

Speech - Diana Plater

As Kevin Tory will be speaking more specifically about union involvement in the NSW Aboriginal political movement, including strike action that was taken, I will speak generally about just a few examples of union involvement with Aboriginal issues that I have come across in my work as a journalist covering Aboriginal affairs. On a personal level, I was involved in reporting the Noonkanbah story in the late 1970s but I will come back to that later.

More recently as a researcher and journalism teacher on a project, Hidden Histories: Aboriginal Inner-Sydney/Leichhardt stories, which is an Aboriginal history of Leichhardt and the inner Sydney area, I have learnt a bit more about union involvement. The history project involves Sydney University of Technology journalism students interviewing Aboriginal people, with the assistance of the Leichhardt Council Aboriginal Consultative COmmittee and writing their stories. It is one way of addressing concerns about media coverage of Aboriginal issues. We have been aware of these concerns for many years but they were also raised by the Royal COmmission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. The report we have been working on should be available in July.

When people think about Aborigines and trade unions, they usually first think about either the Pilbara cattlemen's strike in the 1940s or the Gurindji campaign in the mid 1960s.

But, according to Lester Bostock, the Koori filmmaker who has been attempting to raise money for a television documentary with the working title of Black Voices, there has been a relationship between the union movement and the Aboriginal political movement for at least 50 years.

For example, there were many Aboriginal members involved in the major strikes, particularly in the coalminers' and wharfies' strikes in the 1950s and in the shearers' strikes in the 1930s, 40s and 50s.

Probably one of the better known cases was the Pilbara stockmens' strike in the 1940s.

Don McLeod, a white prospector, who helped about 800 Aboriginal stockmen organise the major stockmen's strike against white station owners, was jailed for his involvement. He was charged under section 47 of the WA Natives' Affairs Act, with "enticing Aborigines from Service". Aboriginal strike leaders, Dooley and Clancy McKenna, also received three months hard labour. It was a state labor government at the time.

The strike received local support from groups as diverse as the Rootmakers' union and the Modern Womens Club

Interstate organisations included the Queensland Labor Council, Victorian Carpenters, Meatworkers and Ironworkers Unions and the Victorian Building Trades Federation. The strike also received support from Aboriginal groups around the country.

The strikers were demanding higher wages and better conditions, which apparently were granted in most cases, but they were also fighting for the right to choose their own representative, in this case Don McLeod.

I interviewed McLeod in the late 1970s when I went to the Pilbara and one of the stories I remember is about when the strike was planned. Because most of the Aboriginal stockmen couldn't read and write calendars were given out (bits of paper?) with the day of the strike marked on it, and each day they would cross off the date. That way all the stockmen knew which day to go on strike.

Realising that economic independence was essential for the Aborigines' survival, McLeod helped them to prospect for scheelite and other minerals in the Pilbara.

Later, the Aborigines, with McLeod as an adviser, formed the Northern Development and Mining Company; it bought Yandeeera station and three others from mining profits then, in 1970, took over Strelley station.

Strelley was an inspiration for other Aboriginal groups who gradually were able to buy back stations with funds from the Federal government, such as Noonkanbah in the Kimberleys. Like Strelley, noonkanbah established its own school, independent of the state education system, where children were taught first in their own languages and later in English.

But, meanwhile, in the 1960s conditions were no better for Aboriginal stockmen in the west and the Northern Territory.

This passage from Frank Hardy's book, the Unlucky Australians, sums up the scene.

During the height of the cattle season it is not unusual for aboriginal stockmen to work fourteen hours per day, seven days per week...A short visit to almost any station employing Aborigines in the northern territory will present the tourist with a frightening array of such environmental complaints as acute bronchial infection, malnutrition, pre natal and post natal deformities, trachoma, infected ears, partial and full deafness from fly-borne infection, berri berri, rickets and venereal disease....one employer openly stated that he used the whip on aborigines as one of his methods of industrial discipline! The historical aspects of the forceful alienation of the cattle lands, a lengthy period of brutality associated occasionally with attempts at genocide and the almost animalistic sexual domination of aboriginal groups by frontier type cattlemen, which even in recent years has included asexual traffic in aboriginal girls as young as seven years of age."

In 1965 the North Australian Workers Union (NAWU), led by Paddy Carroll, sponsored a test case on equal wages for Northern Territory Aborigines, by seeking to have the Cattle Station Industry (NT) Award amended to cover Aborigines.

Up to this time a piece of legislation known as the Wards Employment Ordinance remained in force in the NT. This ordinance laid down conditions covering the employment of Aborigines in all industries, including the pastoral industry, and established rates of pay, ration scales, and standards for housing.

