



# A Timeline of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in the Labour Movement

The Australian Union Movement has a long and proud history of working with First Nations Communities. We will continue to do so as it is at the very heart of our values – social justice for all working people, their families and communities. We are in this together.

## Coranderrk Aboriginal Station Victoria

Men of the Coranderrk Aboriginal Station Victoria demand wage payments for their labour and official tenure of the station.

1869

## Warangesda Strike for Equal Pay

1911

## Coalminers/shearers/waterside strikes

Large numbers of Aboriginal union members involved in these industrial campaigns.

1920s-1950s

## Noonkanbah (Kimberly)

White-owned sheep station owners laid off Aboriginal workers. The Yungnora community then bought the station back. Later on mining companies Amax and CRA wished to mine on the station at Noonkabah, including areas of significant Aboriginal heritage. WA TLC and WA unions provided support for Yungnora community and Kimberly Land Council.

WA unionists refused to drill on Noonkabah, but the then WA Premier, Charles Court, brought in non-union labour to drill for Amax. No oil was found.

1979-1980

## Pilbara Stock and Sheep Workers Strike

Aboriginal stock and sheep workers organised and coordinated a massive Aboriginal strike, which paralysed Pilbara sheep industry for three years.

The strike received local support from Bootmakers Union, Modern Workers' Club and interstate unions such as Queensland Labour Council, Victorian Carpenters Union, Meatworkers Union, Ironworkers Union, and Victorian Building Trades Federation.

Aboriginal strike leaders, Dooley, Clarey and McKenna, along with a white prospector, Don McLeod, were gaoled for breaking the WA Native Affairs Act.

The strike not only involved pay, but also land rights. The strikers later formed their own company, the Northern Development and Mining Company, and bought the Strelley and Yandeera stations.

The event was an important landmark in the struggle for Aboriginal workers to gain economic independence through land ownership and income self-sufficiency.

1947

1936

## Torres Strait Pearl Luggers Strike

The exploitation of Torres Strait Islander pearl divers and the Queensland Government's control of divers' wages was the major cause of the strike by 400 divers in 1936.

*Source: The Bishop of Carpentaria and the Torres Strait Pearlers' strike of 1936 Wetherell, David 2004, The Bishop of Carpentaria and the Torres Strait Pearlers' strike of 1936, Journal of pacific history, vol. 39, no. 2, pp. 185-202, doi: 10.1080/0022334042000250724.*

1957

## Palm Island Strike

In 1957, seven Palm Island men led a strike against the discriminatory treatment of Indigenous people, after a petition to the superintendent that demanded improved wages, health, housing and working conditions, was ignored.

Although poor conditions were a major cause of the strike, the trigger was the superintendent's decision to deport local Albie Geia, who had allegedly disobeyed an overseer. Geia refused to leave the island, united the community, and declared the strike on the 10th of June 1957.

Five days later the strike was broken following dawn raids on the homes of the seven strike leaders. As punishment, the men and their families were banished from the Island, although their actions signified an important change.

1966  
23rd August

## Wave Hill Strike Equal Pay Case

Vincent Lingiari called a meeting with the Gurindji people, traditional owners of the land the Wave Hill station occupied. His message was short and sweet: "We're going." He then led the 200 Gurindji workers (stockmen, house servants and their families) off the property and walked 16km to Jurnarni (Gordy Creek) and later to the sacred place known as Daguragu. They had thrown down the gauntlet in what became known as the Wave Hill "walk-off".

The MUA (Maritime Union of Australia), North Australian Worker's Union (NAWU - now NT branch of ALHMWU), and many other Unions led by Paddy Carroll, sponsored a test case on equal wages for Northern Territory Aboriginals, by seeking to have the Cattle Station Industry (NT) Award amended to cover Aboriginals. The case included a number of future political figures including Sir John Kerr who represented the pastoralists.

"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"

1977

## NSW Trade Union Committee for Aboriginal Rights (TUCAR)

Formed by Aboriginal unionists in the 1970s to encourage union support on Aboriginal issues. Well-known Sydney Aboriginal Trade Unionist Kevin Tory still runs TUCAR.

1955

## MEAA's campaign and the Filming of Jeddah

MEAA (then Actor's Equity) acted to ensure that Aboriginal actors received roles in the film Jeddah. This has continued to be an issue in the entertainment industry and MEAA has continued to be active (e.g 'Race Against Prime Time' video).



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1990

## ACTU Support for Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR)

CAR's vision was "a united Australia which respects this land of ours; values the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage; and provides justice and equity for all."

CAR preceded Reconciliation Australia and had active industrial and trade union programs. Jennie George was a member of CAR from its inception.

1993-97

## Trade Union Aboriginal Employment Development Project

Trade Union Aboriginal Employment Development Project - Aboriginal Employment Development Officer (AEDOs) in each state and territory - creating jobs in the private sector for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers.

This saw employers negotiating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander positions and training places in new projects etc. It involved several initiatives such as ACTU/Lendlease housing projects in NSW, various mining and tourism/leisure projects.

1993

## Partners for Justice Conference

In the International Year for World's Indigenous People (IYIP) the ACTU held a major conference of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander unionists from all over Australia.

The conference facilitated debate on Native Title, employment, industrial, education and health issues. The ACTU President used the forum to offer the ACTU's support for the Mabo Legislation of the Keating Government.

## Cultural/Ceremonial Leave

Cultural/Ceremonial Leave for Aboriginal workers in WA Local Government (Joe Riordan's decision); followed cultural leave negotiated in APS by public sector unions.

1996-97

## Wik/Native Title

The ACTU provided support for Indigenous Working Group on the Wik/Native Title issues under the Howard Government.

*Tim Harcourt, Research Office ACTU*

1995

## First Nations Round Table – United Workers Union

The United Workers Union's Council empower the First Nations Round Table to make recommendations and decisions on policies and issues that affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members. This Round Table is a council that grew from a meeting of First Nations members held in Darwin in March 2017. The members at this meeting formed a Network, which continued to grow and organise a First Nations voice across the United Workers Union membership.

2020

2020

## United Workers Union Health Practitioners

Aboriginal health practitioners working for the N.T. Government secure a historical enterprise agreement as members of the United Workers Union. Union members lobbied governments for over 13 years for a standalone agreement that recognised their profession.

**The union movement and First Nations communities have worked together on many more occasions than what is provided in this timeline. Please feel free to contact our Indigenous Development Officer, Wayne Costelloe, with your stories, so we might add to this history.**

## References

ACTU (1993) Partners for Justice Documents No. 1 and 2.

Cook K (1993) Speech to ACTU Partners for Justice Conference, June 1993.

Harcourt T (1993) "How the Labour Market is Changing", Speech to Burrupur Muru - Tomorrow's Pathways - Aboriginal Employment Conference.

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