deserves in Australian labour history. This is no doubt partly due to the fact that Aboriginal history tends to be presented in the context of race relations rather than work relations. This article seeks to set the strike in its labour history context as a struggle by organised workers for rights that were denied them by sections of management and the state.

The central issue of the strike itself was the workers' right to organise, or more precisely to select representatives to negotiate on their behalf. Because this took place in a situation of colonial dominance this was not merely an industrial demand. It was also a political demand, which went to the heart of the system of 'protection' by asserting that the owners of the means of production and the agents of the state, which acted as their handmaidens, did not have the right to act on behalf of the people. Subsequently the strike led to the establishment of self-managing communities as some of the strikers sought to achieve control of their social and economic situations. Some in these communities still claim to be on strike. The Aboriginal pastoral workers' strike of 1946 is thus noteworthy not only as an early effort by Aboriginal workers at collective organisation.<sup>20</sup> It must also rank as Australia's longest strike and one of the few which has involved both a fundamental challenge to management control and an alternative vision of freedom from that control. It is also a story of thoughtful determination and valiant solidarity, qualities which would have long ago ensured it a place of honour in the history of the Australian labour movement had its heroes been white.

### The strike begins

The official position on the condition of Aboriginal labour in north-western Australia in the period leading up to the strike is well summarised in a 1939 report of the Deputy

<sup>14</sup> Biskup 1965, p. 53.

<sup>15</sup> *Western Australia 1897*, p. 120.

<sup>16</sup> McLeod 1984.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*; Palmer and McKenna 1978.

<sup>18</sup> Brown 1976; Biskup 1973.

<sup>19</sup> Wilson 1961; Wilson 1979; Mandle 1978.

<sup>20</sup> Buckley and Wheelwright 1988, p. 30.

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Commissioner for Native Affairs. 'Generally speaking', the report concluded, 'the natives are very well treated' with some getting wages of as much as one pound per week.<sup>21</sup>

An alternative view was put forward in the same year by the Labor Council of New South Wales in a pamphlet by its Assistant Secretary, Tom Wright, calling for 'a new deal for Aborigines'.<sup>22</sup> Wright argued that the situation of Aborigines was generally one of neglect and deprivation and that raising the demand for a new deal for them 'must be one of the tasks of the Labour Movement'.<sup>23</sup> In his view, Government policy saw 'the salvation of the Aborigines in their transformation into workers (generally without wages) for station owners, miners, mission stations and others who have already contributed largely to the destruction of the native population and treated them virtually ... as chattel slaves'.<sup>24</sup> It was, in other words, 'their "usefulness" to whites', which was the major determinant of Aboriginal policy. A major justification for the policy was that Aborigines were a 'vanishing race' and unless integrated into 'white civilisation' would disappear completely. Wright pointed out that in fact 'it is whites who have deliberately caused their destruction' in order to grab their land and that the official policy of 'protection' would preserve that land theft and add to it the exploitation of Aboriginal labour.<sup>25</sup> He argued that this would further the disintegration of tribal life and would truly fulfil the prophecies of a 'vanishing race'.

Wright's alternative was a radical program of land rights and Government support for Aboriginal self-management. Existing 'reserves' were to be turned over to their Aboriginal inhabitants. New reserves were to be created with 'adequate legal ownership' vested in the tribes currently on them. Non-Aborigines were to be excluded except where their presence was necessary for medical or technical functions. With security of land tenure as its basis, Wright saw the encouragement of co-operative, self-managed enterprises becoming possible. He called for at least one million pounds 'for initial expenditure in restoring and extending reserves and establishing essential organisation'.<sup>26</sup>

Tom Wright was the Secretary of the militant Sheet Metal Workers' Union and a leading member of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA). The foreword to the pamphlet was written by another well-known communist, the author Katherine Susannah Prichard. It excited considerable interest among WA communists and found its way to the Pilbara and Don McLeod. McLeod was known for his sympathy with the plight of the Aboriginal people and local activists of the time recall that Wright's pamphlet 'crystallised much of what he had been thinking'.<sup>27</sup> McLeod's own status in the CPA is unclear, although as early as July 1944 he was writing to Ernie Thorton, National Secretary of the Federated Ironworkers' Association, describing himself as 'a Party member undisclosed' and his work on behalf of Aboriginal people as 'my party task'.<sup>28</sup> The communists were not, of course, the only group in white Australian society to be concerned about the situation of Aboriginal people. Others, including the Association for Aboriginal Advancement and the Women's Service Guild, had been active in WA but it is fair to say that neither organisation could match what Bolton has described as McLeod's 'capacity, rare among

<sup>21</sup> Native Affairs File, No. 574/1939.

<sup>22</sup> Wright 1939.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 31-2.

<sup>27</sup> Davies 1988, p. 34.

<sup>28</sup> Letter, McLeod to Thorton, 14 July 1944.

white men at any time, of gaining the trust of Aborigines and acting as a catalyst to bring them together for concerted action'.<sup>29</sup>

One such action involved protests against the issuing of 'native passes' to mixed descent people in Port Hedland in 1944. The pass system had not been in operation in the area for over a decade and its re-introduction seems to have been occasioned by defence force fears of the local population. The year before a threatened strike by mixed descent workers was averted when the Acting Commissioner for Native Affairs threatened to order the evacuation of all mixed descent persons from the area.<sup>30</sup> McLeod had attempted to represent the interests of these workers in discussions in Perth with the Department of Native Affairs and returned disappointed to Port Hedland to establish a branch of the Anti-Fascist League, with which he had made contact in Perth. His tactic was, of course, to indicate the parallels between the fascism against which Australia was officially at war and provisions such as the pass laws, which he saw as fascism at home. Wilson records that the mixed descent workers, then living outside the three mile limit established by the pass laws, marched into Port Hedland under the banner of the Anti-Fascist League. The authorities were apparently at a loss to know how to respond and simply allowed the protesters to remain, illegally, in the town.<sup>31</sup>