Under this ordinance, Aboriginal men were paid \$6.32 a week for pastoral work, and women \$3.52 a week. At the same time, European stockmen were paid award wages ranging from \$34 to \$46 a week.

The result of the NAWU action was that in March 1966, the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission, as it then was, handed down a decision which put Aboriginal employees in the NT on the same basis as non-Aboriginal employees. However, the commission also accepted the argument put forward by pastoralists that the introduction of award wages should be delayed until December 1968 to allow them to prepare for the change.

In May 1966, Aboriginal stockmen and domestics on Newcastle Waters station, upset by the delay, and led by Dexter Daniels, an Aboriginal organiser with the NAWU, went on strike. Soon after, 200 people, mainly Gurindji, left the Vestey's Wave Hill station and established camp on traditional land at Wattie Creek (Daguragu) from where they petitioned the then governor general for the return of some 1290 square kilometres of tribal land.

The NAWU supported the Aboriginal "strikers", not only in proceedings before the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission, but also with funds, food and the use of motor vehicles. As the Gurindjis fight attracted more publicity, support came from bodies such as the Waterside Workers Federation, and Actors Equity, who sponsored speaking tours down south for Dexter Daniels, Vincent Lingiari and others. Other affiliates of the ACTU gave generously to both the NAWU and the Rights Council.

The Gurindji finally received leasehold title to their land at Daguragu on August 16 1975 and the Daguragu Aboriginal Land Trust was established by gazette notice on August 29 1984 to hold title to the land identified by the then Aboriginal land commissioner, Mr Justice Toohey, and subsequently extended by Mr Justice Maurice in his report of 11 April 1985.

In the years between the beginning of the NAWU's involvement to the successful conclusion, the central issue changed from the pursuit of equal wages to the return of tribal land to its traditional owners.

In the 70s Aboriginal groups were well aware of the importance of maintaining union support. In the Kimberleys - in the far north of Western Australia - the effect of equal wages had been the largescale laying off of Aboriginal workers, who had no choice but to become fringedwellers in the small towns.

Noonkanbah, at the time running sheep, was one of these white-owned stations that layed off its Aboriginal workers, who moved into the camps around Fitzroy Crossing. From there they agitated and fought to get Federal government funding to buy the station back.

When they did return to Noonkanbah, by then run-down and deserted by its former white owners, the Yungnora community began to run cattle but refused a white manager, preferring just to get advice from the government when they needed it. They were beginning to finally run their own lives when the mining companies started to hover around, demanding permission to look for diamonds and later for oil on their land.

The dispute that became famous in 1979/80 centred around an American company, Amax's wish to drill for oil on a sacred site on the station, known as Pea Hill. Right in the early days of the dispute Dickie Skinner, the chairman of the Yungnora community and Frank Chulung, a former chairman of the Kimberley Land Council, went to Perth to talk to unions about support for their struggle.

Dickie addressed a meeting of the Western Australian Trades and Labour Council (TLC) drawing an enthusiastic response from the delegates, representing nearly all the trade unions in the state. Motions of support were carried unanimously, and letters sent to the mining companies, Amax and CRA.

Later TLC meetings where other Noonkanbah people spoke were packed out and have been described to me as "extremely emotional."

When the crunch came in 1980 and the WA government (then led by Charlie Court) forced Amax to drill unionists black-banned the drilling rig. Scab labour was used instead on the rig and to drive the trucks in the convoy up the WA coast to the Kimberleys. Along the way protests were mounted and some local unionists were also involved in these.

Ofcourse, when Amax finally did drill on Pea Hill it found nothing. It's interesting to observe that the Yungnora community has now turned in on itself and has rejected traditional beliefs for fundamental Christianity, perhaps a response to that highly distressing period.

The film, On Sacred Ground, and Steve Hawke's book, Noonkanbah, give much more background and atmosphere about that event. But one thing I do recall is people telling me how Aboriginal people, churchmen and others who were protesting at the Noonkanbah turn-off were holding hands so tightly that it took several policemen to tear them apart.

I have just been in WA and it's like deja vu hearing Charlie Court's son, Richard Court, mouthing some of the similar confrontationist rhetoric of those days.

Like the Noonkanbah and Gurindji disputes, early Aboriginal political movements, even going back to last century were centred around land and dispossession of it by the white authorities.

In fact, when Aboriginal people were no longer able to continue their guerilla wars, they began a concerted campaign for land rights and civil rights.

One of the earliest intercommunity Aboriginal political organisations on the east coast was the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association, known as the AAPA, in the 1920s. It was led by Fred Maynard, a wharfie of mixed Aboriginal and African descent, who came from the Hunter Valley. He had strong links with Aboriginal farmers, who independently farmed their own land on the north coast.

