

Fifty years since the Aboriginal stockmen's strike

By Richard Phillips
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Fifty years ago, on August 23, 1966, more than 200 Aboriginal stockmen and domestic servants walked out on strike, demanding equal pay and other basic rights at the Wave Hill cattle station in Australia's Northern Territory.

Conditions at the large and highly-profitable property, which was owned by the British agribusiness Vestey's, were brutal. Like their Aboriginal counterparts across rural and remote Australia, Vestey's stockmen received far lower wages than non-indigenous workers—\$6.34 and \$33 per week respectively—or were paid in rations of salt beef, flour, sugar, tea and tobacco.

Indigenous female domestic servants at Vestey's were rarely, if ever, paid wages. Aboriginal families were accommodated in small tin sheds on the property; their children were given no formal education and were dragooned into work as soon as possible.

Many Aborigines had no voting rights, with government authorities claiming that they were part of an "inferior race" that was "dying out." Indigenous children of mixed parentage were removed from their parents by missionaries and government officials and taken into "protection," where they were mainly trained as unskilled cheap labour.

In 1966, Vestey's and the Liberal-Country Party coalition government, which was then in office in Canberra, were deeply hostile to the strike and did all they could to defeat it. Five decades later, Australia's ruling elite celebrates the event as a "foundational step in the struggle for land rights."

While the anniversary of the walkout has been commemorated each year with a "Freedom Day" festival in the Kalkaringi and Daguragu settlements at nearby Wattie Creek, several Liberal, Labor and Greens MPs decided to participate in this year's event, along with scores of union officials and TV camera crews.

Labor leader Bill Shorten told the festival that the striking stockmen "were fighting power, privilege, money, racism." Their struggle, he enthused, "made us all better Australians."

Shorten's comments were cynical in the extreme. They were aimed at covering up Labor's political record and the bitter fact that land rights, native title and other forms of land ownership have resolved none of the social disasters facing Aboriginal workers and their families. Indeed, the granting of certain "land rights" over the intervening years has only exacerbated the social divide among Aborigines, fostering a tiny well-off layer of businessmen and bureaucrats—or "Abocrats," as many ordinary Aborigines call them.

The 1966 Wave Hill walkout emerged as part of a growing post-World War II movement of militant working-class struggles in Australia and internationally, which reached its peak between the mid-1960s and 1975.

During the 19th century, Australia's indigenous population had been driven off their tribal lands along Australia's eastern coast and in Tasmania, and ousted from Australia's far north in the first decades of the 20th century.

Because of labour shortages during WWII, however, increasing

numbers of Aborigines in remote Australia were recruited to work on large farms and pastoral stations. This created the conditions for Aboriginal workers to come into contact with left-wing and socialist-minded unionised workers. Discussions began about how to end the slave-like conditions that the Aboriginal workers confronted.

Inspired by previous battles—a bitter three-year wage strike from 1946 by 800 Aboriginal shearers in Western Australia's Pilbara, followed by a series of hard-fought industrial disputes in northern Australia during the 1950s and early 1960s—the Vestey's stockmen decided to take strike action.

The Wave Hill walkout began almost a year after the federal arbitration and conciliation commission, which set wages for all Australian employees, had awarded Aboriginal stockmen equal wages in 1965. The commission, however, gave employers three years to implement the rates.

Station owners responded to the commission's decision by introducing new methods, including the use of helicopters to round up the cattle, and then sacking stockmen and expelling them and their families from the large cattle farms.

The walkout was led by Vincent Lingiari and involved members of the Gurindji, Ngarinman, Bilinara, Warlpiri and Mudbara tribes. It followed an unsuccessful equal pay strike four months earlier by Aboriginal stockmen at Newcastle Waters, about 170 kilometres east of Wave Hill.

Lingiari decided to strike after meeting Dexter Daniels of the Northern Australian Workers Union and various members of the Stalinist Communist Party of Australia (CPA). At that stage the CPA was the only political party with a substantial working-class base that opposed the unjust and discriminatory exploitation of Aborigines.

The strike won powerful support from workers and students throughout the country, who recognised it as a key battle in the struggle to overcome the atrocious conditions and inequities facing Aboriginal workers.

Wharfies, seamen, metal, building, engineering and meat workers' unions organised financial support and speaking tours for the Wave Hill strike leaders. During one five-week tour of east coast cities, strike leaders addressed more than 60 meetings and raised thousands of dollars. Actors' Equity members, along with university and high-school student groups, participated in these support campaigns.