The connection between the Pilbara workers and the Anti-Fascist League was also, in part at least, a connection with the Communist Party. In any case McLeod was discussing the arguments put forward by Wright with his Aboriginal acquaintances at the same time as the CPA began to publicise them in the West. By 1944 Wright's views were being incorporated in CPA State Secretary, Leah Healy's, commercial radio broadcasts with the official CPA line being that the establishment of an autonomous Aboriginal republic would provide the material conditions whereby Aborigines 'can be brought from savagery to the highest stage of civilisation - socialism'. The CPA went further in advocating the view that Aborigines could be 'won as allies of the working class' and promoted a policy of social action to remove oppressive legislation, provide adequate health and medical services and extend to Aborigines the benefits of social welfare.<sup>32</sup>

Joan Williams, then working on the CPA's WA publication, *Workers' Star*, recalls the attitude of the Party to these developments:

The Communist Party in WA, with the biggest population of Aborigines, recognised the responsibility to campaign against their oppression. However the approach had been more in propaganda than action.<sup>33</sup>

Williams recalls that when McLeod started a correspondence with Katherine Susannah Prichard on the issue of the exploitation of Aboriginal people by the pastoralists, the Party could hardly believe its luck. Prichard brought these letters into the CPA office in London Court, Perth. The Party's view was that its own people would not be able to draw Aboriginal workers into action. McLeod, however, having 'the trust of the Pilbara Aboriginal people and some knowledge of Marxism', was in a different position. Williams recalls that 'he felt in need of support and we were a natural group to provide it'. Graham Alcorn, then editor of the *Workers' Star*, took over 'the Aboriginal portfolio' from Prichard and when CPA General Secretary J.B. Miles came to Perth in 1945, McLeod took part in a Party School, which included the CPA's leading local cadres. Williams recalls McLeod as

<sup>29</sup> Bolton 1981, p. 152.

<sup>30</sup> Biskup 1965, p. 357.

<sup>31</sup> Wilson 1961, p. 41.

<sup>32</sup> Native Affairs File, No. 77/44.

<sup>33</sup> Williams n.d.

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having been a 'vigorous participant' in the school discussions, which included the issue of a possible strike by the Pilbara's Aboriginal workers. Subsequent correspondence between McLeod and Alcorn included suggestions from the latter as to how the strike should be planned, what its demands should be and how support of white unionists could be enlisted.<sup>34</sup>

The prospect of communists and Aborigines coming together was the worst of nightmares for the WA Establishment, combining many of its racial and political prejudices. The Minister for the North-West in WA's Labor Government wrote to the Commissioner for Native Affairs to point out that 'the Communist Party knows very little about the fundamental difficulties of the native question'. He continued 'the [CPA radio] talks suggest that the natives possess an intelligent capacity, but you know as well as I do that this is not so'.<sup>35</sup> Official concern with 'the disruptive activities of the [communist] party ... in native circles' was, by late 1944, directed at the activities of 'that communist chap' McLeod.<sup>36</sup> E.H. Green, manager of Talga Talga station wrote to the Department of Native Affairs complaining that McLeod was 'exciting [the natives] to strike' and demanded that 'McLeod's permit to employ natives be revoked'.<sup>37</sup> McLeod had first gained this in order to employ his long-time friend, Kitchener, as a wood cutter. By this time, however, he was employing anything up to ten men in various sorts of rural work he undertook. Amongst these men, for a period of some months at least, was Dooley Binbin, who later recalled that as their work took them into many areas they were able to observe all the injustices affecting other workers: 'this wrong here, that wrong there'.<sup>38</sup>

In his contracting work, such as fencing and well-digging, McLeod provided a model of employment relations which the pastoralists clearly found threatening. At this stage, however, the Department does not seem to have shared their concern and even managed to file the complaint under 'McLeod'. It was not long, however, before a Constable Fletcher took the matter further, reporting that local police saw 'McLeod as a dangerous man among natives'.<sup>39</sup> Just where the danger lay in McLeod's activities may be judged from the fact that the 'natives' he employed were earning eleven pounds a week.<sup>40</sup> The Commissioner for Native Affairs duly revoked the permit, but McLeod appealed successfully in the Magistrate's Court and had it restored.<sup>41</sup>

Despite such official concern with communist influence, however, the real starting point of the strike was not Leah Healy's broadcasts on Perth commercial radio, or McLeod's employing Aboriginal workers at ten times the going rate. It was, in fact, a tribal law meeting, which took place well before the events described above. McLeod has described the meeting at Skull Springs in 1942 as 'an event of great significance, the sort of law meeting which took place traditionally perhaps once every fifty years'.<sup>42</sup> Two hundred representatives from 23 language groups were present and the meeting lasted six weeks. McLeod records that it was this meeting which decided on taking positive action to improve the situation facing the region's 'Beneficial Owners' and gave him 'authority to take

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Letter, Minister to Bray, 19 January 1944.

<sup>36</sup> Letter, Bray to Minister, October 1944.

<sup>37</sup> Letter, Green to Minister, n.d.

<sup>38</sup> Binbin et al. n.d., p. 3.

<sup>39</sup> Native Affairs File, No. 800/45, p. 17.

<sup>40</sup> Binbin et al. n.d., p. 3.

<sup>41</sup> Letter, Bray to O'Neill, 22 August 1945.

