Australian Aboriginal workers strike for fair wages and equality, 1946-1949

1 May 1946 to: Spring 1949

Country: Australia
Location City/State/Province: Pilbara, Western Australia
Location Description: Region in western Australia

Goals:
1. Raise the weekly wage minimum to 30 shillings per week
2. The right to elect representatives that spoke for the aboriginal people
3. The right to freedom of movement within Australia

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 100. Farm workers’ strike  ›  Indigenous Pastoral workers went on strike and travelled to strike camps
- 141. Civil disobedience of ”illegitimate” laws  ›  McLeod ignored law that prevented him from meeting with the strikers

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 100. Farm workers’ strike  ›  Indigenous Pastoral workers went on strike and travelled to strike camps

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 100. Farm workers’ strike  ›  Indigenous Pastoral workers went on strike and travelled to strike camps

Methods in 4th segment:

- 100. Farm workers’ strike  ›  Indigenous Pastoral workers went on strike and travelled to strike camps

Methods in 5th segment:

- 100. Farm workers’ strike  ›  Indigenous Pastoral workers went on strike and travelled to strike camps

Methods in 6th segment:
• 100. Farm workers' strike  › Indigenous Pastoral workers went on strike and travelled to strike camps

Classifications

Classification:
Change
Cluster:
Economic Justice
Human Rights
National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

• Pilbara pastoral workers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Don McLeod, Dooley Bin Bin, Clancy McKenna

Partners:
not known

External allies:
Women's Christian Temperance Union, The Worker’s Star, Western Australia’s Student Guild, Seaman's Union, Sheet Metal Workers Union, the Brick Layers Union, the Seamen's Union, two branches of the Australian Education Union, and the South Australian and Queensland Trades and Labour Councils

Involvement of social elites:
not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

• The Worker's Star
• Western Australia's Student Guild
• Women's Christian Temperance Union
• workers

Groups in 2nd Segment:
Groups in 3rd Segment:
Groups in 4th Segment:
Groups in 5th Segment:
Groups in 6th Segment:

• Seamen's Union

Segment Length: 6 months
Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

**Opponents:**
Pilbara Pastoralist employers, Department of Native Affairs

**Nonviolent responses of opponent:**
not known

**Campaigner violence:**
not known

**Repressive Violence:**
not known

Success Outcome

**Success in achieving specific demands/goals:**
2 points out of 6 points

**Survival:**
1 point out of 1 points

**Growth:**
2 points out of 3 points

**Notes on outcomes:**
The government did not mandate a wage increase for pastoral workers. It is unclear whether Aboriginals were allowed freedom of movement after the strike. The High Court ruled that Aboriginals could elect their own representatives.

In 20th century Australia indigenous workers were treated completely differently from the Caucasian settlers on the continent. Until the 1920s, for example, Aboriginals employed at pastoral stations in Australia received rations of clothing and food instead of cash wages.

The 1936 Native Administration Act required employers to provide housing and healthcare to their Aboriginal workers. Australian law also forced Aboriginal workers to be confined to an employer, and prevented them from leaving a place of employment without consent of an employer. Further restricting Aboriginal mobility, Australian law did not permit them to work in industries that did any type of overseas trading. They lived in low-quality employer-provided houses, without much compensation and unable to leave. In contrast, Caucasian workers were given far better wages and had complete freedom of movement.

In the early 1940s a Caucasian communist named Don McLeod began to question the status quo regarding Aboriginal rights. McLeod’s activism for indigenous rights and dignity, along with the medical help he provided to an injured Aboriginal leader, attracted the attention of other Aboriginal leaders. Dooley Bin Bin, a representative of the Nyangumarta language, and Clancy McKenna, who represented the Nyamal language, approached McLeod proposing a meeting about Aboriginal living conditions.

In 1942, Bin Bin, McKenna, McLeod, and Nyamal Elder Peter Coppin convened a meeting of Aboriginals at Skull Creek. Over 200 Aboriginal people representing 23 communities convened for six weeks to plan for Aboriginal liberation. The assembly included twenty-three languages and sixteen different translators. They agreed on the overall goal of ‘positive change’.

From that meeting, leaders developed a plan to organize a mass strike, with all indigenous pastoral workers refusing to work. They planned the strike for 1 May 1943, intentionally aligning with the International Day of Workers’ Struggle and the start of the shearing season. However, the strike leaders decided to postpone the strike until after World War II, to maximize publicity and good will.
In March 1945 the Aboriginal leader Dooley Bin Bin began travelling to pastoral camps to spread the word about the strike they’d planned in 1943 and then postponed. He traveled on an old bicycle disguised as a relative of a pastoral worker. Bin Bin delivered jam tin labels marked with a primitive calendar indicating the strike date, accommodating for the workers’ illiteracy.

On 1 May 1946 hundreds of Aboriginal workers walked away from their employers at over 25 pastoral stations, on the specific day that shearing and mustering was to begin. The strike left 10,000 square kilometers of pasture untended.

The goals that the strikers sent to the Department of Native Affairs were clear:

1. Raise the minimum wage to 30 shillings per week
2. Grant the Aboriginals the right to elect representatives
3. Grant the Aboriginals the right to freedom of movement within Australia

At its height more than 800 Aboriginals were on strike. Strikers congregated into camps, developing them into small communities. The two major camps were The Twelve Mile camp outside of Port Hedland and the Moolyella camp outside of Marble Bar. Here, they set up schools.