In 1967, the first year of the Wave Hill strike, the Liberal-Country Party government held a national referendum over whether to change the constitution in order to confer powers on the federal government to make laws with regard to the Aboriginal population, and to include it in the national census. In a powerful indication of the extent of popular opposition to the oppression of Aborigines, more than 90 percent of voters answered with an overwhelming "Yes." This was the highest ever "Yes" vote recorded in an Australian referendum.

The Wave Hill walkout, which captured the imagination, and won the support, of broad sections of the population, was part of an escalating series of industrial battles over wages, conditions and the country's repressive industrial relations laws. In 1969, a de facto general strike

erupted after Victorian tramways union secretary Clarrie O'Shea was jailed for the non-payment of industrial fines imposed on his union. The three-day strike secured O'Shea's release and effectively ended the repressive "penal powers" contained in the laws.

The wave of militant action raised both the possibility and necessity of a unified struggle by all workers—Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike—not only for equal pay for Aborigines, but against the capitalist profit system itself, the source of oppression of the working class as a whole, on the basis of a socialist program. The Stalinist CPA, however, was totally opposed to this perspective. Its program was grounded on nationalism and the defence Australian capitalism, promoting illusions in parliament, social reforms and the election of a federal Labor government.

In 1967, the CPA's national congress declared: "The task of communists and others really desirous of assisting the Aboriginal and Islander peoples is to give them fraternal aid in their struggle for emancipation ... The working class, especially its industrial section, is the main social force in Australia in the struggle for reforms within capitalism and for decisive social change."

It was on this reactionary, national-reformist basis that the CPA betrayed the Wave Hill walkout and diverted it into a political campaign for "land rights." This, it falsely claimed, would end racial oppression and produce progressive social reform.

Well-known author and leading CPA member Frank Hardy played a key role in this process, liaising with senior Labor Party figures and helping to formulate the "land rights" demand, including an appeal to then Governor-General Sir Richard Casey.

The Wave Hill strike ended in 1973 after the Whitlam Labor government reissued the leases for Wave Hill, providing a 3,300-square kilometre section to the Murrumulla Gurindji Cattle Company, which had been established by the Aboriginal stockmen, and handing the rest of the property back to Vestey's.

"Land rights," was enshrined in Labor's *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act of 1975* and in the *Racial Discrimination Act of the same year*. It was on this basis that Whitlam, and the most conscious layers of the political elite, moved to cultivate a privileged social layer of indigenous leaders who would defend the profit system, suppress the political demands of ordinary Aboriginal workers, and, above all, divide them from their non-Aboriginal class brothers and sisters.

Labor's measures coincided with the state institutionalisation of feminism, multi-culturalism, black-nationalism and other forms of "identity politics." These were promoted by various petty-bourgeois radical tendencies hostile to Marxism, which is grounded on the primacy of class, as opposed to skin colour, ethnicity, gender or sexual preference.

New government departments, academic positions and professions were created precisely at the point when a growing movement of workers was developing against the Whitlam Labor government and its increasingly right-wing policies. In a bid to camouflage Labor's anti-working class agenda, the Stalinist CPA and various middle-class "lefts," hailed Whitlam's land rights policies and its divisive identity politics agenda as "progressive."

In November 1975, however, the Whitlam government—under conditions of an escalating economic crisis, rising inflation and militant working class demands for pay increases, was dismissed via a constitutional coup by Governor-General John Kerr. The opposition Liberal-Country Party coalition headed by Malcolm Fraser was appointed as a "caretaker government," pending a federal election in December.

Behind the coup was the fear of major sections of the political, corporate and financial establishment, along with their co-thinkers in London and Washington, that Labor was losing its political control over the working class.

While the "Canberra coup" prevented Labor passing its land rights and racial discrimination legislation, the new Fraser Liberal-Country Party

government passed it, without dissension, in 1976.

The smooth political passage of the laws was yet another indication that the ruling elite recognised their value in separating indigenous and non-indigenous workers along racial lines and suppressing the fundamental class issues at stake. In 1981, the Aboriginal Land Commissioner under the coalition government recommended that the Wave Hill strikers' land claim be granted.

In the fifty years since the Wave Hill strike erupted, the passage of various "land rights" laws have resulted in more than 80 percent of northern Australia being "owned" by indigenous people via native title, pastoral leases and other deals.

What has been the result? Oppression and exploitation continue unabated, while the social divide between a small, privileged Aboriginal elite and tens of thousands of socially-marginalised Aboriginal people has never been greater.

The subsequent fate of the Wave Hill strikers and their families, notwithstanding their heroic and determined fight against Vestey's, demonstrates that their "land rights" victory proved to be the opposite.