<sup>42</sup> McLeod 1984, p. 40.

decisions in this area as problems arose'.<sup>43</sup> This meeting also elected Dooley Binbin, who was not present but had great prestige as a traditional Lawman, to represent the desert Aborigines in the management of this issue and left it to these two to select a representative from the settled areas. They later chose Clancy McKenna, a mixed descent man from Port Hedland, to fill this role.<sup>44</sup>

This was to plunge McLeod into two years of negotiating with the Native Affairs bureaucracy and the State Labor Government. From the outset the machinery of the state refused to recognise him as a spokesman and a central demand of the negotiations became the right of the people to appoint their own representatives. Without such recognition, of course, Aboriginal people were effectively denied the right to organise. In particular they demanded that McLeod be appointed Inspector of Aborigines, and hence their go-between with white society and the state. They also demanded that some stations be handed over to Aboriginal management to enable them to undertake self-supporting enterprises of the type described in Wright's pamphlet. Of his efforts to talk sensibly with the Government and its agencies, McLeod recalls:

the attempt was in all respects unsuccessful. I was threatened, abused and told that I was sticking my nose into business that was no concern of mine. The native question, I was told, was considerably beyond my meagre comprehension and certain competent people were dealing with it.<sup>45</sup>

Another recollection of the Skull Springs gathering is that it was after the tribal law meeting that 'Kitchener [one of the brothers working for McLeod] started another meeting and talked to the people about what was wrong'.<sup>46</sup> In any case it is clear that after much discussion in what amounted to a united nations meeting of the tribes of the region, a decision was taken. Years later a group of those involved recalled that decision and their words tell of their frustration with attempts to go through the proper channels: 'What we felt was that somehow we have to break through - we've got to break through'.<sup>47</sup>

Word about the meeting spread slowly. Dooley Binbin recalled that he first heard about the plan for direct industrial action from white workers on the station where he was employed as a blacksmith: 'I heard a whiteman say, "Bye-n-bye you blackfellows are going to be better off - you're going to make a strike"'. Subsequent meetings were held in many places and the strike was discussed many times. Dooley recalls, significantly, that these discussions were primarily amongst Aboriginal workers themselves but that 'sometimes Don [McLeod] came along'. In his version of the story it was at Nullagine in 1945 that he and Don McLeod got down to seriously discussing the situation facing the people. As already mentioned, Dooley had worked with McLeod for four months that year and, as the oral tradition records, during this time 'Don was listening to Dooley and getting what he thought about things'.<sup>48</sup>

In March 1945 Dooley set off around the stations travelling by foot and by rail with the message 'strike on 1 May 1946'. Each station got a calendar, written out on a food tin label, showing how many weeks it was until the appointed day. Dooley recalled that McLeod was worried that some of the stations would not strike, but he just kept going around arguing and convincing people. The authorities were also closely watching the

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*, p. 41

<sup>44</sup> Letter, McLeod to Hess, 28 October 1988.

<sup>45</sup> McLeod 1984, pp. 41-2.

<sup>46</sup> Binbin et al. n.d., p. 3.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 2-3.



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'preparation for the strike'.<sup>49</sup> They singled out particular 'leaders' for close scrutiny. But while this may have intimidated some and limited their freedom of movement, Dooley seems to have been more determined and more able to escape attention. He recalled:

I just wanted to go ahead and get those fellows out [on strike] - even if I did go to jail ... I kept it dark and didn't let the whiteman know. I didn't let the policeman know. I said to the others, 'if I go to jail, you can still go ahead'.<sup>50</sup>

In Perth communists and others led by Dr Alec Jolly and Katherine Susanna Prichard constituted themselves as a provisional executive of the Defence of Native Rights Committee and began collecting money.<sup>51</sup> Graham Alcorn, who had been delegated by the Communist Party as its organiser on the issue, arranged for McLeod to speak on the Perth Esplanade at the regular weekend speakers' forums then in vogue. The *Workers' Star* carried reports of speeches by McLeod and others in support of a better deal for Aboriginal workers, as well as a well researched series of articles detailing the background to the coming strike.<sup>52</sup> By this time McLeod and Alcorn had developed a regular correspondence covering organisational issues such as gaining public and union support for the strike. The difficulties they faced in the extremely conservative political environment of WA's white settler society were exemplified in a superficial way by McLeod's appearance. Joan Williams recalls that this was the subject of some discussion amongst the communist activists seeking to maximise support for the Aboriginal workers: 'Don was perhaps the only man in Perth, except the occasional Navy man, with a beard. His beard, although quite neat, didn't help his image in the paranoia of the time'.<sup>53</sup>

### The early days of the strike

The strike began on schedule, coinciding not only with the international workers' day of 1 May but also with the start of the new season's mustering and shearing. The *West Australian* reported merely that De Grey station and 'at least 11 others' had struck on time.<sup>54</sup> Eventually workers from some 25 stations left their jobs and were joined by many others from the towns of Port Hedland and Marble Bar. The demands were for better working and living conditions and for the Government and its agents to recognise McLeod as the strikers' legitimate representative.

Since it was the start of the shearing season, employers were desperate to get their men back to work. Some immediately offered better wages. Others called in the police. Both had the effect of getting some workers back on to the stations. Efforts were also made to end the strike quickly by gaoling 'key leaders'. This strategy failed miserably because, despite the apparent beliefs of officials, the strike was not merely the work of 'agitators' but enjoyed widespread support amongst both workers and their families. The 'leaders' were only representatives of the will of the people, so as quickly as one 'leader' was gaoled the strikers threw up another to take his place.

Nonetheless those whose activities made them prominent suffered considerable personal hardship and their courage deserves to be recorded. Clancy McKenna, who played a vital role in organising around Port Hedland, was taken into custody late in April, although he was not formally charged until 7 May. He was sentenced to three months under s. 47 of the Native Affairs Act, for enticement to strike. It was not, however, Clancy the authorities

<sup>49</sup> Native Affairs File, No. 800/45, pp. 22-4.

<sup>50</sup> Binbin et al. n.d., p. 2.

<sup>51</sup> Williams n.d., p. 2.

<sup>52</sup> *Workers' Star*, 12 April 1946, 25 April 1946.

<sup>53</sup> Letter, Williams to Hess, 2 December 1988.