Food was a major issue, since employers did not provide the striking workers with ration coupons (Australian food-stamps). The workers set up cooperative stores to handle the supplies some white shopkeepers gave them and share what became available. To further sustain themselves, the strikers hunted kangaroo and goats and gathered plants, minerals, and pearl shells.

Some Aboriginal workers left the strike when offered better wages by their old employers. Other alienated strikers called the police. The government arrested the leaders of the strike, McKenna, Bin Bin, and McLeod. The arrests did not intimidate the strikers; most workers continued to refuse work. One station simply decided not to elect a new leader after the arrests, forcing the police to arrest every worker or do nothing.

In 1946, the Communist Party of Australia and the Women’s Christian Temperance Union formed “the Committee for the Defence of Native Rights.” They held a public meeting in the Perth Town Hall that over 300 Caucasian allies attended. Attendees demanded the freeing of Dooley and Clancy from jail, committed to gather food and funding for the strikers, and employed a lawyer to defend McLeod. The Communist leader Dr. Alec Jolly led this meeting. Additionally, the University of Western Australia’s Student Guild marched to show support to the strikers. The Student Guild also helped raise funds for the strikers.

In November 1946 the Commissioner for Native Affairs sent a medical practitioner to evaluate the safety of the Twelve Mile strike camp. Contrary to public expectations, he found that the Aboriginals were hygienic and well behaved. His report went further to explain that the only way to resolve the conflict would be through a mediated setting where the Aboriginals could fully voice their opinion.

In December 1946, police arrested McLeod when he demanded ration coupons for the striking Aboriginals. In response, over 200 men marched to the jail where he was kept. The pastoral workers demanded the police to set McLeod free. The police then released McLeod.

Police repression in the form of arrest was common. Police arrested McLeod a total of seven times. At one point, police converged upon the Marble Bar camp armed. They shot the strikers’ dogs until some strikers, including Jacob Oberdoo, disarmed them. Police jailed Oberdoo three times during the strike.

In mid-1947, the Australian government established the White Springs Mission near the strike camps to recruit workers willing to leave the strike. The missions failed to recruit any Aboriginals to return to pastoral employment.

In July 1947, after the shearing season ended, some stations that had begun providing wages in response to the strikers’ demands reduced the wages back to the original amounts. Many of those employed by these employers re-joined the strike.
During these two years after World War II Australia experienced a trend of economic expansion affecting almost all inhabitants of the country. However, indigenous Australians in the Pilbara region, whether or not they participated in the strike, failed to benefit from the economic growth and were pushed further into poverty.

Throughout 1947 and 1948, the strikers remained in the strike camps. Armed police consistently visited the camps and demanded the Aboriginals return to work. The strikers formed the North West Workers’ Association to formally represent them in negotiations.

By May 1949, most strikers remained in the strike camps, especially in the Pilbara region which had suffered from the least police repression. Instead of participating in the shearing season, the workers traveled to the pastures and pressured the remaining workers to join them, in an attempt to escalate pressure on the employers. Police arrested thirty-two strikers who had converged at Warragine station for this purpose.

In August 1949, the strikers requested that the Seamen's Union not transport wool from pasture stations in Pilbara. The Seamen’s Union agreed.

On the third day of this targeted strike, a representative of the Australian government told McLeod that the pastoral strikers’ demands would be met if the Seamen’s Union lifted this ban. The government fined the Seamen’s Union £1 for the first day and £5 for every subsequent day.

The Seamen’s Union lifted the ban. The government, however, did not meet the workers’ demands.

By this time the workers had gained the endorsement of nineteen other labor unions, including the Sheet Metal Workers Union, the Brick Layers Union, the Seamen's Union, two branches of the Australian Education Union, and the South Australian and Queensland Trades and Labour Councils. The Workers Star, a Communist paper, covered the strike supportively, while most other domestic publications (dominated by farm owners) either ignored or disparaged it.

In 1949 the Australian High Court ruled that Aborigines had the right to organize and elect their own recognized representatives. In that same year employers at the Mt. Edgar and Limestone Stations and in Kimberly and the Northern Territory granted wages to Aboriginal workers.

The Deputy Commissioner for Native Affairs, Elliot Smith, told McLeod that similar wage standards would be put forth for all stations in the Pilbara region.

Some of the strike camps disbanded. The Agency of Native Affairs did not implement wage standards.

Some of the Pilbara strikers refused to return to the pastoral stations. Instead they worked in surface mining, and saved their wages to form cooperatives and buy or lease sheep stations, including some they had formerly worked on.

In 1951, Aboriginals formed the Northern Development and Mining Company Pty Ltd, the first Aboriginal-owned company in Australia. Inspired by their unity in the three-year Pilbara Strike, Aboriginals finally won equal wages to whites in the 1966 Gurindji strike in Wave Hill in the Northern Territory.

Research Notes

Influences:

With the three-year Pilbara Strike as an example, Aboriginals finally won equal wages to whites in the 1966 Gurindji strike in Wave Hill in the Northern Territory.

Sources:


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