

Thousands commemorate Wave Hill walk-off, birth of Indigenous land rights battle

Freedom Day festival celebrates August 1966 strike that kicked off a tradition of Indigenous Australian protest – one that continues at the festival itself



Children hitch a ride in the back of a Bedford truck – a replica of that used in the historic Wave Hill walk-off in 1966. Photograph: Helen Davidson for the Guardian

By Helen Davidson in Kalkarindji

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Thousands flocked to the remote Aboriginal community of Kalkarindji on Friday to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Wave Hill walk-off.

Among the politicians, union members, and supporters gathered at the Freedom Day festival, were the participants of the August 1966 strike and their families. Many attendees used the event to protest against current employment programs which

they argued still treated Indigenous people like second class citizens working for below minimum wage.

The Wave Hill walk-off came after years of exploitation, violence and murders of Aboriginal people in the region. In protest against poor conditions, meagre wages and rations in return for hard work, Vincent Lingiari led 200 people off the Wave Hill cattle station. The fight stretched for seven years, and laid the foundations for the Indigenous land rights battle. It wasn't until 1975 that the Gurindji won their land back in a historic ceremony attended by the then prime minister, Gough Whitlam.

Selma Smiler, the granddaughter of Lingiari, said her grandfather "had nothing but courage and pride and his people behind him" when he led the stockmen and families to Wattie Creek.

The ceremony participants and crowd had walked from the nearby Kalkarindji, where they had unveiled new signage for the heritage listed walk, before taking to the trail themselves. The family of Eddie Mabo tearfully thanked the Gurindji for inviting them to the event.

Smiler spoke about her grandfather. "He's a legend among Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders," she told the crowd, gathered in a bush clearing near the Victoria River.

"I'm very proud to be part of his bloodline even though people always ask what it's like growing up in his shadow. I'm a very proud granddaughter."

"He fought for every other tribe on Gurindji country," said another granddaughter. "I'd like to see there are changes happening."



Jimmy Wavehill was a young stockman on Wave Hill cattle station who walked off the job in 1966 with Vincent Lingiari, to protest against poor conditions and pay, and to demand the return of their lands. Photograph: Helen Davidson for the Guardian

Jimmy Wavehill, one of those to walk off in 1966, told Guardian Australia the station owners, Vesty's, did nothing for Aboriginal people in return for their hard work.

"They used us, just like a slave," said Wavehill. "They used to tell us to just work hard. It made it good for them, but not good for us. They could have made something good for us, we could have been a family and we wouldn't have walked off the station. But they done the wrong thing themselves. It wasn't Aboriginal people that started it.

"They didn't like Aboriginal people."

Central Land Council chair, Francis Kelly, told the crowd the fight "wasn't finished yet".

"We're proud of those people, the Gurindji mob, fighting the government, [but now] the government is making us weak."

Kelly called for greater government support of Indigenous rangers to protect outstations and lands, and to work with elders.

Federal and NT Labor politicians, as well as Indigenous affairs minister Nigel Scullion and Greens leader Richard Di Natale, also addressed the crowd, promising to keep speeches short as people wilted in the heat.

Much of the event's focus was on the assistance of the union movement to the Gurindji and others camped at Wattie Creek, and many now called for wage equality and reform of welfare and employment programs.

"It takes a particular kind of courage to quietly pack up the belongings you have and just walk off work," said the federal opposition leader, Bill Shorten.

"Seven years to fight. It is amazing. Nine years until we saw that scene of Gough Whitlam pouring sand into Lingiari's hand.

"What were they fighting? Power, privilege, money, racism."

He said it also made him proud of the trade union movement which came down and provided assistance.

Shorten said the adage "a fair day's wage" was still not the case.

“It is long overdue to have a discussion about equal wages in this country. That is long overdue.”

He recalled Lingiari’s words in 1975 that “we are all mates now”, but said “you can’t be mates, you can’t be fair dinkum, until you have true equality”.

Scullion praised the elders in attendance for their role in the walk-off and subsequent fight for land rights, and noted those who had not lived to see the anniversary.

He said the next step of land rights had to include better communication and less bureaucracy for traditional owners seeking to create economic development with their land.

His speech was interrupted by a crowd of protesters who turned their back on the minister and held a banner which read “no justice, just us”.

A statement from the group said they were descendants of the Gurindji stockmen and families, angry at the response of federal and NT governments to Don Dale abuses.



A march to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Wave Hill walk-off crosses a bridge over the Victoria River at Kalkarindji in the Northern Territory. Photograph: Helen Davidson for the Guardian

Scullion acknowledged their action, and said he didn't believe they meant any disrespect to the traditional owners who had invited the delegates and dignitaries to the event.

His comment prompted cries of "shame" from the crowd and others, including union delegates, also stood. Scullion continued his speech over chanting, until an organiser stepped in and asked the protesters to "show respect to the old people here", and the crowd dispersed.

Indigenous leader and newly elected Labor senator Pat Dodson thanked Scullion for his address and urged meaningful bipartisan discussions.

"We'll be looking at him [in parliament] and saying, OK comrade, are you fair dinkum about working for justice for the Aboriginal people, or are you just full of you-know-what?" Dodson said. "We've got to get down to real discussions and real outcomes for the people."

The Freedom Day festival continues over the weekend, with cultural activities and events and live music.