<sup>54</sup> *West Australian*, 3 May 1946, p. 6.

were after. So deeply imbued with racist attitudes were they that they felt that the Aboriginal workers would be unable to act if their 'white adviser' were removed. Bray, Commissioner for Native Affairs, telegraphed North-West police seeking co-operation against 'McLeod's insidious anti-Fascist Communist activities' as the most effective means of ending the strike.<sup>55</sup> The police felt that Clancy would give them the evidence they needed against McLeod. The official report of his arrest to the Native Affairs Department claimed that, 'Clancy is only the mouthpiece of D.W. McLeod'. Unfortunately for their scheme, however, the report concluded that 'so far he has given very little information against McLeod'. Nevertheless in the tortured logic of racism the officer concluded that 'I expect that he will do so when he realises that McLeod has deserted him'.<sup>56</sup> No doubt the fact that Clancy never came to this conclusion was attributed to his supposed lack of 'intelligent capacity'.

The strategy of gaoling the leaders failed even more miserably at Marble Bar where the strikers simply refused to nominate a leader and Constable Gordon Marshall had to be content with chasing them out of town since his gaol could not hold the whole mob. When the strikers moved to Moolyella, Marshall reassessed the situation and went out there to arrest Dooley, whom he kept chained to the grill of a cell for six days while he awaited trial. Dooley and Clancy were tried together on the same charge and Dooley too received a three months gaol sentence. In the meantime the *West Australian* was content to run, but not too prominently, the public line of the Commissioner of Native Affairs that 'most Natives are happy' and the strike was the work of 'a few malcontents'.<sup>57</sup> Although the Commissioner neglected to mention them, the demands of the strikers were well formulated by this stage and had been clearly communicated to the Department. They were for a 30 shilling minimum weekly wage, the right to elect their own representatives and the right to freedom of movement.<sup>58</sup>

A vital aspect of these early days of the strike was the part played by Aboriginal women both as workers on strike and in supporting the establishment of the strikers' camps. While this has not been documented in the way that the involvement of some of the men has been there is at least one detailed account of a woman activist. Prichard recorded the role played by Daisy Bindi (Mumaring), a Nungamurda woman from the area around Jigalong who worked at Ethel Creek station. Her activity in organising meetings in the south-eastern Pilbara before the strike commenced was sufficiently effective to attract police attention and the authorities threatened to remove her from the district. Once the strike began she collected supporters from her area, organised transport and talked her way through a police reception to join the strikers' camp. Bosworth concludes that 'her initiative was largely responsible for spreading the strike to the further inland Pilbara stations'.<sup>59</sup>

Back in Port Hedland, McLeod was arrested and charged under s. 39 of the Native Affairs Act, with entering a 'native camp'. He was released on bail without too much fuss. By the time he was released, however, word of his arrest had reached the strikers and 200 men were marching from the Two Mile with the intention of setting him free or being locked up with him. Port Hedland at this time had a white population of less than 200 and the sudden appearance of the strikers marching down the main street created considerable anxiety amongst the white townsfolk. Unaware of McLeod's release the marchers

<sup>55</sup> Letter, Bray to O'Neill, 3 May 1946.

<sup>56</sup> Native Affairs File, No. 800/45, p. 70.

<sup>57</sup> *West Australian*, 4 May 1946, p. 14.

<sup>58</sup> Native Affairs File, No. 895/46.

<sup>59</sup> Bosworth 1989, pp. 223-4.

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surrounded the gaol, hitting the corrugated iron walls with sticks and demanding that the police produce their man. It was only after someone discovered McLeod visiting a friend in the local hospital that they left. The march had been a landmark as a peaceful show of strength and McLeod records that the strikers 'had quite a different status in Port Hedland after this event'.<sup>60</sup>

### Support from Perth

In the meantime in Perth, the Committee for the Defence of Native Rights (CDNR) had been officially formed at a public meeting at the Town Hall, attended by 300 people.<sup>61</sup> The meeting demanded that Clancy and Dooley be freed, agreed to engage leading lawyer Fred Curran to defend McLeod and set about organising food and financial support. The Secretary of the Committee was an Anglican clergyman, Padre Peter Hodge, while its chairman was the communist general practitioner, Dr Alec Jolly. Although its most active members were communists<sup>62</sup> the list of speakers at the meeting shows that the strikers had much broader community support than this might indicate. They included N. Payne of the Tramways Union, Mrs Vallance of the Women's Christian Temperance Society, Tommy Bropho of the Perth Aboriginal Community, Katherine Susanna Prichard of the Perth Modern Women's Club and Mr Foxcroft of the Society of Friends.<sup>63</sup>

The commitment of some of the non-communist participants in the CDNR was to be sorely tested as their support of the Aboriginal workers forced them into unaccustomed confrontations with authority. McLeod, for instance, recounts the incident of a visit by Hodge to Port Hedland and the 12 Mile camp later established by the strikers. They were both arrested. The charge of 'being within five chains of a *congregation* of natives' must have seemed particularly ironic in view of Hodge's profession. On the same occasion the Padre was to demonstrate the courage of his convictions by addressing an extremely hostile meeting of white town and station people in Port Hedland.

After an initial hearing McLeod was kept in custody and only after an exchange of letters with Fred Curran was it possible to convince the official concerned that he ought to be bailed. Further obstruction was encountered when bail was set at £300.<sup>64</sup> Today's equivalent would be about \$12 000. Nonetheless being bailed enabled McLeod to get to Perth where he addressed many meetings and received expressions of support from union and community groups. These were by no means all left wing organisations and included the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the University of Western Australia's Student Guild. The students even staged a march in support of the strikers.<sup>65</sup>

Eventually McLeod was fined £50 and ordered to pay costs of almost the same amount. An interesting aspect of the trial was the use of the Criminal Investigation Branch's Detective Sergeant Richards, who later played prominent roles in the Petrov Affair and the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation. On this occasion, strangely like the Petrov Affair, Richards produced a 'document' which he alleged McLeod had written and which suggested that there were over '1,000 good Communists' amongst the Pilbara Aborigines. McLeod denied authorship but this did not deter the *West Australian*, which reported that he had admitted that the document was his.<sup>66</sup> The occasion of McLeod's sentencing was one of

<sup>60</sup> McLeod 1984, p. 56.