While the highly-skilled stockmen established the Murrumulla Cattle Company on Vestey's property, the pastoral business was never a viable economic proposition. It lacked finance and the other resources necessary to keep up with the demands of the capital-intensive global industry, which no longer relied on the talents and skills of large numbers of stockmen.

In 1979, cattle testing at Murrumulla produced positive results for brucellosis and tuberculosis. Half the stock had to be slaughtered. The property fell into disrepair, the stockmen went unpaid for weeks at a time, and the business collapsed in 1986.

Today, the descendants of the Wave Hill strikers, who live in the Daguragu and Kalkaringi communities on the banks of Wattie Creek, suffer from the same generational poverty, unemployment and associated social ills as the majority of indigenous communities in rural and remote Australia.

At Daguragu there are no jobs, and the only work available at Kalkaringi is through a Community Development Program, a revamped version of the government's poverty-level "work for the dole" scheme. And "dole" income is subject to the federal government's punitive and anti-democratic "income management" regime, which was introduced in 2007 in the course of the conservative Howard government's "Northern Territory Intervention." With bi-partisan support from Labor, the government dictates where and how indigenous welfare recipients can spend their income.

Today the only significant economic activity in Kalkaringi and Daguragu is at Kalkaringi, where the local football oval and basketball court are being upgraded. The project is being financed by a \$300,000 compensation payment for land compulsorily acquired during the "Intervention."

In 2008, the local council at Daguragu was shut down. Local indigenous leaders, the nominal land "owners," have since been instructed to sign 40- or 99-year leases with the federal government in order to secure funding for four new homes and two upgrades to existing properties.

While Australia's ruling elite and its pseudo-left apologists celebrate the anniversary of the Wave Hill walkout, the real lesson of the historic struggle waged by Lingiari and the other Aboriginal stockmen is that "land rights," "native title" and similar measures have been a political dead-end for Aboriginal workers.

Five decades since the walkout, the conditions of life confronting the overwhelming majority of Aborigines are nothing short of catastrophic. Australia's indigenous population suffers the highest rates of infant mortality, diabetes and disability, the lowest life expectancy, the highest unemployment and imprisonment rates, the worst housing conditions and the lowest educational levels in the country.

The infant mortality rate for indigenous children is almost double that for their non-indigenous counterparts—6.2 indigenous infant deaths per 1,000 live births, compared with 3.7 per 1,000 live births; death from diabetes is seven times higher than for other Australians and there is about 10 years difference in life expectancy between Aborigines and the non-indigenous population.

Perhaps the most damning exposure of the disastrous situation is revealed by the levels of indigenous suicide. Australia's official suicide rate is 13 per 100,000 people; for the indigenous population it is 26 per 100,000.

According to 2014 Australian Bureau of Statistics figures, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders aged 15–24 are four times more likely to die by suicide than their non-indigenous counterparts, and children aged 1–14 are nine times more likely to commit suicide. Recent data from 38 remote Australian postcode areas, most of them in northern Australia, reveals indigenous suicide rates to be between 100 and 199 per 100,000 people, one of the highest in the world.

Land rights, native title and similar racially-based programs espoused by the now defunct Stalinist CPA, Labor, the Greens and their pseudo-left allies have only widened social inequality within Australia's indigenous population. At one pole, the vast majority of Aborigines live in extreme poverty, whilst at the other, a small elite group of increasingly wealthy indigenous leaders, academics, public servants, bureaucrats and business operators, live in another, highly privileged, world.

These affluent layers, including prominent media-promoted figures such as Noel Pearson and Marcia Langton, use racial identity politics to suppress the fact that the historic oppression and social blight afflicting Aboriginal communities is a product of the capitalist profit system; that the majority of Aborigines are part of the working class—its most vulnerable layer; and that the only viable solution lies in a unified struggle of the working class as a whole—in Australia and internationally—to put an end to capitalism.

In every country the ruling elites work night and day to prevent such a struggle by dividing the working class along racial, religious and other artificial lines. This was, and is, the political foundation and purpose of “Aboriginal ownership,” self-determination” a “Treaty” between “white” and “black” Australians, a new “preamble” to the Constitution, and other racially divisive projects.

Fifty years after the Wave Hill walkout, the fundamental lesson posed before the most conscious workers and youth, irrespective of their race, colour or gender, lies in the unified fight for a revolutionary socialist perspective, which aims at establishing a workers' government to reorganise economic, political and social life to meet the pressing social needs of the majority, not the private profits of a parasitic minority. Such a government will develop, as one of its most urgent priorities, the policies and resources necessary to overcome the more than two century-old crimes perpetrated against Australia's indigenous population.

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