Following World War these people were having their land taken away from them, sometimes for returned white soldiers who were given land in soldier settler schemes. It only added to the injustice that many of these Aboriginal people were also returned servicemen but were not eligible for the schemes.

In the 1930s, probably one of the most important and influential Aboriginal unionists was Bill Ferguson, who led the Aborigines Progressive Association from 1937 to his death in 1950. Ferguson was from western NSW, around Darlington Point in the Riverina district, where he had worked as a shearer and been a member of the AWU.

(The AFA is best known perhaps for its involvement in the Day of Mourning activities in 1938, which were a protest to the 150 year celebrations. The Day of Mourning committee published a manifesto, "Aborigines Claim Citizens Rights" for Australia Day 1938.)

During the Depression discrimination increased against Aborigines, who had even less chance than whites of finding work. Aboriginal workers were systematically excluded from the Dole and Relief work in NSW (except when there was some very hard digging to be done). A NSW law made any Aborigine or "any person apparently having an admixture of Aboriginal blood" liable to be banished to a reserve. White communities used these court orders to evict Aboriginal families from towns. And Aborigines who moved into towns seeking unemployment relief were unable to get it.

At the time the relationship between Aboriginal people and the trade unions was not particularly rosy. Some unions supported the White Australia policy and thought Aborigines would take jobs off their white membership. And this was particularly so during the Depression when they were not interested at all in Aboriginal wages or members. They raised no objection to "clearing the towns" of Aborigines.

Ferguson found the only white left group to support Aboriginal activity before 1935 was the Dubbo Unemployed organisers. Strangely enough, the AFA in Sydney had support from the nationalist and Australia First movement, which funded meetings and the AFA's newspaper, the Australian Abo Call in 1937 and 38.

There was also support from some nationalist, conservative women's groups. However, Ferguson remained faithful on the whole to his union background.

The main political party that recognised Aborigines as an issue until around the 1960s was the Communist Party. Later it was trade union support that influenced the Labor Party to take up the issue. There was a spin-off to the Liberal Party when the Fraser government passed the NT Land Rights Act.

On the other hand, some people who were active in the Communist Party before and after the second world war have told me Aborigines were, like women, more of a side issue.

In Melbourne, the CPA was much more supportive than in NSW, partly because individuals got on better. Also, the CPA distrusted the Australia First connection and they did not like the Aboriginal-only requirement that all the Aboriginal activists put on membership to the APA, which they said was "separatist" and not "united front" enough.

Bostock believes the CPA saw Aborigines as one of the downtrodden people of the world. Indigenous issues were seen as part of the world revolution and the workers struggle. There have been a number of Aboriginal delegates that went on early trips to the Soviet Union and China, including Ray Peckham, Chicka Dixon and Pearl Gibbs.

Bostock's father, Norman, was a member of the Communist Party in Brisbane and later a member of the ALP in Sydney, as was Lester in the 1960s. A member of the AWU, Bostock was a delegate to the NSW Labor Party congress in the 1960s under Charlie Oliver, who was one of the early union leaders who made places available for Aboriginal members at conferences.

Bostock said the left unions were much more supportive of Aboriginal issues but were still very paternalistic.

"They had all the answers," he told me. "They saw all the downtrodden people of the world being put in the same boat."

Bostock believes that there is much less interest in Aboriginal issues by the unions today than in the past and this has much to do with the present brand of leadership.

As part of the journalism history project we have been doing at the UTS, a student and I interviewed Pat Eatock, an Aboriginal woman, who has been active in the political movement and now runs a community television station.

Pat was a member of the Communist Party in the early 1960s and her grandmother, Lucy Eatock, was active in the Communist Party during the 1930s when she and her sons were heavily involved in the eviction struggles around Sydney. Pat describes Lucy as a matriarchal figure who gave her sons a political framework and sense of direction.

But Pat remembers that her grandmother's faith in the Communist Party was shattered by members' reluctance to assist the family when three of her sons were jailed on trumped up charges.

"There was this big meeting of the Communist Party somewhere and it was in a town hall...and my grandmother Lucy stood up and said, "hey, what's going to happen? I've got these wives here and their children" and there was no such thing as social services in those days "who's going to look after these kids?". And they actually passed a motion that they couldn't support these families because (the men) weren't in jail for political activity.

"So my grandmother, being a woman of her time was on the supper committee (of the CPA), so she had a string bag full of cups and sauces and brought it down on top of Lance Sharkey's head. He at that time was the Secretary of the Communist Party and she stood up and walked out."