<sup>61</sup> *Workers' Star*, 27 May 1946.

<sup>62</sup> Davies 1988, p. 39.

<sup>63</sup> Native Affairs File, No. 894/46.

<sup>64</sup> *West Australian*, 21 June 1946, p. 6.

<sup>65</sup> *Workers' Star*, 22 June 1946, p. 12.

<sup>66</sup> *West Australian*, 21 June 1946, p. 6.

rejoicing for the authorities. Commissioner Bray wrote to the chief police officer in the North-West to congratulate him on the 'success'.<sup>67</sup>

Curran's defence of McLeod had been based on the view that the Native Affairs Act, under which McLeod had been charged, contravened the British Anti-Slavery Act of 1833. This made some ground in the public arena but totally failed to impress the local magistrate. The gaoling of Clancy and Dooley had already provided a focus for public support for the strikers and the trial and conviction of McLeod added a second. The Committee for the Defence of Native Rights used it as the basis of an appeal to the Secretary General of the United Nations Organisation in which they detailed 'the feudal treatment of Aborigines in Northern Australia'.<sup>68</sup> The case also received some attention from the international press, but in Australia it was very much a case of the media ignoring the strike or being content to repeat the Native Affairs Department's views. It was left to the *Workers' Star* to provide the other side of the story.

The combination of the public campaign and the fact that many strikers remained solid despite the harassment led to the release of Clancy McKenna and Dooley Binbin late in June. They had served seven weeks of their three month sentences. The catalyst for this action was reported as being 'representations from the ALP'.<sup>69</sup> Certainly some sections of the Australian Labor Party did support the strikers. Senator Dorothy Tangney was one of the leading figures to identify publicly with the campaign. The mass media, however, ignored her press releases and it was left to the *Workers' Star* to report her saying:

Aborigines are being exploited in the North West by the big landowning companies and absentee owners, who employ them at a few shillings a week, and don't even provide sanitation or shelter for them.<sup>70</sup>

The State Labor Government was not as impressed by the apparent injustices as the Senator.

The CDNR did not, however, have the public campaign all its own way. After the release of Clancy and Dooley, the Committee attempted to see the Premier and Minister for Native Affairs with the intention of demanding the repeal of the Native Affairs Act. Premier Wise refused to see them. Another indication of the difficulties they faced occurred in the coal mining town of Collie, where the local Council refused a request to support the strikers and dismissed the CDNR as 'cranks'. It was the sort of report about the strike which the mass media did feel able to carry.<sup>71</sup>

### Starting again

Despite the efforts of the authorities the strike showed no signs of going away. In July, some stations, having finished shearing, reduced the wages they had increased in May to get the strikers back to work quickly. Some of these workers now rejoined the strike. In other cases, strikers were promised two pounds per week if they returned to work but when they got to the station found they would only be paid one pound, so they too rejoined the strike. Clancy and Dooley had both been released and were active again and discovered that many non-station employers were prepared to meet the demands. Clancy was, in fact, working for Constable Marshall fixing his car and was being paid the thirty shillings a week which had been the strikers' central demand. Clancy and Dooley set about visiting the

<sup>67</sup> Letter, Bray to O'Neill, 26 June 1946.

<sup>68</sup> Davies 1988, p. 36.

<sup>69</sup> *Workers' Star*, 12 July 1946, p. 2.

<sup>70</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> *West Australian*, 10 July 1946, p. 5.

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stations on which strikers had returned to work. They found that most had done so because of police coercion.

Dooley decided that a dramatic gesture was needed to 'start the strike again'. The Port Hedland race meeting, when many workers would be in town was chosen as the best time. A train load of strikers left Marble Bar for the race meeting but at the Four Mile outside Port Hedland police stopped the train and ordered them off. Clancy and Dooley got them into ranks and they marched into the Two Mile Camp. The next day the Port Hedland police got a shock when the man they had sent out to the Four Mile to sell food to the strikers rushed back into town to report that he could not find anyone there. Local Constable Fletcher then went out to the Two Mile camp with Richards and O'Neill and ordered the strikers back to the Four Mile. They voted to stay where they were and continue the strike.<sup>72</sup> That night McLeod crept out to visit them evading the police whose job it was to ensure that the camp was isolated. A meeting was held and it was decided that the strikers would avoid any outright confrontation with the police. The next day the races were over and station people and their workers streamed out of town. At the Two Mile they were stopped by the strikers. McLeod recalls, 'they lost whatever Blackfellows they were carrying to join the mob'.<sup>73</sup>

The problem for the strikers now became one of how to feed the growing mob. McLeod was working as a wharfie in Port Hedland and donated most of his income to buy food. Under post-war rationing, commodities such as tea, sugar and butter could only be purchased upon production of Government-issued coupons. Previously Aboriginal workers had received these from the stations on which they were employed. Now in the camp outside Port Hedland the strikers were no longer getting these coupons. Dooley and another leader, Jackson, went to the police station to demand the ration coupons, which were properly the property of the strikers. They were told that the station managers had the coupons and that if they returned to the stations they would be able to get them. They then asked McLeod to help but when he went to the police station he was hustled away by four policemen. Under the impression that McLeod had been arrested again, Clancy got the 80 strikers who had been waiting at the cricket ground for news of the outcome to march on the police station. Once again they surrounded it and demanded McLeod's release. But the police had already let him go. So instead they demanded rifle and beachcombing permits which would help them subsist. The marches on the gaol provided the focus for the ballad 'Clancy and Dooley and Don McLeod' by Dorothy Hewett. The ballad paints the emotions of the time well, capturing the sheer heroism of the strikers and the strength of their leaders in standing up to entrenched prejudice. It played a significant part in the public campaign in support of the strike as Hewett was often called upon to recite it at public meetings.

After another meeting McLeod again approached local police in their role as 'protectors of natives' regarding the ration coupons and was again arrested under s. 39 for meeting with the strikers at their camp. In the town white ill-feeling was increasing. There were reports of the formation of white vigilante gangs and the proprietor of the Pier Hotel threatened to shoot McLeod.<sup>74</sup> The strikers decided to split into two groups. One would camp at the 12 Mile outside Port Hedland and the other would return to Moolyella, inland from Marble Bar.

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<sup>72</sup> Binbin et al. n.d., p. 4.

<sup>73</sup> McLeod n.d.

<sup>74</sup> *Workers' Star*, 9 August 1946, p. 1.

It was at this time that Padre Hodge visited the 12 Mile and was arrested along with McLeod for doing so.<sup>75</sup> Hodge was dealt with immediately and was fined. McLeod was remanded in custody for two weeks<sup>76</sup> and was later sentenced to three months imprisonment. In the meantime Clancy was organising various self-supporting enterprises. He was using McLeod's old V8 and travelling the district setting up camps as collection points for pearl shell, kangaroo skins and goat skins. Schools were also established by two self-taught strikers, Tommy Sampi and Gordon MacKay, at the 12 Mile and Moolyella camps. The Education Department refused to send them teachers but did provide correspondence courses.<sup>77</sup> The schools also acted as information centres with the teachers reading newspaper reports and correspondence about the strike to the people.

The camps continued to be visited by station managers, accompanied by armed police, trying to 'encourage' the strikers to return to work. With basic provisions in short supply there was constant pressure on the strikers but, rather than give in, they continued to develop their organisation. After refusing an offer of one pound a week for a return to work, the strikers formed the North West Workers' Association, with the central policy of a full pastoral award wage for Aboriginal station workers.

In October appeals by Clancy, Dooley, McLeod and Hodge against their convictions all failed in the WA Court of Criminal Appeal. The appeals had been funded by the Committee to Defend Native Rights from donations raised in Perth and the eastern States. The *West Australian*, which had given no space to the views of the strikers or their supporters, reported those of 'the learned judges' at some length.<sup>78</sup> Just how learned those views were was revealed shortly afterwards when the matter was taken to the High Court. The point at issue was the interpretation placed on s. 39 of the Native Affairs Act which made it unlawful for anyone apart from officials 'to enter or remain within or upon a place where natives are camped or where any native may be congregated in the course of travel in pursuance of any native custom'. In the appeal case the Chief Justice of WA, Sir John Dwyer, observed that the law was intended to protect 'the natives' and that 'the main method by which that purpose is to be achieved is by the separation of the natives from the non-native population'. Lloyd Davies' comment that this indicated at least, that His Honour understood the politics of the situation, seems apposite.<sup>79</sup> That the actual law was not so well understood in WA was revealed in the High Court where Sir Owen Dixon, 'who has always been considered the High Court's master of the English language', said that the WA judges' construction of the clause could not have been reached by any person 'unless his mind be controlled by some considerations external to the precise text or his sensibilities to English forms of speech have been dulled'.<sup>80</sup> The convictions were quashed.

While the legal arguments raged the strike itself had become much more than a withdrawal of labour. Self-governing communities, supported by their own enterprise and by donations from supporters, had been established at the 12 Mile and Moolyella. All the attempts of managers, police, courts and Native Affairs officials to intimidate the strikers had proved fruitless. Far from losing momentum, the strike was growing. The experience of independence in the camps added dignity and solidarity to the strikers' armoury, while the reactions of management and its political allies actually strengthened the strike in some quarters. In November 1946, for instance, the *Workers' Star* reported a further 100 workers

<sup>75</sup> *West Australian*, 14 August 1946, p. 6.

<sup>76</sup> *West Australian*, 15 August 1946, p. 10.

<sup>77</sup> *Workers' Star*, 4 October 1946, p. 5, 8 November 1946, p. 5.

<sup>78</sup> *West Australian*, 13 October 1946, p. 11.

<sup>79</sup> Davies 1988, p. 38.

<sup>80</sup> *West Australian Law Reports* 1947, p. 1.

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joining the strike over the issue of intimidation. The Department had also given in on the question of ration coupons which were now being supplied to the 12 Mile Co-Operative Store.<sup>81</sup> A report by a medical practitioner at the time told the Commissioner for Native Affairs, no doubt to his considerable chagrin, that 'these natives are well behaved, making an effort to uplift themselves and endeavouring to keep some laws of hygiene'.<sup>82</sup> The doctor went further, offering the advice that the proper way to resolve the dispute was through a tripartite conference at which 'the natives should be given an opportunity to express their views'.

At this stage of the strike serious differences in negotiation stance emerged. In January 1947 some of the Warragine mob were moving back to the station when they were met by Clancy and a group of activists intent on talking them out of returning to work. After considerable argument and a show of force by the pro-strike faction, they agreed to re-join the 12 Mile camp. This resulted in Clancy and 12 others being arrested and charged under s. 9 of the Act for preventing those men from working.<sup>83</sup> In the public arena reaction to this arrest revealed the extent of the gains the campaign had been making. The CDNR held a series of meetings to demand Clancy's release. The Minister for Justice, Nulsen, responded to information supplied from those meetings much more positively than had previously been the case. He replied that 'if the facts you have been giving me are correct we should be supporting the native co-op at Port Hedland [the 12 Mile] and giving them all the help we can'.<sup>84</sup>

The greater interest in finding a long term solution to the issues raised by the strike may have been related to 'trouble with natives' spreading. In Carnarvon a demonstration of Aboriginal workers led by Walter Cameron demanded better conditions, while at Berrimah in the Northern Territory a strike by Aboriginal workers quickly realised its goals of a 30 shilling per week wage plus provision of a canteen, school and other amenities. There were also reports of 'unrest' from Broome, while Perth Aborigines sent Tom Bropho and Jeff Harper on a tour of the South-West to look at working conditions and gather support for the North-West strike.