The student, Samantha Weir, has also looked into ASIO surveillance of Aboriginal organisations and has managed to get hold of the files relating to Communist Party involvement in Aboriginal organisations. The files show that ASIO was keeping an eye on these organisations, probably because they believed they were one of the causes that the Communist Party had direct influence on.

Chicka Dixon was involved in the APA from the 1940s on. An interview with him by student Dave Snell is in our history report.

Chicka told Dave: "We used to have our meetings down at the Iron Workers Hall, George St, north. So I sort of went down to have a sticky beak. I wasn't sort of politically minded at the time. I just wanted to see what was going on. My poor old mother said, don't you get messed up with Progressive Association cause they're all Commos.....The communist party was the only party in the 1940s that'd give you any assistance cause there was no mileage in black issues...we were voices in the wilderness."

Chicka, who has always been a unionist, worked as a wharfie. When Vincent Lingiari came to Sydney to speak about the Gurindji struggle Chicka spoke on his behalf at the Sydney Town Hall. Later he was fined \$60 for swearing at the then federal secretary of the union when he didn't believe they had given enough support for Aboriginal people at Yirrkala in regard to bauxite mining at Gove.

Dave also interviewed white unionist Joe Owens about those days. This is a little of what Joe told Dave about when Gurindji people came to Sydney seeking support from the unions and other groups.

"I can remember them telling about the conditions they had at Wave Hill. Living in humpies on whatever was left over. How they were paid a minimal amount of money and that money was taken up by the company store. Vestey's owned everything. You know, they weren't paid for ages. I think it made people understand there was another life outside of ours. We thought we were badly done by, by a lot of heartless bosses but these guys were living under conditions we couldn't even envisage. You know, living in humpies year in and year out and you had to work in any weather and if you didn't you get sacked. Vestey's which was the highest profile company, an English lord, that got everyone's backs up. An English lord mistreating Australians. I think they got a shock when they heard about the conditions. Cause it had never been publicised. The living conditions were appalling. Twenty five years later some of those conditions have only changed marginally."

Another union that has been closely involved with Aborigines over the years has been Actors Equity. Not only did it support campaigns such as the Gurindji one but it also fought cases on behalf of Aboriginal actors.

For example, during the making of Jedda by Charles Chauvel Productions in 1955 Equity was involved in a dispute over accommodation of Aborigines brought from the NT for the studio sequences. They were living in tents near the Avondale studios at Turella in Sydney.

"I received a phone call about the conditions the Aboriginal actors were living in," the former Equity president, Hal Lashwood, recalled. "Hal Alexander and I went out and we called a stop to everything. Chauvel said that's where they would rather be because they were used to living that way. We said people had to go into boarding houses or the film won't go on." Equity got its way.

Equity and other unions also backed the setting up of the Black Theatre, in Redfern in the late 60s, which opened with Robert Merritt's play *The Cake Man*. The theatre was the launching pad for the career of many Aboriginal and white actors, including Justine Saunders, Max Cullen and Brian Brown.

The long-term results of the Gurindji walkoff and action by other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, often combined with union assistance, have been such gains as better pay and working conditions, and in some states some forms of land rights, living areas on pastoral properties and protection of sacred sites.

It's ironic now as debate centres on the Mabo High Court decision that national land rights legislation that the Federal Government envisaged in the mid 1980s seems to be no longer on the political agenda. Really when you come down to it "Mabo" is a euphemism for "land rights" and that's what Aborigines have been fighting for since 1788.

Going back to WA again, it's interesting to see that members of the Aboriginal Karrajini Association in the Pilbara have been negotiating with Hammersley Iron about jobs in the mining industry in their own country. This is country with towns like Mt Tom Price and Dampier where there is almost no Aboriginal presence. So far some Aboriginal people have been trained in driving heavy duty transport and earth moving equipment. I also understand the WA Trades and Labor Council has produced a document aimed at promoting Aboriginal workers in the mining industry. So, despite all the rhetoric, it's certainly not true to say that Aboriginal people and mining do not mix, as a closer observation of the Northern Territory and South Australian situations would also show.

Today, however, many Aboriginal people still work for below-award wages and under poor conditions for their own organisations. Now with 1993 being the International year of the world's indigenous people, moves to phase in award wages and conditions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations funded by the Federal government are being given even greater attention, particularly by the Department of Industrial Relations and by ATSIIC.

These moves towards awards is setting a precedent in that Aboriginal traditional beliefs and ways of life are - often for the first time - being taken into account.

I understand copies of an article I wrote about this for the DIR in *Workplace* are being circulated. So I won't go into further detail about this matter now, especially as I'm sure it will be a matter for discussion in your workshops.