After he had spent one month in gaol, Clancy's sentence was remitted. During his absence, Ernie Mitchell had been leading the 12 Mile community and his success may be judged from the fact that after Clancy's return the community contributed to send Ernie and his wife, Topsy, on a holiday. Subsequently, Mitchell too was arrested when police visited the camp 'and remonstrated with them for stopping any natives who desired to return to work'. In response Mitchell 'spoke out loudly' and was arrested for his effort.<sup>85</sup> The courage it took to stand up to police in such a situation can hardly be overestimated. The oral tradition reserves a particular place for another leader of the strikers' community, Jackson, who frequently met armed police coming into the camp to deliver similar messages with just two words indicating, in language to which they were well used, that they should go away.

On the other hand the High Court decision had made s. 39 of the Native Affairs Act almost unenforceable and this allowed the strikers a new freedom of organisation. McLeod was able to take a more direct role and put great effort into organising self-supporting activities. The work Clancy had begun collecting goat skins was allocated to the disaffected

<sup>81</sup> *Workers' Star*, 29 November 1946, p. 6.

<sup>82</sup> Letter, Dr Musso to Commissioner for Native Affairs, 2 January 1947.

<sup>83</sup> *Workers' Star*, 31 January 1947, p. 1.

<sup>84</sup> *Workers' Star*, 7 February 1947, p. 5, 14 February 1947, p. 6.

<sup>85</sup> Letter, McGeary to Commissioner for Native Affairs, 24 September 1947.

Waragine mob and shell collecting parties were organised north and south of Port Hedland. But these were minor activities compared with the beginning of prospecting for minerals. This would later develop into a sizeable business and provide the economic basis for self-supporting communities such as those at Strelley and Yandeyarra. Both that and the subsequent loss of the rights to the mineral deposits they discovered are, however, another story.<sup>86</sup>

#### The end of the strike

By mid-1947 the strike had settled down into a war of attrition. As the new shearing season approached, the pastoralists sent a delegation to the Minister for Native Affairs pointing out that without Aboriginal workers they would be unable to muster their sheep and thus would be prevented from shearing. The Minister was also approached by a Roman Catholic missionary, Father Bryan, 'in relation to certain influences amongst the strikers'.<sup>87</sup> Bryan had already shown his colours in the strike when he spoke against Hodge at the public meeting in Port Hedland referred to above. Now he managed to so impress the Minister with his 'wise and balanced appreciation of the situation' that he was sent, along with the Acting Commissioner for Native Affairs, to tour the Pilbara and compile a report on the strike.<sup>88</sup>

One result was that the Government agreed to subsidise the establishment of the ironically named White Springs Mission, of which Bryan was to be the head.<sup>89</sup> Peter Biskup has described the move as 'an attempt to undermine McLeod's influence in the district'.<sup>90</sup> In fact the Mission was also part of a new wave of bureaucratic thought in regard to WA's 'native problem'. Riding the crest of the wave was the new Commissioner for Native Affairs, Stanley Middleton. He had been brought in from the colonial Administration of the Territory of Papua and New Guinea in the hope that WA's 'natives' would prove amenable to the 'benevolent paternalism' which the Australian colonial regime considered a hallmark of its control of TPNG. It was characteristic of his enthusiastically assimilationist approach that while Middleton was refusing to even consider the demands of the 12 Mile and Moolyella communities for grants of land to enable them to expand their self-supporting activities, he organised the reservation of some 230 000 acres for the White Springs Mission.<sup>91</sup> In keeping with the TPNG colonialist tradition the Mission would operate 'along the lines of a pastoral concern to train boys in station work, and the girls [would get] training to fit them for domestic work'.<sup>92</sup> The Mission failed to attract any converts but was able to keep operating on the Government subsidies until 1951.

Suddenly Government funds were also available for mission schools in other areas most affected by the strike. The Church of Christ received funding for a school at its Carnarvon Mission.<sup>93</sup> Father Bryan offered to set up a similarly supported school adjacent to the 12 Mile community<sup>94</sup> and the Methodist Church was approached to 'set up a school

<sup>86</sup> McLeod 1984, pp. 93ff.

<sup>87</sup> Note dated 14 April 1947, from personal notes made by R.R. McDonald while Minister for Native Affairs.

<sup>88</sup> Letter, McDonald to Archbishop Prendville, 8 April 1947.

<sup>89</sup> Native Affairs File, No. 1039/47.

<sup>90</sup> Biskup 1965, p. 236.

<sup>91</sup> Native Affairs File, No. 1039/47.

<sup>92</sup> Letter, McBeath to Minister for Native Affairs, 12 October 1948.

<sup>93</sup> Letter, Minister for Native Affairs to Forest, 10 February 1948.

<sup>94</sup> Letter, Bray to Minister for Education, 25 February 1948.



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and work among the Moolyella natives'.<sup>95</sup> Other offers of assistance were also made as the Department of Native Affairs tried to undermine the strike, including one from Karl Drake-Brockman offering himself for the job of Commissioner for Native Affairs.<sup>96</sup>

Two other pieces of correspondence in this period deserve mention for what they reveal about attitudes in the bureaucracy and the white community. The first involves a Department of Native Affairs Inspector, Mcgaffin, who was stationed at Derby. He complained that the Department was involved in 'slavery' and that far from improving the situation of those they were supposed to protect, officials did not even have the courage to enforce s. 18 of the Native Affairs Act which related to terms and conditions of employment.<sup>97</sup> Having drawn these matters to the attention of the Commissioner for Native Affairs by letter, Mcgaffin went further, charging that his fellow inspectors were too intent upon being friendly with the pastoralists to be able to do their job properly. A Departmental memorandum dismissed the allegations but included enquiries from other officers as to how Mcgaffin could be himself dismissed.<sup>98</sup>

A less, or perhaps more, serious complaint, but one equally revealing of relations between the white community and Aborigines, came from R. Scott, a farmer of Watheroon. Scott was incensed at a ruling of the local football league that 'no more than 8 natives be allowed in a football team'. He saw this as directed at his own successful team which had fewer than that number of whites. He also pointed out that such a ruling would lead to a marked deterioration in the standard of the game in remote areas.<sup>99</sup>

Scott and Mcgaffin, however, represented very minor chinks in the armoury of control and the overwhelming impression from Departmental files is that white opinion was strongly on the side of officials in deploying all their bureaucratic weaponry against the strikers. They were harassed in their communities by hectoring Inspectors and armed police, they were arrested for speaking out in favour of the strike, their children were taken from them with the connivance of missions and so on. The cost of such activity to taxpayers must have been considerable but at no stage was this considered. The communities' demands for land to facilitate their self-supporting activities would certainly have cost much less. All the reports to the Minister for Native Affairs, including the lengthy Bateman Report of 1947, however, recommended that the 'native problem' was best dealt with 'professionally'. In practice this meant the implementation of TPNG style paternalism under Middleton. The strikers wanted the freedom to work out their own futures. Middleton's line was that they must assimilate. In practice this meant accepting the lowest positions white society had to offer.

When the 1949 shearing season began Mt Edgar and Limestone stations agreed to pay the rates and provide the conditions demanded by the strikers. With all Pilbara wool being shipped from Port Hedland the workers appealed to the Seamen's Union to apply bans to wool shorn on other stations. Ron Hurd, a prominent communist, was then Secretary of the Fremantle Branch of the SUA and had no trouble in convincing his members to impose the ban. Government officials and shipping agents tried various ruses to get the wool away. At times they claimed that the ban in fact applied only to Mt Edgar and Limestone wool, and at others that all wool on the wharf was from these two stations. They found the seamen difficult to fool. Eventually the Deputy Commissioner for Native Affairs, Elliot-

<sup>95</sup> Letter, Middleton to Taylor, 20 May 1948.

<sup>96</sup> Letter, Drake-Brockman to Minister for Native Affairs, 22 July 1948.

<sup>97</sup> Letter, Mcgaffin to Commissioner for Native Affairs, 29 March 1948.

<sup>98</sup> Department of Native Affairs, Memorandum, 12 July 1948.

<sup>99</sup> Letter, Scott to Commissioner for Native Affairs, n.d.

Smith, gave McLeod an assurance 'that the wages and conditions we had negotiated on Mt. Edgar and Limestone would be applied throughout the Pilbara'.<sup>100</sup> The bans were lifted and workers returned to many stations. Weeks later, after shearing was completed and the clip had been shipped it emerged that the Department had no intention of honouring this undertaking.<sup>101</sup>

### Conclusion

For most of those involved this was the end of the strike. Many had gone to gaol and suffered considerable personal hardship but the strength of purpose demonstrated by the Aboriginal pastoral workers and their families had brought a new element into WA labour relations. While the strike did not end exploitation it limited the extent to which it would be possible to take Aboriginal labour for granted.

It is in this sense that the strike is a most significant event in Australian labour history. The balance of forces that operated around and within the events described here, however, also serve to set the action in a broader context. Most of the analysis of the strike has concentrated on it as an episode of black/white relations in this country. From McLeod's own recent thinking to Mandle's fine scholarly effort, the tendency has been to see the events in the Pilbara in 1946 as part of an answer to 'Australia's Aboriginal problem'.<sup>102</sup> This is no doubt a reasonable approach to take, and in the context of wishing to be relevant to policy debates is perhaps the most effective. From a more purely scholastic viewpoint, however, the tendency to view the action of Aboriginal workers as primarily relevant to issues of race runs the danger of missing quite a lot.

In this case it has tended to underplay the importance of the strike for the labour movement, both as an issue of the day and as a touchstone of political attitudes. The role of the Communist Party has been greatly understated, by non- or former- communists, as well as by less involved commentators. This has led to a lack of appreciation of the broader political issues at stake in the strike. To take one example: Middleton's support for the Roman Catholic missionary, Father Bryan, may be seen as part of his assimilationist stance and as such merely a matter of policy direction. It may equally, however, reflect a desire on the part of the WA Establishment to balance the views of progressive churchmen such as Padre Hodge, not to mention the Quakers, at a time when radicalism was seen to be making some progress in this very conservative region. It might also be seen in the context of the post-war push by Roman Catholic anti-communists to influence the course of events in WA.

The strike has also tended to be over-shadowed by the fortunes of the self-supporting communities which grew up in its wake. While these fortunes have been mixed the fact that such communities still exist at all is testament to their ability to overcome difficulties, many created by Government policy, and to maintain their independence. That they came into existence a generation before the current land rights and out-stations movements suggests that their pioneering role deserves greater recognition and that their difficult histories require closer scrutiny. Tom Wright's vision of 'a new deal for Australia's Aborigines' had seen Government action as the lynch-pin of the move towards self-governing communities. The Pilbara pastoral workers' strike of 1946-9 shows that these Aboriginal workers were more than capable of initiating the necessary action themselves. It also shows, however, the difficulties such action faces where it is opposed by entrenched

<sup>100</sup> McLeod 1984, p. 64.

<sup>101</sup> WA Parliamentary Debates, 23 August 1949.

<sup>102</sup> McLeod 1984, Mandle 1978.

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conservatism. The breaking down of such resistance would seem as urgent a task for the labour movement today as it was when Tom Wright raised it in 1939.

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